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Socrates in Prison: Socratic Dialogues with Prisoners

KRISTOF VAN ROSSEM
UNIVERSITY OF LEUVEN, BELGIUM

Abstract

In this article, Kristof Van Rossem, Belgian philosophical practitioner and Socratic dialogue facilitator, describes his experience leading Socratic dialogues in five Belgian prisons. He tells many significant details of the encounters. He shows that, in order to do your job well with this public, it was necessary to lock up the Socratic method itself behind bars in order to continue the work 'man to man'. The facilitator himself was in this respect just like Socrates 'put to trial' for everything he did and was obliged to show his integrity as a person. Didactically, the author claims, this experience shows that Socratic work of whatever kind should preferably not be offered 'additionally' to the experience of an existing group. It should instead be executed integrated in the living practice of the participants.

Keywords: *socratic dialogue, prisons, detainees, restorative detention, philosophy in practice, consultancy in prisons*

Introduction

Bzzz! The back gate of the prison opens with an anachronistic electronic sound. In front of a glass cabin I hear "For a training course?" The porter frowns. Why should one indeed train prisoners? Aren't they here precisely because they are uneducated and therefore not suitable for society? Isn't every effort to win this battle lost beforehand? Isn't philosophizing with prisoners like casting pearls before swine?

"Could you look in this direction?" I get photographed and just like at the airport all metal objects in my possession are scanned. I am not asked any questions about my philosophical views. To me, the strangest feature of this bizarre land is that you virtually cannot or should not do anything without the guards. Opening a door, going to the toilet, getting around, it's all done for you by the prison officers (warders) that occasionally look scornfully in your direction. How will I be able to sell Kants "trust in the autonomous reason" to my participants in such an environment?

"Kristof, hello!" Raf is looking slightly more hopeful and enthusiastic in my direction than his fellow guards. He is one of the so-called "recovery consultants" that came into service in Belgium after a ministerial circular of 2000, allowing consultants like him to work on "reintegration." So having a Socratic dialogue with the prisoners should in one way or another contribute to this reintegration concept. Raf instructed me by saying that the objective of these dialogues was to have the participants reflect upon their own life issues and in particular on the issues having to do with personal freedom and responsibility.

Raf accompanies me to the "leisure" space. Here the detainees can have a conversation with their families several times a week for not more than half an hour. If the need is high, there is a separate room next door with a bed to carry out the necessary transaction with an intimate partner. In ad-

dition to this, they have a half an hour walk in the courtyard every day. For most inmates, life in a Belgian prison implies 22 hours a day in a cell that is often not even a private one. Their lives in this cell consist of eating, sleeping, for more sophisticated ones—listening to music, playing games and watching TV, fabricating and smoking hash, quarreling or making plans. A minority reads books. Gert, one of my participants, said: "I think they are making a robot out of a man here: spending 22 hours in a cell instead of getting engaged in some educational process or an activity. What annoys me is that we don't learn anything. Thinking alone is not enough."

Will these men teach me something or the other way around? Will I be able to do a "thinking program" with them? Will that contribute to reintegration? Let's see . . .

1. The crime: the habit . . .

1.1. The preparation

The first session was in Tongeren, in the East of Belgium. Eight participants, on a voluntary basis, were present. I didn't know anything about their penitentiary past but listening to their speeches during the morning coffee, my guess was that the majority were drug dealers. I got some faded sheets of wallpaper and I started my training by asking them to write down their own answer to the question "What do you want to work on in this workshop?" I wanted to have a first glimpse on the diversity of their expectations and to encourage them to participate actively. Six of them wrote down very noble objectives such as "listening", "openness to the other", "showing respect", not always in decent Dutch though. Bert and Angelo said that they had written the same thing on one sheet. Raf, who was also present in the workshop, whispered in my ear: "Angelo can't write!" This was new to me. An average Socratic dialogue participant, I realized, is indeed literate. Unusual was as well the look in their eyes when I started explaining what a Socratic dialogue is all about. It was like they were watching Star Wars! Was this going to be "the clash of civilizations"! How was I going to survive this?

