

Praise for *Socrates Meets*

“How Peter Kreeft finds the time to write so many helpful books is beyond me. How he manages to fill them with such sensible wisdom is known to God alone. The *Socrates Meets* series is just further proof that we are witnessing something special.”

—**Fr. Gregory Pine**, OP, the Dominican House of Studies

“Peter Kreeft’s writing exhibits wit and erudition, but these qualities alone would not be enough to pull off the ambition of these texts: to explore major historical thinkers by putting each in dialogue with Socrates. A flexible and generous interpreter, Kreeft’s imagined conversations allow each thinker to speak for himself, while inviting the reader to participate in the dialectical questioning that draws out the ideas, appreciating their motivations and historical context, and, as often as not, putting them under gentle but critical scrutiny. Kreeft is above all a sensitive reader of texts, and he has composed works that invite new readers to learn how to think alongside, and in critical engagement with, many of modernity’s most influential minds.”

—**Joshua Hochschild**, Professor of Philosophy, Mount St. Mary’s University

“In this brilliant series, Peter Kreeft, like a modern-day Virgil, guides us into corners of purgatory where the father of philosophy, Socrates, instigates conversations with eight of the most provocative minds in Western history. We are in Kreeft’s debt for reminding us that philosophy is not essentially a college or university subject, a strange if not grotesque discipline we undergo in pursuit of a degree, but live mind encountering live mind in live conversation in pursuit of truth—and that the most fruitful conversations are often with the live minds of the dead. The humor and plainspokenness of this series make it ideal for beginning students of philosophy, whether in formal courses or in independent study, but the intellectual vigor of these dialogues will remind even the most seasoned thinkers that a bracing engagement with

Socratic questioning is the best way to shake up the complacency that too often obstructs the quest for wisdom.”

—**Daniel McNerny**, Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy, Christendom College, and author of *Beauty & Imitation: A Philosophical Reflection on the Arts*

“Among the most formative influences on my development as a philosopher has been Peter Kreeft. When I first encountered his work when I was in college I could not believe that someone could make philosophy so accessible and so alive. Although I never took a formal class from Professor Kreeft, I have been a student of his for many decades. Through *The Unaborted Socrates* I was persuaded to embrace a sanctity of life ethic; through *The Best Things In Life* I was taught how to think about virtue, vice, intrinsic goodness, and practical Thomism (though the genius of Kreeft is that he never explicitly tells you he’s doing that). Later, when I was journeying back to the Church, it was Kreeft’s explication of the *Catechism* and his commentary on Aquinas’ *Summa theologiae* that helped me to see how Catholicism made sense and that much of what I believed as a lapsed-Catholic Evangelical was an inheritance from Rome and not something I had discovered by exercising my rational powers on Scripture alone. I thought I had hit a triple, but Kreeft showed me that I had been born at third base. What you will encounter in this series of cross-examinations of the world’s most important modern philosophers is Kreeft at his best. Through the character of Socrates and his famous interlocutors, you are introduced to some of the most influential and difficult thought in the history of philosophy, but in a way that requires no prior philosophical background. In the hands of this master teacher, you will come to appreciate both the strengths and the weaknesses of these towering figures and how the intellectual tradition of the Church ought to engage them.”

—**Francis J. Beckwith**, Professor of Philosophy and Associate Director of Graduate Studies in Philosophy, Baylor University

SOCRATES
— MEETS —
MARX

SOCRATES

— MEETS —

MARX

— • —

THE FATHER OF
PHILOSOPHY
CROSS-EXAMINES
THE FATHER OF
COMMUNISM

— • —

PETER KREEFT

Published by Word on Fire, Elk Grove Village, IL 60007

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Cover design, typesetting, and interior art direction by Rozann Lee and
Cassie Bielak, Clark Kenyon, and Nicolas Fredrickson

Illustrations by Peter Voth

Quotations taken from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist
Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore (London: Penguin, 2002).

