Elke Wiss

HOW TO KNOW EVERYTHING

Ancient wisdom for modern life, from Socrates to Sherlock Holmes

Translated by David Doherty

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About the Author

Elke Wiss is a practical philosopher and internationally bestselling author. She leads workshops in practical philosophy and the art of asking questions, teaching Socratic dialogue within organisations and offering individual philosophic consultations. Wiss is also a producer, writer and director of podcasts, theatre productions, numerous articles, short stories, monologues and narrative philosophical poetry. *How to Know Everything* is her first book.

WHAT READERS ARE SAYING

‘A great book for anyone who wants to better understand themselves and others!’

‘A ray of hope in a time of dispute and polarisation.’

‘I found this book so valuable! A real enrichment for my daily life.’

‘Everyone should read this. What fascinating conversations we would have then!’

‘What a gem this book is!’

‘Highly recommended for anyone who usually gets bogged down in discussions, quarrels, disagreements that lead to nothing.’

‘Elke Wiss makes practical philosophy manageable for everyone. A must read!’

‘Its powerful message urges us to connect more with each other and with ourselves.’

‘A cheerful, unconventional book.’

‘An inspiring, easy-to-read book, full of practical exercises to get yourself started right away. For me it’s a must read!’

‘A clear and practical book for brave thinkers who want to start having better, deeper conversations.’

‘A disarming and urgent book in today’s world!’

‘Some books can actually change your worldview or your daily actions, and as far as I’m concerned this is one of them. I recommend it to everyone.’

‘Read this book, it will enrich your life!’

... to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the *questions themselves* like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*[1]

Introduction

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there.

Rumi, Persian Sufi poet and mystic[1]

'GO ON, ASK your question,' Socrates said over my shoulder. 'Just do it. You've got every reason to.'

I blinked. 'Look, Socrates,' I explained, 'I know you're from about two thousand five hundred years ago, so maybe you've missed a trick or two, but these days that's not something you can just go ahead and ask ...'

This was a good few years ago. I had signed up for a course in 'Practical Philosophy', my introduction to the concept. I was hoping to gain some theory and practical know-how about holding philosophical conversations and clarifying my thinking. As a writer and director of stage plays, I also wanted to get a clearer handle on my own thinking during the creative process of putting a performance together. Perhaps, more to the point, I wanted to be more precise in the questions I asked my actors. So there I was, trying to get to grips with the practical side of philosophy.

On the first day of the course we broke for lunch and I found myself sharing a table with five classmates: four women and one man. Before long, the conversation turned to the topic of children. We went round the table. Do you have children? Yeah, one son. What about you? Two daughters, quite a handful! Everyone was asked a few follow-up questions: How old are they? Are they already at school? Does yours have an iPad yet?

It was the kind of chit-chat I knew well. I was in my late twenties and I'd already had a bunch of conversations just like it. As soon as someone says, 'No, I don't have kids', there's either an awkward silence or the Q&A quickly moves on to the next person. It never failed to surprise me: people with children love talking about having children, but it seems that we prefer to leave the stories of childless people untold. Even then I used to think: hang on a sec, everyone has a story to tell. What makes us decide on someone else's behalf, by not asking them a single question, that *their* story doesn't need to be heard?

Soon it was my turn and I duly said that I didn't have children. I took a breath, all set to say a bit more about myself. At the time I taught a lot of theatre classes in schools and I was brimming over with great stories about kids. Stories I was more than happy to share.

I was also eager to hear about other people's experiences and what motivated them in life. And to share my doubts about whether or not I should have children. I mean, how do you know if it's what you really want? It seems like such a big step. A defining moment. Something you really have to think about. How do you arrive at a decision like that?

But before I could open my mouth, the words 'And what about you?' had hastily been directed at the next participant. Everyone switched their focus to the woman next to me, who was soon chatting enthusiastically about her seven-year-old. Everyone

studiously avoided catching my eye: apparently my story had no place in this conversation.

