

The Socratic Dialogue

:A demand for original and imaginative thinking

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. Introduction

In this paper it is by no means my intention to write a hand out for practical application of the “Socratic Dialogue”. There are more than a dozen reasons for not doing so, but perhaps the most important one, because the Socratic Dialogue as the word ‘dialogue’ already suggests is all about actually participating in it.

Having acknowledged its essential practical nature, it follows that the form of the Socratic Dialogue itself (although rigid in theory as I will discuss later) is under constant reconstruction, reshaping itself through the creative and imaginative powers of its active participants. It is precisely this active and decisive role the participant plays within the Socratic Dialogue that induces the participant to actually undergo a philosophical experience through it.

Now what exactly do we mean by a philosophical experience? Nothing out of the ordinary I would say, in the end all human experience could be defined as philosophical in nature. For an experience itself is neither a fact nor a blueprint of the moment, it reshapes itself constantly by means of our imagination. What makes the actual experience of a Socratic dialogue philosophical is that we deliberately apply the power of imagination as a tool for investigation. By taking our common daily experience as our starting point, we collectively inquire into life-questions of a moral nature. Reformulating partial answer’s while harmonizing oneself in relation to the

specific and unique conditions within the given group of participants.

. Self-growth and the indispensable role of the others

Within the setting of a '*multiple-dialogue*', the Socratic dialogue provides a broad range of opportunities to confront and enrich one self. The process likens that of washing potatoes; rubbing each skin against the other they are all peeled and clean in the end.

Throughout the course of the Socratic Dialogue each participant is required to confidently display his/her opinion without discrimination. Highly valued and welcomed for the moment ones uttered opinion should not function as an end station. And by no means should it be regarded as a dogmatic truth that should be defended throughout eternity. No matter how flattering and overwhelming one's opinion might be, in the process of the Socratic Dialogue one should let go off the fear of entering a stage of genuine doubt and wonder. New inspiration will without fail arise if we vigorously use the power of our imagination. Armed with new inspiration the participants then struggle together within the muddy pool of their unrefined opinions to reach a consensus. Throughout the process one will come to realize and revalue the indispensable role of the other participants as a stepping stone for one's own growth.

Without any hesitation I can now say that the art of participating in a Socratic dialogue lies in the ability to contribute to the inquiry with an original opinion and at the same time distract from all the other involved opinions that stinging bid of new direction that will spark of new inspiration, which in turn will give birth to a deeper and inspired awareness.

. Socratic Dialogue and Inner-Transformation

I had read several introductory explanations before I myself participated in a Socratic Dialogue, including explanations about the general course of the Socratic Dialogue and speculations about the benefits that were to be obtained.

Merely reading about it nevertheless left me with a certain amount of doubts and I was skeptical about whether the Socratic Dialogue in its current form could bring about any fruitful results in the sense of a human inner transformation.

My doubts for the most part were based on conclusions I had formulated in a previous analysis of Plato's dialogue "Meno"¹⁾. There I had stated that Socratic "dialectic" requires the

participation of not only ones rational faculty but demands an involvement of the total human being. I explained there the way in which Socratic “irony” or “stinging” induces the interlocutor to establish a personal and emotional involvement with the direct matter that is under inquiry.

An inquiry about “Virtue” in a Socratic sense does not aim at the formulation of a definite and everlasting true definition. The essence of the matter under inquiry can be pointed at (with the help of a bid of divine inspiration) but Meno’s question “what is Virtue?” cannot be formulated in written word or speech. For if we could, “Knowledge” would be teachable and there would be no need for Socratic “recollection”.

