HOW TO LEAD A SOCRATIC DIALOGUE

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Abstract

The author describes how he facilitated a Socratic dialogue with seven young academics about the topic of “nonsense”. What’s remarkable in this dialogue is that the participants decided to work on a definition of “nonsense” which after some time itself appeared to be nonsense (according to some). However, clever as they were, they were not able to explain why the definition was nonsense on the basis of the definition itself. In this article, this experience is analysed with a focus on the questions that the facilitator is asking. In this way, the reader gets a clear view on what a facilitator is (not) doing in a Socratic dialogue. Given that there is no clear-cut “method” in Plato, the craft of leading a Socratic dialogue is then explained by five Socratic “movements” the facilitator is constantly steering at: to assert, to concretize, to explain, to listen and to criticize.

The teacher who follows the Socratic model does not answer. Neither does he question. More precisely, he puts no philosophical questions, and when such questions are addressed to him, he under no circumstances gives the answer sought. Does he then remain silent? We shall see.

(Leonard Nelson: The Socratic Method)

Here is some bad news to start with: there is no such thing as one “Socratic method”. In the long history of philosophy and classic literature, hundreds of scholars have tried to find out what Socrates really did. Until today we have only one answer: we don't know! In all interpretations of Socrates including Plato, we do not seem to find a definable “method” that

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42 The impossibility to extract the ‘logoi sokratikoi’ from their literary and historical background is shown beautifully by Livio Rossett (2011). See also D. Hansen (1988).
he applied to everyone he met.\textsuperscript{43} So is it good news as well? Can you call different types of conversation Socratic? Well, of course! It is already happening: there are Socratic coaches, therapists, there are Socratic questions, dialogues, happenings...

Maybe you are doing something "Socratic" as well. So what makes it Socratic then? What's your definition of a Socratic dialogue? Here is mine: A Socratic dialogue is a conversation in which one or more participants investigate a) the truth of the claims they make about their own experience and b) the value of the arguments they have for these claims.

In this chapter, I will show how I make this concrete. I will show you how I lead such a Socratic dialogue. To start with, I invite you to the 10th floor of the University Building.\textsuperscript{44}

1. A Socratic dialogue about nonsense...

TING! The elevator arrives. I get in together with six young men. I push the 10\textsuperscript{th} Floor button.

"I have always been interested in philosophy," says Marco. "My PhD is about the infiniteness of the infinite. You know, we use infinity in math as a cypher. In my PhD, I want to find out whether we should continue doing this." I ask: "Who is 'we'?" I don't get an answer. Another guy starts to tell what his PhD is about. It's a long and complicated story about frog genetics. He goes on while we enter the room. As we sit down in a circle, a seventh participant walks into the classroom. This is Karin. She is no Alpha-doctoral student but a social scientist who is working on a PhD on social inequality.

My question: "Who has lived something remarkable in the past few hours?"

John (a biologist): "Well, I read an article in the newspaper this morning on the train. It was about the drastically increased tendency among young people to put piercings on various parts of the body. That, according to the author, is worrisome and harmful to health."

\textsuperscript{43} See R. Reich (1998). While there is not one method, according to Vlastos (1991), one can nevertheless distinguish a coherent pedagogical approach in Socrates.

\textsuperscript{44} The I-person in this introduction is the same as the writer of this article and is also the same as the facilitator in the dialogue. I facilitated this dialogue in the University of Antwerp. It was a part of a PhD-program.
OK, so?

Well, that's nonsense, of course. This has never been proven scientifically! It's only written to frighten parents!

Does it say so in the article?

No, but it shows by the tone in which it is written.

Do you have the article here, John? Then we can all agree!

John takes the newspaper out of his suitcase. Everyone quickly reads what it says. There is some disagreement within the group about the tone of the text, and after a few minutes, John abandons his opinion that it was written to scare parents. "We do not know that for sure," he admits.

I: But do you still think it is nonsense, John?

Yes!

Can you tell us why?

While John responds, I write his words on the flipchart: This article is nonsense because 1) it is an exaggeration to say that this tendency has increased drastically 2) it is not true that it harms health. Nowhere this is scientifically proven (John).

Carl (the physicist) immediately breaks in: "Well, I think it's not. This article may not be scientific, but it is not nonsense: it shows a fairly good storyline." I write on the flipchart: "The article is not nonsense because it shows a good storyline (Carl)."

I: "Where do you see this good storyline, Carl?"

Carl explains how the article is built up. The others seem to be convinced.