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First edition published 2003 by Ignatius Press

Second edition 2025

ISBN: 978-1-68578-214-6

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024945253

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Preface

This book is one in a series of Socratic explorations of some of the Great Books. Books in this series are intended to be short, clear, and nontechnical, thus fully understandable by beginners. They also introduce (or review) the basic questions in the fundamental divisions of philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology, anthropology, ethics, logic, and method. They are designed both for classroom use and for educational do-it-yourselfers. The *Socrates Meets* books can be read and understood completely on their own, but each is best appreciated after reading the little classic it engages in dialogue.

The setting—Socrates and the author of the Great Book meeting in the afterlife—need not deter readers who do not believe there is an afterlife. For although the two characters and their philosophies are historically real, their conversation, of course, is not and requires a “willing suspension of disbelief.” There is no reason the skeptic cannot extend this literary belief also to the setting.

The “I”

MARX: I . . . I thought I was dying! And now I . . . I . . .

SOCRATES: That is a profound little word, Karl. Do you know what it means?

MARX: I don't know what you're talking about. I know one thing, though: I'm not dead. I can hear you, and I can see you too. In fact, you are the ugliest-looking doctor I have ever seen.

SOCRATES: I am not a doctor; I am a philosopher.

MARX: You look like Socrates.

SOCRATES: In this case, appearance and reality coincide. I am Socrates.

MARX: But why *you*? We have nothing in common, you and I.

SOCRATES: Oh, I think we do. I think we have at least two things in common: we are probably the two ugliest philosophers in history and the most hated—or loved.

MARX: Where in the world are we?

SOCRATES: Nowhere in the world. We are in the next world.

MARX: Nonsense! There is no “next world.”

SOCRATES: Ah . . . excuse me, but what do you think this is?

MARX: A dream, of course. It must be a dream. It certainly can't be real.

SOCRATES: Then who do you think is dreaming the dream?

MARX: My brain matter.

SOCRATES: “My” brain matter, you say? Who is this self that possesses brain matter?

MARX: It is I, Karl Marx, you idiot!

SOCRATES: But what is the meaning of that word you just used, that little word that we all use so easily, the word “I”?

MARX: It's certainly not the soul, as *you* thought it was, “Socrates,” or whoever you are.

SOCRATES: Tell me more. If you could teach me where I was wrong, I would be eternally grateful to you.

MARX: Your so-called “soul” is a ghost, a myth, an illusion. There *are* no souls. To be is to be material. It is you, Socrates, who almost single-handedly polluted the waters of philosophy with that muddy myth of the soul, that distraction from everything real, that ghost that you said was haunting the machine of our bodies. I will allow no spooks in my philosophy. I exorcise your ghost. Out, out, damned spirit!

SOCRATES: Alas, it seems that we cannot have the conversation we

are destined to have until you are first convinced of an exceedingly elementary point: that you exist, that there is a self somewhere holding all those body parts together.

MARX: And how do you propose to argue for the existence of this "self"?

SOCRATES: Well, perhaps a modern argument would work for you better than an ancient one. What do you say about Descartes' famous argument, "I think, therefore I am"?

MARX: I say it is a ridiculous argument.

SOCRATES: Why?

MARX: Only an idealist like him, or you, would resort to *thought* to ground real existence. It is the other way round: real existence grounds thought.

SOCRATES: Oh, I quite agree, if by "ground" you mean "cause." Only a thing that exists can think. And thinking does not cause existence.

MARX: You confuse me by agreeing with me.

SOCRATES: Then I will unconfuse you by disagreeing with you. I think our disagreement is not about what *causes* what, but about what *proves* what. I suspect you do not agree that abstract, rational thought (like Descartes' argument) can prove anything real.

MARX: You are right there. I accept only empirical, scientific evidence as proof for anything real.

SOCRATES: And do you have empirical, scientific proof for *that* principle?

MARX: I will not be distracted by your abstract logic. That's why I am suspicious of most of the arguments of you philosophers. Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" is wholly abstract. Nothing concrete proves it or refutes it.

SOCRATES: So you say that the thinking self that Descartes claims to prove is not a reality?

MARX: Exactly.

SOCRATES: What is it, then?

MARX: A dream.

