Socratic dialogue

The Socratic dialogue is an attempt to come to a common answer through systematic deliberation about a fundamental question. It is not about merely theoretical questions. Rather it is about questions which derive from concrete experiences, accessible to all participants. The conversation in fact is a systematic reflection upon experiences. It derives its name from Socrates, Plato's teacher. He tried to bring people to a deeper understanding by asking questions, by inquiring about examples and analysing experiences. His idea behind this was that one does not gain understanding by getting it 'dished up', but only by thinking for oneself.

In the early twentieth century, the German philosopher, pedagogue and politician Leonard Nelson (1882 – 1927) developed the Socratic method theoretically and practically. Crucial to Nelson's approach is the idea of 'regressive abstraction'. This means that, starting from a concrete example, one traces back (regresses) to the presuppositions that lie at the foundation of the example. By inquiring into these presuppositions, which are of course necessary so as to come to the specific judgements in the example, one goes back to the foundations upon which these judgements are based. It is in this way that we develop a general understanding (abstraction).

A Socratic dialogue can last for many hours, even in a small group. First one explores the theme and formulates the fundamental question. Then one collects different examples from the experiences of the participants. Next one selects one example and analyses this one so meticulously that one gains an understanding of the underlying presuppositions. For those who want to take their time the Socratic dialogue provides a unique experience. It is the foundation upon which all the other formats for philosophical conversations have been built.

Approach

1. Formulate the topic of the inquiry in possible initial questions. Select one of these and write it down so that all can see it.

2. Look for examples in your own experience where the initial question plays a role. Each example should be explained briefly and written down in a couple sentences.

3. Select one example. Which is the most interesting? Which may be the most fruitful example for examining the initial question?

4. Let the example be told in sufficient detail so that all participants can take the place of the presenter. Let de participants ask clarifying questions about:
    a. what actually happened;
    b. what the presenter actually did;
    c. what the situation meant to him or her personally;
    d. what the connection is to the initial question.

5. Focus the example on a crucial moment: an act, experience or judgement of the person presenting the example (therefore called the 'presenter'). The description of this crucial moment is the core statement. It has the structure of: "When ….. I did / thought / felt …., because …"

6. Ask about the motives for the act, the explanation of the experience or the reasons for the core statement. 'Why did you do this?' 'How come you felt that way?' 'Why did you think that?' 'Was that the background of your action?' Link the answers to these question back to the initial question and the concepts used in this question. What is their significance for this question?

7. Test the justifications by having the others take the position of the presenter. Would they, given this example, have done, thought, felt the same at that very moment, or not? And why? Everybody formulates his own version of the core statement.

8. Continue the conversation, from these different versions of the core statement. What do they have in common? What disagreement do they reveal?

9. Make sure that a common inquiry takes place. Give feedback when participants only express their own opinions or points of view. Ask them to postpone their judgements and help them to ask questions ('Which question would you like to address to whom?'). Use the flip-chart to clarify the line of the conversation and the connection between the different statements.

10. All participants give an answer plus their arguments to the initial question. Ask them to write it down. Read through all the answers. What is the essence? What is the pivot point of the matter? What underlying values or principles become clear?

11. Recall the dialogue. What did you like? What bothered you? In what sense does it help you in future situations?

Selection of a good initial question

One of the most important features of a Socratic dialogue is the focus on one single question. Mostly, this question emerges from a crucial theme occupying the participants. By way of the steps given here a group can arrive at an argued selection of the initial question. At the same time, the participants gain insight into the criteria for a good initial question.

A. Individually
- Take a theme from your own work which you want to think through with this group;
- List some facts connected to this theme and consider how they should be interpreted and judged;
- Formulate on that basis three questions that can serve as starting point for a Socratic dialogue.

B. In threesomes
- Select per person the best initial question;
- Check that this question meets the criteria (see below).

C. Plenary
- The threesomes alternately present an initial question;
- Each threesome explains how the criteria are met by the question posed;
- From all questions thus generated one is selected to serve as initial question.

Criteria for an initial question

- a general issue
- of a substantial nature
- non-empirical, to be answered through reflection alone
- relevant for the participants
- provokingly formulated
- formulated simply, with a minimum of 'troublesome' concepts
- easily supplied with concrete examples from personal experience.

