

PROVACATIONS AND PROVOCATEURS

Provocation 1

Lecture Theatre

Jonathan Glover

How far is dialogue possible between adherents of different belief systems? What has philosophy to contribute?

The bomb attacks on London of July 7 2005 were carried out by Muslims who had grown up in Britain and were British citizens. An opinion poll suggested that nearly a third of British Muslims agreed with the statement that

“Western civilization is decadent and immoral and that Muslims should seek to bring it to an end”.

(reference to YouGov poll, Daily Telegraph July 23rd 2005)

1% supported using violent means if necessary, while 32% thought only peaceful means should be used. The number of British Muslims was at that time estimated to be about 1.6 million. In other communities, such as fundamentalist Christians, there might be many who would see the divorce rate, or the acceptance of homosexuality and abortion, as signs of a decadent and immoral society. But, if the poll was reliable, there were at that time around 16,000 Muslims who were prepared to give at least verbal support to using violence, and over half a million who thought peaceful means should be used to end the decadent and immoral Western civilization.

In a country where half a million people say the decadent and immoral way of life of the others should be brought to an end, people need to talk to each other. In a world where serious thinkers talk of “the clash of civilizations”, and where we have grown used to killing in war as a regular item in the daily news bulletins, people need to find ways of talking to each other, across the barriers of nationality, religion and political ideology. This talk will explore how far fruitful dialogue between adherents of different systems of belief is possible. It will consider this in the context of rival very general views of the world. Since Socrates, philosophy has been taught by getting people to spell out what they believe and their reasons for doing so, followed by the method of *reductio ad absurdum* through producing counterexamples to the beliefs or to the reasons given for them. “Surely you are not prepared to accept this implication of what you say?” In this way epistemology argues against beliefs by showing their costs. Logic alone is enough to exclude inconsistent belief systems, but not enough to choose between consistent ones. What more is needed?

The talk will also look at a more particular context: the rival historical narratives of a conflict, such as the one between Israelis and Palestinians.

Provocation 2

Lecture Theatre

Petra von Morstein

Freedom and Methods in the Practice of Philosophy: The union of singularity and interconnectedness

Dialogue from immediate experience begins with poetry. Philosophical enquiry begins with the poetic act of articulating what is given in immediate experience which as such cannot be conceptualized. We are acutely aware of this in extreme experiences (Grenzsituationen)

However, all human experiences including habitual and trivial ones, have an immediate subjective component. This is the component of freedom, the indeterminable component of being human and of human experience.

With regard to habitual and trivial experiences we tend not to be aware of their immediate subjective component. Extreme experiences urge such awareness upon us. They, so to speak, make phenomenological reductions happen. As to ordinary ones we have to perform phenomenological reductions deliberately in order to be able to recognize ourselves as subject in our experiences and begin our enquiry. There can be no experience which is closed to philosophical enquiry.

Phenomenological reduction, whether it happens or is deliberately performed, is inherent in philosophical living and the work of Philosophical Practice. This implies that every description or explanation of an experience inevitably leaves room for questions. Thus dialectical thinking naturally ensues from necessary phenomenological reduction. Phenomenological reduction and dialectical thought, in short interminable enquiry, are inherent in human nature and, therefore, in philosophy as Philosophical Practice, and in the Lebenskunst of shaping one's life to the extent that we are free to do so. Philosophical Practice is the primary response to human freedom. It is by virtue of freedom present in every individual that human beings are intrinsically dialogically constituted. By denying and suppressing freedom, we deny and suppress our dialogical nature. Philosophical Practice is enactment of responsibility for our freedom and its sustenance. It is inherently political.

Provocation 3

Lecture Theatre

Jos Kessels and Dieter Krohn

Socratic Dialogues: Baby & Bathwater – What to keep and what to change?

Theory and practice of Socratic Dialogue (SD) in the Nelson-Heckmann-tradition develop. Some changes may be justified, even necessary. Some may lead to the loss of essential features of SD. What is the baby, what the bathwater?