SOCRATES: If the self is a dream, who is the dreamer?

MARX: Brain matter, of course. I prefer "I pass wind, therefore I am" to "I think, therefore I am."

SOCRATES: So smelling is better proof than thinking?

MARX: Indeed it is! It's empirical and, therefore, scientific.

SOCRATES: So you know that you are real, not by thinking, but by sensing?

MARX: Right.

SOCRATES: And is that also the way you know someone else is real, like me?

MARX: It is.

SOCRATES: So you know others in the same way you know yourself: by sensation.

MARX: Correct.

SOCRATES: Do you know my thoughts now? Even before I speak them?

MARX: No.

SOCRATES: Do you know your own thoughts now, before you speak them?

MARX: Of course.

SOCRATES: Why? If you know others in the same way you know yourself, why should there be this great difference?

MARX: What a simplistic question!

SOCRATES: Perhaps it is. But do you have a simplistic answer for me?

MARX: Yes! It is because the chunks of matter that constitute your brain and the chunks of matter that constitute my brain are different and separate in space and do not touch.

SOCRATES: But then why—

MARX: Wait! Why am I arguing abstract philosophy with you? What am I doing here? I was in bed waiting to die, and now I am arguing philosophy with Socrates in a dream. This is ridiculous.

SOCRATES: It is not. It is what you must do, what all must do, eventually. It is the first philosophical commandment: "Know thyself." It is not an option but a requirement. And while you could easily divert yourself from that task in the other world, that is not permitted here. That is why I have been sent to teach you. In the other world you could easily avoid me—that is, the task I represent, "know thyself." In this world you do not have that option.

MARX: Well, I will play your game, then, simply because I seem to have no other option. Tell me, please, more about this so-called next world. Do you know the future here? The future of life on earth, I mean.

SOCRATES: Yes, some of it, as much as is needed.

MARX: How?

SOCRATES: You are not ready to learn that yet. That would be a diversion and a distraction.

MARX: A diversion from what? What must I do?

SOCRATES: You must remember . . .

MARX: I do not like to remember; I prefer to plan. I prefer the future to the past.

SOCRATES: In other words, you prefer dreams to facts.

MARX: No, no. I am a lover of facts. I am a scientist. In fact, I was the first to find the scientific formula for all of human history. And I found countless facts to prove my formula. You

see, Socrates, that is how a scientist proves his ideas: with concrete facts, not with abstract arguments, like you philosophers.

SOCRATES: Our task here is to examine your "formula for all of human history," and the evidence for it in your most famous book, which changed the world.

MARX: You did say "changed the world," didn't you?

SOCRATES: Yes. You, Karl, made a greater difference to historical events, and to the lives of more people, than any other human being in modern history.

MARX: I knew it! I knew it! I succeeded. But I never finished my great book.

SOCRATES: I was not speaking of that overlong, colossal bore *Capital*. I was speaking of *The Communist Manifesto*.

MARX: My rhetorical masterpiece! I knew it was destined to change the face of the earth. What do you want to examine about it?

SOCRATES: Oh, just one little thing: Is it true?

MARX: True? Of course it's true! It changed the world, didn't it? Didn't you say that? It succeeded.

SOCRATES: So the proof of truth is success?

MARX: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Couldn't a lie be successful, if the liar persuaded others to believe it and if he had his way and his will with them? Couldn't a lie change the world, too, if people believed it?

MARX: Not in the long run. History is the womb of truth.

SOCRATES: And just what do you mean by that image?

MARX: That truth is tested by action, not by contemplation or abstract thought or even argument.

SOCRATES: So arguments don't really ever prove anything to be true?

MARX: No, they do not.

SOCRATES: I know you will not produce an argument to prove *that*, then. But would you *explain* it, at least, even though you refuse to prove it?

MARX: The substantive point is this, Socrates: Thinking is itself a concrete act that takes place in history and has material causes. It is not some ghost outside the act, looking at it from some transcendent point of view outside time and space, as you idealists think. That was the fundamental error that you started, Socrates, the error of idealism. And then it was picked up by Plato and Aristotle and Augustine and Aquinas and Descartes and Hegel and their deceived disciples. Too bad I wasn't around in your day, Socrates; I would have stopped that error, which vitiated philosophy for two thousand years. I would have done for you what I did for Hegel: turned you right side up. And turned all of philosophy right side up.