1.2. The questions

As a stimulus for a conversation there in Tongeren we took an excerpt from a documentary about the experience of prisoners in the prison of Bruges. The intention was to provide inspiration to generate questions. Looking backwards, that wasn't necessary: there were plenty of questions that interested them and that had nothing to do with this video. I haven't used the video ever since. Some of the questions they formulated were:

- Why can't I stop myself from beating someone up?
- Who are we in prison?
- Am I responsible for everything I do?
- Who am I in jail?
- Why should we show more respect than the jailer?
- What makes someone worthier than anyone else?
- Why does my past haunt me?
- Should you always follow the rules?

Due to an influenceable intervention of Raf (who had "responsibility" on the agenda), this last question became the question that we would deal with at this first meeting. We sought a few experiences on the basis of the classical criterion: it had to be their own experience, rather simple, as recent as possible (Van Rossem, 2014). And they were supposed to have an opinion about a central moment of this experience, which corresponded to the question. Ronny and Marc claimed in their stories that they didn't follow the rules that very morning. They said they were late for the course because they still had a "morning ritual." Yuri described how he smoked a cigarette in this very room right before the Socratic dialogue started, even though the consultant forbade this. Because it looked fairly simple, I proposed the group to go into the latter story.¹

1.3. The conversation

I asked the participants to form their own opinion on the matter: was Yuri here to follow the rule (no smoking) or did he do a good thing not obeying the rule? Two opposing views dominated: Marc said it was OK to smoke in there because if he didn't, he would not have been enjoyable for others. Yuri himself blamed the power of habit. He didn't have time that morning to smoke a cigarette because he got out of bed too late. This was against his habit, so he compensated that during the course time. Andy chimed in: "I'd light up a cigarette because it's my habit."

Bert and Rudi still would not do it in spite of that irresistible urge. They claimed that the argument of Yuri was actually an excuse: After all, you can get up earlier to smoke if you know it's forbidden during the course. Moreover, you have to avoid smoking out of respect for the organizer and the course supervisor.

Raf, the recovery consultant, of course went along with this point: Yuri shouldn't smoke out of respect for the other attendees. Furthermore, you may jeopardize the course.

Gert and Ronny made it even more dramatic: Yuri knew it yesterday, so he could get up earlier. What he did was not OK: this way, he lost my trust and trust of others as well.

A number of aspects were investigated further: whether habit is a justification, whether you can have your own conduct under control when the temptation is truly irresistible, etc. Bert and Rudi claimed that you could stick to rules only to the extent you can keep yourself under control. Since Yuri didn't do that, it follows that he didn't control himself. Yuri did not agree on that: he was under control, although he admitted it was a "habit." So how to think about that? Gert made the point even stronger: you must adhere to the rules not only because you control yourself, but also because you owe it to yourself. Kant would be proud of him...

I didn't question a whole lot of assertions being made: for example whether it was really a habit that prompted Yuri to act, whether he was really being "enjoyable" for others as Marc said in his defense, etc. The effect of this was that it remained comprehensible and "loose" for the participants. The discussion was streamlined and the participants looked satisfied. Yet I didn't think it was satisfactory:

- the "real topics" such as personal responsibility and freedom of offenders were not touched only by talking about this cigarette
- it still resembled too much the speech of the rehabilitation consultant who was present all the time. Without me allowing him to go his way, the choice of the sample and the question would have been different and probably not the way he wanted.

- even though the story and the question fitted the traditional criteria in a Socratic Dialogue, I felt something else was needed to achieve an in-depth conversation.
- the "conclusion" was a theoretical one and in fact a veiled rebuke to Yuri.

At that time, the author of this story was not aware of his "crime", pushing the participants to go through a Socratic "format." He merely did so because of "habit"! In the prison of Mechelen, a really tough guy was there to change that!