Felix: "This article is indeed well built-up. It is perhaps uninteresting and unjustly displayed by the author but it's not nonsense. A few others nod in agreement and give their own statements spontaneously.

I: "So guys, I see a few of you say that it is indeed nonsense, just like John did. And a few of you deny this, like Carl did. What should I believe now? Is it nonsense or not?"

Then Marco, the "infinite" mathematician, takes the floor: "We can't go any further in this dialogue if we don't know what we are talking about when we use the word 'nonsense'. I think it's very interesting but it is a problematic term. We need to have a definition of nonsense before we can move on!"
I: “I'm sorry to repeat my question of this morning, but who is ‘we’, Marco?”

– The whole group. “We can't talk together because we mean different things with the word ‘nonsense’.”

– “Is that so?”

The entire group nods.

Marco: “If we have a definition, we speak a similar language.”

I ask each participant individually whether they agree with this. Without exception, everyone says “yes”. They decide to look for a definition.

Sketches are drawn on pieces of paper and three times, a definition of “nonsense” appears on the flip, which is then subsequently abandoned.

For about fifty minutes they leave me alone, devising one invention after another. I remain motionless and ask no questions. I say nothing and I do nothing. They are at the helm. Eventually they agree on the following definition: “A statement is nonsensical when the reference power of the characters in their semantic context does not correspond to the mental structures of the subject in his / her genesis.” Marco writes this on the flip. Underneath this statement, he hangs the mathematical formula with which this definition can be formalized:

\[ \forall x : x = y \uparrow \Box (\iff [x = (\Sigma)] \lor [((\Sigma) / C)] \neq z / b) \]

Everyone seems to agree. We go to lunch.

The afternoon session starts.

Karin: “During lunch I have been thinking about our definition and I believe it is wrong!”

Marco (violently): “Are you kidding?! We have repeatedly asked if you agreed with it and you affirmed several times. I'm not going to start all over again!”

Felix: “Marco is right. We don't do this work again. It's a waste of time!”

The others nod.

Karin: “Well, I changed my mind. It’s not forbidden, is it?”

I: “Do you want to hear what Karin has to say about it or not?”

A moment of silence.

Karel (after some hesitation): “Well, OK, just tell us then!”
Karin: "I think we miss the social dimension of a semantic structure. What makes sense for some social classes, may be absurd for others. That depends less on semantic structures then on social habits in the use of language. In a recent study of neo-Marxist."

Marco (firmly interrupts her): "I’m sorry. This is really bullshit. Language still transcends social class!"

Franky (jokingly): "Another typical female to spread out the leftist language here again!" Others laugh, Karin, in turn indignant.

I: "Marco, do you say that what Karin is saying here is nonsense?"

Marco: "Of course! This adds nothing new to what we already figured out this morning."

I: "Ok, but is it nonsense?"

Marco: "Of course it is."

I: "So could you explain to us why this is nonsense on the basis of the definition?"

It remains silent for one minute. Marco looks perplexed.

Franky: "Karin probably did not, on the basis of her mental structures or habits, see that making linguistic structures has nothing to do with economic relations. Therefore, it is nonsense."

I check whether Karin understands and she denies.

I: "Did Franky use the definition as it is written on the flipchart?"

Karin and John deny. Felix and a few others are still making an effort. I ask them repeatedly for that one intervention that makes Karin see in a clear-cut way why what she said was nonsense. No intervention seems clear or convincing enough. After fifteen minutes of trying to fit the definition to the experience of hearing Karin, the whole group decides to cast aside the definition on the flipchart. Beautiful as it was, it now seems to be useless.

The uselessness of the definition does not however seem to convince everyone of the fact that the definition was “nonsense”. Franky and Marco still try to “save” the definition saying that it was not of any use now but it could prove its meaningfulness in the future. The distinction: meaningfulness versus lack of reference, is subsequently applied to the discussion of the morning about the newspaper. Franky and Felix repeat that the article does make sense. In this way, you cannot call it nonsense. But in a scientific way it clearly is. Some more discussions follow about the meaningfulness or the nonsense of the whole dialogue.
Twenty minutes before the time is up, I ask the group to write down what they had learned on the content level during the dialogue and what kind of thinking competences they have been practicing. My last question of the day is: “does anyone have a last remark or a question about what happened today?” Some of them express their appreciation about the seminar. Karin and a few others say they found especially the confrontation moment after the lunch very interesting. On Marco’s turn, he says: “You know, I think this day has changed my life a bit. I have the feeling now that I can throw away the majority of the definitions I have been formulating during my doctorate. They may be meaningful to me but they’re not useful in reality... I’m afraid I’ll even have to rethink the meaningfulness of my whole doctorate!”

