

MEETING SOCRATES

How to do Socratic consultations

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Abstract

A Socratic dialogue is mostly understood as a philosophical inquiry that is necessarily executed in a group setting. Also in the German tradition of *Das Sokratische Gespräch*, there is hardly an exception. However, Socrates himself did never do that. In this article, the author shows what it takes for a facilitator to lead a Socratic dialogue in a one-on-one setting. In distinguishing this Socratic dialogue from other ways of doing philosophical counseling, some typical Socratic 'movements' are described .

Keywords

Socratic dialogue, philosophical counseling, facilitation of dialogue, critical thinking, argumentation techniques, Socratic style in counseling

Introduction

What makes a consultation 'Socratic'? One obvious requirement is that in such a conversation, something similar to what our Athenian friend did must, in some sense, take place. And what was it that Socrates was doing? Hundreds of scholars in the long history of philosophy and Classic literature have tried to answer that question. Until today we have only one answer: we don't really know what he did! Just like is the case with Jesus or Mohammed, it's impossible to understand his words and actions leaving aside the interpretations of the historical texts in which he plays a roll (Rossetti, 2011). One thing is sure : Socrates himself did not have a definable 'method' that he applied to everyone he met (Reich, 1998). But this doesn't mean that any conversation today can be legitimized as being Socratic. Below, I describe exactly twenty minutes of a conversation I had with Anne. I didn't know anything personal about her. She was a participant in a workshop I took, on this topic, and she volunteered to be my conversational partner. After this talk, an exercise followed in which the participants practiced leading a one-to-one Socratic dialogue. At the end of the workshop, some critical questions were addressed. At the end of this article, I discuss some of them.

1. The conversation

Kristof, the facilitator (K): Who has experienced something remarkable last week and can also point to a remarkable moment during that experience?

Anne (A): Yes, I have something. Two days ago I went to have lunch with a friend. At some point in the conversation, she claimed, "I never judge!" But she does that all the time. That presented

a difficulty for me.

K: Why is that?

A: Well, because she is so blatantly wrong. Marian, that's her name, is a very spontaneous woman and has an opinion about everything. I like her for that. Going out for dinner with her is always fun. She blurts out everything quite thoughtlessly. During lunch she talked animatedly about her mother. I just sat and listened. And then, when she said she never judged, I immediately thought: "Oh my girl, how little you know yourself!"

K: What else did you think?

A: I wanted to say something like "That's not true, you're constantly doing that," but I did not dare.

K: Why not?

A: I was afraid she would be angry. In my understanding of her, she cannot tolerate criticism and would react angrily if I were to confront her with this.

K: Did you say anything?

A: (hesitates, looks uncomfortable) Well, after a moment of silence I said something like "Never ... Well?" but in a light-hearted manner, so that it didn't seem as if I was holding her accountable for what she had said. Afterwards, the conversation went on as usual with small talk.

K: I come back to my question: what did you exactly think at that moment?

A: Now that you ask me, I did feel some reluctance. I felt it a pity that I just could not tell her this. I thought: She'll never be a true friend of mine.

K: What is important here? What would you like to focus on?

A: (takes a moment to think) The last part is important I think, about friendship.

K: Could you state here and now, that Marian will never be a true friend of yours?

A: (doubts) Well, you never know of course, she could change over her lifetime. She's a nice friend, you know. She's someone you can always have fun with, but I wouldn't say she's a "true friend", now. No. To be a friend like that requires something more, I think.

K: OK, so you say: "She's not a true friend of mine". What does this have to do with the moment she said, "I never judge"?

A: Well, it was at that very moment, when she said, 'I never judge', that it became clear to me that she's not really one of my true friends. I had been thinking about this for a while already, but at that moment, it became very clear to me.

K: (writes down) "When Marian, during our conversation, said: "I never judge," I knew clearly what I had been thinking about for a while: that she's not a true friend of mine."

K: Is that correct?

A: Yes!

K: Why did you know that at that moment?

A: Well, I knew that because, a) I didn't have the feeling I could be myself with her.

K: (writes it down on sheet) can you explain this a bit more?

A: Being myself means that I feel I can say anything I want, and that is the feeling that I expect to have in the company of a true friend.