SOCRATES: And what do you mean by *that* image? What is "right-side-up" philosophy and what is "wrong-side-up" philosophy? What was my error, and the error of all those other philosophers, in a word?

MARX: In a word, as I said in my *Theses on Feuerbach*, "Philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."

And I could change this world, too, whatever it is and wherever it is, even if it is a dream, as I suppose. For even dreams have to borrow what truth they have from the world, from the only world there is. Hmmm . . . Tell me something about this world. You have workers and employers here, I suppose? You certainly need economists, and . . .

SOCRATES: No. We have no workers or employers, and we need no economists, because we have no money. Your work is over.

MARX: That is impossible. Even a dream should make more sense than that.

SOCRATES: Perhaps you could try to show me why we need economists here.

MARX: I will refute you by your own kind of logic, Socrates. Since I can see you, you must be a bodily being. If you are a bodily being, you must have bodily needs. If you have bodily needs, these must have relative values. If they have relative values, they can be exchanged or bought and sold. If they are exchanged, bought, and sold, you need economists, for economics is the science of these things. For instance, that white tunic you are wearing—who made it? Where did you buy it?

SOCRATES: Oh, dear. Must we go into all that before we can explore your book?

MARX: My book is *about* that! Here, let me see that tunic you are wearing. Take it off for me for a minute, please.

SOCRATES: It does not come off. It is not the kind of clothing you know. It does not disguise me, but it reveals me. This is the land of light and of revealing, not of concealing. See, even your own filthy clothes do not come off, no matter how you tug at them. They reveal the soul that wears the body that wears them.

MARX: Ach! What a twisted dream this is! Help!

SOCRATES: That is precisely my purpose here: to help, or at least to begin to help you “untwist” some of the twisted dreams you had and still have. But you are not dreaming now, Karl, you are waking. In fact, you are more awake than you ever were before.

MARX: Then away with it! I do not accept this universe! I will destroy it!

SOCRATES: You no longer have the power to destroy anything here except illusions.

MARX: I shall organize a party! I will find your victims. Whom else are you oppressing, you tyrant of thoughts? I will unite your victims, and we will throw off our chains. I will issue my manifesto: Workers of the Dream World, Unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains! You have a world to win!

SOCRATES: There is no need to shout. No one can hear you but me.

MARX: Then join me, Socrates, and together we shall begin a revolution.

SOCRATES: You don't understand. There is absolutely no need here that could possibly be addressed by your revolution.

MARX: Conservative! Reactionary! Counterrevolutionary! Antidishmentarian!

SOCRATES: Are you finished?

MARX: No!

SOCRATES: I am patient.

MARX: And I am not. I am not patient but agent. What do you think this is, a hospital for minds, with me as the patient and you as the doctor?

SOCRATES: You have said it.

MARX: This is intolerable! This is hell!

SOCRATES: No, it is only purgatory—purgatory for you and heaven for me, at the same time. A very economical arrangement, eh?

MARX: What torture will you perform on me, Doctor Socrates? Will you dissect me?

SOCRATES: No, I will dissect only your book.

MARX: Don't you know already exactly what is in my book?

SOCRATES: I do. But *you* may not.

MARX: How can I not know what I wrote myself? If I wrote it, I know it.

SOCRATES: Most of you don't really understand what you write. That is why you need something like me, something like a mirror.

I am sent here to be your mirror. Not yet for your soul—that will come later—but for your book. A modest beginning, really.

MARX: I see you have a copy of it in your hand. And so do I! How did they get here? Are there bookstores?

SOCRATES: Another distracting question. I will not answer it.

MARX: Well, if my book remains in the next world, it is truly immortal. What must I do with it?

SOCRATES: It must move from your hand to your head.

