

1 INSTRUCTIONS: Print this page for next class's Socratic Circle. Bring your philosophy book. Complete the
2 handout on the second page.

3 Socrates & Zen by Geoff Sheehan

4 Many share a common picture of Socrates: a goggle-eyed, pot-bellied, barely clothed man, asking all and
5 sundry difficult, and irritating, questions about virtue, a fixture in the public places, shops and gymnasia in
6 and around the central market place of fifth century BCE Athens. What was he on about? One answer to
7 this question, 'searching for definitions', seems on the face of it utterly inadequate: Socrates was tried and
8 executed because he was searching for definitions!

9 Yet definitions are important. For Socrates, only if we make clear and distinct definitions which can
10 illuminate all situations under discussion can we be said to know what a particular moral value is. So we
11 can know what bravery is only if we can discern what the many acts we call 'brave' have in common, from
12 the bravery of the soldier in pitched battle, to the bravery of the worker who stands up to bullying in the
13 workplace, to the bravery of the depressive who crawls out of bed every morning despite every fibre of
14 their being urging them to stay put. But simply to arrive at a common definition – even assuming that this
15 is possible – seems to me to fall short. Socrates is after more than the knowledge enshrined in definitions; or
16 rather, the knowledge he is after must be passionate knowledge.

17 What then of the sort of knowledge or wisdom that Socrates is seeking? Perhaps we can approach this
18 through one of Socrates' most puzzling statements: "No one does wrong willingly" (Gorgias, 509e). For
19 Socrates, if one knows the correct course of action, one undertakes it. The corollary is that if one doesn't
20 follow the correct course, then one simply did not know it (and therefore cannot be punished!).

21 Knowledge then is far beyond a question of definitions. We might say that wisdom is a matter of life or
22 death. A Zen-like parable told by Mark Vernon may help in this regard:

23 *One day a dispassionate young man approached the philosopher and casually said, "O great Socrates, I come to you*
24 *for knowledge!"*

25 *The philosopher took the young man down to the sea, waded in with him, and then dunked him under the water for*
26 *thirty seconds. When he let the young man up for air, Socrates asked him to repeat what he wanted.*

27 *"Knowledge, O great one!" he sputtered.*

28 *Socrates put him under the water again, only this time a little longer.*

29 *After repeated dunkings and responses, the philosopher asked, "What do you want?" The young man finally gasped,*

30 *"Air. I want air!"*

31 *"Good," answered Socrates. "Now, when you want knowledge as much as you wanted air, you shall have it."*

32 (from Wellbeing by Mark Vernon, 2008)

33 The response Socrates wants from those he questions is not simply a definition: that definition must be
34 grounded in a passion for understanding the value to be defined, to the extent that a failure to live the
35 value would be instant proof that it was in fact not known. To put the matter another way – only if we are
36 as full of knowledge of our values as the young man wants to be full of air, can we be said to know their
37 meaning.

38 We are no further along the road to the sort of moral knowledge which Socrates is searching for; but
39 perhaps the koans here may make the path a little easier to travel.

Name: _____

As you read the text, select a few phrases that you find meaningful or interesting. Write each phrase in the first column below, then write your reaction (a comment, question, connection made, or analysis) each quote in the second column.

If you are still confused, watch this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JYXrBt5nBfc>

| <u>Line number</u> | <u>From the text</u> | <u>My thoughts</u> |
|--------------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| | | |

Make at least 2 connections between the passage above and Euthyphro