

Socratic Logic, Faith, and the Christian

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by Charles W. Martin One of the most difficult required courses at Asbury College for students working toward a liberal arts degree in the early 1970s was "Introduction to Philosophy." The fact this course was required of all students gave many of them reason to think about the nature of a liberal arts degree, which is intended to provide a broad base of general knowledge and to develop the student's general intellectual capacities. Practically speaking, this meant there were required courses in a foreign language (for 2 years), not to mention one or more courses in areas such as philosophy, history, music, speech, psychology, sociology, Western literature, and science, together with those courses in one's selected field or major.

As special as a liberal arts degree is even today, unfortunately, such a degree does not cover every subject, nor does it claim to do so. Rather, the idea behind a true liberal arts degree is to prepare the student to use his or her acquired intellectual and reasoning skills toward studying those subjects not covered. For example, in the "Introduction to Philosophy" course the professor briefly dealt over a period of several days with Socrates and the Socratic method. Specifically, Socratic logic, followed by Platonic questions and Aristotelian principles. Sounds really exciting doesn't it? Really, it was, because our professor often personified the roles of different philosophers ranging from Aristotle and Pythagoras to Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche. Often times he came in "character" and simply began to talk - he called it "philosophizing" - and we were challenged to guess which philosopher he was portraying so that our notes would make some sense later when we studied them. But while we were introduced to Socratic logic, what we learned in a few days was a far cry from taking a course on the subject. In this issue of the Bulletin our focus is not to introduce you to everything that might be contained in a course on Socratic logic. Rather, as the title implies, we simply want to persuade readers of the Bulletin that personally studying Socratic logic or taking a logic course at a local college or university is a great way to improve your thinking skills and, in particular, your understanding of Christian theology. Socrates would feel it quite appropriate that we begin with some questions: Why should anyone study logic? What can you do with logic? The answers may surprise you, because it is not so much what you can do with logic, it is what logic can do for you. Peter Kreeft puts it this way in his recent text on logic: Logic builds the mental habit of thinking in an orderly way. A course in logic will do this for you even if you forget every detail in it,.... No course is more practical than logic, for no matter what you are thinking about, you are thinking, and logic orders and clarifies your thinking. No matter what your thought's content, it will be clearer when it has more logical form (Peter Kreeft, *Socratic Logic*, St. Augustine's Press, 2004, 1). Perhaps we should begin by distinguishing between the two kinds of logic. In many university and college contexts the only logic courses offered focus upon mathematical or symbolic logic, also known variously as propositional logic, syllogistic logic, and even "propositional calculus," but most often as "formal" logic. Some people refer to this as the "algebra of statements." If you were to take a course in "propositional calculus" the focus would be on deductive logic and you would spend many hours studying the relationships formed between propositions by connectives or "constants" (or "sententials") such as "not," "or," and "if...then." In sentential or propositional logic the student learns there are only nine rules of inferences which he or she must learn, along with a few logical equivalences, in order to carry out the reasoning governed by this domain of logic. If one is equipped with the nine rules he will be able to assess the validity of most of the arguments he will ever encounter. For example, the first rule is modus ponens, which in symbolic logic is stated this way: 1. $P \rightarrow Q$ 2. P 3. Q In symbolic logic one uses letters and symbols to stand for sentences and the words that connect them. In the above example the "P" and the "Q" stand for any two different sentences, and the arrow stands for the connecting words, "if ..., then...." To read this premise (line 1) you would say, "If P, then Q." Another way of reading $P \rightarrow Q$ is to say, "P implies Q." To read the second premise (line 2) we just say, "P." The reason letters and symbols are used is because sentences that are very different grammatically may still have the same logical form. For example, the sentences "I'll go if you go" and "If you go, then I'll go," though different grammatically, obviously have the same logical form. By using symbols and letters instead of the sentences themselves we can make the logical form of a sentence clear without being distracted by its grammatical form. As for the rule modus ponens, it tells us that from the two premises $P \rightarrow Q$ and P , we may validly conclude Q . This rule of inference is one that we use almost unconsciously all the time. A simple example of it can be written out this way:

- If John studies hard, then he will get a good grade in logic.

- John studies hard.

