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978-1-107-06742-4 - What Would Socrates Do?: Self-Examination, Civic Engagement,  
and the Politics of Philosophy

Joel Alden Schlosser

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## What Would Socrates Do?

Socrates continues to be an extremely influential force to this day; his work is featured prominently in the work of contemporary thinkers ranging from Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss, to Michel Foucault and Jacques Rancière. Intervening in this discussion, *What Would Socrates Do?* reconstructs Socrates' philosophy in ancient Athens to show its promise of empowering citizens and noncitizens alike. By drawing them into collective practices of dialogue and reflection, philosophy can help people to become thinking, acting beings more capable of fully realizing the promises of political life. At the same time, however, Joel Alden Schlosser shows how these practices' commitment to interrogation keeps philosophy at a distance from the democratic status quo, creating a dissonance with conventional forms of politics that opens space for new forms of participation and critical contestation of extant ones.

JOEL ALDEN SCHLOSSER is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Bryn Mawr College. Previously, he held the Julian Steward Chair in the Social Sciences at Deep Springs College. He completed his MA and PhD in political science at Duke University, and he was a visiting instructor at Carleton College in political theory and constitutional law. This is his first book.

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## Preface

*What would Socrates do?* This question first occurred to me when teaching an undergraduate course on ancient political thought at Duke University. As we read and contemplated Socrates' injunction that "the unexamined life is not worth living," it struck me as all too easy to fold this demand for reflection and thoughtfulness into our twenty-first century obsessions with self-knowledge, self-exploration, and even self-infatuation. My students and I were already doing this, imagining ourselves as like Socrates: uniquely perspicuous, countercultural, and critical. We stood against the grain and, despite all being part of an elite university, we were speaking truth to power.

Were we? Who was to say we hadn't just lashed ourselves to a different mast? I kept wondering what Socrates would do, how Socrates might have questioned our assumptions, how his questions might have translated to our times. Socrates was not just an ancient version of the now famous Apple Macintosh advertisement to "Think Different." And if Socrates was not merely going to serve as window dressing for our late modern patterns of thought, we needed to think differently about what Socrates might mean.

This line of questioning and reflection took place at the same time as a major development at Duke as well as at other universities around the country: the advent of civic engagement. In 2007, Duke received two grants of \$15 million, from the Duke Endowment and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, to found its Center for Civic Engagement and flagship program, DukeEngage. These programs and others like them sought to bring service learning to a new level, making knowledge developed in the classroom functional or even leaving the classroom behind entirely in favor of the kind of experiential learning attainable only on-site and hands-on: building clinics in Kenya or teaching migrant

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workers' children in China or partnering with local organizations in Guatemala to create safer cooking stoves. The "change yourself, change your world" motto of DukeEngage expressed an underlying philosophy that while academics might give you knowledge (carried out in classrooms and laboratories on campus), transformation, both of self and of others, could only really occur outside the proverbial ivory tower. Transformation gave evidence of knowledge that really mattered. We needed to engage.

As I watched these new ideas take root (and as DukeEngage replaced Duke basketball as the number one reason given by applicants for why they wanted to attend the university), I kept wondering: What would Socrates do? Given his influence on the founder of *the Academy*, Plato, Socrates seemed like the quintessence of the academic: discussing theories of the good life rather than living it, hypothesizing about justice rather than making it a reality. Yet this story did not quite seem right. Yes, Socrates did not seek political accolades, although he did serve when called upon, both in the military and in high-level governmental positions chosen by lot. Yes, Socrates did not lead a revolution of the slaves against their masters or of Athenian women for greater empowerment, although nobody did such things in the Athens of his day. But Socrates' thought was not merely theoretical, nor were his inquiries abstracted from the place where he conducted them. Instead, I had the growing suspicion that we needed to understand the *practice* of Socrates' thought and how this practice mattered in its context. Only with such an understanding would we be in a position to dismiss "Socratic engagement" as abstruse and irrelevant. In any event, we had to ask ourselves: If Socrates really had been an analogue of today's insulated academics, would the Athenians have killed him?

*What would Socrates do?* This became the question behind my reflections on both our appropriations in the modern classroom (and the scholarly explications behind them) as well as the contemporaneous shift of attention (and money) to civic engagement as somehow more meaningful, authentic, and – perhaps most significantly yet also most obscurely – *engaged* than conventional, classroom-based learning. What of Socrates' engagement? I wondered.

As a political theorist, I also immediately began to consider these questions in the broader political context of democratic politics in the United States. If "Socrates" merely mirrored our approaches to self-actualization, if he merely functioned as another "success guru" to be placed next to Deepak Chopra and Oprah Winfrey, and if Socrates'



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philosophy embodied in the academy had been eclipsed in importance by the engagement of hands-on, community-immersed learning, then was Socrates completely irrelevant to thinking about, let alone improving, political life in the twenty-first century? I didn't want it to be so, but previous attempts to make Socrates relevant seemed guilty of domesticating him the same way my students and I had in the classroom. Socrates could be an ideal democratic citizen, an ideal dissenter, an exemplar of the liberal arts, or an enigmatic ironist. In each manifestation, Socrates became just one of us, regardless of where we stood; "Socrates" seemed infinitely malleable, and thus rarely a truly critical interlocutor.

This book emerged from these questions and reflections. It is my attempt to think long and hard about what Socrates would do and deepen our understanding of how to go about asking this question in ways that might produce alternatives to the current situation. If followers of Socrates are wont to assimilate him to their own modes of thinking (as my students and I once were), I suggest that reconstructing what Socrates did in his own, very different situation can inhibit these tendencies. Seeing the complicated and strange relationship of Socrates to his own times can illuminate how Socrates' philosophy might be translated in more complicated (and potentially estranging) ways to our own. If civic engagement threatens to overshadow "Socratic engagement" (as it seems to do at Duke and elsewhere), I show how Socrates' thought was embodied in Athenian public spaces as well as what Socrates' practices might look like in the world today. To envision what Socrates might do now, I turn our attention to innovative "Socratic" practices like the Socrates Cafés and the Clemente Courses to show how Socrates' philosophy might continue its legacy of provocative and associative questioning conducted both in public and around matters of public concern. Finally, if Socrates' ambivalent relationship to politics and democracy is too easily effaced by political theorists' desires to make something of Socrates (be it a democrat, a radical democrat, a liberal dissenter, a model of civil disobedience, or otherwise), I insist on the strangeness of Socrates, what in Greek is called his *atopia*, which must remain fundamental to all of our interpretations and appropriations if we are to keep the questions of Socrates alive and vital. "What would Socrates do?" may be unanswerable in any ultimate sense, but asking the question with honesty and rigor can, I hope, lead us to better ways of living together.

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## Gadfly explanation

In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates describes his relationship to Athens as like a gadfly to a noble horse. Like the incessant gadfly, Socrates tells the jury, "I never cease to rouse each and every one of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long and everywhere I find yourself in your company." This striking image captures the essence of Socrates' own strangeness. Socrates appears opposed to conventional political life, but like the gadfly, this anti-conventional appearance stems not from a rebellious intent so much as an unflagging commitment to question the assumptions upon which the Athenian democracy rests, to rouse the horse to wakefulness. The image of the gadfly thus helps to illuminate philosophy's peculiar challenge for democracy more generally: its unremitting interrogation that can often irritate; yet its concomitant promise of a more lively, perhaps even better, politics.