K: What does this have to do with her saying, "I never judge"?

A: Well, that I didn't feel I could freely say that she was mistaken!

K: OK. Do you have other reasons why you knew at that moment that she's not a true friend?

A: b) There was no mutual understanding. She doesn't feel what I think and vice versa. I must be careful about what I say to her. I have to watch what I say all the time.

K: OK, are there any other reasons?

A: c) She disappointed me with her response.

K: What's the disappointment about?

A: I'm disappointed in her. To me, saying "I never judge" shows that she doesn't know herself, and that's what I expect from a true friend.

K: And which of these three reasons you gave here is the most important one to you?

A: The first one, I think. With a true friend, you need the feeling that you can be yourself, don't you?

K: Did you have the feeling that you could be yourself, at the moment she said, "I never judge"?

A: No, as I told you, I felt I had to be careful with her; that I couldn't say whatever I wanted.

K: What would you call this feeling?

A: (thinks) I think it is being restricted, not being free.

K: And is this feeling of being restricted the most important reason for saying you knew she will never be a true friend?

A: Yes.

K: Why is that?

A: With a true friend, you never have a feeling of being held back, restricted.

K: OK, but why is it more important than a lack of mutual understanding, or Marian not knowing herself?

A: (thinks deeply) I think that's because being myself and feeling free, rather than restricted, is necessary if a person is to be a true friend. The other two can occur, by chance, in an ordinary friendship, even in a true one. But when there is this feeling of being restricted, it will never truly be a true friendship. Don't you think so?

K: How do you know you will always feel that with Marian?

A: Well, I have another friend, Karin. She's been a true friend for a long time, and with her, I don't feel that.

K: But do you think this can change? And change in the case of Marian?

A: Well, that's always possible, of course, but it's very unlikely. It's a feeling that sometimes comes back, depending on the person you're with.

K: Do you have this feeling of being restricted now, in this talk with me?

A: To be honest: sometimes, yes; I'm afraid that I might say something wrong.

K: Does it mean then that I will never be a true friend of yours?

A: No, but if this feeling were to continue, then I think I would, indeed, never be your true friend.

K: So how many times would you need to have this feeling before you knew that I would never be a true friend?

A: I don't know how many!

K: So if you don't know how many times you need to feel this, how could you know this, all of a sudden, in the conversation with Marian?

A: (is silent) I'll think about it later. Could we stop this now?

K: Yes, the time is up. Thank you Ann for this conversation.

A: Thank you.

2. What is the facilitator doing here?

1. The conversation starts in the middle of an everyday life event. Anne almost spontaneously comes with a story about which she has an opinion. I'm not concerned with her opinion, as such; I don't care about the topic, or the story. The only thing I am interested in is:

a) Is she able to tell the story in entirely concrete terms (i.e. not like "I almost always meet people who...") and,

b) Can she locate a moment in the experience where something happens about which she has an opinion. The only thing I do is to ask questions, so that I have the story in front of my eyes, like a film, and facilitate her in asserting something about a critical moment. That moment occurs here when her friend said, 'I never judge'. That is the moment when reflections about friendship arose in her mind.

2. While Anne is telling her story, several observations on her encounter are introduced, such as "Marian has a statement about everything", and 'Marian blurts anything'. But they are 'detached', in the sense that Anne doesn't want to make them the basis of a truth claim. It's only after my question "Where would you like to focus on?" that she makes a claim that is more precise and emphatic: 'she will never be a true friend of mine'. Because this still sounds like an assertion within her account, without making a point in the here and now, I ask her if she also regards it as a claim at this very moment, that Marian is not, in fact, a good friend. And she does. From a logical point of view, I expected that. If she thought she would never be a true friend, one might also expect her to say she wasn't one now. She even says that, at that moment, she knew she was not a true friend.

3. Once her statement is made, I invite Anne to formulate her actual reasons for seeing the situation as she does. Then I write down every reason she gives, in her very own words. What I think about those reasons doesn't matter here. I don't question the arguments as such, only the way they relate to the experience, and what they mean in her mind. Here, for example, the concept of 'being myself' is not clear to me, so I ask her to clarify it.

