Askesis I - THE SOCRATIC TEST
Master Your Thoughts & Emotions

Background: Managing your emotions (*your psycho-physiological state)* is no easy task, especially when there are deep seated fears and insecurities that flare up when triggered by some external event. The application of a 'filtering system' for dealing with unwanted, disturbing thoughts that will only ruin your mood, dampen your enthusiasm and drain your energy, is a very useful tool for keeping your mind peaceful and functioning at its best.

This is what is called the Socratic 'Elenchus' (Ancient Greek: ἔλεγχος, Romanized: 'elenkhos', means audit, cross-examination, scrutiny) We find this in Plato's early dialogues. The **elenchus** is the technique Socrates used to investigate our inner narratives which may not always be true or justified.

In this easy to understand, anecdotal story with Socrates, we will see a demonstration of the way Socrates may have applied it.

It was a warm summer's evening in ancient Athens. The smell of jasmine was in the air…

Socrates was taking a stroll by the shimmering sea near Athens, when an acquaintance ran up to him excitedly and said, 'Socrates, do you know what I just heard about one of your students?'

'Wait a moment,' Socrates replied. 'Before you tell me, I'd like you to pass a little test. It's called the Test of Three.'

'Test of Three?'

'Yes,' Socrates continued. 'Before you tell me about my student, let's take a moment to test what you're going to say. The first test is **Truth**. Have you made absolutely sure that what you are about to tell me is true?'

'No.' the man replied. 'Actually I just heard about it.'

'All right,' says Socrates. 'So you don't really know if it's true. Now let's try the second test, the test of **Kindness**. Is what you are about to tell me about my student something good?'

'No, on the contrary…' said the man, a little embarrassed.

Socrates continued, 'You may still pass though because there is a third test—the test of **Usefulness**. Is what you want to tell me about my student going to be useful to me?'

'No, not really…'

'Well then,' concluded Socrates, 'if what you want to tell me is neither true nor kind nor even useful, then why tell it to me at all?'

As the story reveals, there are three filters we can apply to process our thoughts and beliefs before allowing them to dwell in our minds and drain our energy and mood:

1. **Is it True?**
   Is it the truth, the full truth and nothing but the truth?

2. **Is it Kind?**
   Is it kind to yourself and others given that we are all people and never perfect?

3. **Is it Useful?**
   Is there a reason it should occupy space in your mind?

Now try it for yourself:

Name: "THE SOCRATIC TEST"

Purpose: Using three 'filters' to overcome distressing, frustrating, angering, fear-filled thoughts and beliefs you may presently hold, and keep your mind peaceful and efficient.

Instructions: Bring to mind a particular thought or belief that worries, distresses or angers you, regarding your personal or professional life. It can be a large or small thing.

For example, before I became a management trainer, I was stuck in an unfulfilling job in Corporate Finance. The inner narrative that most worried, stressed and frustrated me was: ' *If I leave my job, my father will be so disappointed in me. I'll lose his love and admiration. He won't ever forgive me.'*...What is the deep-mistaken-limiting-belief that lies at the heart of that inner narrative? *'I'm not worthy*.'

A) In one or two sentences, *write down the most frustrating, angering or frightening inner narrative that comes to your mind.* It will likely be a belief you presently hold about yourself, another person or a situation. Try not to analyze it. State it simply. Start your sentence like this for example: *"I hate that….." or "I worry that…" or "I feel stuck because…."*

 B) 'Deeper down inside, I'm afraid that………

 C) If that happens, then (bad consequence)……

 D) If that happens, then (worse consequence)……

☞ E) On a deeper level, it implies that ………..(something bad about you) ex: "I am not worthy…" or "I'm a failure…"

F) How do you feel when you believe that story, narrative (D+E)?

1. Is that story, narrative (D+E) 100% TRUE? *(ETHOS)*

'Interrogate' the belief, that story-narrative to see how we may have ***distorted reality*** in our mind… Ask yourself:

-Am I perhaps ***dramatizing*** the situation and overblowing its importance?

-Am I perhaps ***generalizing*** and assuming things that are not 100% true?

-Am I perhaps ***over-personalizing***, taking offense too easily or even blaming myself for matters that are not related to me?

Now ask yourself again, is my thought or belief 100% true?

☐ NO, actually……

☐ It's only 10%-20% true
☐ It's only 21- 30% true
☐ It's only 39-50% true

2. Is that story, narrative (D+E) KIND? *(PATHOS)*

Is that narrative kind towards yourself? ☐ NO ☐ YES

Are you putting yourself down, being too critical? Self-reflection is good, but very often we judge ourselves too harshly. We're all human and we all make mistakes; the point is to learn from them, not to let them drain our energy and confidence. (You may find that you can trace back this harsh criticism or to the way you were disciplined when you were a child).

Also, is it kind towards the *other* people involved? How does the situation look from their perspective? This diagram below, may assist you in this process by showing how perspective affects our view of truth: Nobody's perfect. Have you judged them correctly? Remember that the goal of doing this transformation is to protect *your happiness*. The kindness serves *you,* by ridding *you* of toxic energy. This may be an opportunity to forgive someone and let go.

What do you see here, an old lady (looking forwards), or a young lady (looking backwards)?

3. Is that story, narrative (D+E) USEFUL ? *(LOGOS)*

Although fear can sometimes be beneficial, alerting you to real dangers, too much fear and pessimism can poison your mind with self-defeating doubt and paralyze you with indecision. It may also be concealing your deeper desire, or an opportunity. You have, therefore, to become a 'witness' to your thought-streams and encourage yourself to think thoughts which are *useful*, in order to keep them healthy and productive.

Consider your victim-story narrative or that deep-limiting-belief. What is the benefit of allowing it to run around in your mind? Does it help you in any way? Of course not ! It just perpetuates the situation.

Imagine for a moment: Who could you be if you didn't have that thought?

What sort of thoughts would you have instead? (List 3)

What would your life look like, if it did not exist?

It's really a question of shifting to a higher dimension...

Plato taught,

> ***'Whenever you want to talk about people, it's best to take a bird's eye-view and see everything all at once.'***

From this elevated perspective, imagine who you could be without your victim-story or limiting belief….I'm not asking you to do it right now, just to imagine yourself, from up above, looking down on that situation… Could you *imagine* releasing it?

Could you *imagine* letting go of your old narrative and the emotion/vibration of fear that comes with it?

☐ Yes I can imagine letting go
☐ No I can't imagine letting go, YET

Let's get more specific: *By when* are you *interested* in experiencing this freedom?

☐ A month from now?
☐ A week from now?
☐ Tomorrow?
☐ What about right now?

How can you *rephrase, change or modify* the narrative or belief, so that it's more *truthful, kind and useful* ?

Write down this new, re-phrased statement, in positive terms. Then , read it out loud, putting your heart into it, until it sounds and feels just right i.e. you will feel a flowing, uplifting vibration, you will feel energized as you say it. (If you like, say it with your hand on your heart.) **CONGRATULATIONS! You did it !**