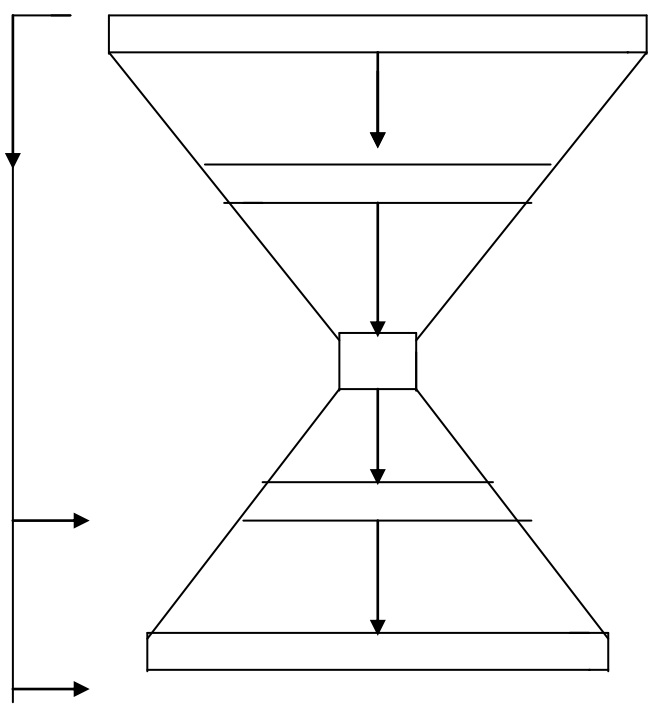
Criteria for a good example

- the example connects well to the initial question;
- the presenter knows the example from personal experience;
- the presenter has a role in the example; he's not just a spectator;
- the example has ended; the presenter is no longer involved in the situation;
- the other participants can relate to the example easily;
- it is not necessary to explain technical or theoretical aspects of the example to be able to understand it;
- the presenter can tell the example fully;
- the simpler, the better.

The hour glass model

The course of a Socratic dialogue can be visualized by a structural diagram of the argumentation. The diagram includes the principal elements of the Socratic dialogue according to Nelson and Heckmann in a single image, namely that of an hour-glass.
The diagram first shows that in this approach a question is not answered directly, but only through the detour of an example and with a link to experience. In this way a broad, starting question is first restricted to a single example and then further to a core statement. Then the presuppositions of this statement are examined, at various levels, which leads to statement of increasing scope and generality. This gives the structure of the dialogue the shape of an hour-glass.

The hour glass Model



Question: the starting point and focus of the enquiry

Example: the personal experience

Core statement: the specific statement that is being examined

Rules: justifications on which the statement is based

Principles: justifications of the rules.

Rules for a Socratic dialogue

Most of the rules given below were formulated by one of the founders of contemporary Socratic dialogue, Gustav Heckmann.

1 Socratic dialogue is thoughtful reflection on a fundamental question based on the experience of the participants, not on what they have heard or read (no appeal to authorities or others).

2 This reflection is 'genuine self-examination'. That is to say, when a participant has doubts about the topic he should express them. But when after self-examination his doubts are resolved, he should not pretend to doubt (no hypothetical talk).

3 Participants should take the trouble to express themselves clearly, but also as briefly as they can. They should save long speeches for some other occasion (no monologues).

4 A participant should not concentrate on his own thoughts alone; he should try to understand those of the others as well. To ensure correct mutual understanding, the facilitator can at any moment ask a participant to repeat in his own words the point raised by another participant (communication check).

5 Thoughts about basic questions are often expressed in general or abstract statements. Whether the speaker really knows what he is saying, that is, whether his statement is more than a string of words, becomes evident when he illustrates his statement by concrete examples which his audience can experience. During the conversation every general or abstract statement is subjected to this test (concreteness).

6 Investigation of a basic question is not completed as long as the dialogue partners still adhere to contradictory views (aim at consensus).

7 To keep the inquiry transparent the available instruments should be used to the full. These primarily involve: systematic notation of statements; clear distinction between main dialogue, strategic dialogue, meta-dialogue (methodical approach).

Ten tips for the facilitator in a Socratic dialogue

1. Be strict about procedure, but do not interfere with the content, even if you disagree with statements from one or more participants. Independent inquiry demands that the participants themselves determine the content.

2. Check that the initial question meets the criteria: is it fundamental, in readily understood wording, answerable through joint thinking, easily supplied with concrete examples? Is the question relevant and motivating to the participants? Does it get at the core of the inquiry?

3. Check that the examples meet the criteria. A good example is one known first hand through personal experience of the presenter. The presenter should be someone who was actively involved by doing something or taking a stand. The simpler the example, the better. Avoid negative examples; they evoke hypothetical thinking.

4. Try for rapid selection of an example. List the preferences, let them be explained briefly, decide. Not everybody needs to like a specific example, as long as you can work with it.

5. Explore the example as well as possible by letting the presenter introduce the setting and context as concretely as possible (the ‘film’). Have the others ask questions, and let the presenter explain. The intention is that the presenter sketches the example in enough detail that the others get a complete picture and can imagine themselves in the place of the presenter. Ask explanatory questions about:
   a. what actually happened (facts);
   b. what the presenter himself did (action);
   c. what the situation meant for him personally (feeling).

6. Let the example focus on one crucial act, one experience or one judgement, the so-called 'crucial moment'. Trace what the presenter did, said and felt at that moment. Link the initial question to that moment. First make that moment as concrete as possible by way of the questions asked under 5 above: what happened, what was done, what feelings were evoked? This description is the basis for joint inquiry in how you must interpret the event, act or experience. Write the crucial moment on the blackboard (or flip-over) in two ways:
   a. the act or experience as such;
   b. the interpretation and justification of it in relation to the initial question.

