

**“SOCRATES, WOULD YOU LIKE TO JOIN  
THE CHIT CHAT CLUB?”**

**BY**

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**SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA**

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Good evening, gentlemen.

Perhaps no one enjoyed a good “chat” more than the Athenian philosopher Socrates. But, gentlemen, his chats were not of the superficial or rambling sort. Instead, they were characterized by penetrating questions put to his interlocutor in an attempt to elucidate truth about the important subject at hand. All thirty-five of the Socratic dialogues were written by his student Plato and, with a few exceptions, were named for the interlocutor with whom Socrates is speaking. Often funny, and always intellectually stimulating, some lead to a final conclusion, some to an impasse called an *aporia*, and some to an outright refutation of the interlocutor’s position called an *elenchus*.

British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once quipped, “...the European philosophical tradition...consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.” That was no hyperbole, gentlemen, for when reading the dialogues one finds Socrates verbally tackling philosophical problems in at least five of the major branches of philosophy: ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, aesthetics, and politics.

After rereading one of Plato’s most beautiful dialogues, “*The Phaedrus*”, I thought to myself, “If Socrates were alive today, would he be interested in joining the Chit Chat Club?” I gave this question some thought and would like to share with all of you this evening my answer to that question. But to do so, I thought it would be great fun to depart from the usual essay format at the Chit Chat Club and fashion my answer in the form beloved by Socrates, dialectic.

So tonight I invite you, gentlemen of the Chit Chat Club, to indulge in a bit of fantasy as I share with you a little dialectic or, dare I say, “a chat,” I had with Socrates the other day in San Francisco’s Union Square.

**CHARACTERS:**

MARC CRUCIGER, A MEMBER OF THE CHIT CHAT CLUB

SOCRATES, A PHILOSOPHER

**TIME:**

MIDDAY - JUNE , 11, 2011

**SCENE:**

UNION SQUARE, SAN FRANCISCO. A GROUP OF YOUNG MEN HAVE JUST SHUFFLED OFF LOOKING A BIT PERPLEXED AFTER HAVING A LONG CONVERSATION WITH A SHORT, DISHEVELED, ELDERLY, UNATTRACTIVE, WHITE-HAIRED MAN

Marc

Excuse me, sir.....I think I know you.

Socrates

I don't think so....In fact, I am quite sure we have never met.

M

True, but I've seen you here in Union Square recently, often talking to young men.....or, maybe I saw your face in a newspaper. I'm not sure.

S

I have no idea what a newspaper is, but it is true that I come to Union Square and have conversations with people. In fact, I was just speaking to those young men you see walking away over there.

M

Yes, I saw them leaving you. They seemed a bit flummoxed and confused.

S

Well, like everyone, they want pat answers to profound questions and get frustrated when I ask them to define their terms and clarify their thoughts.

M

And what were you discussing with those fellows?

S

Democracy. They believe it is the best system of government.

M

And.....you had a different opinion?

S

Well let me say that I am not sure democracy is the best form of government. (*Plato, "The Republic"*)

M

Please forgive me, sir, for I haven't introduced myself. My name is Marc. What's yours?

S

My name is Socrates.

M

Holy Zeus!

S

No, young man, my name is Socrates, not Zeus!

M

Yes, I heard you.....Socrates! I am just amazed to meet you, Socrates!

S

Thank you, Marc.

M

If I'm not mistaken, the Delphic Oracle once said that there is no one wiser than you in Athens and, now that you've come to San Francisco, I'm sure that's the case here too.

S

Marc, I think the priestess at Delphi was exaggerating! Perhaps she had consumed too much wine when she was speaking to my boyhood friend, Chaerephon. To be perfectly honest, Marc, I know nothing. (*Plato, The Apology"*)

M

I sense a bit of irony, Socrates. Surely, you're being far too modest!

S

Marc, as I have said many times, "I make no claim to wisdom, great or small." (*Plato, "The Apology"*) But I do have an enquiring mind, and I am always in search of the truth. In fact, as I once told Gorgias, "...I have a pure love of knowing the truth." (*Plato, "The Gorgias"*) So, the best way to describe me is that I am a fellow who likes to ask a lot of questions in order to learn the truth about important subjects.

M

Such as .....the best type of government.

S

Yes, I have given that a great deal of thought.

M

Well, Socrates, suffice it to say that I'm absolutely thrilled to meet you!

S

But why, young man, may I ask?

M

Well, Socrates, I am a member of a group..... of gentlemen..... that meets monthly, and we have an opening in our club, and I would be thrilled for you to join it.

S

What, in the name of Zeus, is .....a club?