I found that strange. After all, we were more or less the same age and shared at least one interest, given that we had all signed up for the same course. Surely this was an ideal opportunity for more in-depth discussion, in a setting where you needn't be hemmed in by the standard tropes and habits of conversation.

A kind of indignation began bubbling up inside me. Why start a conversation about children and then only include a select few? Why would you tacitly determine whose stories are told and whose stories are passed over? Why not let each person decide for themselves whether or not they have something to share?

Once the woman beside me had said all she had to say about her little girl, the question was put to the next person – a woman in her early forties, with playful brown curls. 'No,' she said, 'I don't have kids,' and instantly the group was all set to move on.

That was when time stood still and I heard a voice behind me say, 'Go on, ask your question.' Socrates flashed me an encouraging smile. There was a twinkle of enjoyment in his eyes as he watched me squirm. 'Just do it! You've got every reason to.'

I looked at him and explained that was simply not the done thing in our day and age. 'I can't just come out with a question like that ...'

Socrates raised an eyebrow. 'That's the whole problem with you guys. You've come up with this code of conduct that labels some questions uncomfortable and inappropriate, while others are positive and permissible. And all because you think you have to spare people's feelings – that questions have to be polite. That you have to avoid subjects that are real and maybe even painful. When that's exactly what makes them so important.'

'Yes, but ...'

'The question you want to ask is factual, right?'

'Well ... yes ...'

'So how can a question of fact be inappropriate?'

'I ... uh ... I don't know.'

'Exactly. The question "Did you choose not to have children?" isn't all that different from "Did you choose not to celebrate your birthday? Or not to pursue your studies? Or not to take that promotion?" The fact that you've attached painful emotions to that particular subject, and made it an unwritten rule to tiptoe around it, has nothing to do with the question itself. No wonder you guys feel the need for more depth in your lives. You've turned conversation into a minefield! For fear of triggering an explosion, you keep everything as safe as can be. But when you do that, your conversations become superficial. And boring into the bargain.'

I opened my mouth to defend myself, but Socrates went right on without batting an eyelid. 'Besides, if you think people without children have as much right to tell their stories, but you keep your mouth shut, that makes you part of the problem. You're just as guilty of keeping that unwritten rule alive.'

I blinked again, a little dazed. Now what?

'Ask the question,' Socrates sighed, nodding at the woman with the playful curls and leaning back in his chair.

Oblivious to the art of asking questions, but with a dose of good intentions and a desire to grow as a person, I decided, encouraged by Socrates, to give it a try. The revolution starts here, I thought. I'll take a stand for childless women in group discussions everywhere. Not to mention adding some depth to this particular discussion. I

summoned up my courage, took a deep breath, looked Playful Curls straight in the eye and broke the momentary silence in the group. 'And was it your own choice not to have children?'

Another silence followed, tense and awkward this time. I could feel the rest of the group holding their breath. The woman glared at me, seemed to freeze, then said between clenched teeth, 'No. It wasn't my own choice, no.'

The others made a collective effort to turn invisible. No small feat for six people crowded round a small table, but they gave it their best shot.

I felt my own nerves spiralling out of control. 'Great advice, pal!' I hissed at Socrates. 'Thanks for nothing.' Alarm bells started going off in my head. How on earth was I going to salvage this situation?

Lunch was well and truly over, and we headed back to class as a group. I made a point of falling into step with Playful Curls and stammered something along the lines of 'I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I just feel that in discussions like this people who don't have kids are so often passed over and I really don't think that's fair, and I always want to know more about people's stories and, because I was genuinely interested in your experiences, I thought I'd just go ahead and ask ... because, well, everyone deserves to be heard and we're here to learn about practical philosophy after all and to ask better questions and ...'

Stumbling through a minefield of my own making, I don't think I managed to formulate one coherent thought. My cowardly, shame-faced apology remained hovering somewhere in mid-air. She gave a curt nod, a sign that I could stop talking, then added in a fierce whisper, 'You know, I think it's very strange that people assume they have the right to ask a question like that.' She strode off towards the classroom and left me to straggle along behind her.