Then why are we encouraged to inquire in the first place, if all inquiry is doomed to fail its target? Is there something more worthy for us to gain in the process than only a certain end definition? For Socrates it is the painstaking efforts of the interlocutor to continue the inquiry, the battle against his/her fear and resentment in the face of acknowledging ignorance. Self-pride and arrogance being over won giving place to doubt and wonder. The effort of questioning and answering ones soul, giving birth to insight with which one can further the inquiry. All these and more are signs of the internalization of “Virtue” in ones own behavior. And that is precisely what I wish to see realized within the current “Socratic Dialogue” as well. The Socratic Dialogue cannot serve as a safeguard for intellectual word-play in which we can hide ourselves behind facades of self content opinions. What we aim for is more than just a revolution within our operating conceptual framework. For if the Socratic Dialogue truly induces progress towards a more philosophical attitude then we can expect that the participants are more likely to be challenged to reflect upon their character limitations than on any form of rational inability. In the end it is the total sum of the combined original imaginative powers throughout the course of the Socratic Dialogue that will create the favorable condition for each participant to experience in his/her own way a victorious sense of self-growth and delight.

. The general course of the Socratic Dialogue

Let me now give a brief outline of the characteristics of the general course of the Socratic Dialogue. And comment on my personal astonishments, embarrassments and enlightening moments while participating in a Socratic Dialogue myself.

The Socratic Dialogue starts with the formulation of a philosophical question confirm to the interests of the participants in a given group. This question may vary in many ways, though

it should be a question of a general nature that can be reasoned upon based on daily life experience.

To give a practical example, “When is keeping silent better than talking” was the question under inquiry when I participated in my first Socratic Dialogue at an International Conference. Due to time limitations at that given occasion, this question among others was decided for us beforehand. All participants of the group showed to have a certain affinity with the question and 6 of the 14 participants in the group had prepared an example of a daily experience in which the problem “When is keeping silent better than talking” had actually appeared.

One after the other each example was carefully taken under consideration and a detailed report of the particulars of each experience was written down on paper sheets by the facilitator. Having worked through all experiences carefully and in a satisfying way (this process alone already takes up a lot of time if done thoroughly) we conducted a final round of selecting ‘one’ example among the six for our further inquiry.²⁾ In our group the following example was chosen anonymously.

Miss. X was on holiday abroad with her sister. After a long day of shopping and sight seeing they decided to eat somewhere in a small and quiet restaurant away from the stress of the big city. Being sisters they always openly talked about all kind of subjects. Looking around the restaurant Miss. X's eye fell on a couple somewhere in the back of the restaurant, having dinner not conversing a single word to each other. Miss. X's immediate reflex (being a deliberate single woman) was to speak out to her sister “look at that couple over there, is it not terribly boring to have to eat with the same man every day?” But before the first word left her mouth she swallowed it all back in, as she realized at that moment that her sister too was married.³⁾

Not one of the participants had any problems imagining themselves in the same situation, all was clear and simply explained. This does not mean though that everyone would have reacted similar under the same circumstance. The next step was to gather relevant side-information including information about the general character of Miss X relationship to her Sister and other details explaining for her motives. (This part of the Socratic Dialogue can become very confronting and personal on the part of the example giver and one has to be willing to share ones

experience with the others in full honesty and debt). Throughout the process of being questioned, the example giver might unexpectedly recognize certain self-confronting motives behind his/her own behavior or habits.

Now that most information about our example is formulated and has become a common frame of reference we continue with the next step, that of formulating a 'core statement'. At this stage we don't need to focus on all gathered details, we should rather concentrate only on relevant information regarding our starting question. In other words, 'where in the example do we see our problem most directly reflected?' or 'what is it in the example that fundamentally answers our question?'

Formulating the 'core statement' is not as easy as it sounds and it can take up a lot of time.⁴⁾ We all tend to reason from a different kind of angle and concept, being one in a large group one might feel uncomfortable in making too many concessions on the way to consensus. To avoid having the process turned towards a deadlock because of this, we start to openly question each other in order to uncover the various concepts behind the formulations of the 'core statement'. As Boele comments:

The next step is to make this presupposed concept explicit in terms of conditions, criteria, and rules [...] one could say: we are looking for the premises on the basis of which we can conclude the core statement.⁵⁾

This movement of going back again towards the starting question in formulating the core statement is called 'regressive abstraction'.⁶⁾