M

Well, Socrates, the word "club" is a modern term used to describe a group of people organized for a common purpose who usually meet regularly.

S

Oh! I have never heard that term used in that way. The only club I know is best described as a big stick.

M

You are right, Socrates. A club is a big stick, too. But it can also refer to a group of people who meet.....(interrupted)

S

Yes, I now understand that word usage. I thank you for the definition. But tell me, Marc, does this club of yours have a name?

M

Yes, Socrates. It is called the Chit Chat Club.

S

Did you say Kit Kat Club?

M

No,...Chit... Chat... Club.

S

I am sorry, Marc. My hearing is failing as I age.

M

A common malady as we age, I am sorry to say, Socrates.

S

What did you say?

M

Nothing! Nothing! Sorry, Socrates, I'll try to speak a bit louder for I am known for having a very soft voice.

S

And I am known for asking questions.....but we digress. Tell me, Marc, what do you do at this Chit Chat Club? Why in the name of Zeus would I want to join it?

M

Well, we meet for libations...

S

Now that sounds delightful.....I do like wine.

M

Yes, Socrates, and we do not water down our wine like you do in Greece.

S

Really! So all of you must become quite inebriated at your Chit Chat Club. You know I went to a symposium once, and I was the only one who left sober. (*Plato, "The Symposium"*)

M

I think I remember reading about that party, Socrates, and, as I recall, you discussed the topic of love. (*Plato, "The Symposium"*)

S

Yes, we did, Marc.

M

And there were a number of people there. Alcebiades, Aristophanes....(interrupted)

S

Aristophanes is an idiot! A funny one, perhaps, but still an idiot!

M

Yes, I agree, Socrates. But for some reason he really dislikes you. I remember reading his play "*The Clouds*" and...(interrupted)

S

Let's not talk about that fat, flatulent fellow!

M

OK.

S

"Ohhh?????Kay?????? What, in the name of Zeus, does the word "OK" mean?"

M

It is slang for saying, I agree

S

Thank you. Definitions are very important to me.

M

Yes, I know.

S

Well, Marc, it is very important to define terms. Many people bandy words about like, "justice," and "virtue" without being able to define them. But I digress again. Sorry. Now about this Chit Chat Club....

M

Again, we meet for libations...

S

I like libations but I can get them anywhere.

M

True, Socrates....but, please, let me finish.

S

I am sorry...

M

Right...we meet for drinks and then dine.

S

Sounds very good so far...

M

Yes, but that is not the real purpose of our meeting.

S

Well, get on with it, young man! Pray tell, what is the purpose of your club.

M

It is to listen to one of the gentlemen read an original essay about a topic of his interest. After the reading, each member is called upon to make a comment about the subject.

S

Mmmmmmmmmmmmm....go on, Marc.

M

Well, that's it, really.....and we meet 10 times a year.

S

Mmmmmmmmmmmmm.....

M

Well, Socrates, would that amuse you?

S

Well, it might amuse me, Marc.

M

I mean.....would you be interested in joining our club, Socrates?

S

In order for me to answer you, Marc, I shall have to ask you some more questions.

M

That does not surprise me at all, Socrates. So, please, be my guest, and I'll try to answer them the best that I can.

S

Good! I admire men who are willing to engage in a serious intellectual exchange. First of all, what subjects are brought up at the Chit Chat Club?

M

Many, Socrates. One member recently brought up the topic of justice. Another recently brought up the topic of education among the youth; both topics I am sure would interest you.

S

Indeed they do, Marc! Both very interesting and important topics.....justice.....and .....education..... I have thought a great deal about both those things. But, what of you, Marc? What subjects have you brought up at the Chit Chat Club?

M

I once discussed the topic of love. (*Cruciger, M.P. "The Biochemistry of Romantic Love" [www.chilit.org](http://www.chilit.org)*)

S

Ahhhhhhhhhhh.....love.....a most interesting human emotion. "A madness...that is "a gift of the gods." (*Plato, "The Phaedrus"*) While I was in Athens I discussed that very same topic with a young man named Phaedrus (*Plato, "The Phaedrus"*), and I also discussed it during that symposium I mentioned a few moments ago that was held at Agathon's house in Athens. (*Plato, "The Symposium"*)

M

Yes, I know.

S

How do you know about this and about other things that I have mentioned, Marc?

M

Well, Socrates, I read about them.

S

Ahhhhhhhhhhh.....I would wager that young student of mine by the name of Plato had something to do with that! Perhaps you know that he was an aspiring author of tragedies before meeting me. He then burned them after deciding to become a philosopher.

M

I did not know that, Socrates.