2. The punishment: verbal abuse

2.1. Tough circumstances

Mumbling voices were heard all over when I entered a very small, triangular old room with only two windows that couldn't open. Here, all eleven of the thirteen participants in pale beige clothes were gathered. Just like in Tongeren, I had neither a flipchart nor tables, only the markers (that I had by the way bought myself). There were only some sheets of old brown cover paper that I found next door. Inconvenient circumstances. But again: take it or leave it, due to a lack of appropriate infrastructure.

By the firm handshakes that I exchanged with the participants, I suspected a significant past that I—as agreed beforehand—knew nothing about. This time, we had a whole day ahead of us. There were also two women: Ann, a rehabilitation counselor and her assistant Catherine. The last one that came in was Jorg. You could recognize him from far away by his imposing body and his very noisy, jovial style with which he greeted everyone. After a short introduction where the participants exchanged their expectations, they wrote down some questions, as well as they could.

When I looked at the sheet, I was struck by a strange spelling of the "O" in a few sentences: a few well-defined stripes were drawn all through the "O's."

Time for a break and coffee: in this case an indefinable black substance that was served in plastic cups. When I wanted to fill up my cup, the thermos made a percolating sound: prrrrh! Damn! No coffee anymore. Spontaneously I made a joke, saying: "That's probably what the last sound of a human being sounds like!" This big Jorg who was standing next to me then said: "I know what it is like, the last sound of a human being!" Oops! He told me his story that I recognized from the newspapers. He was sentenced for a double murder, stabbing a knife in the back of two youngsters at a party night of a youth movement. The reason: an unpaid beer. One would probably call this "senseless violence" today. But it surely made sense to Jorg given the enthusiasm he expressed along the story.

2.2. Strong stories

It didn't take long for them to agree on a question they wanted to discuss: "When am I myself?" Staying true to the method I asked them to articulate an experience on this topic and to share it in pairs. This did not work: they all talked about other things. So I brought it to a common discussion. Unlike in Tongeren, real stories came to the table here. Dirk was telling how a few months ago, he smashed down a car with a whole group of "friends." The victim was a guy who had betrayed a fellow drug dealer's supplier. When he helped them, he was not himself, he said.

Jorg told them with great panache how he had demolished a pub with his "friends." They also wanted to tackle the pub owner, but Jorg refused to participate. Even though his friends went much further, he, as a gang leader, considered it was sufficient. At that time, he claimed, "he was himself." The story was told with great style and velocity. This, in combination with his dominant verbal presence, evoked resistance in some participants. André, who was sitting right in front of him, immediately expressed his doubts. He said that Jorg got simply carried away by his group.

None of them were being themselves. So the moment he decided to stop demolishing the bar while the group went on, he still wasn't himself. If you are truly yourself, André said, you don't attack a small bar! Many were delighted with André's reaction and recognized themselves in this theme: they let themselves be carried away by so-called friends, cronies, etc. It's fairly easy.

Jorg responded very picky to Andre: "You don't know what you're talking about, you don't have friends like me." An attack and a reply that sounded as sharp as it was loud. A few minutes of arguing followed. I suspected an underlying conflict between them and wanted to put the conversation back on track: "Let's see if there are other stories." Patrick told, in very general terms, that he was only himself in the pub and not at the factory. Rachid, a very religious Moroccan drug dealer told the group that he didn't follow the conditions of his provisional release because it went against what was written in the Koran. Without going into much detail, he said: "I do not know what that is, being yourself. For me, being myself is doing what Allah asks of me." Jorg replied to that: "I understand it. For me, being myself is doing what Hitler asks of me." Suddenly I understood what the strange characters on the "O's" on the sheets meant. I was sitting there in a group with a fundamentalist Muslim and a neo-Nazi. But I kept cool and decided along with the group to deepen the example of André, which for the majority was the most simple and recognizable.

2.3. About revenge and women

After lunch, two participants, without mentioning, dropped out. But André and Jorg, the two cockerels, were present. I asked André to give a more detailed explanation of his story about a demolition of a car he did together with his friends. He said he was under the influence and it was the group that incited him to do it. It happened also because of self-interest: the supplier could not supply him anymore. And it was revenge: the car owner had arrested his friend. André told the group that when he was home alone thinking about the incident, he realized that he had been too much under the influence of the group pressure. Crashing a car together is indeed inefficient, and in addition they were all considered criminals by the police. That wasn't OK and he had not been himself. Nico agreed. "And moreover," he said, "It was not an effective action. André got arrested and that is not 'professional.'"

