

## Rules of Thumb for Socratic Discussion

*Adapted from "Notes on Dialogue" by Stringfellow Barr*

The many dialectical conversations in Plato's dialogues suggest several rules of thumb. One hesitates to propound rules for a kind of discussion that is essentially spontaneous. But it is hard to see how these particular hints could stifle spontaneity.

1. The exchange of lengthy monologues should be eschewed at all costs. If discussions are to be probing and profitable, interlocutors must be brief and to the point.

2. Socratic dialectic has a different code of manners from a dinner party, where religion and politics are sometimes forbidden for fear that rising passions might damage social intercourse and where interrupting a long-winded and empty speech is considered discourteous. In dialectic, a politely inserted request for clarification, analogous to a "point of order" in political assemblies, always has the floor.

3. In dialectic, democracy consists in everyone's listening intently, not in "equal time". When a good basketball team is on the offensive, its members do not snatch the ball from each other but support the player who has it, who in turn passes it to a teammate whenever a pass is called for by the common purpose of the team. In dialectic the opposing team is the difficulties all men face as they search for the truth. It does not matter whose mouth gets used in overcoming this antagonist, provided that all are attending carefully and interrupting with questions when they do not understand.

4. Herodotus's anecdote that the Persians deliberated while drunk and decided while sober implies that in the early stages of a dialectical exchange, a "wild idea" is often more fruitful than a prematurely prudent opinion. The imaginative and the unexpected were frequent ingredients in Socrates's own style.

5. Perhaps the most important rule of Socratic discussion was laid down by Socrates himself: "Whithersoever the wind of the argument blows, there lies our course" (*Republic*, 394d). This means that some of the forms of relevance that a judicial proceeding must exhibit, and the forensic style and strategies required by formal debate, are irrelevant to dialectic. The point is not to instruct one's fellows, nor even to persuade them, but to think with them and trust the argument to lead to insight, sometimes to very unexpected insights.

6. There is one final rule of thumb. When free minds seek together for greater understanding, they tend as did Socrates to move with lightheartedness and a sense of the comic. The relevant jest is never out of order, for good conversation always combines high seriousness with pertinent playfulness.