We do not want to do much lecturing. We prefer dialogue. You can expect some provocative statements related to the following questions:

- Can short dialogues (not six days but one hour) in a group of people having their individual interests be Socratic Dialogues?
- Dialogues in a holiday setting, not bound by any real engagement – do they not miss the essential grain of Socratic Dialogues?
- Having a theme and a question and a small group and a flipchart and Heckmann's rules - is that enough? Do you not need on top of that some explicit model of the Socratic Dialogue: the hour glass model? Do you not need knowledge of the techniques of dialectics?
- Can the knowledge or insight you are after in a Socratic Dialogue really be formulated?
- What are the consequences for the schooling of facilitators?

Provocation 4

Lecture Theatre

Beate Littig

New Biotechnologies, Ethics and Neo-Socratic Dialogues: The cases of Xenotransplantation and Genetic Counseling

The (public) debates about new biotechnologies and their medical applications (like stem cell research, genetic testing, xenotransplantation etc) focus on the ethics of these technologies. The debates are less about risks or uncertainties (as in the case of e.g. nuclear power stations) but about the dignity of human beings, the images of life, the differences between species, autonomy and the like.

But who are the participants in these debates? Who defines what the debates are about? Who is in a legitimate position to make decisions about the fundamental ethical questions? Should it be professional experts, ethicists, lay people? How do medical professionals, how do modern societies in general deal with these challenges? Which instruments or dialogical methods enable stakeholders to talk about the ethics of new biotechnologies?

The presentation tackles these questions from a sociological point of view. Recent sociological research has investigated the role of so called ethics committees in the field of the new biotechnologies, approaches of participatory technology assessment and moral communication in bioethical controversies. The talk will give a brief overview about this research and will then give details about two international research projects which used Neo-Socratic Dialogues (NSD) to discuss ethical questions with different groups of stakeholders. One project was about the ethics of xenotransplantation¹, the second one on ethical problems of genetic testing and genetic counseling².

In both projects Neo-Socratic Dialogue was used as a form of intervention and to evaluate the NSD as a trans-disciplinary tool for dialogue and problem solving, as well as means for participatory policy making involving relevant stakeholders.

The paper will present results of the Neo-Socratic Dialogues and the accompanying sociological research on the effects of the talks. In the final part the chances and limits of Neo-Socratic Dialogues in the field of new biotechnologies will be resumed.

¹ Xenotransplantation means the transplantation of non-human cells, tissues and organs into humans. It is based on progress in transgenics and immunology, which have enabled the production of genetically modified animal organs that are more compatible with the human immune system, and also on improvements in controlling the human immune response. Xenotransplantation is associated with new risks and raises a number of major ethical problems. Though it could contribute to reducing the shortage of organs from human donors and thus save the lives of many patients waiting for transplantation, there is a serious risk that viruses causing animal diseases might cross the species barrier and spread through human populations (xenozoonosis)

² Genetic tests may reveal a genetic disposition for a disease a long time before its symptomatic manifestation. This knowledge may seriously destabilize tested people and their relatives psychologically and socially, particularly when there is neither cure nor prevention. Genetic counseling, which is (at least in a medical setting) obligatory before and after a genetic testing is to help patients and their relatives to plan their lives adequately on the basis of genetic test results. Yet, both counselors and patients describe genetic counseling as problematic for various reasons.

Provocation 5

Fernando Leal

The Value of English as an International Language

The purpose of this address is to raise questions for discussion rather than to answer them or (worse) pontificate about the subject.

First, I shall state a few facts about the historical process by which English has become (pretty recently, as it turns out) the most widespread language in the history of the world. There are in fact some prejudices and even myths that could be dispelled or at least aired during the discussion.

Then I shall propose two important principles of communication which seem to be at odds with each other, and shall try to apply them to a variety of fields in which we humans need and use language. The principles are: (1) each human language is a unique and irreplaceable good, unfathomably precious for a variety of reasons, so that losing any is a tragedy — and unaccountably many have already been lost and will in all likelihood be lost soon, the process of language extinction being possibly faster today than in the past; (2) having a global language as an instrument of communication across regions, cultures, customs and traditions of thought and feeling is a great public good, in spite of the multiple limitations that any particular language inevitably has — as opposed to all the other single ones that have emerged in the history of humankind on earth.

