

The Role of Experience for the Participants in Socratic Dialogue

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Abstract: *The Socratic Dialogue in the Nelson-Heckmann tradition is a method practiced in limited circles. This method is called Neo-Socratic Dialogue. It is a group activity in which people discuss together within certain rules and methods. It is open to anyone who aims to search for the truth. A Socratic Dialogue can last many hours or many days. It begins with a question, and all participants share their real-life experiences relevant to this question. Then, after a short discussion on these life experiences, one narrated life experience is selected. All subsequent discussion will be on the analysis of this life experience. The aim is to reach an answer to this question at the end of all discussions. In this active dialogue, the facilitator moderates all discussions. Participants speak freely, ask questions, sometimes change their minds, and eventually the discussion ends with a consensus. Most of the participants get new ideas at the end of this dialogue and leave with improved critical thinking, reasoning, and arguing skills, as well as democratic values.*

For the Socratic Dialogue, it is important to have a really suitable example that is drawn from the experiences of the participants. What is the importance of the experience of the participants? What are the benefits of this role in personal and public life for the participants in Socratic Dialogue? This paper will discuss those questions. We will firstly review the Socratic Dialogue functions, and then we will discuss the importance of the experiences of the participants.

Dedicated to the memory of Dr. Rene Saran (1921-2023)

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The Socratic Dialogue in the Nelson-Heckmann tradition is based on the critical philosophy developed by Leonard Nelson and Gustave Heckmann. It is practiced by

reasoning out a problem together, questioning the truth, and encouraging participants to philosophize independently and critically. The Socratic Dialogue starts with an initial question that always gets connected to the participants' personal experience to approach the truth and fosters participants taking responsibility for their own thinking by reflecting together. This paper will focus on the role of the participants' experiences in Socratic Dialogue in the Nelson-Heckmann tradition by arguing the importance of experience in light of the question, what role does the experience of the participants play in Socratic Dialogue? We will first consider how the Socratic dialogue functions, and then we will arrive at the importance of the experiences of the participants. To do so, a new task will simply arise in front of us: evaluating the benefits of this role in personal and public life for the participants in Socratic dialogue.

Introduction to Socratic Dialogue

First of all, it is important to see how the Socratic Dialogue proceeds in the Nelson-Heckmann tradition if we want to understand the role of experience among the participants. In the twentieth century, Leonard Nelson developed the Socratic Dialogue (Nelson, 1949, pp. 1–43). He criticised Socrates, but he was inspired by his philosophical and pedagogical attitudes and called his method Socratic. As a philosopher, Socrates assumed that philosophical thinking led us from darkness into its light. As a pedagogical attitude, he made his pupils do their own thinking and introduced the interchange of ideas as a safeguard against self-deception (Nelson, 1949, p.17). After Leonard Nelson's early death, his student Gustave Heckmann developed the method and added the meta-dialogue in the process. Dieter Krohn stated that even though it is not part of the content, the sole purpose of the meta-dialogue is to support the work on the content of dialogue (Krohn, 2004, p.22).

A Socratic Dialogue can last many hours or many days. It starts with a philosophical question, and then the facilitator collects different examples from the experiences of the participants. Then all participants choose one personal experience to analyze. Heckmann adds that it is a Socratic principle that insights into the general ramifications of any given problem can only be gained by understanding and analyzing concrete experiences, thus clarifying and stating separately the general knowledge that it entails (Heckmann, 1981, p.126). Participants have to accomplish their tasks even though sometimes they have difficulties. They are responsible for the progress of the dialogue. And finally, they have to strive for consensus that should be

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based on their own insights and voluntary consent. Everyone has to make an honest decision. In this context, participants need to be honest and open to others' thoughts and statements. Then they examine the specific statement, the justifications, and the rules of the justifications. It is obvious that participants have the autonomy in thinking that allows them to gain philosophical insights. The dialogue comes to an end with consensus, in Heckmann's words, "reasoning it out jointly" to approach the truth takes place (Heckmann, 1981, p.2).

