

What Is Autonomy? A Socratic Dialogue In Practice

Nigel Laurie

As every participant in a Socratic dialogue comes to discover, no description can do justice to the richness of the experience at its best and the subtle and powerful learning that can take place. With this warning in mind, Nigel Laurie offers a brief report on a Socratic dialogue held earlier this year at which he was rapporteur. We hope it will provide newcomers with some insight into the process, its rationale and its logic. Some details have been changed or omitted to preserve confidentiality.

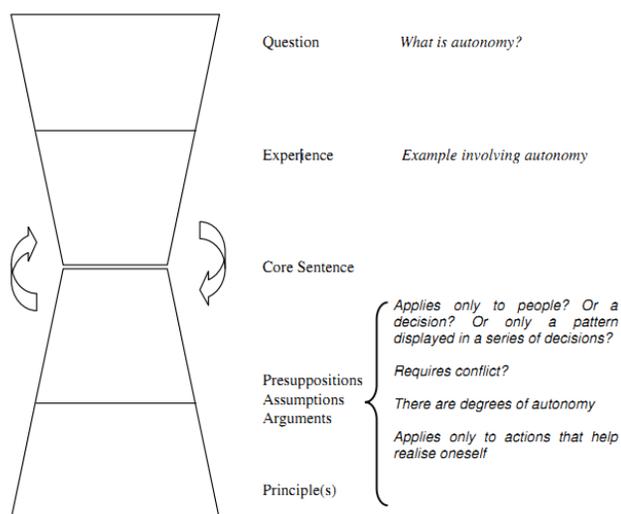
In February this year, ten participants from a variety of backgrounds ranging from management consulting to education, computing and philosophy for children gathered at Claridge House, a retreat in rural Surrey. They were there to attend a weekend Socratic dialogue to investigate the question: what is autonomy? The facilitator was to be Jos Delnoij, the Chair of the Dutch society for consultant philosophers, the VEP.

Introducing Socratic Dialogue

Jos Delnoij began by explaining that modern Socratic dialogue has its origins in the dialogues of Socrates and the work in the twentieth century of Leonard Nelson. Socratic dialogue as practised today is a rigorous inquiry into a question and our own thinking about it, aiming to investigate our assumptions in a joint process. It seeks two things: shared insight and an answer to the question, possibly in the form of a consensus.

The Hour-Glass Procedure

The dialogue addresses a well-formed philosophical question (i.e. one answerable by thinking about it rather than getting empirical data) by following a procedure sometimes likened to the hour-glass shown below.



The Starting Point: an Example

At the outset, each participant brings to the dialogue an example in which the concept—in this case, autonomy—is instantiated. These examples must be concrete and selected on the intuition that each is a valid example of the concept in the question. After some, or all, have been heard the group chooses one to be the subject of the enquiry on the basis of the following criteria:

The example should be:

- Drawn from our experience—not hypothetical
- Relevant to all participants
- Recognisable as a case of autonomy to all participants
- Finished – i.e. the experience has come to an end
- Not unduly complicated
- One where the example-giver is willing to provide additional information to the group so they can investigate it fully
- One which does not involve others present (or criminal acts!)

The Rules

The enquiry is governed by ground rules which demand the virtues of patience and perseverance:

1. Strive for consensus
2. Postpone your (pre-)judgements
3. Express yourself clearly and concisely
4. Think for yourself (no appeals to authority)
5. Express your actual doubts but not hypothetical ones

The Three Levels of Dialogue

Besides addressing the question in a 'content dialogue', Socratic dialogue can address other issues that typically arise. Questions of procedure are dealt with in a 'strategic dialogue' and matters of group behaviour and feeling in a 'meta dialogue'. These dialogues can be requested by any participant. Keeping them separate allows the content dialogue to proceed untroubled by other considerations.

Having introduced Socratic dialogue, Jos then asked the group whether it was happy to investigate the question proposed. It excited personal interest in some and philosophical interest in others and all agreed to work on it.

The Example

Considering the examples:reaching a consensus on which example to select

Jos invited each participant to offer an example of a personal experience of autonomy. Those given included decisions

- to become a practical philosopher
- not to be racist while living in a racist society
- to leave school

- to achieve independence in one's thinking
- to make choices which had previously not been made

Jos then opened the process of choosing the example to be the subject of the dialogue. People first spoke in support of their preferences and in the discussion assumptions about autonomy emerged. For one participant it applied only to cases that are central to a person's life. For some, it involved confronting a dilemma. Another participant believed that autonomy did not need to involve conflict at all. The group finally settled on an example to work with.

This session provoked several strategic and meta dialogues, reflecting the difficulty the group had sorting and choosing among the examples. In the strategic dialogue, Jos stressed the importance of concrete information so that all participants can get into the experience being described. In a final meta dialogue she invited comments on the experience of the session. Some noted a positive atmosphere with a strong desire to co-operate and select an example. Others questioned the democratic process, suggesting it was unduly time-consuming compared with other methods and wondering whether it had indeed chosen the best example.