- John will get a good grade in logic. Although there are overlaps, this is not quite the same as Socratic, Aristotelian, or informal logic. This kind of logic assumes the existence of essences and our ability to know them. Modern symbolic logic often does not assume such a metaphysical realism (that essences are real). Rather, symbolic logic tends to assume that essences are only names or "human labels," no doubt because the basic units of symbolic logic are not terms but propositions. Then, as shown above, it relates these propositions in argumentative or syllogistic structures not unlike a computer does: if p, then q; p; therefore q. Today a more popular phrase for Socratic logic or Socratic thinking is "critical thinking." Unlike formal logic, Socratic logic or critical thinking is more practical for most people, although it should not be thought of as simply a watered-down version of formal logic. By this I mean that most people we talk with and engage in dialogue with (such as sharing Christ or talking about the existence of God) do not resort to presenting an argument in symbolic logic. Socratic logic is more practical in the sense that it focuses on understanding and interpreting ordinary language, and not only analyzing an argument, but also constructing an effective or sound argument and smoking out hidden assumptions. Our minds are indeed computers - our brains compute all the time and much faster than any computer. But our minds are also much more than simply a computer. We can also "see" or understand. One's purpose in using Socratic logic is because an argument or discussion should begin and end with understanding, with insight. I mentioned Peter Kreeft's new text, *Socratic Logic* (St. Augustine's Press, 2004). In it he

introduces students to many classical quotations and great philosophical issues in the hope of preparing them for "reading Great Books [of the Western World] rather than Dick and Jane" literature. In other words, the student trained in logic should easily be able to "critically" read and evaluate any article or book, whether fiction or non-fiction, not to mention speeches, sermons, and even television sitcoms. In an age such as ours when there are so many messages being sent through so many different communication mediums there is great need for skills in logic. This is true both in the world and in the church. Sharon Schwarze and Harvey Lape have much the same purpose in their popular text on Socratic logic, now in its 2nd edition (2001): *Thinking Socratically: Critical Thinking About Everyday Issues* (Prentice Hall). Like Kreeft, Schwarze and Lape seek to teach critical thinking skills in the context of ordinary life issues. The situations they use range from the problem of evidence at a trial to the absence of an explanation of why two children died in the same daycare center on the same day. Like formal logic, Socratic or informal logic also deals with the basics of logic, such as *modus ponens*. But rather than using symbols, Socratic logic tends to focus more on the "old" or natural logic of the four language arts (reading, writing, speaking, and listening). In his distinguishing between the forms of logic Kreeft writes: Another place where modern symbolic logic merely manipulates mental symbols while traditional Aristotelian logic expresses insight into objective reality is the interpretation of a conditional (or "hypothetical") proposition such as "If it rains, I will get wet." Aristotelian logic, like common sense, interprets this proposition as an insight into real causality: the rain causes me to get wet. I am predicting the effect from the cause. But symbolic logic does not allow this commonsensical, realistic interpretation. It is skeptical of the "naive" assumption of epistemological realism, that we can know real things like real causality; and this produces the radically anti-commonsensical (or, as they say so euphemistically, "counter-intuitive") "problem of material implication" (Kreeft, 19). Thus, in Socratic logic the student still must study special terms (i.e., categories, predicables, division), material fallacies (i.e., inductive fallacies, procedural fallacies), the rules and nature of definition, contradiction in terms of the square of opposition, different kinds of arguments, syllogisms, induction, and even some philosophical applications of logic - including logic and theology, metaphysics, cosmology, philosophical anthropology, epistemology, and ethics. But, for the Christian, this kind of progressive study, as Kreeft, Schwarze, Lape, and others teaching in this area readily testify, will make one a significantly better thinker. Don't misunderstand. Logic is not the same as philosophy, but it is an excellent preparation for the study of philosophy. Kreeft puts it this way, "Logic is to philosophy what a telescope is to astronomy or a cookbook to a meal. It is no substitute for the real thing, but it makes 'the real thing' work much better" (Kreeft, 358). For example, I mentioned above some of the "philosophical applications of logic," beginning with logic and theology, followed by metaphysics, cosmology, etc. These divisions correspond to the most basic questions about life, that is, questions about God or the Ultimate Reality; about reality as such (important in addressing various forms of Eastern mysticism); about the visible universe; about human nature; about how we know; and about good and evil, the nature of the "good life," and the "good society." But how practical is Socratic logic for the Christian? If you have read this far, I realize most believers today are not regular readers of journals like *Faith and Philosophy*, a quarterly produced by the Department of Philosophy at Asbury College. But did you know that it is logically provable that there is a God who is, as the Bible teaches, an infinitely perfect being? Indeed, there are many different kinds of arguments for God's existence. Can the principles of logic, together with sensory (experiential) data available to everyone, together supply premises from which the existence of God can be validly deduced in ways that should convince most people? Yes, but a valid argument is one thing, refusal to believe what is true is quite another. The most famous arguments for the existence of God, such as those of Thomas Aquinas and Anselm, try to show that the answer is a definite yes. But can any sense data prove or disprove the existence of a God who by definition cannot be sensed? Modern empiricists claim that the answer is no - that God's existence cannot in principle be proved. Can formal logic alone disprove atheism, that is, is atheism logically self-contradictory? Anselm's famous "ontological argument" answers yes. Does the existence of evil in the world (the opposite of good) disprove an infinitely good God? The most famous argument for atheism answers yes. Regardless of how we answer these kinds of questions, we must answer the arguments of the other side. In short, the debate over the existence of God, which is often involved in contexts like the creation vs. evolution debate, is not merely one about faith, as many Christians presume, it is one about logic. In other words, it is not just about our "sharing personal feelings," rather it is a hard look at facts and arguments. Many unbelievers in our postmodern world are not at all interested in our personal feelings, rather they want something more objective and sound. Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God is the most famous argument that proves God's existence only from the definition of God and without reference to experience. There are other logical arguments that try to do this, but none of them has generated as much interest as Anselm's. The philosophical question it raises has intrigued philosophers since Anselm first formulated it in the 11th century. The following version of Anselm's argument comes from the 20th century philosopher Norman Malcolm: Let me summarize the proof. If God, a being greater than which cannot be conceived, does not exist then He cannot come into existence. For if He did He would either have been caused to come into existence or have happened to come into existence, and in either case He would be a limited being, which by our conception of Him He is not. Since He cannot come into existence, if He does not exist His existence is impossible. If He does exist He cannot come into existence (for the reasons given), nor can He cease to exist, for nothing could cause Him to cease to exist nor could it just happen that He ceased to exist. So if God exists His existence is necessary. Thus God's existence is either impossible or necessary. It can be the former only if the concept of such a thing is self-contradictory or in some way logically absurd. Assuming that this is not so, it follows that He necessarily exists (Norman Malcolm, "Anselm's Ontological Arguments," *Philosophical Review*, 69 (1960), 49-50). For those unfamiliar with Anselm (1033-1109), he was an archbishop of Canterbury who is remembered for this argument and is credited for originating it. To restate it, God is a being "than which none greater can be conceived" and such a being who existed only in thought would not be such a being. Later philosophers who defended this argument include Rene Descartes and Gottfried Leibniz. Those