The last step left in the course of the Socratic Dialogue is a 'test-round' in which the previously formulated core statement has to prove its validity in related examples (new examples or the examples from the other participants at the very beginning) as well. Marinoff writes accordingly:

This is the only point in the Socratic Dialogue where hypothetical situations are allowed. If you can contradict the definition, you refine it accordingly.⁷⁾

Although in practice this point in the Socratic Dialogue is hardly ever reached by any group (due to time limitations). I nevertheless imagine this stage to be very important and challenging for several reasons. After the hard labor of reaching consensus in the group concerning the 'answer' to the starting question, we enter what I call a 'danger-zone' because it is the stage in which we are most likely to leave the fertile soil of philosophical inquiry. It's when we reach the (temporary) limits of our imaginative power and emotional endurance that a yearning for stability and clarity about a reached end result intervenes. What we should not miss to realize when this happens, (as I mentioned in the very beginning of this paper) is that any euphoric yearning for definite and everlasting definitions is rooted within illusion. A philosophical way of life is marked by willingness and courage to reexamine, reformulate and even refute previously well reached conclusions in order to further the process of an ongoing inquiry in quest of deeper understanding. Our present form of Socratic Dialogue like so many of the historic 'Platonic written dialogues' is by its very nature destined to end 'Aporetic', that is to say open ended leaving the participants with a slight sense of bewilderment. This bewilderment though, cannot scare off any participant with a true inner-motivated philosophical attitude; always keen and ready to start a new inquiry at any given moment within any given group of participants.

. The special role of the facilitator

Since I am not yet trained as a facilitator I can only describe my astonishment at seeing and experiencing them at work. Being familiar with fairly common teaching settings,⁹⁾ the contrast with the role of the Socratic Dialogue facilitator struck me with a sense of delight. I even want to go so far as to say that the Socratic Dialogue facilitator could function as a good 'role model' for teachers at work in public education who are aiming for educational reform. Let me now explain in more detail why I think this is the case.

The most difficult part of being a Socratic Dialogue facilitator lies in the ability to act 'transparent'. That is to say, not to color the group of participants with any of his/her own opinions. The group has to be guided by the facilitator in such a way, that the participants themselves will take the full responsibility for bringing out suggestions, answers and guiding principles along which the Socratic Dialogue can creatively and colorfully unfold itself.⁹⁾

The fact that the facilitator should have a 'transparent' role does not mean he/she has no strong presents during the course of the dialogue. In the contrary the facilitator is under constant treat and battle of being pulled back into the accustomed school teacher's role.

Inexperienced participants in Socratic Dialogue might constantly expect from the facilitator that he/she skillfully and smoothly guides the group away from confusion, presenting easily digestible directions and portions of instant-knowledge. The fact that the facilitator deliberately has to 'bounce back' the responsibility for solving friction and stagnation to the participants themselves is a very difficult task.

One way in which the facilitator can help to bring clarity within the process (without oppressing his/her own opinion) is, by having the participants regularly reformulate each other's statements. Contradictions can so be easily traced and new refinements can be written down on sheets of paper by the facilitator on request (Let me remind that throughout the whole process the facilitator continuously writes down every detail on paper-sheets and makes frequent corrections). Reformulating each other's statements also helps clarifying whether a given participant's personal opinion is truly contributory (or not) to the direction in which the group-process is heading at that given moment. Opinions based on sudden personal inspiration can easily and fairly unaware lead the group-process away from its original aim.¹⁰⁾

It is important to reemphasize at this point that all events of the Socratic Dialogue are centered on an evolving 'group-process'. Individual strong opinions form important steppingstones but personal opinions are useless as such if they do not directly benefit the group process at the moment they are uttered.