During Nico's explanation, our Jorg had been writing with big letters on a sheet: "Only revenge yourself for the friends who help you to be yourself." With "O's" crossed over and a few swastikas of course. Without me addressing this, André himself said: "I would like to know if Jorg would have done the same as me." When I asked for an explanation, André said he was sure Jorg didn't understand "revenge" the same way as he did. This concept seemed to interest the group much more than "being oneself." So I asked all the participants to discuss in pairs whether the André's story was indeed an example of an act of revenge and secondly, what this "revenge" really was. Then, Ann and Daisy, who until now had been very quiet, said they couldn't judge that situation because they had never been in a similar experience. Immediately after that, Jorg said:

Jorg: "That's quite normal for women."

Me: "Why?"

Jorg: "Women don't know that feeling of vengeance."

Me: "Could you repeat what Ann and Daisy just said?"

Jorg: "Women are not like men, they are softer, they don't understand that feeling of friendship, they don't know that revenge . . ."

Me: "If you mean all women, why don't we start with Ann and Daisy to check if this is the case: what question do you want to ask them?"

By that time, however, Jorg didn't hear me anymore. Speaking loudly he overruled every discussion with his rhetoric, condemning not only women but also basically all other human beings with the exception of the white male Aryan race. André wanted to interrupt but didn't get a chance. The same for Ann and Daisy.

I was still the so-called Socratic facilitator but I got in the mean time so scared that I started to raise my voice. The research spirit and calmness that this process normally evokes were totally lost. For more than ten minutes the group was exposed to the most abhorrent thoughts.

2.4. Socrates beaten up

Jorg left for a break in rage, followed by the others. I stayed in the room dazed and confused. Ann and Daisy were next to me but looked significantly less stressed than I did. I admitted that I didn't have the group under control any longer. Jorg's sudden blatant racism and sexism made me lose all my concentration. And so I lost the fragile research spirit that I managed to evoke in people like André, for example. Then Ann said: "The only one who has held a Socratic dialogue the last few hours is you!" After the break, these words remained in my mind as a ghost. The participants came back without Jorg. Some last thoughts on "being oneself" were exchanged in a very calm, almost absent way. During the evaluation, participants confessed to be quite satisfied with the day.

However, I myself went home with a very strange feeling. It only occurred to me the next day that Ann was right. I realized that I would never facilitate any more Socratic discussions in the same way. I simply followed a formal pre-established procedure instead of adapting the process to the public I was dealing with.

I suggested changing the announcement of the conversation the following week in Turnhout from "Socratic dialogue" to "a conversation about what really matters."

3. Recovery: what really matters.

3.1. How do you know you can trust someone?

In a corner of the dining area in the Turnhout prison, seven detainees showed up. Handshakes were as sturdy as before.² It was as if they wanted to say: "I want to be greeted as a human being, regardless of my past". I told them that my intention that afternoon was mainly to give them the opportunity to express whatever they felt was important. Somebody asked me: "Is this your job? Do you earn money with this?" I told them a bit about my job, which clearly wasn't similar to theirs. Most of my interlocutors there turned out to be drug dealers. This time, I had a number of questions written down on a paper in order to gain time. Going through them, they said they wanted to go

for "How do you know you can trust someone?" Right on target! Stories followed about "partners in crime" that had remained faithful to them and others that had betrayed them. "You can't trust anyone" seemed to be the bottom line.

Frank, a crook as it turned out, took the lead in the dialogue. He had already introduced himself claiming that he had been working with these philosophical questions in the history of Western thought. "And Socrates," he said, "was the most important one." As a response to the claim that it wasn't easy to trust someone, he firmly reacted by saying: "That's not true. Trust is not so difficult and you can easily obtain it." I said: "Ok, Frank, so show me then. Would you say that you trust these conversation partners here and that they trust you?" Him: "Of course. Every time they need something, they can come to me. I deliver them everything they ask for!"