Experience of Socratic Dialogue

It is clear that Leonard Nelson and Gustave Heckmann developed the Socratic Dialogue that related to concrete life experiences and critical thinking (Nelson, 1949; Heckmann, 1981). The aim of the Socratic Dialogue is to philosophize individually and as a group. In this sense, participants in Socratic Dialogue should focus on their own thoughts, but at the same time they need to understand the thoughts of other participants because that is vital for mutual understanding. All participants contribute and put themselves in the shoes of the other dialogue partners. Moreover, there should be full understanding between participants in the Socratic Dialogue; they have to be clear about the meaning of what has just been said by testing it according to the concrete experience. Dieter Krohn adds that each participant's contribution should be based upon what the example-giver has experienced, not upon what the participant has read or heard (Krohn, in Brune, J.P; Krohn, K, 2005, p.9). In the Socratic dialogue, participants try to understand the thoughts of others and help each other clarify and formulate those thoughts. This is called maieutic, which is the Socratic skill of the midwife. Each participant is a midwife for the other's ideas. Participants should express themselves as briefly as possible to contribute to the common search for truth on the given problem.

The Socratic Dialogue is a philosophical investigation in a group setting to form a community of inquiry. It enables people to bring all kinds of backgrounds to the group. This situation can enrich the dialogue and give new and interesting perspectives, but sometimes it can limit the whole process. Heckmann sees this issue as one of the two constraints that limit what is possible. This concerns the intellectual interests and capacities of the participants. He gives an example of the mathematical truth in which the participants' interest in the problem is not strong enough to go ahead with the examination of the mathematical truth (Heckmann, 1981, p. 156). Another

constraint is for the empathy. The need to empathize may be a problem for some children or adults, according to their intellectual levels. With regard to these different target groups, the question can be made attractive for participants in various ways. In particular, age, pre-existing knowledge, and the social, cognitive, and emotional competence of the participants have to be taken into account. In terms to cognitive competence, for example, this means that the question should not exceed the cognitive capability of the participants, but should also be difficult enough to arouse the participants' motivations and ambitions to find an answer. To solve this problem, proceeding from a concrete everyday situation, a Socratic question that is related to the knowledge of the participants about life and the world should be developed.

In Socratic Dialogue, the example of the personal experience needs to connect to the focus of the inquiry. The example should be selected for the clarity and comprehensiveness of the situation. The example giver has a role in the example; he or she knows his or her example from personal experience; he or she is not a spectator; he or she has to tell the example fully, but when the experience of the example is past, the example giver is no longer involved in the situation (Kessels, Boers, Mostert:2009, p.39). In this context, one's experience becomes all participants' experience. On the other hand, each participant comes from a different background and brings his or her feelings, which include fears, prejudgments, passions, etc., so during the sessions there may be some modification of this experience; participants reshape and re-narrate it, so one's experience transforms their experience that refers to the group.

In the Nelson-Heckmann tradition, participants start their investigations from real-life examples of the participants rather than their theoretical reflections. All participants are asked to come up with a personal experience relating to the topic in question. Every participant has different ideas and different views that make up his or her worldview, but those differences also include some inconsistencies. Precisely at this point, about two thousand five hundred years ago, Socrates wanted to reveal these inconsistencies in his dialogues and to show the inadequacy of the person's thoughts. In his dialogue, *The Sophist*, Plato claims that one person only realizes that, after his opinion has been refuted and shamed, he is, in fact, ignorant of something that he thinks that he knows, and then begins to investigate a question that goes deeper. After that, it will not be obstructed by the so-called knowledge and the earlier superficial opinion. We can call this necessary step towards a further investigation of one's own opinions the *elenchus*, the refutation, or the shame. We can see *elenchus* in the center of Socratic Dialogue. However, this time it becomes a group process that is performed by the participants of the Socratic Dialogue in the Nelson-Heckmann tradition. Here,

too, *elenchus* shows ignorance created by so-called knowledge. Dieter Krohn states that the participant's experience is the point of departure for the philosophical insight. It is what makes the philosophical inquiry. We could understand this insight in terms of subjective conviction or the absence of any further doubts. He also assumes that all experience is incomplete and that new experiences can lead us to new insights, causing Heckmann to assert that in a Socratic Dialogue, so-called definitive answers and irrefutable results cannot be found (Krohn, in Saran and Neisser, 2004, p. 21).