The Comprehensive Claim of Marxism

SOCRATES: Perhaps it would be best for you to introduce your book first, to explain its context and its purpose, as if you were teaching it in a university classroom. I think you are much readier to lecture than to dialogue at this point, so perhaps this method would relieve that itch a bit.

MARX: Do you really expect me to respond to an insulting invitation like that?

SOCRATES: Yes.

MARX: Why?

SOCRATES: Because you are an egotist. And also because you have no choice: there is nothing else to do here.

MARX: Hmph! Well, I will take up your challenge.

The book we are about to explore is very short: a pamphlet of only 12,000 words. Yet it has changed the world, as I knew it would. It contains the essentials of communism in these few pages. All the rest of my writing consists in additions or refinements to this.

I wrote it at age twenty-nine. Engels did not write a word of it. However, he supplied some of the ideas. The *Manifesto*

corresponds to the twenty-five questions in his catechism, *Principles of Communism*. More importantly, he supplied most of the money to print it.

It is a Great Book because it finally solves the mystery of man and lays bare the most fundamental laws that have always governed human behavior. I did for man's history what Darwin did for the history of animal species and Newton did for the inorganic universe. It is the supreme achievement of human thought. I was the first to make history truly scientific.

All the philosophers, from Plato on, sought the "philosopher's stone," the world system, the formula. Each claimed to find it, but none did. Every time thought came to a halt before the timeless formula of some philosopher, the world moved on and refuted it.

Then came Hegel, who made change itself the formula. That was true, but not original: Heraclitus, even before your time, Socrates, had seen that "everything flows," like a river. He sought for the *logos*, the law or formula, for universal change; but it was not found until Hegel, who saw for the first time that logic itself moves with history, that truth itself changes according to the pattern of what he called the "dialectic": a *thesis* generates its own *antithesis*, and from this perpetual conflict emerges a *synthesis*, which then becomes a new thesis generating its own new antithesis, and so on until the final synthesis. Hegel, with unbelievable stupidity, identified this with "God," or "The Absolute" or "Spirit"—probably the three worst words in human speech and the three most harmful myths in human thought.

Heraclitus discovered the universality of change, or "becoming." Hegel discovered the logical form of it, the "dialectic." But I discovered its true content: matter, not spirit. Hegel thought that ideas caused historical conflicts; I found the causes in the real world. Ideas are only the echo or the effect.

Furthermore, within the real world I found the source of historical change, not in unpredictable individual characters

or choices or passions, but in economic determinism. This was the key to making history a science: something predictable and controllable.

The forces of the dialectic of history are economic classes. Class conflict is history's engine.

I was also the first to show how the socialist, classless utopia of which others had dreamed would grow like a flower from the plant of my present world. For once the number of classes is reduced to one—the proletariat—conflict is reduced to zero.

This is accomplished by the elimination of the only other remaining class, the bourgeoisie. The meaning of my era is precisely there: capitalism had already reduced the plethora of classes that had characterized feudalism to just two, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The communist revolution will be the last great event in history, for it will eliminate the bourgeoisie, leaving only “the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat,” as I said in my *Critique of the Gotha Program* and elsewhere, leading to a society of perfect equality and justice, where “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all,” and where, as I said in the same book, all things flow “from each according to his ability to each according to his needs.”

SOCRATES: That was a wonderful speech, Karl! It did exactly what it needed to do, in introducing your book. It was admirably clear and simple: even I could understand it. It was powerful and appealing: you are truly a great rhetorician. Lastly, and best of all, it was short.

MARX: So if you are satisfied, let us *do* it, not just think about it. Will you join the Party?

SOCRATES: Well, now, I think you will find some difficulty in organizing that kind of thing here.

MARX: I am not afraid of any challenge, even in my dreams.

SOCRATES: You don't understand.

MARX: What is the problem?

SOCRATES: Well, in addition to the small detail that we are not in your dream but quite real, we have one other little thing that we have to take care of before we can think about practicing your philosophy.

MARX: What is that?

SOCRATES: What do you think? What should you make sure of first, before you put any philosophy into practice?

MARX: That I have the money needed. Is Engels here, too?