4. Because we have not much time, I subsequently ask Anne to take a look at those topics, and to choose the most important one. She chose the topic of her feeling of not being able to be herself with Marian. As it is rather vague to me, I ask her to conceptualize this feeling. She calls it 'being restricted'. Now that we have all that she thinks, 'on the table', the critical part comes in. I invite her to look critically at the quality of her own arguments, starting with her sense of their importance, in rank order. I do this by asking her why she thinks her feeling of being restricted with Anne, is the most important reason. Second, focusing on the argument itself, I ask her to investigate whether this feeling of being restricted is a good source of knowledge for judging the quality of this particular friendship. After all a feeling comes and goes, but does that count as knowledge? How long time should this feeling persist or keep recurring before you know that that isn't a true friend who is sitting in front of you?

5. While questioning this last point, I suddenly make a move to the here and now. I ask her to compare the feeling of being restricted with Marian with the feeling she has in this conversation with me. When is the feeling concrete enough to conclude: you're not a good friend? This last point remains unresolved, because of time constraints. But Anne got fed up with it as well, just as Euthyphro got fed up with Socrates some 2400 years ago...

3. Critical questions

1. Is this a Socratic dialogue?

A Socratic dialogue is a conversation in which you reflect continuously on:

- a. what you actually say about your experience, and why you are saying it (expressed in terms as specific and concrete as possible), and
- b. what the truth is of those beliefs and the validity of the arguments; b) then follows as the logical outcome of a). In this conversation with Anne, this second movement remained unaccomplished because time was up. The critical investigation of the truth of her arguments had just begun. Nevertheless I already call this a Socratic dialogue because you can see some essential 'Socratic' moves happening:
 - i. To take position : The inquiry starts as soon as there is a participant that holds a claim about a moment in his/her experience, something he or she believes to be true. Here, it is Anne claiming that she knew Marian was not a true friend.
 - ii. To concretize : I ask her a few times to concretize what she says in her experiential account: "What has this to do with the moment Marian cried out 'I never judge'?"
 - iii. To argue : I ask Anne to explain what she holds as a truth. I invite her to give arguments for her view. And I do this as exhaustively as possible, until she herself says 'it's enough'. This is the famous 'mid-wife move' that is so frequently quoted. When I ask my client for her claims, and her arguments for those claims, I bring out into the open the knowledge my conversational partner is aware of, perhaps sub-consciously. This happens without explicit invitation; it is a spontaneous process. In this case with Anne, it went very smoothly without too much pain.
 - iv. To listen literally : I write down Anne's thoughts as literally as I can. I can only do this if I listen very carefully to what she says.
 - v. To criticize : Once her arguments are on the flipchart, I ask Anne to look at them critically. When she considers, for example, why the first argument is the most important, she is questioning the concept of friendship in her own mind. It's a concept that entails that there is a necessary condition to be fulfilled: that you can be yourself, meaning that you don't feel any restrictions, that you can say whatever you want.
 - vi. To mirror : At the end of the conversation, I ask Anne to apply her 'epistemological' claim about knowing what a good friend is to the situation in the here and now.

2. How important is the presence of a 'community of inquiry'?

Although the critical thinking here is done without the presence of a group, I would still call this conversation a Socratic Dialogue. Some Socratic moves, like listening attentively, asking questions, etc. will generally be made here by the facilitator instead of by the group. The

facilitator is definitely much more actively questioning than in the case of a group deliberating about the casus.

Nevertheless, two people can replace the critical function of the group. The essence of a SD is not in the mere fact that it is done by a group. The dialogic essentials reside in the movements I have described above. Group dynamic aspects, such as 'finding' each other, empathizing with the example of the other etc. are not unimportant but are subsidiary and supportive components of an SD. Empathy with the situation of the other can also be very helpful, for example, in a coaching or a TGI-group discussion, but it is not essentially Socratic.

3. (How) does the counselor influence what the client says?

