**Socratic Dialogue Example**

SOCRATES: Atreus, I envy you greatly. If I was curator of this gallery, I would have spent a lifetime deciding which of two paintings were more beautiful, yet it only took you a single day.

ATREUS: Surely Socrates you do not give yourself enough credit. You are one of Athens most intellectually gifted citizens. You would have no difficulty in determining which of two things were more beautiful.

SOCRATES: No Atreus, you give me too much credit. I would never be so foolish as to claim that I could determine which of two things were more beautiful, for I do not even know what beauty is.

ATREUS: Surely you must know what beauty is. The notion of beauty comes so naturally to us that to claim not to know is simply foolish. Even a child knows what beauty is. Are you just putting me on, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Not at all Atreus, I am only asking what beauty is out of complete and utter sincerity. Please won't you lend me a moment of your precious time and impart on me your knowledge in this particular area?

ATREUS: Very well Socrates. Beauty is that which we find physically attractive, things that are pretty, things that look good, are pleasant to look at, pleasing to the eye and so forth. Surely you would agree?

SOCRATES: So Atreus, beauty is simply that which pleases the eye?

ATREUS: Of course, Socrates. It is as simple as that. You see, the notion of beauty is not a difficult concept to grasp; you understand it already.

SOCRATES: My dear Atreus, I am troubled by one thing. What are we to make of music that people speak of as beautiful? Are we to say that they are mistaken in their thinking and that only that which is physically appealing is beautiful?

ATREUS: No, Socrates, of course not, music too can be beautiful.

SOCRATES: But I thought beauty was that which is pretty, pleasing to the eye, things that look good, etc. Are you now saying that your definition of beauty was inadequate? If so Atreus, please try again to tell me what beauty is and be as exact as you can in your explanation this time.

ATREUS: We will simply adjust our definition of beauty to include those things that also sound beautiful. Will that do?

SOCRATES: I am not sure, Atreus. We'll have to investigate this new definition further to see if our understanding of beauty is adequate. Let me ask you this Atreus, is our dear old friend Cronus beautiful? (Here I imagine the fictional character Chronus to be a withered unattractive old man).

ATREUS: Surely Socrates, most would not think so. Cronus is of such an old age that any beauty that once was with him has now left.

SOCRATES: But Atreus, our friend Cronus has given all his wealth to charity, has worked a lifetime as a volunteer, and is widely considered a virtuous person by all who have met him. Would it be wrong to say that Cronus' character has moral beauty?

ATREUS: No, I suppose it would not be wrong to say that Socrates. I would agree that Cronus' character is morally beautiful.

SOCRATES: Therefore I am left to conclude that beauty is not only that which is appealing visually and audibly, but there can also be beauty in character, is this correct Atreus?

ATREUS: Yes this is so Socrates.

SOCRATES: And what is it about Cronus' moral character that makes him beautiful?

ATREUS: Cronus' moral character is considered beautiful because the acts he performs are morally praiseworthy; his acts are good acts.

SOCRATES: Ah, so am I to understand that beauty must express good in order to be beautiful?

ATREUS: Yes Socrates, that is right. What has beauty must express good.

SOCRATES: Good Atreus, you are doing better. I feel we are getting closer to understanding what beauty is. Now, is beauty a part of good, or is good a part of beauty? Or do both terms have identical meaning?

ATREUS: I am afraid I don't understand the question Socrates.

SOCRATES: Is all that is beautiful good, or is all that is good beautiful?

ATREUS: All that is beautiful is good.

SOCRATES: Yes, but what about the second part of the question, Atreus? Is all that is good beautiful?

ATREUS: No, Socrates. All that is good is not beautiful. For example, we might say that Pythagoras is good at math, but it would be inaccurate to say that Pythagoras is beautiful at math. So good and beauty are not interchangeable terms.

SOCRATES: Very good Atreus. So we shall say that beauty *must* be good in order to be rightfully considered beauty. But let me ask you this Atreus. Do you consider plays to be beautiful?

ATREUS: Of course Socrates, there is great beauty in plays. A play is a work of art. A play is a beautiful thing, it expresses raw human emotion, it teaches, it entertains, etc.

SOCRATES: And what about the play Orecleia, Atreus? Have you seen it? (This is a fictional play created for this dialogue)

ATREUS: Yes Socrates, I have seen it. It is a beautiful play, with all of its elegant costumes, poetic dialogue, and so on. Orecleia is a true work of art.

SOCRATES: But Atreus, the central message in Orecleia is terribly immoral; it is about cheating, stealing, and lying. Its main characters are completely immoral too. Are we to still say that it is beautiful even though it contains much that is not good?