To check this, I asked the others: "Is this correct? Do you trust him?" An awkward silence followed. One minute is a long time for a moment like that. Frank's face twisted. Irritated and nervous he shouted: "Marc, isn't that so? And Yuri, you do trust me, don't you? I've always helped you, haven't I?" The silence became even more painful.

I said that the last incident revealed that he was wrong about the last part of his claim. After a short break, during which I talked a bit to him personally, we continued to dwell on that point. Following a brief examination he admitted with a lump in his throat that he thought many people trusted him. The only reason was that he always gave them something. Real trust, however, said the others, is something else. Frank concluded resignedly: "That's the story of my life." He thanked me at the end and added once again that no intellectual in the history of Western culture had been so influential as Socrates...

3.2. Is there a method?

It has often been argued that the most typical of the Socratic questioning style is the "elenchus," which means literally "rebuttal, embarrassment or shame." Socrates was said to embarrass his interlocutors by confronting them with the inconsistencies contained in their speeches. The "shame" that follows the moment of recognition of one's lack of accurate knowledge, is the start of a new investigation into the real nature of things. In this inquiry, it is important that what you claim to be true is recognizable in the facts. In its most simple form, one can recognize such an elenchus experience in what happens to Frank. He comes to a conclusion that its premise, namely that trust can be built through the exchange of goods, is not true. There he had six fellow partners around him who had all done business with him but none of them claimed to trust him. Trust, they said, was built on a faithful affection rather than on some economic exchange. The fact that his friends/clients said this for the first time so clearly and openly certainly confronted Frank with the wrongness of his beliefs. It was a shock to him and most probably a start for an intensified introspection.

But the question remains whether Socrates' elenchus experience can be seen as a part of a "method." Looking closer at Plato's texts, you can only conclude that he does something different with each of his interlocutors (Reich, 1998; Vlastos, 1991).³ Sometimes he looks for definitions, sometimes he evaluates the value of contrasting individual allegations, sometimes he just wants to be right about his own moral standards, and sometimes he works with them to reach the truth that he himself is not sure about. In the *Phaedrus* for example, you can see how he even brings himself into an "elenchus" experience. He is after a philosophical investigation, no matter at what cost: "The unex-

amined life is not worth living." He wants to investigate, to reason, to check things out without any interruption. He wants to hear arguments for the positions taken by his interlocutors and not just take anything for granted.

This continuous search for meaning and for truth is more important than a methodological pattern (the lesson learned in Mechelen) or a preconceived structure (the Turnhout experience). That you yourself as the facilitator can be subjected to Socratic scrutiny as well, was the final lesson to be learned in Hasselt.

3.3. Why do I do what I do?

There was a hustle going on in the main hall of the Hasselt prison that afternoon: participants that had to call their lawyer at the last moment, others that had forgotten to take their medication before the session began. But we ended up with five attendees sitting in silence in the chapel of the prison. Again, no flipchart, neither paper nor pens, just a small organ, a few chairs, and presence of the Lord . . .

I sat there as "naked" as I could. I even did not have a list of questions this time. I asked them to say something about themselves, and then I asked the others if they understood a story of their colleague. Once again heroic stories came about but everyone stayed quite polite, even a bit distant with each other and with me. This changed when Antonio, a dealer with a weight of more than a hundred kilos, spoke about his "work". "I", he said, "am not like the other colleagues here. I am a responsible dealer! My work, unlike the other colleagues here, is 'ethical.'" I thought to myself: "Wow, such a competitive claim, now we're on track!" I asked Antonio to explain his claim by providing a personal experience. He told a story, with such an Italian bravura, about how a client, just before he was arrested, had called him out of his bed at four o'clock in the morning. He urgently needed stuff (heroin I assume). "I jumped in my clothes, got on my motorbike and immediately drove to his place. But I found both my client and his wife completely stoned on their dirty sofa. Across the room there was rubbish, used needles, beer cans. It stank and there was loud music playing. Among all that junk a naked kid of about four years old was running, crying. And another child was crying in bed."

