

Living Together in our Modern World – Reason and the Role of Dialogue

Report of the Chichester Conference¹

For Socrates, dialogue was not a method or technique, but a mode of relationship with other human beings with whom we seek to know wisdom and virtue, on which human happiness depends. Socrates also believed that knowledge of what is true, and love of what is good, afford for human beings enduring happiness, which they will naturally choose. Yet Plato knew that emotions often get in the way of acting on the basis of what we know to be good and true, which is why he banned poets and dramatists from his ideal republic – they deceive and corrupt by playing on the emotions of readers and audiences. Today, we no longer search for truth as a unitary or universal quality, but accept plurality and difference, axiomatically. Yet when different belief and value systems lead communities into conflict and violent wars of liberation, we may wonder whether a Socratic approach can contribute effectively to the resolution of those conflicting beliefs.

In keeping with the Society's Socratic aims, the Chichester conference in 2009² was organised as a series of six 'Provocations' in which the applicability of Socratic principles to contemporary situations and debates could be tested and illustrated. Significant aspects of those debates are presented here, to convey a broad summary of the conference experience.

Jonathan Glover's opening presentation, *How far is dialogue possible between adherents of different belief systems? What has Philosophy to contribute?* addressed the potentially divisive social consequences of the terrorist bomb incident in London on July 7th 2005. The absolute values held by some cultural and religious groups encourage mistrust of others as a necessary concomitant of adherence to a particular system of beliefs. Jonathan contended³ that in order to understand issues at the centre of ethics, the study of how we should live, we need better to understand people and what they are like: in order to engage successfully in living together reasonably, we need to know what human beings themselves are like. Living is not done alone, but in relation with others. Dialogue, therefore, should present a mode of knowing others and founding our actions with others on the knowledge we have obtained of who they are and how they act. His talk looked particularly at some rival historical narratives, and in particular those of Israelis and Palestinians.

¹ The conference, *Living Together in our Modern World – Reason and the Role of Dialogue*, was held in the University of Chichester from 27th -31st July 2009, and was organised by the Society for the Furtherance of Critical Philosophy (SfCP), with support from the Philosophical Political Academy (PPA) and the Society of Socratic Facilitators (GSP).

² For details of the full programme see: http://www.sfcp.org.uk/6th_conf_programme.htm

³ Jonathan has written widely on ethics and history, including J. Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, Yale University Press, 1999.

The conflict between Israel and Palestine, and the conflict between Israel and Lebanon in 2006, provide telling examples. Each believed themselves to be defending their own 'sovereignty' and neither side could credit the other with good will, because each was held fast by the force of a stereotyped image of the other. The Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa tried to address similar issues by removing false claims from propaganda publications. A way forward may be found, perhaps, by moving beyond literal to human truths, and through narrative truths to dialogical truth. From a humanist perspective people's histories are complex and include memories of their injuries, oppressions, and experience of injustice. Edward Said⁴ argued that a historical dimension is necessary, but must acknowledge that there will be different claims regarding the significance of cherished narratives. A way of doing that might be for Israelis and Palestinians to make films of their own 'truths'. Propaganda would be permitted so that the films might be both as emotionally powerful as possible, whilst attempting also to convey an objective account of events. Technical help may be needed to make such films. Viewing the films would then enable each of the two groups to look at each other's version of the truth in turn, and then discuss them, using a moderator or facilitator within agreed ethical rules.

In this way, Jonathan exemplified and illuminated links between the conference theme of 'living together reasonably', and one of the Society's chief purposes, of developing and disseminating the practice of Socratic Dialogue. In identifying the 'reasonable' in the meanings and structures that bind together the 'we' and 'you' of togetherness, it might become possible to build habits of toleration. Perhaps this is the core purpose of attempts by writers in fields such as Global Ethics⁵ to establish a balance sheet which identifies the costs of mis-beliefs and unexamined costs overlooked by human beings when they call for both liberty and equality, not always recognizing that elements in one might need to be foregone in order to secure elements of the other.

Socratic Dialogue challenges incomplete ethical systems. Here Chomsky's notion of a deep structure of logical and semantic relations underlying each individual's understanding, an innate grammar, may be helpful. Socratic Dialogue could help facilitate individuals to explore the grammar of their own thinking and reflect critically on their belief system and its compatibility with those exhibited by the group in which discussion is shared. Deep intellectual agreement within a group may more readily be achieved, or a cognitive map developed around disagreement on particular issues. Teaching that uses philosophy in ways that acknowledge and explore ideological differences may promote awareness of the precarious epistemological standing of all beliefs. If this is the case, should we perhaps spend more time considering and talking about events in the past, around which hurt is still engendered, and is liable to erupt in episodes of local violence – with a view to setting the hurts aside?