We go out of the room, the elevator comes and we go down to the ground floor.

2. What is the facilitator doing here?

2.1. The traditional structure of a Socratic dialogue (afterwards abbreviated as SD)

In most Socratic workshops, you will find a similar structure:

1. A question that:
   - is formulated as short as possible
   - you can have several different answers to (no right or wrong answers)
   - is formulated general enough to be able to be applicable to several examples

For example: “When do you stop helping?”

2. One experience that suits as an example: that means
   - it should be a recent one
   - the storyteller can indicate a concrete moment in which somebody (or the storyteller himself) says or does something

For example: “Joan looked at me angrily”.
3. One assertion the storyteller has about the moment in the experience. He can formulate this opinion in terms of the question.

For example: “When Joan looked at me angrily, I stopped helping her.”

4. The arguments the storyteller has for this claim.

For example: “I stopped helping her because

- she gave me a sign that she didn’t appreciate it
- I didn’t feel comfortable anymore.”

5. A critical investigation of the group into the truth of the claims and the value of the arguments.

This is not a chronological structure of how a SD proceeds of should proceed. It is true though that you need a claim of some participant first and you need to know what it is about and what it refers to before the group can critically question it. But for every group, the facilitator has to design the most suitable structure (and also leave it again if necessary). In this SD, I chose not to start with a question but to start with an experience of one of the participants. This is faster. In this way, within half an hour, the group had

- a concrete and recent experience: the newspaper Marco had been reading in the train.
- a moment in this experience: the article he read about the tattooing.
- an assertion he had about this moment: “It is nonsense”;
- his arguments for this assertion: because it leads to bad health etc. They are written on the flipchart.

Notice that in this group, I did not introduce the Socratic method by giving a speech or by sketching the structure as I do here in the article. I did give them an article to read because it was their first acquaintance with the Socratic method. But I did not open up any theoretical discussion about it. Just like Socrates himself, I started right away: „I did my thing.“

It is experiential learning!

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45 This approach is the closest to the original Socratic approach. In the beginning of the Euthyphro (one of Plato’s dialogues) for example, Euthyphro approaches Socrates and tells him about something he has experienced coming from the
2.2. My main activity: asking questions

During the whole dialogue, I stay out of the content level. I do not give my opinion about what "nonsense" is. I do so because

1. it adds nothing essential to the variety of interpretations already produced by the participants;

2. I need all my energy to stimulate the participants to think critically and to listen to each other.

Not only do I abstain from the content, I also do not give any comments or judgements on the meta-level (about the method itself). My attitude as a facilitator here is that of non-knowing. It is a tradition going back to the famous dictum "I know that I don't know" from the Apology. But Socrates said it in an ironical way. Here, there is no irony: I really do not know what "nonsense" is, neither what the group should do at a particular moment.

So the only thing I did was ask questions all the time. There are two directions in which my questions go: a direction up and a direction down. When an assertion is made, you can question down to the facts, the experience, the reality the statement refers to. Or you can question up to the reasons the interlocutor has for his assertion, in order to get to the reasons behind the reasons. Take for example John’s spontaneous statement "the article is only written to scare parents". My question just after his statement was one down: "Does it say so in the article?" The mere fact that he could not show that it is the case, made him withdraw what he said. A bit further on, John claimed that it is still nonsense. I asked him why (question up) before I wrote his statement and his arguments on the flipchart.

2.3. The trust in the inquiry

In daily life, the direction up is more common than the direction down. People tend to speak in general terms instead of showing what they refer to (like I do now). They tend to generalize rather than concretize probably because it is more easy. It is very typical of the Socratic style to be harsh

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Athenian Court: he has just put his father on trial! Socrates then goes on questioning what he says about it. There is no question to start with.

on the concretization. The participant has to show what he refers to in a concrete example, almost all the time.\footnote{In the words of Gustav Heckmann: "The facilitator has to guide the participants to work from the concrete and to ensure that the link to the concrete is always in people’s minds when they progress towards general insights." See G. Heckmann (2004, 109).}

But why then did I let the whole group take the way \textit{up}, trying to find a definition? One reason not to interrupt was that there was some energetic “flow” and some enthusiasm in the group. They seemed to find each other. It was unpredictable though that this whole enterprise would take such a long time. But it was predictable that one moment or another, I would ask some questions \textit{down} to see what this whole definition refers to. So, when finally the crucial question came: “can you show that what Karen is saying is nonsense using the definition?” I more or less caused a real tragedy! The well-established definition they worked on so hard needed some proof now. And it felt like a failure to all of them that they were not able to give this.