philosophers who are known for their attack of Anselm's argument include David Hume and Immanuel Kant. In the 20th century Anselm's line of thinking was defended by Alvin Plantinga (see the July 1996 Bulletin which focused on "Alvin Plantinga's Impact on Christian Apologetics"), Norman Malcolm (mentioned above), and Charles Hartshorne. Some of the 20th century versions of Anselm's ontological argument have stressed the idea that "necessary existence" is an essential property of God. Others favor the argument because it does not depend on religious experience or feelings, since these are readily claimed by adherents of other religious faiths whose deities are quite obviously not the biblical God. The reason modern philosophers have emphasized the idea of God's necessary existence or being in Anselm's argument is because this is crucial to the argument. A "necessary" being is a being whose existence is no mere accident or the contingent result of some cause, but whose very nature it is to exist necessarily. Anselm's argument appears simple enough, but it is actually far from simple. Most people who first hear or read it are tempted to dismiss it rather quickly as being nothing but an interesting riddle. However, great thinkers in every century since Anselm have defended it, the most recent being Alvin Plantinga, who in his writings has worked out a variation of Anselm's argument in great detail. Logic, both formal and informal, places much emphasis upon reason. Historically, evangelical believers have viewed faith and reason as allies and not as enemies. In other words, they do not allow reason to take the primary place of faith, hope, and love. There is an old medieval formula that speaks of "faith seeking understanding" and another that states "I believe in order that I may understand" (cf. with our comments in the October 2004 Bulletin dealing with "Why Doesn't God Make His Existence More Obvious?"). But as we have alluded to above about placing too much emphasis on personal religious experience, believers trained in Socratic logic are always careful to distinguish between objective rationality and subjective rationality. Truth is objective, but we human beings usually are not. Further, we live in a fallen world where people's exercise of "reason" is often expressed in various forms of irrationality. Because this is the case, an argument that is in itself perfectly rational and valid may fall on ears that have been deafened by prejudice, ignorance, misunderstanding, incomprehension or some ideology. Indeed, this often happens in the larger church between different theological traditions. Anyone who has carefully studied the polls taken by Gallup and Barna knows that most people today, Christians included, choose what they believe not by looking at the evidence, but by looking at such things as ideological labels (i.e., "liberal," "conservative," "Democrat," "Republican," "Calvinist," etc.), or by determining which group of people with whom they want to be associated, or, more often than we might imagine, by vague feelings and associations (theological and psychological) evoked by an idea within their consciousness, rather than by objectively looking at and studying an idea, concept, or doctrine and the reality it points to outside their consciousness. Moreover, regrettably, this type of irrationality often takes place in our day-to-day lives, including the context of classrooms, boardrooms, executive offices, worship services, and group Bible studies. This is why Peter Kreeft and Ron Tacelli comment: We need not and should not employ any of these substitutes for reason in order to "make contact with" or "be relevant to" those who are doing so. We make contact and relevance not by changing rationality into irrationality but by changing irrationality into rationality. That is what education is. - Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, InterVarsity, 1994, 16). The study of logic is also the study of the way that, ideally, we should reason as human beings. The inherent structure of human reason takes place in three acts: understanding, judging, and reasoning. Logic takes these three acts and expresses them in terms, propositions, and arguments. If we were to make a simple comparative table of this it would look something like this:

HUMAN REASON	LOGIC
1. understanding	1. terms
Either clear or unclear.	2. judging/judgments
2. propositions	Either true or untrue.
3. reasoning	3. arguments
Either logically valid or invalid.	

A term is clear if it is intelligible and unambiguous. Terms express concepts which express real essences. A proposition is true only if it corresponds to reality, that is, if it states a fact. In other words, propositions express judgments which express facts. An argument is valid if the conclusion follows necessarily from the premises. Thus, if all the terms in an argument are clear, and if all the premises are true, and if the argument is free from any logical fallacy, then the conclusion must (necessarily) be true. We can say that arguments express reasoning which express causes, real "because's" and real "whys." Kreeft and Tacelli put it this way in reference to arguments used in the context of Christian apologetics: [Logical] arguments are like eyes: they see reality. The arguments in this book demonstrate that the essential Christian doctrines are true, unless they are bad arguments; that is, ambiguous, false or fallacious. To disagree with the conclusion of any argument, it must be shown that either an ambiguous term or false premise or a logical fallacy exists in that argument. Otherwise, to say "I still disagree" is to say "You have proved your conclusion true, but I am so stubborn and foolish that I will not accept this truth. I insist on living in a false world, not the true one." -Kreeft and Tacelli, 18. From a Christian (eternal) perspective, the most important use of logical argumentation is for convincing unbelievers of the truth of the Christian faith and the great doctrines of Christianity. But as we have observed on these pages on many previous occasions, biblical faith is more than one's mental belief or affirmation of certain orthodox doctrines, such as the Bible's teaching concerning human sin, Jesus' atoning death on the cross, and His physical resurrection and ascension. Right doctrinal beliefs are just the beginning. Christianity is primarily a relationship with a Person, Jesus Christ, who said, "I am the way...no one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Even in the Old Testament the psalmist talks about the importance of knowing God (Yahweh) as a person. Knowing a person is very different from knowing things, even knowing things about a person. One can gain knowledge about a person by simple observation. In other words, we can be introduced to a person, read his or her resume, even spend some time with that person without it ever impacting us in any way, except we know and believe a few things about that person. Such knowledge has no weight or impact. There is little "dialogical character" in the knowing of such things. But when we know a person, that implies a very different relationship, one not based on observation or gathered knowledge, but a

dynamic relationship which involves responsiveness between two persons.

In Romans 1:5 Paul refers to the "obedience of faith." While we are justified (saved) by faith alone, true faith results in changed behavior, that is, holiness, good works, not sinning, not conforming to this world. (cf. Rom. 6:1-2; James 2:26; 1 Peter 1:14-16; 1 John 1:6; 2:3-4; 3:6). Paul tells the Roman believers they have been "crucified with Christ" and thus they are "freed from sin" (Rom. 6:6-7). Then he warns them that "the wages of sin is death" (6:23). As believers, we are called upon to "confess" Christ with obedient living.