Perhaps to me, this new sense of 'group-awareness' was the most challenging factor within the whole process of the Socratic Dialogue. Maybe due to an overly enthusiastic character, I constantly let the process astray by my seemingly creative and imaginative new suggestions. After realizing that it disturbed more than it contributed the group, I had to constantly guard myself to 'shut up'. Frustrated at first because I felt really inspired and enthusiastic while uttering my thoughts, I later felt rather embarrassed about my own tendency. I realized that I had to allow myself to be a part of a larger and more meaningful group dynamic.

During the evaluation round I formulated this personal revelation as follows, "What struck me is that it can be the right moment for me to speak but the wrong moment for the group to hear". Quite amused I was reminded by one participant that my struggles to 'shut up' were well in tune with the starting question of our Socratic Dialogue namely, "When is keeping silent better than talking?"

. Self-reflection

While going through my own 'self-confronting' experience, I noticed that other participants as well were challenging something very different from me at the same time. To give an example, among the participants that were not yet familiar with the Socratic Dialogue was a married couple who both had worked in regular education. I noticed from the beginning that especially the man was not feeling comfortable with the, at first loose and in a sense chaotic start of the dialogue.¹¹⁾ I must admit that our group was an extraordinary mix of not only participants of all kinds of nationalities (being held at an International Conference) but among us were at least four well trained Socratic Dialogue facilitators as well as a handful of still inexperienced participants. Of course this situation made our Socratic Dialogue rather interesting but not less challenging at the same time.

The well-trained facilitators that now participated as fellow members of the dialogue powerfully contributed to the process *they* were already well acquainted with. While stimulating the still uneasy new comers to actively contribute to the process with original and imaginative thinking, they also boldly intervened when the process was about to wonder of astray from its original direction.

Being a newcomer one has basically no idea what to expect and how to contribute in a way that is truly conform to the intentions of the Socratic Dialogue. This fact led to several emotional confrontations among the participants. Especially the male part of the above mentioned couple let's fictionally call him Peter for the moment, showed his annoyance by refraining from further active participation, ignoring most of the process while trying to hold back his anger. All signs of discomfort were clearly readable from his face and this worried me. I put up my arms crossed in front of my face as a sign to the other group members that I was applying for what is called a 'Meta-Dialogue'.¹²⁾ I wanted Peter to have the opportunity to talk about how he felt so that he could once again actively contribute to the process.

For Peter and all the rest of us, it was not clear what exactly had led to this situation. A few instants in which Peter's suggestion was boldly replied or not valued enough were recalled and all participants had the time to reflect on their way of giving responds or comments to others.¹³⁾

I concluded for myself that within the process of the Socratic Dialogue an underlying feeling of goodwill towards each other is very important.¹⁴⁾ At last most of Peter's discontent resolved but the Meta-Dialogue had brought about another challenging factor to the stage, participating as a couple makes self-confrontations double confronting; feeling the need of always having to support or back-up each others opinions out of a sort of loyalty towards each other. "Let

her (his wife) speak” or “she can think for herself you know” where often heard remarks from the participants towards Peter.

. Socratic Dialogue in Japan

I would like to finish this paper with a few words about the expected benefits of Socratic dialogue in Japan.¹⁵⁾

Living in Japan myself it is not too difficult to see striking differences between the communication skills of Japanese people and that of people of Western traditions. Needless to say, both traditions the East as well as the West possesses valuable aspects that can enrich the process of Socratic Dialogue.

As a Dutch being raised in a very open and multi-colored society one's personal strong opinion seems all that counts for. On the other hand 'courtesy' towards one's superior dictates most rules for communication in Japan and strong personal opinion here might stand in the way of 'the efficiency of obedience'. Nevertheless, living at the rise of a new century we are all faced with the challenge of constructing new traditions and cultures that foster harmonious cooperation between people of all kind of backgrounds. It is precisely here that I see an important role for the Socratic Dialogue in Japan.