In Socratic Dialogue, participants need to start with concrete experiences and remain in contact with those experiences for the initial question. To gain insight, the connection between any statement and personal experience needs to be explicit. This insight is possible by examining and analyzing a concrete experience, but on the other hand, the participants also need to search for the underlying general principle and convictions through the process of 'regressive abstraction'. Therefore, Nelson stresses the importance of having the philosophical reflection of the dialogue grounded in the domain of real-life experience (Nelson: 1949). Heckmann also emphasizes that experiences constitute the substance of this work (Heckmann, 1981, p.1). In this context, thinking Socratically means to think concretely, to work with one's experience and an example to give a deeper understanding; otherwise, it could raise a lot of meaningless speculation. Helge Svare assumes that there are two kinds of inspiration for this principle: One source of inspiration is the term content, which comes from Kant's famous dictum that "concepts without content are empty". Here, the term content refers to empirical content. Another inspiration could be Plato, who in his dialogue depicts Socrates as a person who often starts the philosophical inquiry by examining examples brought forward by his dialogue partners based on their experience and also checks the propositions brought forward by testing them against such examples.

The regressive method of abstraction is the essential concept for understanding Leonard Nelson's thought in Socratic Dialogue. Nelson uses the regressive method of abstraction (*die regressive Methode der Abstraktion*) to determine the philosophical principles. He states that the regressive method of abstraction does not provide any new knowledge about facts and laws, but it uses reflection to transform into clear concepts what reposes in our reason as an original possession and makes itself obscurely heard in every experiential judgment. (Nelson, 1949, p. 10). If we analyze the conditions of experiential judgments' possibility, we see more general propositions that constitute the basis of particular judgments. In fact, those concepts take place in our minds from the beginning, and we find them in every individual

judgment, but the regressive method of abstraction transforms them into clear concepts through reflection. Heckmann described this as the path of abstraction, from judgment in concrete cases towards the general truth on which that judgment is based, which was found in some cases and missed in others (Heckmann, 1981, p. 113).

Nelson explains that regressive abstraction reverses the usual process of reasoning, which begins with reasons and establishes consequences. In the usual process of reasoning (the progressive method), one might begin with an idea, then from this point begin to build and consider what logically flows from such a belief. However, the regressive method consists in rooting the consequence in experience by asking participants to describe an actual event in which they experienced their belief and in helping the participants discover the ‘obscurely heard’ principles that gave rise to that consequence or belief. Nelson calls those principles basic principles, and he assumes that they generally form the ground of our judgments and evaluations only in an obscure way, without stating and becoming clearly aware of them, and that participants must make use of an artificial regressive procedure to make them (Nelson: 1949, pp. 107–108). In this context, according to Nelson’s explanation of the idea of regressive abstraction, we have to eliminate accidental facts in order to bring out fully the underlying assumptions of a judgment. It is obvious that this type of abstraction is contained in a regressive process that can be understood by thinking and arguing. The starting point is a particular experience-based judgment, so abstraction targets an abstract statement responding to a philosophical question. To gain a deeper theoretical understanding of regressive abstraction, we should work out the starting point and the regressive character of argumentation in a Socratic Dialogue. Now it is understandable that we start with the experience of the participants, which is the base of the regressive abstraction, and then the path of abstraction of the participants in the dialogue goes to general truths. Robert Farmer assumes that Nelson clearly marks out in his writing the key aspect of a Socratic Dialogue: the fact that the facilitator must not intervene in matters of content. The participants must only say what they really believe; no thought experiments or hypothetical examples should be introduced. On the other hand, the language should be used to express thoughts and be as simple, non-technical, and clear as possible. It is clear that the process requires time as well as consistent, persistent, precision thinking, and that it must occur in groups to minimize the possibility of self-deception. After Nelson, his student Gustav Heckmann provides more specific details about the workings of Socratic Dialogue and the influences how the method is used today (Farmer: 2018, p.10).

