

# SOKRATES

## The Game of Dialectic

**NUMBER OF PLAYERS** This is a game for three or more players, ages “old enough to talk” to “still alive between the ears.” In each round, one of the players assumes the role of Sokrates (the questioner) while another assumes the role of Sokrates’ “victim” (the respondent). The rest make up a jury of bystanders, one of them presiding over the jury and serving as timekeeper.

**EQUIPMENT** A timepiece, a sack of marbles (containing as many marbles as there are players, all plain but three: one red, one blue, and one greenish-yellow), scorekeeping materials (paper, pencil), and wine (this last being entirely optional).

**OBJECT OF THE GAME** Overall, the object of the game is to win by being awarded the largest number of points. In any given round of the game, the object for the questioner is to expose a contradiction in the statements made by the respondent. The object for the respondent is to answer the questioner as honestly and straightforwardly as he can without contradicting himself. Finally, the bystanders’ function is to make sure play runs as smoothly as possible: they are to censure the questioner and the respondent for any infractions of the rules, commend them for particularly good moves, and serve as judges concerning whatever decisions may need to be made during the course of the play.

**WHO PLAYS WHAT ROLE WHEN** A leader—the “host”—emerges and volunteers to be responsible for administering the marbles, keeping score, and staying detached enough to remind the players, “this is just a game,” should anything like a quarrel or a fight threaten to break out. This role is permanent for the duration of the game, but the player filling it may fill other roles as well—that is, he may still play. If there are more than three players, then any of them, including the host, may choose to be a permanent bystander: anyone who does this serves throughout the game as a member of the jury of bystanders but never draws a marble. The host then has all the active players (those who have not chosen permanent bystanders status) draw marbles from the sack to determine which role each will play in the opening round of the game: plain marble—bystander; greenish-yellow marble—president of the jury and timekeeper; red marble—respondent (i.e., “victim”); blue marble—questioner (i.e., Sokrates). The player who wins any given round takes on the opposite role in the next (i.e., if the winner of any given round was the questioner in that round, he takes on the role of respondent in the next; if he was the respondent in the round he won, he takes on the role of questioner in the next), and then the host has all the other active players (including himself, unless he himself just won the last round) draw marbles as before to select another jury president/timekeeper and a new opposite number for the previous round’s winner. The rotation of roles continues in this way for the remainder of the game.

**HOW TO PLAY** In each round, the questioner—Sokrates—has seven minutes to try to expose a contradiction in the opinions of the respondent. He opens the round with questions designed to identify a subject of real interest to the respondent, and then proceeds to pose, concerning that subject, some central question of the form “What is \_\_\_?” If he fails to pose such a question within two minutes (as determined by the timekeeper), the respondent wins the round by default. If he does pose such a question within two minutes, then play is not interrupted at the two-minute mark, and he simply continues to ask his questions. Should he eventually succeed in bringing out a contradiction in the answers of the respondent, he wins the round. If not, the respondent wins.

**RULES OF ENGAGEMENT** Though the questioner may ask any questions he likes and may make whatever statements or comments he likes along the way (and may, in general, carry on in a thoroughly Sokratic fashion), there is, of course, no point in his making any *external* criticism of the respondent’s statements. His aim, after all, is neither to set the respondent straight about anything nor to prove that any statement made by the respondent is

false, but only to bring out any *contradiction* he can in the *respondent’s* opinions about how his central “What is \_\_\_?” question should be answered. The questioner may not, therefore, declare victory on the grounds that there is an inconsistency between one of the respondent’s answers and some statement or statements made by the respondent on some *previous* occasion (i.e., prior to the current round of play), or on the grounds that the respondent’s position is outrageously or palpably false. The respondent, for his part, must answer as honestly and as unevasively as he can in a genuine attempt to respond to the questioner’s “What is \_\_\_?” question. He must do his best, in his answers, to say what he actually thinks, and he must, if at all possible, avoid the answer “I don’t know.” The respondent may not stall; he must answer as quickly and clearly as he can. He may ask questions only for the purpose of clarification, and he may make no long speeches. It is up to the bystanders to determine the legitimacy of his questions and the responsiveness of his replies. If and when play is interrupted by the bystanders, time is suspended. If the bystanders have not reached a decision on whatever problem they’re considering by the end of three minutes (their time begins as soon as Sokrates’ time is suspended), then the jury’s president makes the final ruling. (If either the questioner or the respondent disagrees with the bystanders’ judgment as to who has *won* a round, he is given two minutes to argue for his position. The bystanders then obey the reasoning that seems best to them at the time—again with a three minute limit and under the governance of their president—and issue a final decision. Play then proceeds to the next round.)

**SCORING AND WINNING** At the beginning of the game, the scorekeeper lists the names of the players who have not chosen to be permanent bystanders. (The players may either give themselves Greek names for the course of the game or use their given ones.) Whenever one of the players wins a round (as described above), he is awarded a point. At the beginning of the game (before the assignment of roles for the first round), the players should decide on either a maximum score or a time limit (two hours, for example). If there is a maximum score, the first player to reach it wins. If there is a time limit, then the player with the largest number of points at the end of that time wins. If there is a tie for first, one or more tie-breaking rounds may be held to determine a winner.

### NOTES AND COMMENTS

- Only active players (those who have not elected permanent bystander status) may score points by winning rounds, and they may do so only while playing one of the two central roles.
- All the questioner has to do to win a round is (a) pose a “What is \_\_\_?” question within the two minutes allotted for this purpose and (b) unmask a contradiction in the answers of the respondent in the time that remains. For beginners, this may not be as easy as it sounds, but with practice, one improves.
- All the *respondent* has to do to win a round is respond to the questions of the questioner without contradicting himself. This is, even for old hands, *definitely* not as easy as it sounds, as one improves *here* only by abandoning or altering one or more of one’s beliefs.
- If all goes well in the play of the game, the bystanders actually do next to nothing—except, of course, enjoy the dialogue that takes place between the questioner and the respondent. Even a judgment on their part as to who has won a given round will be superfluous if the outcome is evident to all. This is as it should be.
- The game is generally most successful if the players are familiar with the dialogues of Plato, but at least one person played it successfully without ever reading them (namely, Sokrates himself), and so one *can* just plunge in.