The fast rise of modern (western) culture in Japan opened up a new storehouse of opportunities but not without risks. Continuous deep-rooted reflection and independent reasoning is needed for its people to recognize, 'what modern society wants from them', and 'who they themselves think to be'. Without self- reflection people will start to float, dragged along in a stream in which they cannot longer recognize themselves. Van Rossum¹⁶⁾ therefore well defines Socratic Dialogue as an exercise in 'phronesis'.¹⁷⁾ Rejecting blunt and surface level prejudgments, aiming at sharp and detailed perception that sees through to the core of the matter.

Drop-out due to mental distress and disorientation will prevail in a society that does not lent support in the need to adjust to changes in a creative and personal way. This kind of adjustment without doubt acquires original and imaginative thinking, for the adjustment we aim at is besides active and voluntary, one that pertains to the entire self. Harmonizing the various elements of our being, going beyond mere passive adjustment to external changes in our surrounding. Dewey comments:

The connection between imagination and the harmonizing of the self is

*closer than is usually thought. The idea of a whole, whether of the whole personal being or of the world, is an imaginative, not a literal, idea. The limited world of our observation and reflection becomes the universe only through imaginative extension.*¹⁸⁾

Socratic Dialogue in the long run, might help to resolve culturally imbedded causes of corruption and transform cultivated (blind) obedience into creative and reflective cooperation. But maybe first of all and in my opinion of most importance is the immediate role that the Socratic Dialogue can play in encouraging Japan's further 'female emancipation'.

Notes

¹Jansen, S, "Dialectic; a means for inner-transformation" Master thesis Soka University, Tokyo, 2002.

² The best example is often the one that is clear and simple, in which each participant easily can recognize the significance of the starting question and without difficulty can place him/herself in the given situation.

³ SFCP/PPA 4th International Conference Newman College, Birmingham, 28th July-3rd August. 2002.

⁴ During my first one and a half-day of Socratic Dialogue we never reached the point of formulating a 'core statement'. Under pressure of a time limit the process up until that moment was being evaluated. Having worked through only half of the process of the Socratic Dialogue it nevertheless had given rise to enough interesting and confronting situations to satisfy all participants.

⁵ Boele Dries, "The benefits of a Socratic dialogue Or: Which Results Can We Promise?", *INQUIRY: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines* (p.51)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Marinoff Lou, *Plato not Prozac*. Harper Collins Publishers Inc. New York, 2000 (p. 264)

⁸ In which any given 'good' teacher is supposed to keep control over his/her pupils and solemnly directs the course of the class.

⁹ I have to note here that it is important that the facilitator at any given new stage within the Socratic Dialogue 'technically' explains the aim and procedure of that particular stage, of cause this is of less importance when working with well experienced participants.

¹⁰ Remember that all the different stages in the Socratic Dialogue have to be followed in a relatively fixed order (like previously described).

¹¹ The participants themselves have to struggle together to direct the dialogue. Most of us are not familiar with this kind of procedure and among the ones that get annoyed by it most easily are participants who feel secure within a strict and orderly guided process in which they are more or less an passive observer.

¹² At any given moment in the Socratic Dialogue one can stop the process temporary for a sort of 'time-out' in which you can discuss any emotional or personal feeling about the process so far.

¹³ I cannot help but notice once more some striking similarities between Plato's 'Meno', who struggled with his character weakness of being overly self content about his sophisticated knowledge and most of the new comers including me, who seemed equally handicapped in the face of a philosophical inquiry. For not only do we tent to show of our knowledge only to reconfirm our own content with it, we seem to have lost the ability to 'doubt' altogether.

¹⁴ Even in the case of Socrates when using his famous stinging irony it was nevertheless imbedded in goodwill towards his interlocutors.

¹⁵ Up until today only at Osaka University efforts have been made to establish a faculty under the name of clinical philosophy.

¹⁶ Van Rossum Kristof, *"Horsels op een paard- het socratisch gesprek in het vormingswerk"*. Vorming jaargang 16 nr.3,februari 2001.(p.179)

¹⁷ Which centers on perception and experience rather than on the transmission of theoretical concepts.

¹⁸ Dewey John, *A common faith*. Yale University Press. 1934, (p.18)