Richard Norman⁶ approached the theme from the perspective of possible threats to liberty arising from increasingly assertive claims in support of religious faith. In this he was revisiting ground explored scientifically in Darwin's evolutionary theory of human

⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.

⁵ The Centre for Global Ethics at the University of Birmingham, UK, defines the field as dealing with "the moral questions that arise from globalization".

⁶ R. Norman, *On Humanism, Thinking in Action*, Routledge, 2004, and other books on moral philosophy and ethics. The full text of Richard's paper may be found at www.sfcg.org.uk

origins; by George Eliot, creatively, in the fictional life of her eponymous hero *Adam Bede*; within a framework of political economy by Karl Marx in *Critique of Political Economy*; and philosophically by J.S. Mill in *On Liberty*. Richard posed the following questions: “Are there limits to dialogue? Aren’t some disputes already settled? If they are, then isn’t it misleading to prolong the dialogue? Doesn’t it imply that the dispute is an open question, when in fact it isn’t? Doesn’t it give to an irrational position a credibility, which it doesn’t deserve?”

An example would be belief in witches. Residual ‘believers’ who claim to rely upon pre-historic religious beliefs can be thought of as invoking tenets from an unrecoverable institutional setting, pre-literate, leaving no religious artefacts or other traces than sets of stones arranged in ways that strongly suggest association with religious rituals and beliefs, but whose contents cannot be inferentially recovered from such traces as remain. We might say simply that beliefs that posit an imagined, historically unsubstantiated system of institutions, need not be accorded the same respect as those manifested in historically traceable institutions whose beliefs and practices can be set out and interrogated. Jonathan Glover made a similar distinction when he argued, “logic alone is enough to exclude inconsistent belief systems (by exposing their costs) but not enough to choose between inconstant ones”. Irrational beliefs concerning processes of species differentiation, matters of empirical fact, are more readily exposed as false (as, for example, by Darwin’s theory) than metaphysical claims, such as creationism, that are based on faith, independently of empirical evidence.

Petra von Morstein⁷ argued that close association between the heuristic and the ethical in SD were marks of an ineradicable human preoccupation with a search for justice, deriving from a “union of singularity and interconnectedness”, a perspective with significant potential value in philosophical counselling. **John Halliday** also reflected a concern for some of the practical gains to be had from the practice of dialogue, in obtaining an appropriate balance between formal and informal learning in schools and colleges, and in work and local government settings, such as planning consultation exercises and arrangements for determining access to jobs. His thesis was that contemporary living, and educational curricula in particular, had been colonised by a modernist preoccupation with instrumentality, an approach to learning as “an endless acquisition of mental products.” Increasingly, such products are pre-defined for learners by government agencies and commercial and media interests. Attempting to re-orient learning to living, he advocated an approach to learning as “moral education through practical activity in conjunction with others”. This would remove learning from its current authoritarian and instrumentally bounded setting, and provide young people especially with access to possibilities, the capability to think of things in alternative ways. Such an approach would entail “an openness to the views of others which are bound in some instances to be in conflict. It requires confidence to persist with a problem even though its immediate solution is not apparent. It involves a willingness to accept contingency. Finally and perhaps most importantly it involves the acceptance that learning is risky and that often learning will involve challenging authority structures and vested interests.”

Jos Kessels shared a dialogue with **Dieter Krohn**, exploring whether practical experience of Socratic Dialogue might lead gradually to necessary changes in the theory

⁷ *Freedom and Methods in the Practice of Philosophy: the union of singularity and interconnectedness.*

and practice of conducting dialogue in the Nelson-Heckmann tradition; his discussion, drawing upon his recent work as a consultant, argued for replacing the schoolroom (academy) by the market place (agora), as the preferred site for applications of SD. Some may feel that essential features of this tradition might be lost in this process – and so it is useful to identify what might need periodically to change, without losing those essential features, by asking - What is the baby, what the bathwater?

Jos reminded us that some years ago, a group of Dutch exponents of SD had, in their terms, wanted ‘Socrates back on the market’, implying that short dialogues (not six days but one hour) were a necessary restriction for those whose working lives made intense demands on personal time, leaving not enough ‘free space’ available for extensive dialogues. They claimed that this is explicitly in line with the Socratic ideal, as opposed to the traditional practice of conducting dialogues in a holiday setting, where full engagement is in practice optional – this, he argued, was contrary to the Socratic ethos. The question on which we should be focused is, rather, whether it is possible to make enough free space for open dialogue in a context of competing and even conflicting interests.

