

# A DIALOGUE ON THE SOCRATIC DIALOGUE

*By Fernando Leal and Rene Saran*

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## Introduction

Volume 1 of these Occasional Papers contains a translation of Leonard Nelson's essay on the Socratic Method. As was explained there, the essay was based on a lecture given by Nelson at the Pedagogical Society in Göttingen, Germany, in the early 1920s, nearly 80 years ago. Perhaps that explains why the Editor received several comments from readers who had found Volume 1 of great interest that they had problems with Nelson's essay. This welcome feedback led the Editor to ask the authors of this piece to write about the Socratic Dialogue in a more accessible way. She asked us because we enjoy cooperating and have between us a range of perspectives on the Socratic Dialogue. Rene has experienced it in Germany, Britain and Holland ever since she can remember (and she's retired now); she became a Socratic facilitator in 1996. Fernando came to know the Socratic Dialogue when a student in Germany in the 1980s. Having studied Leonard Nelson's philosophical works, he met the circle of people in Germany who were active in the Philosophical Political Academy and has been attending several of the Socratic Dialogue courses.

We chose the dialogue form for this article in an attempt to make our exposition of the Socratic Dialogue more lively and accessible, especially to newcomers. Writing a dialogue is a very difficult endeavour because Plato's dialogues have been and are a model which no-one has managed to match. Plato was one of the greatest poets in Western literature. Our readers should be indulgent towards us and bear in mind that we ourselves are fully aware that we cannot compete with Plato.

In our little dialogue we set out to introduce a new first-time participant, Anna, to what participation in the Socratic Dialogue has to offer. Anna has just arrived at a residential centre where several groups are going to engage in Socratic Dialogue for five days; she is apprehensive, doubtful about her own capacity, and during the first evening gets into conversation with Fernando and Rene. She tells them that a friend told her about the Socratic Dialogue, that he was enthusiastic about it and suggested to her she would find it interesting and enjoy participating because he felt she was tired of the emptiness of everyday conversation. Not that Anna is a blue stocking, lacking humour, or always

serious. She enjoys the banter of small talk with her friends and even engages mischievously in occasional gossip. Both as a student and subsequently in her professional life she experienced searching and serious conversations and discussions but those were solely within specific and limited settings.

Neither Fernando nor Rene have any intention of pontificating - each will describe what the Socratic Dialogue means to them. Anna quickly recognises that in a sense everyone develops their own approach to the Socratic Dialogue - so it doesn't mean just one thing.<sup>4</sup>

## The Dialogue

*Anna:* Hi folks, I am Anna. Some friends of mine told me you two know so much about the Socratic Dialogue. I have so many questions - may I join you?

*Fernando:* Please do.

*Rene:* Fire ahead.

*Anna:* First of all, what makes the Socratic Dialogue distinctive?

*Fernando:* Like everything humans have invented, the Socratic Dialogue develops and changes. You Anna know business, so you'll understand that business today is different from what it used to be. Even at the same point in time, business in different cultures (for example Japanese compared with European) has different characteristics.

*Rene:* But I think we must identify something central and abiding in Socratic Dialogue which characterises it. A Socratic Dialogue can happen at any time between two or more people when they seek to answer a question.

*Anna:* But here on this course we have the choice between a few questions. What do you mean, then, it could be any question?

*Rene:* Not any type of question. For example, not one about empirical knowledge; it has to be a philosophical/ethical question, or a mathematical one or one about the theory of knowledge. This is

the case because it has to be answerable by our own effort of reflection and thinking.

*Fernando:* As far as I am concerned any question can be approached with this method.

*Anna:* So the two of you disagree over that point. I am really confused now. How on earth were the questions chosen for this course?

*Rene:* Facilitators tend to discuss the suitability of questions with each other. Both in Germany and in Holland facilitators get together to brain storm the suitability of questions as well as other aspects of the Socratic method. To give you a personal example, when I facilitated my first Socratic Dialogue, I wanted to be sure to take a question on which I felt the necessary confidence, because being a facilitator is no easy task. As various aspects of education had interested me for a long time, the whole topic of relations between students and teachers and the question of discipline concerned me. So I chose a question about that which asked: *Do teachers have the right and/or the duty to discipline their students?*

*Anna:* How did that dialogue develop? It sounds interesting.