That lunchtime encounter, that conversation and that question have stayed with me so clearly because they stirred such powerful feelings – in the woman I was talking to, and in me.

I felt ashamed, I felt guilty, though it was hard to say exactly why. My intentions had been pure: I had wanted to connect and create a more open, more meaningful conversation. To share our stories. To go beyond the superficial chit-chat of 'What do you do for a living?', 'Where do you live?' and 'How many kids do you have?' I had wanted to make room for everyone's stories. To question an unwritten rule that had begun to seem unfair to me. Like a modern-day Socrates, I had wanted to conquer the world with good questions, worthwhile answers and better conversation.

During that fateful lunch break I wish I had known what I know now. That there *is* a way to ask that kind of question without dragging the other person through a swamp of unwelcome emotions. That it *is* possible to create a context and conditions in which you can move beyond small talk and strike a deeper chord. That you *can* ask questions that connect, questions that allow you to say what's really on your mind, even if it hurts a little sometimes. That you *can* look at questions differently, and find ways of asking them that are less likely to prompt a defensive response. That *good* questions lead to strong answers that deserve your fullest attention. That there *is* a way to have a conversation on equal terms, one in which essential ideas and beliefs are held up to the light. A way to get to the heart of the matter, to distinguish sense from nonsense – an approach that allows everyone to take responsibility for their own emotions and sensitivities. A way to let the question simply be what it is: an invitation to dig a little deeper.

It's an invitation you are free to turn down or accept. Without the need for painful silences, wounded souls or praying to turn yourself invisible at a lunch table so small that there's no room to hide.

If I had known then what I know now, I would still have asked that question. But I'd have asked it differently. As Socrates often did, I would have asked permission. I would have said, 'I'd be interested to hear more. Do you mind if I ask you about it?'

But I didn't know then what I know now. I did the best I could with the tools to hand and the result was a painful experience, one I have often thought long and hard about since. In the years that followed, that brief exchange made a huge contribution to my personal development, my education and even this book. Since then I have gone on to learn more about practical philosophy, the art of asking questions and of holding philosophical and Socratic conversations. I studied in the Netherlands and abroad. I founded a company called De Denksmederij (The Thinksmiths) and gave training courses and workshops in Socratic discourse, critical thinking and asking questions. Every day since then has been part of a learning process. Learning what works and what doesn't. What constitutes a good question. What you can do to bring depth to a discussion and get people thinking, philosophising together and connecting with one another. And I got to know Socrates, who is something of a hero to me now. He is my Beyoncé of philosophy, and I am most definitely a fan.

During training sessions, philosophical consultations and presentations, I have seen and felt for myself the impact of holding a conversation with a different intention, and how conversations can change for the better when you actively cultivate a Socratic attitude and work on your approach to asking questions. I have seen and felt how much more substantial and meaningful conversations can be when you become aware of the all-too-human pitfalls around listening and having a conversation, and discover how to avoid them.

I experienced the joy of sharing that knowledge with other people, and equipping them with those insights and skills. As time went on, I realised I wanted to write a book to help everyone who longs to have better conversations but doesn't yet quite know how to make them happen. Let me take you on that journey. With Socrates as our guide, we will explore the art of asking questions. So that in any situation, under any circumstances, you will know how to bring depth to a conversation, and how to understand a bit more about the world around you – to know everything a little more deeply – by asking what needs to be asked.

PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY: WHAT USE IS THAT?

Practical philosophy is not some esoteric school of thought reserved for bearded old guys in ivory towers. Practical philosophy embraces important ideas like justice, friendship, inclusivity and courage and links them to questions that we find ourselves asking in practical everyday life. Is it okay to lie to a friend? Does my company need a more inclusive hiring policy? When is it best to keep something to yourself? Is this the right time to change jobs? Does the way I behave really reflect who I am? Should I be putting my own interests first in this situation?

We've all been there. At a crossroads where our own personal dilemmas and life's big questions intersect. Every one of these questions is central to our lives, but good luck in googling the answers! These sorts of questions can quickly make you think yourself into a corner.