He then went on to discuss appropriate method and techniques⁸. Intention is not enough; nor is it sufficient to gather a small group, identify a theme, and a question, supply a flipchart and agree to observe Heckmann’s rules. Some explicit model of the Socratic dialogue was needed in addition: for example - the hour glass model⁹, where participants used techniques of definition by breaking down concepts and re-combining them; techniques of situated reasoning, to evoke pathos and personal engagement; techniques of eliciting and formulating ideas; and several more. In short, Jos argued, dialectic is a very specialized business with important implications for the training of SD facilitators. There is also the question of whether the knowledge sought in a Socratic dialogue really can be formulated. Jos argued that it cannot, though Socratics often think it can. Nelson suggests it can, with his theory of the psychological basis of epistemology. This hinges on the question what you consider this knowledge to be. Our classical tradition and concept of knowledge as propositional may be too limited¹⁰.

Suggestions proposed for debate were that the following should be retained, as the foundation elements of SD:

- A Socratic interrogator to provoke joint reflection on the assumptions underlying experience and action.
- The creation of free space in which individuals are helped to philosophise and to widen their perspective of the good life.
- Collaborative self-inquiry, attempting precision at different levels: logos, pathos, and ethos.

⁸ See also Jos Kessels, Erik Boers, Pieter Mostert, *Free Space, Philosophy in organisations*. Boom, Amsterdam, 2004; and Jos Kessels, Erik Boers, Pieter Mostert, *Free Space, Field Guide*. Boom, Amsterdam, 2009.

⁹ An applied version of this model was well illustrated in slide 11 of Beate Littig’s presentation.

¹⁰ Jos and Dieter discuss this matter more thoroughly in: “Can we put into words what a Socratic dialogue really is?” - Dieter Krohn and Jos Kessels, Dialogue on the Meaning of Socratic Dialogue”, *Philosophical Practice*, November 2010; 5(3): 661-673. An extended and related discussion of these and other aspects of SD may be found in Bernard Roy, “To imagine, to recollect, per chance to discover: The modern Socratic dialogue and the history of philosophy”, *Philosophical Practice*, November 2005; 1(3): 159-170.

- Constitutive ingredients of the Socratic method, namely: identifying a theme, a question, an example, replacing or putting oneself in someone else's shoes, regressive abstraction, the hunt for an idea.

What should be changed:

- Search for relevance when identifying participants, themes, and reasons for talking. SD should engage with the marketplace and everyone's everyday life, and not only operate in schools, universities, or holiday type settings.
- Abandon purism, attachment to a 'Reinkultur'; instead exponents should seek explicit association with practices like consultancy and organizational development, and with the large number of educational 'instruments', for instance from the liberal arts, that also stimulate reflection and discourse.
- Strive to make Socratic dialogue an established part of leadership training for managers, governors, MBA students etc.
- Work on making Socratic dialogue play a developmental role in the practical discourse, strategy and vision in use in a wide range of organisations.
- Encourage the use of SD in the public sphere so that dialogue animates public debate.

As a consequence, facilitators of Socratic dialogue should get a much more thorough training in philosophy and in consultancy based training. The approach advocated here was summarised as development of a discourse through shared reflection. Necessary conditions for this to 'take place' include:

- Creation of 'free space': escaping from the routine strategic stance in order to explore one's principles of action.
- Second, the proper command of essential skills based on the three linguistic disciplines of the 'liberal arts', the *Trivium*, formed from *dialectics*, the art of conducting dialogue; *rhetoric*, the art of persuading; and *grammar*, the art of finding 'words that work'.
- willingness to investigate the 'the good life', what is required for general well-being - not in an abstract sense but in concrete topics that might be controversial or fraught with emotions.

This implies that we are willing to explore different views of 'flourishing', and to sift accounts of personal perspectives on what the common good entails. The case was advanced in the belief that it is vitally important that this form of discourse should be practised routinely in organisations where people work.

In his response, **Dieter Krohn** stated that it would be helpful to look again at the baby, the SD in the Nelson-Heckmann tradition, and so avoid unnecessary points of discussion. In the Nelson-Heckmann tradition it is clear that questions should be relevant to participants, and that real life should be the basis of their philosophical investigations. In this tradition, concrete experience, whether from the private, professional or political sphere, is analysed under the aspect of insights to be gained, which could be epistemological or ethical in character. The facilitator needs to be experienced not only in group dynamics but also in all the philosophical methods which are to be applied in SD. And, of course, the training of facilitators in those fields must be very thorough.