Finally, I shall illustrate in some detail the conflict between those two principles as it plays itself out in a very peculiar form of communication, viz. Socratic dialogue, in view of the high value many of the conference participants assign to it.

Provocation 6

Authority, Faith and the Limits of Dialogue

Richard Norman

This year is the 150th anniversary of the publication of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* and Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. In this talk I want to bring the two anniversaries together. Mill's defence of the liberty of thought and discussion in chapter 2 of his essay is also a classic presentation of the case for dialogue as a means of arriving at the truth. But in the light of the continuing controversies about evolutionary theory and its creationist opponents, my intended 'provocation' is to ask: is dialogue always appropriate?

Mill's position might seem to be summed up in the old adage that 'there are two sides to every debate'. But is that really the case? And does every opinion deserve a hearing? Creationists argue that creationism should be given equal time in school science lessons, so that pupils can hear both sides of the debate and make up their own minds. Is that where an emphasis on the importance of dialogue should lead us?

The example points to the institutional vacuum in which Mill's defence of dialogue is located. It is essentially a negative rejection of constraints on freedom of expression. But if dialogue is important in the way he suggests, then we need positive institutional provision to enable it to take place – in educational institutions, but also in scientific and intellectual communities, the communications media etc. And once we start to think in those terms, we cannot avoid the need for decisions about which opinions should be debated. The idea of a 'free market' of ideas leads to absurdity (equal time for flat-earthists, Scientologists etc?)

It's difficult to see how such decisions can be made without appealing to the authority of experts. Surely the content of science lessons in schools has to reflect the prevailing scientific consensus. Most of us are not in a position to judge which views are serious contenders. But does this mean a reversion to dogmatism?

To avoid a blind acceptance of the authority of scientists, education needs to foster a questioning attitude, and dialogue has an important role to play here. Pupils need to learn not just *that* evolutionary theory is the best explanation available, but *why* it is, and that can be achieved in part by encouraging them to question it, perhaps drawing on creationist ideas if they come from a religious background.

Pupils also need to understand how the authority of scientific experts rests on *scientific method*, and that a vital component of this is the role of critical dialogue and the openness of theories to refutation by evidence. Here we come up against another challenge from the creationists: that all beliefs and theories in the end rest on a 'faith position' which cannot itself be supported or refuted by evidence. This may appear to get some plausibility from a Kuhnian philosophy of science. It needs to be answered if we are to defend the power of dialogue.

Our Provocateurs

Jonathan Glover

Jonathan Glover did his BA in philosophy and psychology and B Phil in philosophy at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. He stayed in Oxford teaching philosophy until 1997. He was a Fellow of New College, Oxford. He moved to King's College London, where he was Director of the Centre of Medical Law and Ethics from 1998 until 2008. His books include *Causing Death and Saving Lives*, *What Sort of People Should there be?*, *Humanity, a Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, and *Choosing Children: Genes, Disability and Design*.

Dieter Krohn

Dieter Krohn, student of Gustav Heckmann at the University of Hannover, Germany (1965 – 1968) became a Socratic facilitator in 1969, a member of the PPA in 1978 and is now its secretary. Since the foundation of GSP in 1994 he has chaired this society of Socratic facilitators in Germany. Dieter, now retired, taught at a comprehensive secondary high school and at the University of Hannover. He was also the coordinator of the teaching of English as a second language for comprehensive schools in Lower Saxony, Germany. He has written about Socratic dialogue, edited a number of volumes on the Socratic method, and has been an author and an editor on the teaching of English as a second language.