The man, Antonio told us, became aggressive and wanted the stuff immediately but he had no money with him. Whereupon Antonio, a lifesaver, made a proposal to provide the stuff free of charge for two weeks, under a condition that the house was totally cleaned up, the kids were in bed on time and wouldn't be exposed to drugs.

And, he added: "I told him I would pass by every day to control him."

He triumphantly looked in my direction: "So," he said, "This is what I call ethical dealing." Then this conversation with me followed:

Me: "Just to check the profit balance here, Antonio, can you tell me, in percentage, how much of what you did is profitable for you and how much for them?"

A. "I think 65% is for myself. After all, I remain 'the boss' and they remain even more dependent on me than before. You know, this is more important for a dealer than the money itself. It is, you

could say, customer loyalty. 35% of what I do is for them because I serve them well, including their children, and I bear a financial loss. And you, Kristof. What you do here with us, is that ethically any better? What percentage of this is for us and how much is for you?"

Me: "Thanks for your question, Antonio. I think it is about the same percentage. The majority, about 65% of what I do is for myself. I want to discover new stories, new experiences. I am curious about life behind bars and I learn a lot from you. Maybe I'll write an article about it one day. I earn nothing for myself here, the money goes to my organization. And I think about the same percentage is in your profit. I can help you out with your questions ..."

A. (triumphantly): "So, we are colleagues . . ."

Me: "You forget one important difference, Antonio. Your product seems much more addictive than mine. This is still ethically problematic."

A. (quietly): "You're right. That's why I'm probably in jail and you will walk out again soon . . ."

Here I experienced for the first time a real "dispute" as we read in Plato. Often participants do not interrogate an attendant so he can still enjoy a "safe" position. Antonio did not suffer from this kind of respect and also wanted to have a man to man encounter. The best part was that it was not a 'battle' where the only thing that mattered was proliferation of power. It was rather a mutually challenging talk of a man with another man where everyone, including myself, made concessions. In addition the subject of this conversation was typically Platonic. It is about the virtue of the partners involved. It is not merely talking about allegations, it is what makes Antonio and myself as a person virtuous or not. My own integrity, not only as a coach but also as a person is questioned here. This is indeed what you can read in Plato. But unlike in my talk with Antonio, Socrates' interlocutors often ended inferior to him.

Indeed, Plato makes it very difficult for them to keep their integrity. Socrates is always better and sharper (Beverluis, 2000).⁴In the doorway I thanked Antonio sincerely for his sharp questions but especially for the respect that I felt and the equivalent position which he invited me to.

3.4. From man to man

Since the conversation in Hasselt, I felt something new. I was personally affected. I met someone who was open and honest to me and I had been open and honest myself meeting him. Here, something more happens than in a conversation that is merely focused on argumentation and reasoning. In the "sacred heart" of the prison chapel, two different, maybe opposite positions were abandoned to make room for respect and closeness. Since that time, I often went home with an idea: "I might as well be in prison. I've just been lucky to have ended up in a better environment than them." This attitude opened doors.

In one of the last conversations, something that I will never forget happened. In a corner of the room with six participants there was Nick, a drug dealer in custody that stood out for his appearance. He was dressed almost like a North American Indian. And he drew attention because of his silence. The only thing lacking was smoke coming out of a peace pipe. After about an hour of conversation with his colleagues, I talked to him directly: "Do you have anything to say about this conversation Nick?"

He rebounded (to put it strongly), looked me straight into the eyes and said: "What is the value of my words now?" And then the whole group fell silent for minutes. I then asked him if he could clarify that. He said that before he came to prison and later on in his cell he had been studying a variety of Oriental thinkers. He had reached the conclusion that all this talking would not substantially help you in life. His story made a big impression. We decided to talk about this with the group. Every word spoken was a subject of research. What was the value? What was essential to speak about and what wasn't? We ended the session a bit earlier. It was so intense that we felt no more time was needed. When leaving, every participant expressed his gratefulness to me about the conversation.