S

Yes, however, he still likes to write. He is forever scribbling things while I am engaged in a discussion with the youth of Athens. Sometimes I think he is more interested in scribbling than he is with the search for truth. He is a bright fellow, though..... a lot of promise there.....but, by Zeus, I wish he would stop his scribbling and pay more attention.....if so, he might actually become a good philosopher!

M

Well, Socrates, you might be pleased to learn that Plato.....(interrupted)

S

Now Marc, let us not digress. Enough of Plato right now! For Zeus's sake, let us keep to the subject at hand, namely this club of yours called the Chit Chat Club and whether or not I would like to become a member.

M

I am sorry, Socrates.

S

You can be most certain, Marc, that the topics of love, justice and education interest me. But tell me, what is the method by which these topics are brought up in your meetings?

M

Well, Socrates, they take the form of an essay.





S

Pray tell, Marc, why not?

M

Time does not permit for that.

S

*"Time does not permit for that."* (spoken with a bit of amusement/disdain and a rolling of the eyes) Tell me, Marc, are you interested in finding the truth on important subjects?

M

Yes, indeed I am, Socrates.

S

And do you think that is the case with all the other members of this Chit Chat Club?

M

Yes, I believe that is the case.

S

And do you think that there are some absolute truths that can be discovered by men..... truths that are true for all men at all times and all places.

M

Yes, Socrates, I do.

S

Well, you have obviously not met Protagoras!

M

No, I have not. But, wait! Now that I think about it, Socrates, was he not that fellow..... I think that they are called Sophists.....who once said, "...man is the measure of all things" ? (*Plato, " The Theaetetus "*)

S

Yes, he was, Marc. And do you know what he meant by that statement?

M

I think so, Socrates. I believe he meant that there are no absolute truths. That what is true for one man may be false for another man. And what may be true for one culture may not be true for another.

S

Yes, that is what he and his colleagues promote. In fact, Protagoras and others like him make their living by traveling from city to city instructing the youth on how to persuade by means of clever speeches and arguments. The craft is called "rhetoric" and those who teach it are called "Sophists." They delight in verbal games but do not concern themselves with absolute truths. To them, all truth is relative. The purpose of their teaching is to impart to their students these verbal methods of persuasion.

M

Well, Socrates, there are many today who hold that there are no absolute truths, and they make speeches to substantiate their claims. Some of them are referred to as postmodernists. They claim that truths are not cross-cultural. An extreme example is they might argue that illiteracy amongst women in some cultures is acceptable if that is what the culture believes is the right way to do things and for others to insist otherwise is wrong.

S

THAT is why we need philosophers, Marc. Those who have left the cave of illusion and ignorance to see the light of knowledge of what is right and what is good, and who return to the cave to inform those who are still in chains and know only ignorance. (*Plato, "The Republic"*)

M

I agree, Socrates. We do have need and will always have need of those enlightened souls.

S

I might add, Marc, that in regard to your example, namely women receiving an education, I am not one for preventing that....quite the contrary, in fact. (*Plato, "The Republic"*)

M

I know that, Socrates.

S

How?

M

Because I read it.

S

I am impressed.

M

It might interest you to know, Socrates, that I actually delivered a speech about this very subject of relative truth in today's culture....about these postmodernists.....at the Chit Chat Club several years ago. (*Cruciger, M.P. "Postmodernism—Have We Seen the End of It?" [www.chilit.org](http://www.chilit.org)*)

S

Really?

M

Yes.

S

I am, indeed, sorry to hear that this moral relativism is still with us, but, I must admit, I am not surprised. But tell me, Marc, was your essay about these "postmodernists," or whatever they are called, well received by the gentlemen of your club?

M

I think so, Socrates.

S

How do you know?

M

Well, they all thanked me for my speech and seemed most appreciative.

S

Do you think that they understood all the concepts?

M

I think they did.....(pondering a bit).....but....come to think of it.....I am not..... absolutely sure.

S

Why?

M

Well, I....(interrupted)

S

Did you spend enough time with each member allowing for questions and answers concerning the veracity of your point of view or, importantly, the other members' points of view?

M

No, I am afraid I did not, Socrates.

S

Let me guess why.....*"because time did not permit for it?"* (said with an ironic tone)

M

Yes, I am afraid you are correct, Socrates.

S

Have you ever heard the word, dialectic, Marc?

M

Yes, I have Socrates.

S

And what does it mean?

M

Well, Socrates, it is a word used to describe a verbal exchange between individuals using logical arguments in an attempt to arrive at the truth.

S

Very good, young man!

M

Thank you, Socrates.