Looking exclusively to the content-level, the group has lost time. They took a track that after about two hours seemed fruitless. But I was not to blame. The responsibility of the result of the dialogue is a shared one but the aim of my steering is to encourage the group to take as much responsibility as possible: it is not my Socratic dialogue, it is theirs! And in this steering, every detail is important. It already starts with the free inscription to the course and the email in which I asked the participants to read the article. Second: By “letting go” of the process, I trust in the rationality of the group, more specifically the rationality they develop looking at their own experience.\footnote{Because the Socratic dialogue itself is a critical investigation of the meaning of experience, it is of course not the teacher or the facilitator that will provide this meaning: it is the student himself who has to do this thinking work. It is up to him to figure out what he has learned looking at his own experience. Leonard Nelson writes about this: “The essential thing is the skill with which the teacher puts the pupils on their own responsibility at the very beginning by teaching them to go by themselves—and by so developing this independence that one day they might be able to venture forth alone, self-guidance having replaced the teacher's supervision.” (Nelson 2004, 144)} The whole way \textit{up} to the useless definition is a part of this process. And thanks to this experience, a more sceptical attitude towards prepared definitions was acquired.
2.4. Two typical Socratic movements in Plato: Protrepsis and Elenchus

Although there is no formal Socratic method in Plato’s texts, one can nevertheless distinguish some Socratic movements that occur regularly.\footnote{I follow here the interpretation of Rebecca Cain (2007).}

The first is the movement of *elenchus*. This is a “destructive” movement, usually translated as “confutation” or “confusion”. Socrates leads his interlocutors to confusion by showing that their arguments are incompatible. Often, by giving contradictory examples, it helps them to realize that their assertions are based on “everyday opinions” (*doxa*) rather than on knowledge. In the Gorgias for example, Callicles says at the beginning that pleasure and happiness are different. After being questioned by Socrates, he claims that the two are the same. When Socrates confronts him with this, he gets confused. In the Socratic literature, this undecidability is called the *aporia*.

The result of the *elenchus* is the experience of “perplexity”.\footnote{The experience of ‘perplexity’ is according to Matthews the most typical one in Plato and in Socrates. See G. Matthews (1999, 31-41).} The interlocutor is surprised that he was so ignorant. The aim of this experience is to generate curiosity about the real facts. That is why Socrates often encourages his partners to find better knowledge just after the *elenchus*.\footnote{As Beversluis has shown though, Socrates is not always sincere in getting his interlocutors through the elenchos experience. His dialectical tactics do not always arise from the “care of the soul”. Socrates is not so serious all the time. (J. Beversluis 2000, 37-58).}

In this group, the *elenchus* experience happened the moment Marco—the genius inventor of the glorious definition—is confronted with the fact he cannot use it to explain his own spontaneous assertion: that what Karin says is nonsense. This sudden crash from the upper spheres of knowledge to the bare facts of experience hurts a bit: Marco looks perplexed and is silent.

Second, Socrates made *protreptic* interventions (which you could translate as „incentives“). These are direct or indirect interventions aimed at convincing the interlocutor to think better. It is the „constructive“ part of his „method“. With these kinds of interventions, Socrates aims at a moral and psychological impact on his interlocutors.\footnote{This is the interpretation of among others Vasiliou (2008).}
In this dialogue, you can distinguish a *protreptic* movement when I encouraged Marco, the same genius, to come up with a convincing example to prove that his reasons to call a sentence nonsense—a lack of meaningfulness—made sense. He seemed not able to but in the end he made an attempt after all.

3. Facilitating a Socratic Dialogue

3.1. Facilitating is a craft

Rather than a "method", I see Socratic dialogue as a style. You can recognize it when somebody is doing it just like crafts such as Tai Chi, pottery, playing piano or football...