Enter practical philosophy. It's my belief that the best way to look for these kinds of answers is by talking things through with someone who asks the right questions, so that you can become wiser together. I want to share with you a particular way of having conversations, of joining together with others in a search for wisdom, new insights and answers to essential questions.

But this is not a book that will help you dazzle people with small talk. What it *will* do is help you tap into the hidden depths in your conversations. When you explore new possibilities and perspectives, when your own thinking is 'switched on', the deeper layers of a conversation open up and you start to see the potential for new discoveries and surprising insights. It's a kind of flexible thinking where you decide to switch your point of view or jump aboard another person's train of thought to see where it takes you, and have a discussion without the desire to convince the other person or to come out on top.

Writer Lammert Kamphuis gets to the heart of practical philosophy: 'Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset once said that philosophy is the science of the superficial: when you philosophise, you bring unconscious ideas, assumptions and beliefs to the surface.'[2]

It is both worthwhile and rewarding not only to become aware of your own unconscious ideas about human nature, but also to leave space for other people's ideas, too. It's a skill I like to call 'agile perspective': the ability to think outside your own framework, opinions and views. And philosophising is the perfect way to train it. Agile perspective is all about exploring and investigating the other person's point of view, without immediately becoming caught up in your own opinions. It's about letting go of your personal feelings for a moment, and exploring an issue clearly and calmly, keeping your slate as blank as possible. And when your own opinions do arise, it's about questioning them critically and discovering that you have a much broader mind than you thought.

In other words, this is a book for brave thinkers. For people who dare to doubt, and who are eager to investigate something instead of assuming they know it for sure already. Who are happy to embrace not-knowing something. For people who have the courage not to pipe up right away, but to keep quiet for a while and listen. Who then take that quiet moment as the starting point for a question that digs a little deeper, that shows they want to know more. In the knowledge that philosophising – not-knowing, asking questions, searching for answers – makes you a richer, wiser person. It's a book for everyone who isn't content to insist, 'This is my truth', but who wants to go in search of shared wisdom.

Albert Einstein once said, 'If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first fifty-five minutes determining the proper question to ask.' This book will help you ask questions that matter. Important questions. Questions that invite, explore, unravel, reveal, confront, deepen, challenge, excite and set things in motion. This book will train you to think, analyse and question critically. It will provide you with practical guidelines, conditions, techniques, theoretical backgrounds and ways of listening. And it will serve as a compass to point you towards further exploration and philosophical depth in your day-to-day discussions.

What it won't do is supply you with a simple checklist of questions guaranteed to hit the bull's-eye. There are none. A question that is bang on target in one situation can completely miss the mark in another. Believe me, I know.

WHY SOCRATES?

Welcome to your practical manual for developing an enquiring attitude and asking better questions. With the philosopher Socrates as your guide and teacher. Picture him in sneakers, stilettos, cowboy boots ... whatever floats your boat.

Socrates, the Ancient Greek thinker who lived some 2,500 years ago. One of the world's most practical philosophers, who haunted the squares and markets of Athens trying to engage people in philosophical discussions, to seize the moment and get to grips with what really matters in life. He was quick to acknowledge his own lack of expertise and adopted an enquiring attitude with the sole aim of questioning others about their knowledge and wisdom. Socrates asked questions – lots of questions. He understood the art of asking questions like no other. He had two main reasons for taking this approach:

1. He wanted to be wiser. Operating on the principle 'I know that I do not know anything', Socrates went in search of true knowledge. He realised that true knowledge arises from dialogue and saw his partner in conversation as first and foremost the whetstone on which to sharpen his own thinking.
2. He wanted to free his conversation partner from the errors in their reasoning, their flawed thinking and their attempts to kid themselves and others (i.e. their bullshit). He helped them go in search of 'true knowledge'. Through his critical questioning, they came to understand that what they thought they knew for certain was not true knowledge at all.

In our modern world, where we all think we know the score, and where opinions receive more airtime than facts, we could definitely do with a healthy dose of openness, curiosity and not-knowingness. Socrates and his practical approach to philosophising, thinking and asking questions provide the perfect touchstone. From him we can learn how to develop an enquiring attitude that's full of wonder, and find ways to ask critical questions of each other and of ourselves.