S

Now tell me, Marc, did you ever hear the story of my taking a young lad with no formal education...a servant boy, actually, and in a few moments of dialectic he....(interrupted)

M

YES! I do recall that story, Socrates! Oh, I'm terribly sorry for interrupting you.

S

That is all right, Marc. Go on.

M

Well, I believe it happened when you were talking with the Sophist, Meno. You asked his servant boy, who was there at the time, questions, and in a very short time the boy, who had no formal education as I recall, discovered a geometry theory! I was amazed when I heard that story! (*Plato, "The Meno"*)

S

And how did I elicit that mathematical truth from the uneducated boy?

M

By asking him questions, Socrates. You actually elicited a law in geometry by patiently asking him questions....using dialectic to be precise.

S

Exactly, Marc.

M

Yes....that is the methodology of your philosophical inquiries....by asking penetrating questions you attempt to elicit the truth of the topic at hand and, in so doing, educate the person with whom you are speaking. You know, Socrates, some academies refer to this technique as the "Socratic method."

S

Well, Marc, I am not one for beating my own drum, as I am sure you know. However, you have heard correctly about my methods and goals, young man. I use this technique of inquiry and teaching because I find it is the very best method for seeking the truth....or, at least, to encourage those with whom I am speaking to question their definitions and conclusions.

M

But, Socrates, what about the reading of an essay that is carefully researched and thought out by its writer? Remember, I told you that a poet once described an essay as "a dialogue of the mind with itself."

S

I do recall that. And I told you that I find it a very, very curious thought.

M

Why, Socrates?

S

Well, Marc, do you think it is really possible to have a dialogue with oneself?

M

Well.....in the strict sense, perhaps not. But, Socrates, is it not possible that an intelligent man of high moral and intellectual integrity..... essentially the gentlemen that we have at the Chit Chat Club.....could not that man discover truths through research and conversations and then convey them in a written speech..... as we do at the Chit Chat Club?

S

Yes, Marc, I think that could be the case. But let us say, for the sake of argument, that I were a member of the Chit Chat Club and gave a speech from my prepared text, an essay as you call it, to the members. Without sufficient time for in depth questions and answers.....a dialectic .....I would not know if all those at the table understood my reasoning and conclusions. And, most important, without a lengthy dialectic, there would be no opportunity to refute my arguments or conclusions. Do you see my point?

M

Yes, but...(interrupted)

S

By the way, I am curious.....what are the professions of the men in your club?

M

Well we have doctors.....

S

Good! I have always held the medical profession in the highest esteem.

M

I know.

S

I suppose that you learned that by reading?

M

Yes.....but back to your question, Socrates.....we also have theologians.

S

Excellent! Excellent! I would find it most interesting to engage in a dialectical discussion about religion with those members.

M

And we have teachers.

S

A noble field .....IF..... done correctly! Not like the Sophists!

M

I agree. And, Socrates, one of our members is a teacher of history.

S

Ahhhhh....history. It would be interesting to discuss his thoughts on our long conflict with Sparta and to contrast his ideas with those of Thucydides.

M

Yes, it would be interesting. And, Socrates, one member is a teacher of ethics.

S

Ahhhhh.....meeting him would be a pure delight! I would like to inquire as to what he holds as ethical truths.... and.....how he arrived at them.

M

And Socrates we also have judges in our club.

S

Ahhhhh....men who concern themselves with justice, one of my favorite areas of intellectual inquiry. I would certainly enjoy having a dialogue with them.

M

That would not surprise me in the least, Socrates.

S

But, Marc,..... do you have any .....philosophers .....in your group?

M

Well, Socrates, if you consider a philosopher a lover of and a searcher for wisdom, I would contend that all the members of the Chit Chat Club are philosophers, if not by profession, certainly at heart.

S

Yes, Marc, your Chit Chat Club sounds like it is composed of very interesting men—honorable and erudite fellows with inquiring minds and good souls who ponder subjects of importance and share their thoughts with speeches on those topics. I applaud that.

M

Thank you, Socrates. I am flattered.

S

However, young man, it is the format of your club that is problematic for me. You see, I find that the dialectic is the very best method to search for the truth and to teach those who thirst for the truth. So, I must..... with the greatest of respect..... decline your offer to join your most illustrious club.

M

I understand, Socrates.

S

And, Marc, I hasten to add that I am not a writer. Unlike my student, Plato, I find I have no time for that sort of thing nor do I endorse it. I much prefer the dialectic in my intellectual encounters with those who are in search of the truth.

M

.....Several times during our conversation, Socrates, I have told you that I knew about your activities and thoughts, and you questioned me as to how I came to know about them.