Functions and importance of the experience of the participants

After analyzing the importance of the experiences of the participants, a new task will simply arise in front of us: evaluating the benefits of this role in personal and public life for the participants in Socratic Dialogue. We call it benefits because we should dialogue about really relevant and important issues in personal and public life. Leonard Nelson developed this method and used it in the political and social democratic movements. Socratic Dialogue is related to real life and helps us to improve our lives. When the experience of the participant is discussed in Socratic Dialogue, the participants experience the fact that a very ordinary event in their own lives is so versatile and that it serves to teach them so much. The ultimate goal of the Socratic Dialogue is to improve participant's ability to make the right decisions that are well-justified in their lives. This requires the participants to develop their critical thinking abilities. A dialogue is Socratic "if it enables the participant to make the transition from concrete experience to general insight". The participant will not gain insight unless he does this work all by himself (Heckmann, 1981, p.127).

Robert James Farmer, who conducted research to find out the expected benefits for the people who participate in Socratic Dialogues, says that there are many benefits that participants are said to experience as a result of participating in Socratic Dialogue. Firstly, it enables participants to review and revise (or reject) some of their opinions, to widen their vision, and to gain insight into some of their beliefs. Secondly, it allows us to experience the advantages of constructively and cooperatively thinking together. Thirdly, it permits them to recognize the educational value of personal experience and improve their critical thinking, reasoning, and arguing skills. Later, it is encouraging to learn that a heterogeneous group of people is able to reach a genuine and meaningful consensus about challenging subjects. Finally, it expands their model(s) of what learning is and how and under what conditions it can take place (Farmer, 2018, p. 45–70).

Socratic Dialogue educates the participants in the values of democracy and civil society and the development of autonomous and critical thinking, as well as interpersonal, ethnic, and cultural tolerance. Participants learn to be safe and confident in Socratic Dialogue. Horst Gronke stresses that the characteristic of the Socratic Dialogue is the acceptance and demand for self-responsibility on the part of the dialogue partners. In this sense, the Socratic Dialogue expects self-determined individuals with a basic readiness for change. It is very often asked how far Socratic

Dialogue changes people in a good manner. Many participants said that they had been changed by Socratic Dialogue. Gronke adds that “if this is not the case, the Socratic Dialogue, which increases the conviction potentials of the dialogue partners, is useless” (Gronke, in Brune, J.P., Gronke, H., and Krohn, D.: 2010, p. 45). Every individual not only needs to learn to know herself or himself through dialogue but also learn to live with others in a society. Gisela Raupach Stray adds that Socratic Dialogue makes the participants think clearly and precisely and makes them responsible for society. She talks about some people from the Nelson circle who were engaged in the movement against the atomic bomb, in Amnesty International, and later in the peace movement. For example, Gustave Heckmann and his wife were very politically active during their lives. In this context, Socratic dialogue is not only a method; it is a concentration of democratic values and virtues. The participants get to experience these values in practice, especially when discussing issues in a non-authoritarian and non-dogmatic way. Socratic Dialogue contributes to developing the citizen model of Socrates and Kant (Strey, in Shipley, P., and Mason, H. 2004, p. 202–204).

Socratic Dialogue can also help students and teachers to develop ethical awareness. In this context, Tamsyn Imison, a prominent British educator and educational strategist, tells us about ‘the ethical school’ among both students and staff. Imison worked as the head teacher of a successful comprehensive secondary school in London. During six years, the school council was trained in using Socratic Dialogues to discuss ethical issues of concern to them, so Imison was able to introduce Socratic Dialogue to all students. In their evaluations, all who participated expressed the view that it was a significant learning and enlightening experience (Imison, in Saran and Neisser, 2004, p. 27). After her experience and her observation of others engaged in learning, Imison emphasized that learners often learn best collectively. In this context, Peter Senge says that when teams learn together, they have good results and members can grow rapidly. For him, the discipline of team learning starts with dialogue because this is genuine ‘thinking together’. The group discovers insights not attainable individually (Senge: 2010).

Conclusion

Consequently, in the Nelson-Heckmann tradition, Socratic dialogue is a unique way to philosophize and foster mutual understanding to approach the truth in the group. The starting point is the participant’s experience, but all experiences are incomplete,

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so new experiences can lead to new insights. To analyze the role of the experience of the participants in Socratic dialogue, one needs to understand the tasks and behaviors of the participants from different perspectives. The way to accomplish the philosophical task is not easy, but nevertheless, the challenge is to engage in the structure of Socratic Dialogue and the experiences of the participants.

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