7. Make sure a joint inquiry starts. Prevent participants from merely formulating standpoints, opinions or judgements. Instead, let them help each other to think things through by suspending judgement and by asking questions ('What is your question, and whom are you addressing?'). Prevent debate; the point is not that that one wins or proves his right. We are after inquiring underlying images and arguments. Avoid giving advise to the presenter. A Socratic dialogue is not about solving the problem. Use the example to engage in joint examination of our underlying views and motives.

8. Often, participants tend to seek definitions for the terms used, before they begin the inquiry. But definitions come at the end, not at the start. Far more effective is to make the terms concrete first, rather than define them.

9. Stick to the main thread, prevent side-tracking. Summarise, repeat and order. Make use of a flip-over or blackboard to stay on course.

10. Ascertain that all participants can offer an argued answer to the initial question in relation to the example. Let everybody in fact formulate that answer. Are the words expressive, do they point to essentials? Are they words that make a difference, that reach you, that engage you? Or do they just evoke derision and indifference?

Report and analysis of a Socratic dialogue

In the course of the dialogue the views entertained in the group on some important question are explicated. The participants submit a large number of ideas, standpoints and arguments. To order and handle these it is advisable to prepare a report, an analytical summation of the arguments. The report can be the starting point for a subsequent round of investigation. It can also help to digest the dialogue or be used as basis for a summary of arguments.
To write an analytical summation of the arguments it is important that each participant first writes his own report. All reports are sent to the other members of the group and to the facilitator. The latter orders the reports into an analytical summation.

Scope of the participant report
The report is a means to improve understanding of one's own firm beliefs and arguments, and those of others. Because it is also sent to the other participants it should be neither too long nor too brief, say, no more than about 800 words. Write in understandable prose, not in 'report jargon'.

Present a brief description of the following elements:
- What happened in the example?
- Which is the presenter's crucial moment (action, thought, sentiment)?
- What is your own core statement?
- Which are the major arguments offered in the dialogue?
- Which general rules or principles are the basis for your own arguments (the big story)?
- What is, therefore, your answer to the initial question?

Scope of the analytical summation
This report presents a review and ordering of all introduced arguments. It serves as starting point for closer examination of the underlying views held by members of the group:
- Write out the initial question;
- State the names of the participants and the facilitator;
- Guided by the participants' reports draw a detailed picture of the example;
- Reduce the participants' arguments to two or more positions (statements) pertinent to the initial question;
- Collect, per statement, the arguments advanced by the various participants.

Guidelines for the strategic dialogue

During an extensive Socratic dialogue strategic decisions are repeatedly taken about the progression of the inquiry. This may for example be a decision to take a closer look at one particular statement, or to inventory the remaining contrasting views on this point in the group. In a group dialogue such choices are often made, usually in passing. Sometimes, however, it is necessary to take a strategic decision more deliberately. In that case the main dialogue is temporarily halted. A time-out is introduced.

1. A participant proposes that the main dialogue be halted, so that strategy can be discussed.
2. The proposal is motivated briefly, by stating at what point in the inquiry and why a decision is needed about how the main dialogue should be continued.
3. When all participants understand the motivation the strategic dialogue can commence.
4. The facilitator leads this part of the proceedings as well.
5. The group lists the alternatives for continuation of the inquiry; these alternatives may be written down.
6. The group examines the arguments for each of these alternatives, without getting into their substance (since this would amount to continuing the main dialogue).
7. The group selects a continuation of the inquiry acceptable to all participants.
8. The approach thus selected is written out; the strategic dialogue is over; the group resumes the main dialogue.

Guidelines for the meta-dialogue

A long Socratic dialogue taxes participants' patience. A meta-dialogue provides opportunity to talk about how the inquiry and the mutual interaction is experienced. The participants learn how the others experience the dialogue. Also, they can think about how to continue the dialogue adequately.

1. We recommend that one or more time-outs for a meta-dialogue are stipulated in advance.

2. In addition, a meta-dialogue is started whenever a participant or the facilitator sees an immediate reason for it. This need arises when negative feelings hinder him in constructive participation in the main dialogue.
3. The main dialogue is halted; the facilitator indicates explicitly the objective and method of the meta-dialogue and may cede the chair to a (trained) participant.
4. The group members together examine the conversation climate. Have the dialogue rules been observed adequately during the main dialogue?
5. All negative feelings that get in the way of the main dialogue can be expressed and considered. Let all participants speak their minds.
6. When participants talk with each other about mutual irritations it is advisable not to speak in general terms. Refer to the concrete behaviour that occurred and the effect it had.
7. Feelings of well-being, too, can be expressed and their causes examined.
8. Investigate possible links between the interactions discussed and the substantial inquiry in the main dialogue.
9. Provide opportunity for questions about the method and structure of the inquiry so far.
10. Decide jointly what additional rules are needed to ensure effective continuation of the main dialogue.