The group had difficulty choosing the example primarily, I suspect, because the concept of autonomy is theory-laden and group members carried many conflicting assumptions about the concept. While it is found in plain English the concept is rarely used in everyday speech. And when it is used it occurs perhaps most often in conversations where theoretical positions are at stake. The various examples revealed these and the differences made choosing difficult. Members favoured or objected to examples on the grounds that they involved emotions, occurred in extreme situations, were central to the owner or involved life-changing decisions, involved dilemmas, struggles or complexity. Strong views on these aspects made systematic sorting and selection of the examples hard to achieve.

Exploring the Chosen Example: gaining a full concrete understanding of it

The example selected concerned a participant, Andrew, choosing to go on a particular two-day workshop. Jos explained that this session aimed to give everyone a full concrete understanding of the example. The group's questions must aim only at ensuring understanding, not on commenting, or expressing disagreement.

Andrew presented his example in concrete detail and discussion then elaborated it. Concepts such as ambition, duty and pressure emerged to clarify what was being discussed and Jos intervened to warn against introducing new terms at this stage; the time for them was not yet right. She urged the group to put questions concretely and ask only those needed to elicit the detail required to decide whether or not autonomy was present in the example. Eventually Andrew wrote his example in full on a flipchart to provide the group with a common document. The group continued to explore the example asking about the physical setting in which the decision was made, the existence of any negative factors, what Andrew thought was of value in life, and what would have happened if some circumstances had been different. Jos ruled out this last hypothetical question as prohibited by the rules.

Putting Oneself in the Example

Having investigated the example, the next stage required each participant to check if they could put themselves in the position of Andrew and then make an intuitive judgement about the presence of autonomy. Jos posed two questions: (1) can you put yourself in Andrew's place? and (2) do you accept it as an example of autonomy? While the group considered this, Andrew formulated a core sentence to express precisely where he judged autonomy was present in his example, which included the following elements: the absence of external pressure, going against someone else's wishes and doing something which was of value to him.

Everyone confirmed that they could put themselves in his place but not all were convinced the experience was of autonomy. The group were left to reflect further over lunch.

Is the Example an Example of Autonomy?

Having narrowed the concept of autonomy down to a core sentence it was the task of the remainder of the dialogue to broaden it out again by uncovering assumptions and presuppositions made about autonomy, and, hopefully, finding principles we could all agree on concerning autonomy. This would be no easy task, since we had already used about six of the nine hours available.

For some the concept could not be applied to an individual decision but only to a pattern displayed by a series of decisions—in this respect “autonomous” was said to be like “strategic”. One participant drew on the Oxford English Dictionary to support his view but the dictionary was ruled out as an authority and therefore barred by the rules. Jos explained that much everyday reasoning starts with a general broad definition (such as the dictionary might provide) and we then ask if a specific example we are considering fits this definition. However, in Socratic method we start with the specific case and then seek to uncover the assumptions that make possible our intuition that the case in question is in fact one of autonomy. (This is the process of regressive abstraction.) We have to stay close to our personal intuition and experience and reference to authorities will prevent us doing so.

The Dictionary reference prompted the question whether a decision can ever be autonomous; on one view only people could be autonomous, not their decisions or actions. Some suggested that autonomy could be present only if both sides of a conflict were fully and carefully considered before a decision was made. Another suggested that there are degrees of autonomy and that the example was not a clear-cut instance.

Seeking Consensus on Criteria for Autonomy

In the final session, Jos helped the group strive for consensus. She suggested looking for arguments that might provide a criterion for autonomy. One participant suggested that actions that contribute toward realising one's self entitle the person to be described as autonomous. Another forwarded the view that autonomy is a continuum, any point on which indicates the degree to which a person's actions are based on their own norms, as opposed to relying on approval and disapproval by others. Others felt this was too wide as it could include, for instance, love. It was suggested we had a criterion of usage but not a definition.

Jos concluded by remarking that the group had reached dissensus. This is not at all uncommon in Socratic dialogue. From one perspective, travelling is more important than arriving, the process matters more than the goal.

Evaluation

Some participants reported what they had learnt about the Socratic dialogue method such as the process of regressive abstraction and the challenges it poses. Another had been stimulated to think about applying the disciplines in other contexts. Jos remarked that choice of question is important and that it perhaps needs to be more specific for a large group. She remarked also that one day is too short to hope to reach consensus unless the group is small.

From my own point of view, it appeared that interesting points had emerged in the discussion, including:

Where is autonomy to be located?

The group appeared to assume that autonomy was a matter of internal personal experience rather than a phenomenon capable of being perceived objectively in the world.

What does autonomy apply to?

Participants suggested that autonomy could be applied to either an action, a series of actions, a decision, the will, or the self. They reached no agreement on which.

How does autonomy relate to morality?

In a way reminiscent of Kant, some in the group suggested a necessary connection between autonomy and morality.

Participant reactions to the dialogue itself ranged from “fascinating” to “frustrating”. While some were concerned at the difficulty in reaching consensus, many reported that the insight and awareness provoked by the dialogue had in themselves been very fruitful.

Article originally published as:

Laurie, Nigel (1999). What is Autonomy: A Socratic Dialogue in Practice. *Practical Philosophy*, 2:3 (November), pp.21–29.