Fernando Leal

Professor of Philosophy and Social Science at the University of Guadalajara (Mexico) Fernando currently works on three fields: the interface between ethics, economics and politics; the history, philosophy and methodology of the social and cognitive sciences; the application of linguistic theory to the study of neurodevelopmental disorders. He co-edited *Person-Centred Ergonomics: The Brantonian View of Human Factors* (London, Taylor & Francis, 1993), and has just published (in Spanish unfortunately) a book-length dialogue on the nature of values (*A Dialogue on the Good*, 2007) and a collection of *Essays on the Relationship Between Philosophy and the Sciences* (2008).

Beate Littig

Beate Littig is head of the Sociology Department at the Institute for Advanced Studies. She studied Sociology (History, Philosophy and Psychology) at the Universities of Göttingen, Hamburg and Berlin. From 1987-89 she was a member of the interdisciplinary research and consulting team at the Daimler-Benz-Institute for Technology and Society in Berlin. The focus of her work then was on the analysis of changing values in Western societies and its potential impacts on the enterprise. From 1990-92 she participated in the two-year postgraduate-programme at the IHS, Department of Sociology. From 1993-94 she worked free-lanced in several research projects (such as environmental learning and qualification, social issue management). In June 1994 she became research assistant at the HIS. In 1995 she finished her Ph.D. at the Fern Universität at Hagen. Since February 1996 she has been a senior researcher at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Vienna, Department of Sociology. In 2001 she finished the habilitation procedure at the University of Vienna and became lecturer of Sociology at the University of Vienna. She works (in research and teaching) mainly in the fields of environmental sociology, sustainable labor societies, participatory

technology assessment, gender studies and qualitative research methods. In these areas she coordinated national and international research and participates in international research networks. Since 2005 she has been vice-president of the Austrian Sociology Association (ÖGS). Beate Littig is a Socratic facilitator and member of the GSP.

Publications include

Littig, B. (2004) „The Neo-Socratic Dialogue (NSD): A Method of Teaching the Ethics of Sustainable Development“, in: Galea, C. (ed): Teaching Business Sustainability, Sheffield: Greenleaf Publ., pp. 240-252

Grießler, E., Littig, B. (2003) "Participatory Technology Assessment of Xenotransplantation: Experimenting with the Neo Socratic Dialogue.", in: Practical Philosophy 6(2), 56-67

Petra von Morstein

Petra von Morstein grew up in Germany and studied at the Universities of Münster and Oxford before teaching at Universities in various countries but mainly at the University of Calgary, Canada. In recent years her work has focussed mainly on the Practice of Philosophy. In 1987 she founded the ASPP, Apeiron Society for the Practice of Philosophy, a public, not-for-profit, non-academic Philosophical Society which continues to be active in Calgary. After moving to Berlin in September 2007 she continued her work as a Philosophical Practitioner in Philosophical Counselling, Philosophy Workshops as well as lectures and seminars.

Her publications include Essays on Philosophy of Mind, Philosophy and Literature, the Practice of Philosophy, a book (English) on Aesthetics, as well as translations and poetry. In October 2006 she was elected Vice President of the IGPP/ ISPP (International Society for the Practice of Philosophy).

Richard Norman

Richard Norman was formerly Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Kent. His work has been mainly in the areas of ethics and political philosophy. His book *The Moral Philosophers* (Oxford University Press, 1983, 2nd edn. 1998), which has been widely used in courses on moral philosophy, is a critical introduction to the history of ethics, leading to a defence of a form of ethical naturalism. His conception of values as grounded in shared human experience underpins his subsequent work in ethics and political philosophy. *Free and Equal* (Oxford University Press, 1987) defends a radically egalitarian political philosophy which aims to reconcile the supposedly conflicting values of freedom and equality. *Ethics, Killing and War* (Cambridge University Press, 1995) argues for pacifism, a position which is distinct from absolute pacifism but recognises how difficult it is to provide any moral justification for war. His most recent book is *On Humanism* (Routledge, 2004), in which his commitment to shared human values is located within a popular exposition and defence of a non-religious outlook. He is one of the Vice-Presidents of the British Humanist Association, and a member of the Humanist Philosophers Group.