Using the Socratic style, you can do philosophy with children, youngsters, do coaching, therapy, teaching etc. And you can conduct a Socratic dialogue like I did here. Following Socrates himself, being "Socratic" is not a matter of applying tools. It is more the execution of a craft, a style of thinking, talking, acting that you "can't help" because it is embodied in who you are.\(^{53}\)

So what determines this style then? It is of course the steering of the facilitator. With every question he asks, he is steering the group in a certain direction. More precisely: His questions aim at disciplining his public to make certain Socratic movements. You can do this well only when you concentrate as well on the form of the utterings as on the content. Then you can hear for instance that a participant who is answering, "well, you know" to your question "why is that?" is not giving an argument when you ask for one. Look at how a craft like plumbing or carpeting is taught: it is in the activity itself that the craft is shown and transmitted, not (only) by reading or relating it. It is by looking at the movements participants make that you see if it works or not. This is a slow learning process and it demands discipline. But the more you do it, the more it becomes "second nature".\(^{54}\)

3.2. The Socratic movements

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\(^{53}\) See for more about the craft: G. Sennett (2008).

\(^{54}\) For more about this style of facilitating a Socratic dialogue, read in Dutch: H. Bolten and K. Van Rossem (2014) and in English: K. Van Rossem (2014).
Here are five essential movements that the facilitator is steering at with his questions. A mastery of this style enables the facilitator to do his work in every kind of conversation.

(1) To assert

In this movement, the participant says something which according to him or her is the case in reality. He takes a point of view about which you can have different opinions. Here for example John claims that the article is nonsense. The formulation is important here. In asserting that the article is nonsense, he is doing more than communicating a private experience, such as: “I think the article is nonsense”, or “I have the impression that the article is nonsense.” On these utterances, you cannot strictly dissent. Moreover, it is important that the assertion is not just given “for fun” (like some youngsters for example might do in the classroom). He or she actually has to mean it. So the job of the facilitator is to encourage statement making and to question half or unfinished statements. But he also has to recognize ready-made statements. And they come along all through the dialogue. It comes along for example when Karin says “It’s too strong to call it nonsense”.

(2) To concretize

Once a statement is made on a state of affairs in the world, you have to know what it is about, what it refers to. This is not always the case. When Marco for instance takes off saying: “we need to have a definition of nonsense before we can move on!”, it is not clear what this “we” is about: is it this group, the whole of humanity? So I asked about it. Once it is made concrete, it can be investigated.

So the facilitator must therefore be able to recognize general and hypothetical (“if ... then ...”) statements. Furthermore, he must be able to question statements hovering above reality like a balloon. He has to help the balloon to get down to the concrete reality.

(3) To explain

In a Socratic dialogue, you do not only discover what others (and you yourself) think about a state of affairs, you also look at the reasons they (and you) have for these assertions. The facilitator asks for reasons every time he hears an assertion that is relevant to the investigation. And he has the task to register them in the words of the participant. It happens a first time when John gives his statement about the article being nonsense, a
second time when Marco claims that what Karin says is nonsense. And a third time when Karin says “it’s too strong call it nonsense.” Every time, I asked the participant to explain why this is the case.

(4) To listen

As a participant and as a facilitator, you can only determine what someone says, if you have heard what he has said in a literal way and if you can repeat it verbatim. On this condition, there can be a joint investigation. In a Socratic dialogue, we do not paraphrase anything. Listening does not (necessarily) mean here giving the other the feeling that he or she has been heard. For what is it worth having this feeling if the other just did not hear what you said? As a facilitator, you model this behaviour and you encourage participants to do so as well. When Franky, for instance, explained why he agreed with Marco, I asked Karin directly to repeat this. This was important for the common understanding of what was going on. When you neglect the questioning about the listening, the investigation risks being too much a game among a few concerned and not common group-research.

(5) To criticize

A Socratic inquiry is a sustained search into what someone says about something, why he has that view, and what this is worth. This research takes place through mutual questioning. The participants try to understand each other by asking to sharpen or concretize what they say. They ask for arguments or question the validity of arguments. The ultimate goal of these questions is to determine whether a claim is tenable and to assess the quality of an argument. The facilitator does this questioning constantly, and encourages the participants to do so as well. I was evoking this movement, for example, at the beginning of the dialogue when I tackled Carl’s assertion that the article “is not nonsense because it has a good storyline”. I asked him to show this storyline to the others.

4. Conclusion

Facilitating a Socratic dialogue means mainly showing two kinds of behaviour: questioning and listening. This questioning style can be learned, not by a short workshop or by following a “plan” (although it might help). Just like playing piano or driving a car, it is a craft that is acquired patiently and with a lot of practice.
I started the chapter with some bad news: that there was no clear cut method in Plato’s texts which you could call Socratic. But here is some good news to end with: you can practice the Socratic questioning style every day! And just like swimming or riding a horse: it is best to start with some small steps. Good luck!

Literature