This is of course a central question to understand what is happening here. To be short : I accept everything on the content level of what my client says but I don't do that on the formal level. Her speech is the material I work with. In my client's mind, there is more than enough content/wisdom about friendship. But it is 'loose,' intuitive, not thought through. This is where I as a philosopher come in. I require Anne to formulate what she wants to say in a particular way, one that requires reflection, and much more so than she might have expected. Following the Socratic adage that "the unreflective life is not worth living", I invariably do the best I can to help my client reflect upon what she says. So how do I do that? A simple answer: by asking questions. But what kinds of questions?

First the questions have to be 'open' in the sense that the answer to the question is not hidden somewhere in the question. Suppose I asked Anne something like "Do you really think that being yourself with your friend is that important?" Would that make her think? This fairly explicit question is not in itself particularly interesting, but it satisfies my need as a questioner for confirmation of my beliefs about her answers more than it helps her to reflect upon her thinking.

A second characteristic of questions I ask is that they are not prepared nor prefabricated. They have to match the spontaneous speech of my client in order to have their intended effect. This requires me to follow exactly everything Anne says here. Does 'following her speech' mean that I support her opinions or agree with everything she says? No. But my own position about friendship is simply not relevant here. Just like a good midwife, I don't stand in the way of the birth of reasoning in the client. Sometimes it is very tempting not to do so, and to follow and steer responses your way, especially when some theme is brought up that might look interesting and worth looking into. Anne, for example, seemed to think that she should avoid holding her friend accountable for what she had said. That's why she reacted with a giggle to the proposition that "I never judge". I found that remarkable. But as she doesn't address it as an issue, I let it pass, as part of her story.

This brings me to the third criterion for my questions: they must enable her to investigate her thinking critically, in a Socratic way. This means the client has to make the moves I talked about. So a question like "What exactly did you think at that moment?" enables her to concretize. A question like "Why did you know that at that moment?" invites her to explain, and to give reasons for her claim. So do I influence the content of what she says? Yes, there is some influence, but it is applied indirectly. In this respect, my job is the same as that of a potter: the

clay is not my main concern (although the material must be of an acceptable quality, of course). My job is to create the form that makes the clay (her intuitive assertions) into a pot (her well established and critically investigated claims and arguments).

The application of indirect influence, however, observes limits, namely, the limits the client sets him or herself. Just like the Platonic sketch of the insatiable Socrates, reflection and questioning for me have, in principle, no limits. But, I go only as far as my client allows me to go. When she is fed up with the questions, or wants to be left alone, that's her prerogative. At that point I stop. Whenever she might want to continue the conversation in the future, I'm her man.

4. To conclude

I conclude with a note about temptation. During the conversation, Anne did not only non-verbally express some need for support (a questioning look, silence). She also asked me a few times to approve what she was thinking: "you need the feeling that you can be yourself, don't you?" or "But when there is this feeling of being restricted, it will never be any true friendship at all. Don't you think so?" It is very tempting here to listen to the Siren's voice and help Anne, to comfort her, to let her feel that she's not stupid, that her intuitions are right etc. But that is not my job! I neither confirm nor deny what Anne says. I don't show any empathy, I don't 'hum' or give signs of approval. The only thing I do is encourage her to think further by adding, 'OK', a few times before I formulate my next question. So, for me, the main activity of being a counselor, or facilitator, is sitting down, waiting, listening, structuring the formulations of the client in my head, and simply asking questions all the time. I am not aloof; I even listen very closely, but without being 'near' to her. Why is this important? Because my job is to enhance critical thinking in the client's mind. And this means: growing up, standing on your own feet, being responsible for what you say and think. I try to reach this with a seemingly 'casual' way of listening. What I do is creating clearness and order in what I, quite literally, 'hear' from her. I'm not looking for any 'deeper' truth, behind or in between her words. Questioning Socratically means working on the surface of thoughts. What you see, or hear, is what you get.

You can call this resistance towards appeals for help from the client the attitude of a 'compassionate distance'. I am passionately involved with my client: I listen very carefully and follow his or her speech very closely. I am the best mirror you can get. But the mirror is not the same as the person, it merely reflects him. I never play my clients' game. I don't 'understand' my client, nor am I 'connected' with him or her. I'm always at a critical distance. The Socratic counselor is not a savior. His questions are not intended to make flowers grow. All he can do is to draw the curtains aside, so that the sun of reasoning can enter and let the flowers grow.

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