

Interview with Jos Delnoij

Tim LeBon

Jos Delnoij is the chair of the Dutch Association for Philosophical Practice (VFP) and one of the leading practitioners of Socratic Dialogue in the Netherlands. She is founder of the Leiden Dialogue centre which organises Socratic Dialogues in the Netherlands, UK, Switzerland and Germany. Her work includes facilitating Socratic Dialogues with universities, the Dutch Government, political parties, management consultancies and business—and SCP members. It was after a Socratic Dialogue organised with the SCP that she kindly agreed to answer some questions asked by Tim LeBon

Tim LeBon: Jos, perhaps you could first tell me and our readers something about the history of Socratic Dialogue?

Jos Delnoij: At the beginning of this century, the German philosopher Leonard Nelson developed the Socratic Dialogue method to philosophise dialogically in groups. In 1922 he wrote his quite famous *Die Sokratische Methode* (The Socratic Method). This was originally a lecture delivered before the Pedagogic Society of Göttingen. As a faithful disciple of Socrates, he was hesitant to deliver this lecture *about* philosophy, because it was not his aim to teach philosophy, but to teach pupils to *philosophise*. He founded the Walkemühle school near Cassel, one of the aims of which was to train its pupils in enlightened and liberal citizenship. When he died at the age of forty-five, he left behind a three-volume work on the foundations of ethics and politics, substantial books on jurisprudence and on the theory of knowledge and a treatise on mathematics, epistemology and educational theory.

One of Nelson's closest friends and disciples, Gustav Heckmann, kept Nelson's method alive and himself wrote about Socratic Dialogue—it was he who introduced the “meta-dialogue”.

About ten years ago, Socratic Dialogue was brought to the Netherlands, since when several philosophers have refined the method, practised it and written articles. Jos Kessels translated Nelson's work, introduced the “dialogue on strategy” and was the first to practice a “Diner Pensant”. I introduced the use of colours on the flip-chart, to clearly discern dialogue on content (blue), meta-dialogue (green) and dialogue on strategy (red). I also wrote an article about the six variants we have in The Netherlands today. Several philosophers practice Socratic Dialogue regularly and some earn their living (partly) by doing so. Last year the VFP, The Dutch Association for Philosophical Practice, initiated two Socratic Dialogue Facilitator's courses: one Dutch, the other one international. Dries Boele was the first to develop an introductory training in this field.

I'm already getting a sense of the aliveness and scope for innovation in Socratic Dialogue, but perhaps some of our readers need to be made aware of some more basic information. What actually happens in a Socratic Dialogue?

A group of 6–12 participants investigate, through thinking, a fundamental question that interests them all. The dialogue should deal with a suitable question,

so not one you could answer empirically, for example by way of experiment. Examples of appropriate questions are “What is tolerance?” and “When is change for the better?”. The investigation is at the same time a self-investigation—participants should consider questions like : What are my presuppositions about the subject? What are my experiences? What is my intuition? Each participant must be willing to put their judgements at stake, they must be willing to investigate their own thinking and maybe alter their own values and norms. The aim of a Socratic Dialogue is to achieve a genuine consensus about the answer to the general question. This is not the same as giving in or voting!

The starting point of the analysis is an example from real life. Normally each participant gives an example derived from their own experience. So if the general question was: “What is tolerance?” then the participants would choose an example that they “think”—they have the intuition—is an exemplary case of tolerance.

The philosophical method is called by Nelson “Regressive Abstraction” and is distinct from induction and deduction. *Regressive Abstraction* looks into the assumptions and presuppositions that have to be true for the example—which has been agreed by all to be a good example of tolerance—to actually be an example of tolerance.

So two separate techniques are brought together—regressive abstraction—going from experience to principles—and the search for consensus. It follows that the facilitator has to be keeping track of several processes at the same time, as well as the content of the dialogue and group dynamics—quite a challenge. Perhaps you could say a few words about the role of the facilitator.

The facilitator does not participate in the dialogue on content. His or her task is to create the opportunity for participants to think about the general question according to the Socratic method. The dialogue is “marked out” by several rules—regulative rules i.e ones which make it a *dialogue*, and constitutive ones, which make it a *Socratic* dialogue in a Nelsonian way. Some regulative rules are: let other participants finish their sentences, do not hold long monologues; write on the flip-chart (this is a rule for the facilitator). Constitutive rules include: your contributions to the dialogue are grounded in your experience; do not base your stand on authorities, other than “the “forceless force of the better argument”; strive for consensus. Facilitating Socratic Dialogue requires many skills and insights, a certain sensitiveness and even knowledge, all the more so when doing Socratic Dialogue in organisations

What are the particular challenges of doing Socratic Dialogue in organisations?

Two particular challenges are to ensure material is dealt with philosophically rather than psychologically and to have the sensitivity to ask the right questions. A Socratic Dialogue is intended as an open space for people to think; not to make psychological issues of problems that come up. Also, in organisations you have to ask questions, e.g. when there is a contradiction; you have to notice it and make it explicit and make the dialogue work. The facilitator needs sufficient knowledge of the company to be aware of its assumptions and also to distinguish its business principles from ethical principles. Someone might say “we need to do X so we can stay in business”, but as a philosopher you can’t be satisfied with that—you have

to push them beyond the limits of their usual thoughts. So you might ask “What is the importance of this organisation that makes you think it needs to be continued?”. Its a challenge for the philosopher, which I think should be taken.

I know that you and other Dutch consultant philosophers have now had a number of years experience facilitating Socratic Dialogues. Can you tell me something about the Dutch experience?

In the Netherlands we now work in education (as Nelson did), for example universities and secondary schools. Socratic facilitators also work in business (e.g. banks and business consultancies) and in non-profit organisations such as political parties, the police force, prisons and the civil service.

Socratic Dialogue works for those who are willing to really comply with the constitutive as well as the regulative rules. The benefit differs from one group to another. In some cases a well-grounded consensus about the general question results, in which case the answer can serve as material for a shared mission statement. Another team may gain insights into their thinking processes, assumptions and attitude. As the facilitator you have the opportunity to draw more attention to a particular aspect, depending on the emphasis wanted (or needed). Nevertheless, I cannot promise a certain result on the content level.

What are your hopes for the future of Socratic Dialogue?

I do hope that the Socratic method will be put into practice world-wide. This method “embodies”, reminds us of and stimulates virtues that advance and benefit humanity. The Socratic method develops the intrinsic union or connection between thinking and acting, thinking and experiencing, and thinking and (pre)judging. Gaining this insight, and being sincerely willing to understand oneself and other people, may have unforeseeable consequences that may be very worthwhile. My second hope concerns time. Some philosophers get so excited about Socratic Dialogue, that they want to start facilitating today rather than tomorrow! Given the variety of skills and experience needed to facilitate properly, this is not a good idea. This does not mean that, in the meantime, they cannot learn from other facilitator’s performances. So guard philosophy, and, also important: don’t spoil your own market by starting before you are ready! I hope that philosophers interested in becoming a Socratic facilitator will be able to practice the *virtue of patience* until they are fully trained

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