*Fernando:* Yes, it was fascinating.

*Anna:* How do you know, were you there or has Rene told you about it?

*Fernando:* I was a participant in that group.

*Anna:* So how was it then?

*Rene:* I remember the example well. We always start from the concrete — choosing an example of real life experience as told by one of the participants. Choosing the best example can be difficult for the group. Once selected, participants ask all sorts of questions and the details of the example are fleshed out.

*Anna:* That sounds almost like gossip!

*Fernando:* Perhaps there's an element of that! But in the Socratic Dialogue the example and its details are a kind of platform for reaching more general judgments about different ethical aspects of our lives.

*Anna:* I see the point. But couldn't this kind of probing become embarrassing?

*Rene:* You're perfectly right. All kinds of difficulties can arise. This is why facilitators have developed criteria for selecting the example.

*Anna:* For instance?

*Fernando:* First of all, the person volunteering the example has to be willing to present it with frankness and to answer all questions.

*Anna [puzzled]:* All questions? I don't think I could do that!

*Rene:* Well, reasonable and relevant questions only!

*Fernando:* Of course. There is a second important aspect: the example should be about an experience that is concluded and 'filed away'.

*Anna:* Ah yes, an experience that doesn't hurt any more.

*Fernando:* Yes, but it has to have some enduring significance.

*Rene:* I agree, without that the example wouldn't provide Fernando's platform.

*Anna:* I'd like now to get back to that example about discipline. Can you share it with me?

*Rene:* In this case I can, but sometimes an example best remains confidential to the group. People are sensitive and feel that it is a privilege to hear about someone's particular experience. The trust developed in the group prevents them talking about it with others outside the group.

*Anna:* So what, then, was the example?

*Rene:* It was given by a secondary school teacher about an adolescent and very bright boy who always wanted to be in the limelight. This prevented other students from participating on an equal footing and the teacher felt obliged to discipline the bright student in order to give the others their chance. So that raised the issue of rights and duties.

*Fernando:* Immediately another participant interjected that it was much too early to talk about rights and duties. According to him, we first had to talk about discipline, in particular to establish that the example was actually a case of disciplining.

*Anna:* I seem again confused! Aren't you moving in circles?

*Fernando:* It's funny you should say that, that's exactly what the old Athenians objected to Socrates: that he was all the time going round in circles, thoroughly confusing everyone.

*Anna:* What, then, did Socrates answer?

*Fernando:* He agreed with the description; but added that he was himself confused.

*Anna:* I'm beginning to doubt whether I will like the Socratic Dialogue.

*Rene:* This Socratic confusion is precisely what often causes impatience and frustration among participants. They want answers. Often pressure is exerted on the facilitator to allow quicker progress towards answering the question.

*Fernando:* Ah yes, progress! We all have become so used to demand progress from everyone and on all occasions. [Somewhat mischievously:] But you know, Anna, in the Socratic Dialogue what we do is rather more a re-gress than a pro-gress.

*Anna:* You mean going back ward rather than forward?

*Rene:* Oho, I'd like that explained!

*Fernando:* Well, take the example we were just talking about. The original starting question was whether a teacher has the right or the duty to discipline students. That questions sounds quite straightforward. But the moment one starts really thinking hard about it, the very concept of disciplining, which we were presupposing in the very formulation of the question, becomes unclear.

*Rene:* So we have to focus on *that* concept first, before we can tackle rights or duties.

*Fernando:* Exactly.

*Anna:* I see. And this may look to newcomers like moving in circles.

*Fernando:* Only natural. But in fact it would be more helpful to think of it in terms of retracing our steps, questioning what we were taking for granted, trying to clarify our own presuppositions. And this stepping back can and will happen again and again in a Socratic Dialogue, so no wonder people get impatient sometimes.

*Rene:* My experience as facilitator is that when such impatience has unnerved me and I have allowed the group to try to leap forward, it has been fatal to the process.

*Anna:* You mean, someone actually passed out?

*Fernando* [laughing]: No, not quite that.

*Rene:* But it does happen that a participant is so exasperated that he demands an immediate Meta-Dialogue.

*Anna:* What on earth is that?

*Fernando:* It's a bit like in a soccer game when a player or a coach asks for time off to discuss an incident (for example, when someone has been hurt). The game or the dialogue is interrupted to talk about it and how it might move on. A Meta-Dialogue is just a dialogue about the dialogue.