Nick was the last in the room. He shook my hand, thanked me very much and said that he would miss me. "You will go back home after this conversation," he said, "but I am left in silence." I said I would never forget him, and that I hoped to meet him again when he was free.

We hugged each other and I left but could not hold back my tears.

I met someone, but not through a course, not as a companion or a participant but as man, as another human being.

4. Punishment: no punishment

What was the value of this Socratic training in prisons? First, it is questionable whether it can still be seen as a "training." In the classic sense, this means that at least a program is offered to participants, that the trainer as a "possessor of knowledge" or "know-how," transfers this to his / her audience. You could call this the additive style: the assumption is that you can add something (knowledge or skills) to your audience. I clearly had this attitude at the start of this process. At that time, I still followed Raf's command to "let them think about responsibility." I wanted them to do a Socratic dialogue together and this was, as I learned in Mechelen, a solitary fantasy. After all, I didn't use the knowledge and experience of my participants to the fullest. I was too concentrated on myself. During the process, I began applying the integrative style more and more. I added just as much as was needed to help my participants examine their own attitudes or beliefs.

A good example is the conversation with Frank, who through contact with his colleagues and me began to revise his beliefs about trust. Whoever wants to guide a philosophical conversation in a way that still somehow refers to the Socratic tradition cannot ignore this style. It is founded on the principle of trust in the rationality of the participants (see Nelson, 1922; Scott, 2000).⁵

Socrates himself was not a classic teacher. When, in the *Apology*, he had to defend himself for his actions against the judges of Athens he says:⁶

I was never anyone's teacher (*didaskalos*) . . . And whether any of them turns out well or ill, I should not justly be held responsible, since I never promised or gave any instruction to any of them; but if any man says that he ever learned or heard anything privately from me, which all the others did not, be assured that he is lying.

Socrates' activities don't get conventional labels in Plato. In the *Symposium* for example, he suggests that what Socrates and his disciples are doing is "Eros" or love. But these "loving encounters" confront you in an often merciless way with yourself and thus contribute to self-knowledge. Nicias, an Athenian general, said in this respect in the *Laches*, a dialogue about courage:⁷

(...) whoever comes into close contact with Socrates and has any talk with him face to face, is bound to be drawn round and round by him in the course of the argument—though it may have started at first on a quite different theme—and cannot stop until he is led into giving an account of himself, of the manner in which he now spends his days, and of the kind of life he has lived hitherto; and when once he has been led into that, Socrates will never let him go until he has thoroughly and properly put all his ways to the test.

The beauty is that Socrates himself experienced about the same thing in the *Apology*. With a life in prison ahead of him, Socrates also let himself "be accountable for himself and the life he has lived so far." While he was seen as "criminal," he claimed only to have lived his freedom.

The comparison with Socrates in prison is somehow grotesque. But let it not be a coincidence that this process of mutual accountability in a conversation took place in prison. This is, after all, the "mirror" of society. The prison embodies or institutionalizes what society at a given moment in history thinks about good and evil. Here, people become real persons, a word that in Latin means "masks." Masks are very important and ensure safety. The attitude of detachment and engagement, specific to chaplains, social workers etc. in prison, is present as well in the detainees themselves. They all play their role. And so do you as a trainer. And if your job is "Socratic dialogue," "going to the essence of things," you can't do it "keeping up appearances." Sooner or later, your personal integrity is put under scrutiny. Words and deeds undergo a merciless tension. Neither the "perpetrators" (social workers, educators) nor the "victims" (the prisoners, participants) go free here. Everyone must take responsibility, must adjust his mask (Bolten and Van Rossem, 2005).⁸ In that sense it is a mutual "deprivation of liberty": You can't hide behind a function, a position or an institution. In this view, prison can be seen as a "quarantine": a place where that offers reflection or contemplation for everyone involved. Imprisonment is a cure to restore the congruence between words and deeds. It is a "recovery" from the unproblematic thinking about oneself the society offers.