Socrates: a most practical philosophy

Socrates, our hero, lived in Athens around 2,500 years ago. He was born in the year 469 BCE. His father was a sculptor, his mother a midwife. He grew up, married a woman called Xanthippe and together they had three sons. Initially Socrates followed in his father's footsteps and became a craftsman, but he soon turned to the art of instruction. In the *agora*, the heart of political and cultural life in the city, he entered into conversation with anyone who would listen – administrators, merchants, politicians, craftsmen, artists and students – to discuss fundamental aspects of their lives and work. By asking questions, Socrates gave people the opportunity to account for their decisions, to reflect on the justifications for their behaviour and to set out the reasoning that led to their points of view. This brought him much respect, but not everyone was a big fan of his probing way of asking questions. It earned him the nickname 'the gadfly of Athens'.

Socrates believed that the only thing that makes us truly happy is knowing what is right; our inner ability to distinguish the good in every situation. Human beings want to be good at what they do. How do you become a good father or a good friend? How do you know what choice to make as a manager or business owner? What does right and responsible action mean to you, as a doctor? Socrates was a master of questioning and


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First of all, it's what the world needs now. This rapid-fire society of ours, with its tendency towards polarisation, can benefit hugely from slowing down, from a fundamentally philosophical attitude, from people who are genuinely interested in each other and who know how to ask the right questions. The public debate, talk shows, interviews, opinion pieces, online and offline discussions and even our heated conversations over dinner: all too often they take the form of attack and defence, amounting to little more than mud-slinging fuelled by a ragbag of opinions or a tug-of-war between opposing views. None of this is especially productive, connective or helpful. When the dust has settled, everyone retreats to their own corner to cool off and sinks even deeper into their own closed views rather than opening up to the other person's experience.

So many of us are ready and willing to have a good conversation about the themes of the day: about racism and the aftermath of colonialism, about discrimination, gender, body shaming, #MeToo, refugees and migrants or the climate crisis. These are the sorts of topics that seem to inflame tempers all too quickly, push people's buttons and make them determined to be understood, instead of first trying to understand the other person's point of view. For our own sake and the sake of the world we live in, we need to find better ways to have these conversations. We need to pay more attention, listen more closely and try to understand *before* we are understood.

We need to ask good questions that lead to deeper understanding. Without them, we wind up losing touch with our creativity, our powers of imagination and our ability to think critically.

Asking focused questions helps us develop these skills and conduct richer, freer and more complex conversations in ways that are more effective and more nuanced. This book is designed to help you grow in these areas.

Femke Halsema has been a leading light of Dutch politics for many years. Having bowed out of the parliamentary arena a few years ago, she returned to public life in 2018 as Mayor of Amsterdam. In an interview in 2019 with the current-affairs weekly *Vrij Nederland*, she talked about a debate she had recently had with the rising star of the populist right, Thierry Baudet:

> I really immerse myself in other people's point of view. I ran into Thierry Baudet last year, a few weeks after our debate in Amsterdam, and he told me 'You came out of that debate much better than I did.' I thought that was very noble of him. 'Do you know why?' I asked. 'There's a big difference between you and me. I take a genuine interest in you and your views, so I prepared thoroughly. But you have absolutely no interest in me.' He sees me as a symbol of something he hates, without knowing what I actually stand for.[5]

Femke Halsema's attitude is one we seldom see, whereas the attitude she attributes to her opponent, Baudet, is one we see all too often. We know too little about each other and although we are barely even interested in the other person's opinion, we have already decided we don't like it at all. Without actually knowing why.

The attitude of curiosity, of wanting to ask questions, of wanting to explore the other person's point of view, begins right here with us. With you and me. In our conversations with friends, family, at the dinner table, at work or down the pub. And from there, this new Socratic style of talking, of wanting to become wiser together, will hopefully ease its way into debates, talk shows, newspaper columns and the political arena. This change for the better can start with us.

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