*Anna:* How does it work? What actually happens?

*Fernando:* The type of questions discussed in the Meta-Dialogue are different from those in the main dialogue. They include the reasons, including the emotions, which caused the impatience and frustration.

*Anna:* So if one participant is upset by the behaviour of another, this would be a reason for the Meta-Dialogue?

*Rene:* Yes, it is common practice to have a Meta-Dialogue on the agenda everyday when those sorts of frustrations can be aired, and also questions asked about the Socratic Method and any difficulties that have arisen. As these sometimes arise from the way the facilitator conducted the group, it has been found helpful for the facilitator to vacate the chair and for the group to agree to a participant taking over this role.

*Anna:* Do you mean the facilitator is ousted? It sounds like a coup.

*Fernando* [laughs]: No, no, no - it's only for the duration of the dialogue.

*Anna:* So during the Meta-Dialogue the facilitator would be able to express her own frustrations freely and explain her behaviour to the group.

*Rene:* Yes, I suppose that could happen, but it is much more likely that group members express their frustrations with each other, with the facilitator or with the slowness of the dialogue. I remember one dialogue in which someone expressed anger at the painfully slow pace, and got some support. Like you, it was his first Socratic Dialogue. He had come with fervent interest in the question and wanted to reach an answer before he left.

*Anna:* I think I might be just like him. I am used to looking for results. In the business meetings I attend time is money.

*Fernando:* I quite see what you mean and sympathise with it. But reaching the answer is not the main purpose of a Socratic Dialogue.

*Anna:* So what, then, is the purpose?

*Rene:* In my view it is to assist people to think more clearly in cooperation with others, to articulate their beliefs together with the reasons for them, about major issues in order to reach insights and understanding at a deeper level.

*Fernando:* That's a mouthful! Let's begin with the first part. Thinking in cooperation with others has very different properties from thinking on one's own.

*Anna:* That sounds almost banal. Why do you think families, business people, professionals and even children are constantly talking among themselves?

*Rene:* Remember I said talking about major issues. You'd surely agree that not all family councils, business meetings and professional conclaves do that, not to mention child's talk.

*Anna:* OK, not all — but do you imply that when those conversations are about important questions, then it's a Socratic Dialogue?

*Fernando:* Yes, I think if such conversations are conducted in the spirit of real cooperative thinking then indeed they have something Socratic about them.

*Anna:* I see what you mean. I've experienced within families or among colleagues in the organisations familiar to me people often shut each other up, individuals fall silent and stop contributing, whilst others dominate the proceedings and get their own way.

*Rene:* Have you read the Socratic Dialogue rules which were sent to you before you came?

*Anna:* Yes I did, but I am now beginning to see more clearly their significance.

*Fernando:* One useful way to think about the rules is to realise that they work both ways. Everyone has the right to be heard which also means all have the duty to listen. On the other hand everyone also has to say what they think in order for the others to listen and understand what is meant.

*Rene:* From this follows that no-one should interrupt when someone else is speaking, nor should people hold forth in endless monologues or at the other extreme fall silent.

*Anna:* Does the facilitator have to ensure that all these pitfalls are avoided? That's a tough task!

*Fernando:* It is tough, but we shouldn't put the facilitator into an isolated position. In fact, we must recognise a group responsibility here. After all, it is the group which develops the content of the dialogue.

*Anna:* Do you mean, the facilitator says nothing, totally unlike many teachers I know?

*Rene:* That's right, you'll see in the rules that the facilitator is not to intervene in the content. This, too, can be difficult because there's always the temptation to steer the group in a particular direction.

*Fernando:* After all, the facilitator will have thought about the question beforehand.

*Anna:* So she's got two tasks: to control herself and to control the group.

*Rene:* When it gets hard to control a group as facilitator, I often seek the group's help. For example, if things get chaotic due to constant interruptions the group might agree that no-one speaks without first signalling and being given the word. Another problem arises when the group loses its way. In such a case the facilitator needs the help of the group to re-establish what we're talking about. The facilitator cannot alone ensure the necessary calm and patience.

*Anna:* Calm and patience? Isn't that going to take all the fun out of it?

*Fernando:* To be funny and patient are not incompatible; in fact, Socrates was both. The best dialogues I've attended were abundant in humorous and spontaneous moments.