S

That is correct, Marc.

M

And, Socrates, I told you that I learned these things by way of reading about them.

S

Yes, indeed you did inform me of that, Marc. And I will confess that I have been most impressed with the amount of knowledge you have of my encounters with Meno, Phaedrus, and Protagoras, to mention a few, despite the fact that you were not present at those events.

M

Thank you, Socrates. But let me ask you this: would you agree that my knowledge of those dialectics is accurate, despite the fact that I was not present when they occurred?

S

Yes, that is the case.

M

And, Socrates, would you agree that if there had been no written records of these conversations that you had with Meno, Phaedrus or Protagoras, the knowledge gleaned from those encounters would benefit no one except those who had engaged in the dialectic?

S

Well, I suppose that is the case, yes, Marc.

M

And, Socrates, would it not be the case that writing can impart wisdom to those who read it? After all, I did gain knowledge of you and your thoughts by reading manuscripts of the events.

S

Yes, that is true, Marc.

M

And, Socrates, if an essay.... a written document, if you will..... is "...a dialogue of the mind with itself..." then, in a sense, could not an essay be a type of dialectic?

S

Yes, Marc, I see your point. But there are two very important issues to consider.

M

And what are those Socrates?

S

First, how would the reader of the essay know whether the writer is a man of moral integrity and intellectual honesty?

M

Well, Socrates, one would not know for sure, yet one could try to glean those things by evaluating the writer's thoughts and ideas.

S

Well, one could try, Marc. But the Sophists can be quite crafty.

M

True.

S

And, second, and most important, the reader can never engage in dialectic with the words on a scroll, can he?

M

Yes, that is true.

S

As I once told Phaedrus, the written word is like a painting because it "...maintains a solemn silence." (*Plato, "The Phaedrus"*) If the reader tries to engage with the text, it always gives the same answer. Is that not true, Marc?

M

Yes, that is true, Socrates.

S

And, let us suppose that the writer is wise and the manuscript is truthful; those writings can still be misunderstood by the reader. You see, Marc, writings, as I also said to Phaedrus, cannot "protect and defend themselves." (*Plato, "The Phaedrus"*)

M

I understand, Socrates. But writings do allow for a certain immortality of ideas from serious thinkers.....like philosophers.

S

Marc, I will concede that taking time to read the thoughts of others who have worked hard in discovering truths is worthwhile, but it can never compare with the dialectic method of truth seeking.

M

Well, Socrates, after THIS dialectic with you today....and I see it is midday now..... I can understand why you will not join the Chit Chat Club. But your decision saddens me because I believe our club's members would delight in your knowledge.

S

You flatter me too much! Remember, Marc, I know nothing!

M

Well, Socrates, if you know nothing there is surely no hope for the rest of us.

S

Never, never give up hope, Marc.

M

Thank you Socrates. I shall always remember that.

S

Good.

M

There is one thing I would like to say, Socrates.

S

And what is that my dear fellow?

M

I believe that you would enjoy the company of my fellow Clubmen.

S

Yes, Marc, if those men of the Chit Chat Club are as you say, namely, philosophers at heart and are willing to engage in dialectic in the search for truth..... then, yes, I would enjoy their company. Gentlemen with inquiring minds who delight in the search for wisdom are the kind of men I adore.

M

Trust me when I say to you, my dear Socrates, the men of the Chit Chat Club are, indeed, just as you described them.

S

Lovers of wisdom?

M

Yes, Socrates.

S

And seekers of truth?

M

Without doubt, Socrates.

S

That is good, and it warms my heart.

M

Thank you.....speaking of truth, before we part, Socrates, I must dispel one truth that you seem to hold so dear.

S

Pray tell, Marc, what is that truth? I am most curious.

M

The truth that you know nothing, Socrates.

S

Well, Marc, I do know nothing.

M

FALSE, my dear Socrates! You NOW know about the Chit Chat Club of San Francisco AND you NOW know that you do not wish to be a member!

S

By Zeus! You are right, Marc! I guess that I am not so ignorant after all. Thank you for giving me that bit of knowledge.

M

You are most welcome, Socrates.

S

I must be getting along. I have enjoyed talking with you, Marc. I would like to do it again some time.

M

Thank you, Socrates. I would love to do it too.

S

Speaking of doing, Marc, I would like to do something for your club.



M

Pray tell, what would you like to do for our club, Socrates?

S

I would like to encourage my student.....Plato....you know, the scribbler.....to join your club. He has a good mind and heart, and, unlike me, he loves to write, so I am sure he would be an excellent member for your Chit Chat Club.

M

Of that, Socrates, I have no doubt!