So what's the use of dialogue, Socratic or not, in a prison? For a facilitator, the art of leading goes certainly beyond the ability to listen to others. It assumes, among other things, the attitude of passionate distance and the ability to examine the perspective of another person just like your own. A dialogue about integrity is an ongoing exercise in generosity of everyone concerned. Because where lies the greatest injustice: in the commission of an act as such or in denial or the prohibition of the opportunity to take responsibility? Where is "deprivation of liberty" situated: only in institutional settings or even in subtle interpersonal and inter-verbal blockades and discussions between all parties involved? You can see prison as a big living question mark to everyone's so-called "freedom" in our society. When you look at it this way, it is pre-eminently a place where "recovery," understood as a constant and courageous research to improve congruence between words and actions among all stakeholders, can happen.

I thank "my" prisoners for the impact they had on me and hope that my influence on them has made them "freer."

"Who of us is facing the best fate? That no one knows, only God." (Plato, *Apology*, 42a)

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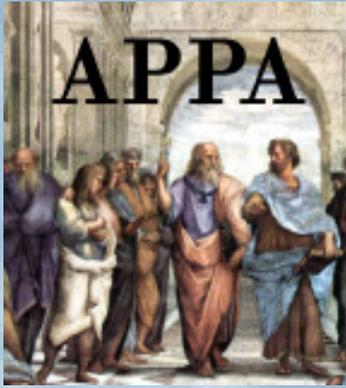
Notes

1. In this article I do not go deeper into how to lead a Socratic dialogue. You can read more about this e.g. in Van Rossem (2014). Or you can download material from www.socraticdialogue.be
2. I realized only later that these sturdy handshakes could be interpreted as the showing of their worthiness as an equal human being.
3. See Reich, R. (1998). While there is not one method, according to Vlastos, one can nevertheless distinguish a coherent pedagogical approach in Socrates : see Vlastos, G. (1991).
4. An interesting study in this respect is Beversluis, J. (2000). He shows in several Platonic dialogues to be short that Socrates isn't a respectful interlocutor for his pupils. He in some way 'abuses' them.
5. This standpoint is inspired by a Kantian reading of the importance of Socrates in didactics of philosophy by Leonard Nelson in his 1922 essay 'The Socratic Method'. He put it very strongly there claiming that there are only two styles of teaching : 'dogmatic' and 'socratic' teaching. And you are 'dogmatic' as soon as you think you have extra knowledge to offer your pupils. Instead, a Socratic teacher should remain silent, ask questions, in any case do nothing that prohibits the reflection of his pupils. This effects as well the instructions you give as a teacher/facilitator : "let us keep firmly in mind the one that must be excluded unconditionally: the influence that may emanate from the instructor's assertions. If this influence is not eliminated, all labor is vain". Nelson, L. (1922). For a firm study on the pedagogical style of Socrates, see further Scott, G.A. (2000).
6. Plato, *Apology*, 33a5-b8, via <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>
7. Plato, *Laches*, 187e-188c, via <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>
8. Together with Hans Bolten, we wrote an article about the importance of this mutuality in training integrity in organisations (in Dutch), see H.Bolten, H. en Van Rossem, K. (2005). *Zo gezegd zo gedaan. Trainen in integriteit, in Ethische Perspectieven*, 15, 1, p.34-46. You can download this from www.socraticdialogue.be

Correspondence: kristof@socraticdialogue.be

Kristof Van Rossem is Master in Science of Religions and Master in Philosophy (KULeuven, University of Amsterdam and of Uppsala). He has published on practical philosophy, women in philosophy, ethics and humour. As an independent trainer, he accompanies coaching and reflection processes in different organisational settings. He leads an annual training course in Socratic dialogue facilitation. He has been engaged in adult education and is currently teaching philosophy and (professional) ethics at the Odisee Highschool of Brussels. He is a teacher trainer at the University of Leuven where he leads an annual seminar in philosophizing with children and adolescents.





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