*Rene:* Fernando, earlier you said there is something quite special about thinking together, how would you relate that to the rules?

*Fernando:* Let's, for example, take persons who are in the habit of dominating every conversation. They can do that because they're self-centred, in love with their own voices, not listening to what others have to say. Suppose such persons find themselves in a Socratic Dialogue. In so far as the facilitator and the group succeed in upholding the Socratic Dialogue rules, such behaviour would be restrained.

*Anna:* Do you really expect such people to change their everyday habits?

*Fernando:* That might happen in the long-term if such people expose themselves to the Socratic Dialogue on several occasions. But I was thinking of something more immediate. Dominant people tend to have one-track minds - they tend to think and speak along the same lines and even to repeat the same thought. If the rules are kept this will be prevented during the Socratic Dialogue - dominant people for once are forced to change their thinking pattern.

*Rene:* Why is that so important unless there's a more long-term effect?

*Anna:* Fernando is surely only expanding your own statement of the purpose of the Socratic Dialogue: to assist people to think more clearly in cooperation with others.

*Rene:* Yes, but I added that people doing this were likely to reach insights and understanding at a deeper level.

*Fernando:* And what if they don't? Would that diminish the significance of the Socratic Dialogue?

*Rene:* Yes, I believe that a dialogue which does not make people develop insights and deeper understanding is of lesser value.

*Anna and Fernando* [at the same time]: Why?

*Rene:* Because I made the assumption if they attained such insights it would affect the way they conduct their lives.

*Fernando:* As my old friend, the Editor, says: 'what is the evidence for your assumption?'

*Rene:* OK, it's a hunch, to get the evidence would need research.

*Anna:* Oh dear, does that mean some social scientist has to observe us? That would make me take the next train home!

*Fernando:* Don't worry, we're not there yet! I agree with Rene that the ultimate purpose of the Socratic Dialogue is to change the way people live. That was already Socrates' avowed purpose. But whether this can be achieved through insight and understanding, and indeed whether insight and understanding always result from Socratic cooperative thinking, are for me open questions. Hm, come to think of it, we're back at research!

*Rene:* Meanwhile however most participants do enjoy the experience. More seriously, on this matter it might not be too difficult to do some research by writing both to those who have acquired the habit and those who seem to prefer to stay away from the Socratic Dialogue.

*Anna:* I certainly can think of some dominant personalities who, if restrained, would never come back.

*Fernando:* By the way, dominant people are only one type who would be changed if they keep to the rules. Think for instance of the silent type.

*Rene:* Yes, some people just love listening to others but never offer to share their own thoughts.

*Anna:* I've got it now: the two way rule — some need restraining, others need coaxing!

*Rene:* As facilitator one has to be tactful and sensitive about the silent ones. It's useless to pounce on such people.

*Fernando:* In fact, this is again a group task rather than the facilitator's alone. In good groups such people are able to open up because the group makes them feel comfortable.

*Anna:* In my experience some people remain silent because they fear they'll be interrupted.

*Fernando:* Yes, people who love constantly to interrupt belong to a third type because they're not necessarily dominant ...

*Rene:* ... And certainly not silent!

*Fernando:* There you go, you're interrupting me — I hadn't finished. I was going to add that interrupters often do this out of liveliness, spontaneity, and humour. They can be quite disarming and charming.

*Rene:* We don't want to lose those enchanting qualities, so it's a question of applying the rules flexibly.

*Fernando:* Are we now clear that the way people think is changed at least for the duration of the Socratic Dialogue and provided the rules are upheld?

*Anna:* Yes, in theory at least, but I'm waiting to try it — tomorrow morning.

*Rene:* That's the spirit!

*Fernando:* You'll find that in the Socratic Dialogue your thinking becomes very confused at first but if you learn to slow down and listen carefully to everything that is said you'll reach a new sense of structure and order.

*Anna:* It is good that you say this because there's something that's been troubling me all along. With a difficult question and listening to everyone's contributions I'll need to concentrate really hard. What if I lose the thread of the argument?

*Rene:* That's where the board or flip chart helps. The facilitator insists that every important question or statement is written up.

*Fernando:* Yes, and group members can and should ask for points to be written up if the facilitator fails to do so.