ATREUS: Of course Orecleia is still a beautiful play, Socrates, even with all the immoral elements.

SOCRATES: But why, Atreus? We have already said that that which is beautiful must be good, yet Orecleia has much that is bad. Are we to now say that beauty can express something bad and still be beautiful?

ATREUS: Yes, it looks that way Socrates. I am not prepared to say that Orecleia is not beautiful just because it contains bad; I maintain that it is a beautiful play. Therefore, I am left to conclude that beauty can contain bad and still be beautiful.

SOCRATES: Lets not be too hasty now in our conclusions Atreus. Maybe people find the play beautiful in spite of the fact that it contains some bad? In other words, maybe the play is beautiful because it contains more good than bad?

ATREUS: By Zeus, Socrates, that's it. Beauty can still be found in that which contains some bad, as long as there is more good overall than bad.

SOCRATES: So do the people only like the morally good parts of the play? That is, do they only find beauty in the parts of the play that have a good moral message?

ATREUS: No, people enjoy the immoral aspects of the play too. People enjoy the conniving characters who cheat, lie, steal, etc. These characters do not detract from the beauty of the play; in fact, I think they add to its beauty. These unsavoury characters serve to make the play more interesting and more realistic; true to life.

SOCRATES: Do you not see what you have done just now, Atreus? You have admitted that people find beauty in badness too. Therefore, how can we hold that beauty must express good in order to be beautiful?

ATREUS: I don't know Socrates. I just know beauty when I see it. I sometimes find that which is bad beautiful, sometimes that which is good beautiful. Beauty is up to the person judging it.

SOCRATES: I see Atreus. Perhaps this new revelation will lead us to the answer of what beauty is. If beauty is up to the person judging it, then can everything be beautiful? Can even the most disgusting of creatures, the most mournful music, and the most conniving character be beautiful?

ATREUS: No Socrates, of course not. There are limits as to what can be beautiful.

SOCRATES: Great Atreus. We are now on the brink of discovering what beauty is. Tell me what the limits are to beauty. For surely where the limits of beauty are to be found, we will find the true essence of beauty.

ATREUS: Please Socrates, I have grown weary upon this endless questioning. I am not able to describe the limits of beauty. I will give one last attempt at defining beauty. See this flower that grows here? This flower is beautiful.

SOCRATES: In virtue of what is this flower beautiful?

ATREUS: This flower is beautiful in virtue of the way it makes me feel. This flower instils in me a feeling of beauty.

SOCRATES: So beauty is a feeling?

ATREUS: Beauty is that which one feels when one is looking at something appealing, or pleasing to the senses, such as this flower.

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OCRATES: So beauty is that which one feels when sensing something appealing. But appealing is the word you used to describe beauty. Therefore, your claim would be that beauty is that which one feels when one is looking at something beautiful. My dear Atreus, you have not given me any clearer picture of what beauty is than what I already had before I came here. I feel that if we spend just a few hours longer, we will be able to determine just what beauty is, Atreus. Won't you stay and enlighten an old fool?

ATREUS: Please Socrates, I must go. I have just remembered some final preparations for the gallery that I need to do right away. Goodbye Socrates.

**Tips for a Socratic Dialogue (SOCRATES ROLE)**

**Locate the statement that sums up their argument**. Socrates would often elicit such a statement by asking the person to define something, like "What is justice?" or "What is truth?" You can employ the Socratic method using any declarative statement which a person sounds certain of, like "This table is blue."

2) **Examine the implications of the statement**. Assume that their statement is false and find an example where the statement is false. Can you provide a scenario, real or imaginary, that is inconsistent with their statement? Wrap this scenario in a question:

* "To a blind person, is this table still blue?"
* If the person says no, proceed to the next step.
* If the person says yes, ask: "What makes it blue to a blind person, and not green, or pink, or purple?" In other words, if someone can't see, what makes the table blue? This question might stump some people who regard colour as only existing in the perception of the human experiencing it. If so, proceed to the next step.

**3) Change the initial statement to take the exception into account**. "So the table is blue only to those who can see."

**4) Challenge the new statement with another question**. E.g. "If the table is in the middle of an empty room, where no one can see it, is it still blue?" Eventually, you should come to a statement that the person has agreed to but that contradicts their original statement. In this example, you might end up pointing out the subjectivity of the perception of color and argue (using questions, not statements) that color only exists in a person's mind as a result of their perception; it isn't actually a property of the table. In other words, the table is not blue. Your opponent's perception of it is blue.