If the actual conditions allow enough time for reflection, and give participants equal rights in the discourse, it will not matter where the SD takes place, whether that is within organisations or in holiday settings, "on the market" or "in the academy". But if we want to be sure that we don't mistake the real baby of SD for discussions of a quite different kind, however relevant and interesting they might be to participants, we should check whether the essential features of SD are being fulfilled, namely:

- Does the group intend to answer a clear philosophical question?
- Do the participants start with the concrete and remain in contact with concrete experience?
- Is full understanding between participants strived for and achieved (within the possible limits)?
- Does the group aim at consensus and not give up too easily?
- Does the facilitator help the group in those respects without impinging on the participants' process of forming their own judgement on the content level?

If these features are found to be present, it is highly probable that we have the baby there safe and sound. If any of these features are missing from the dialogue, it is highly probable that the baby has been lost, and we have something different from an SD.

Models of the SD process might be useful, but no single one must predominate, as they not only help to structure the SD, but could also be misunderstood as a mere 'recipe', and so limit creativity and independent thinking. Dieter also distinguished SD as a process from its application, or use in 'field work', in particular settings, such as in work by Grete Hermann¹¹, Nelson's disciple, who used SD in support of organised political activity among members of the resistance movement in Nazi Germany. Jonathan Glover added that much depends on how we do SD, and that the training for SD facilitators should be broader than envisaged in current arrangements.

These points seemed to be especially applicable to the example presented by **Beate Littig**, when she examined how Neo-Socratic Dialogue (NSD) can help ensure that ethical aspects inherent in the introduction of new technologies in the field of personal health are discussed collaboratively with patients¹². New biotechnologies introduce both opportunities and risky choices for patients and professionals responsible for their application. Whilst xenotransplantation (XTP) can help solve the shortage of organs from human donors, and save the lives of many patients waiting for transplantation, there is a serious risk that viruses which cause animal diseases might cross the species barrier and spread through human populations. Before such choices may be offered, an institutional framework of ethical inquiry comprising hospital committees, research funders and interdisciplinary academic committees will normally scrutinise the issues involved. But such fora are unavoidably focused upon technical assessment of the technology itself, and its potential benefits for the patient. Ethical implications of its use tend to be subordinated to the agenda of more powerful agents. Bioethics commissions are unavoidably expert-centred, their processes characterized by the deployment of power relations and interest bargaining, with ethical issues insufficiently considered

¹¹ See F. Leal and R. Saran, (2nd edit., 2009) *Dialogue on Socratic Dialogue*, Appendix 2, p. 30.

¹² *New Biotechnologies, Ethics and Socratic Dialogues. The Cases of Xenotransplantation and Genetic Counselling*. A revised version of Beate's paper has subsequently been published as: Littig, B. (2010) Neo-Socratic Dialogue in Practice: The Xenotransplantation and Genetic Counselling Cases, *Philosophical Practice*, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp 685-697.

and outcomes not systematically documented. Differences are recognized but not resolved, and contained by individualizing them. Instead, she argued, such technological controversy should embrace conflicts concerning goals and values, not only facts. Participants should, for the sake of “social robustness”, include citizens (the public) and stakeholders (patients), as well as experts and institutional interests. The process should be heuristic rather than conflictual, transacted as argument rather than a bargaining session, and for such a process Socratic dialogue had an important function and role to offer. Ethical questions arising from XTP that are still to be resolved include:

- Is it in principle acceptable for reasons of religious belief, cultural values and animal welfare to use animals to provide organs and tissues for transplantation into human beings?
- Which animals could be used - primates or non-primates?
- Is it acceptable to save the life of an individual whilst putting at risk health care professionals, relatives and the general population?
- Is it acceptable to restrict the individual freedom of xenograft recipients to protect public health?
- Is it acceptable to neglect alternative approaches to solving the donor organ shortage and to invest limited research resources into a technology, the success of which is highly insecure?

EU Member States vary considerably in the extent to which there is public awareness and discussion of XTP. While some countries have already set up expert commissions to investigate the problems of XTP and have started to issue related guidelines - e.g. for the UK, for the Netherlands and for Germany - many other countries have yet to address XTP. Here, the applicability of SD to live settings, where ethical questions are implicit and inseparable from the technical problems being considered, is vividly illustrated. Yet, as we saw in the discussion between Jos Kessels and Dieter Krohn, and in the business oriented work undertaken by Dutch facilitators, the aim of making SD relevant to professional contexts seems to introduce a problematic dimension of its own. There appears to be an unresolved question as to how SD can retain its inherent philosophical, maieutic and ethical qualities, when applied to real life situations.

Michael Strain*
November 2010

*I should like to record my thanks to Richard Norman, John Halliday, Alison Taysum, Rene Saran, Jos Kessels, Dieter Krohn, and Pat Shipley for their help and support in preparing this report. Published papers, and conference material prepared by Beate Littig, were also used. Errors and omissions are the author’s responsibility.