SOCRATES: No, something more basic than that.

MARX: There is nothing more basic than that.

SOCRATES: Yes, there is.

MARX: That I have the power base? Fear not; I shall create it.

SOCRATES: No, something else.

MARX: Associates? Organizational skills?

SOCRATES: Something about the philosophy rather than about you. What do you want to be sure a philosophy is?

MARX: Dynamic? Radical? Progressive? No? You still shake your

bulbous, ugly head! Challenging, engaging, galvanizing to action? No? Flattering, perhaps? Sly and clever and winsome? No? Original? Creative? Interesting? No, still! Surely you are not suggesting that it be comfortably traditional? No, again. What, then? I give up this demeaning guessing game. What are you after? Tell me the secret. What is the occult quality that you demand in a philosophy before you will put it into practice?

SOCRATES: I was thinking of *truth*.

MARX: Oh.

SOCRATES: Is that your only reply? That one little syllable?

MARX: But practice will reveal that, Socrates. Truth always emerges, eventually, from the process of history, the dialectic. Truth does not come outside of action and before it; it comes *in* action and as the result of action.

SOCRATES: Is that so?

MARX: It is so, I assure you.

SOCRATES: So it is *true* that truth only emerges from the process?

MARX: Yes.

SOCRATES: And are we in the process now, or are we outside it and at its end?

MARX: We are in process.

SOCRATES: And truth is not *before* this process, or *outside* it, but only emerges from it?

MARX: That is what I said. You have a very short memory.

SOCRATES: Then, since we are only in the process and not outside it, how can we know what is outside the process?

MARX: We can't.

SOCRATES: We are like fish, then, in the sea, who cannot fly above the sea like birds.

MARX: Right.

SOCRATES: So we cannot know what is or is not outside the process, just as a fish cannot know what is or is not outside the sea?

MARX: Right again. You are beginning to understand my point, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then how can you know that there is no truth outside the process?

MARX: What? What's that you say?

SOCRATES: If fish cannot know what is outside the sea, they cannot know what is *not* outside the sea, either. So if we cannot know any truth outside time, we cannot know that there *is* no such thing as truth outside time, either. But you said you did know precisely that: that there is no truth outside time.

MARX: I will not let myself be tricked by some philosopher's abstract logical argument and be diverted from the real into the ideal. All your own ideas, Socrates, including that static logic of yours, too, are nothing but the product of your pre-industrial peasant-aristocrat-conservative social order.

SOCRATES: And yours?

MARX: All ideas are the products of social conditions.

SOCRATES: But your social conditions, including your education, were thoroughly bourgeois. If ideas are nothing but products of their social order, your communism must be a thoroughly bourgeois idea.

MARX: I need not answer your pitiful logic, Socrates. It is impotent. You seek in vain to slay the juggernaut of history's dialectic with the weapons of words. Words are mere shadows, specters, ghosts.

SOCRATES: Including your words, Karl? Are they also specters?

MARX: You keep doing that, Socrates! It is a most annoying habit.

SOCRATES: Isn't that image, that of a specter, exactly the one you used for your own words, or your own ideas—namely, communism—in the very first line of your book? Here it is: "A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of communism."

MARX: I must warn you, Socrates, that your habit of throwing other people's words back at them will not win you many friends. It will only win arguments.

SOCRATES: My purpose here is not to win friends, or to win arguments, either, but to be your helper, if not your friend, by being a mirror held up to your mind so that you may know yourself.

MARX: Are you so naïve as to expect me to believe you are my helper when you subject me to such torture? And to expect me to accept it as in my own best interests?

SOCRATES: Yes, indeed. Unless you want to be a comic figure instead of a serious one. For I can think of nothing more comic than a philosophy that does not account for its own creator. A philosophy without a philosopher—now that's a paradox.

MARX: Is your task here to dissect me or my book?

SOCRATES: Only your book, for now. But that task is a means to the higher end of knowing yourself. Are you ready to begin?

MARX: Go ahead, do your worst, Socrates!

SOCRATES: No, Karl, I will obey my mother instead of you: she always told me to do my best.