*Rene:* Indeed, I've known this aspect of keeping an overview of the group's work critically discussed during the Meta-Dialogue. It's a very important part of the Socratic Method.

*Fernando:* Some people in addition like to keep their own personal notes but others find it impossible because it interferes with their concentration. In any case, the importance of the flip chart record lies in exhibiting the group's shared thinking.

*Rene:* Whilst a point is being written up the group needs to concentrate on ensuring that the thought being recorded is expressed with as much precision as possible.

*Fernando:* The effort of writing up group thoughts is the clearest manifestation of cooperative thinking.

*Anna:* Does this mean you only write up things which everyone agrees with?

*Rene:* Yes, if and when all-round agreement is reached, then a consensus sentence is formulated. But important disagreements are also recorded against people's names.

*Anna:* So part of the Socratic Dialogue is actually a debate?

*Rene:* No, most definitely not! I recently had the very unexpected experience that some participants treated the dialogue as a debate, making their points to win.

*Fernando:* Did they actually say so?

*Rene:* Yes, one person said so quite explicitly. He even used the expression 'scoring points' during the Meta-Dialogue.

*Fernando:* 'Scoring points' would of course mean in this context producing good arguments, or at least arguments that seem to be good because they are well formulated by a very articulate person.

*Anna:* Ah yes, I know the sort of people. It is a different sort of domination I have experienced in some business meetings. These people don't appear to dominate in the way we were talking before.

*Fernando:* Yes, they are sometimes even very quiet people; they speak little but they are always deadly.

*Anna:* And one feels so powerless. Even if one feels one is in the right, they win at this game.

*Rene:* This should not happen in a Socratic Dialogue. Every participant has the right to self-defence against the arrows of words.

*Anna:* What does the facilitator do to protect the innocent?

*Fernando:* I think the flip chart can be used in such situations. Am I right, Rene?

*Rene:* Yes, the facilitator must prevent any wordsmith to steam roller the group into a false consensus. If only one person still harbours doubts, that's enough. The flip chart will record the powerful statement or overwhelming argument together with the fact of disagreement which the person cannot articulate with reasons at that moment.

*Fernando:* Again a bit like time off in soccer!

*Anna:* I think I'm starting to like it. But Rene, what happened when that participant said he was 'scoring points'?

*Rene* [very emphatically]: Oh, I had to disabuse him. In fact, it was during that very searching Meta-Dialogue that I as the facilitator suddenly recognised what had been going on.

*Anna:* What then had been going on?

*Rene:* Although it was a good and cooperative group, somehow the work lacked the clarity and cohesiveness which I normally expect and to some extent had achieved in the past. I experienced the facilitator's despair.

*Fernando:* Would you say they'd actually been listening to each other and thinking together?

*Rene:* For two and a half days I wondered because I was unable to identify what the problem was. I even shared my discomfort and asked for the help of the group. The Meta-Dialogue worked as a huge eye-opener for me.

*Anna:* If that happened to you as an experienced practitioner, does that mean that the rules in themselves don't necessarily ensure that the group works in the right spirit?

*Fernando:* One way to look at it is that people stick to the rules of the Socratic game in a formal sense because they want to reach an outcome, an answer to the question. What they perhaps fail to recognise is that the process of the dialogue is more important than reaching an answer.

*Rene:* Well, I'm not so sure whether one is more important than the other, but I agree that the process is basic. In fact, most dialogues I've experienced ran out of time before answering the starting question, without people feeling disappointed.

*Fernando:* I often think of the Socratic Dialogue as akin to mountain climbing. The fun, the excitement and the point lie wholly in the actual climbing, not in reaching the peak.

*Rene:* Yes, but you would surely agree that the view on reaching the top — often magnificent and overwhelming — is worth having.

*Anna [dreamy]:* What a beautiful image ... Dear me [looking at her watch] have you realised that's already 11.30! If we're to be fresh tomorrow we better turn in.

## Appendix 1

### Aims, Procedures and Rules for Socratic Dialogue

#### *Basic Aims*

Summarised they are:

- a) To answer the question by seeking out the truth of the matter and to reach consensus — ie reaching a result or **outcome**;

- b) To experience the cooperative process of seeking the answer and to understand each other — ie engaging in the **process**;
- c) To deepen individual **insights and understanding** particularly of ethical and value issues as the basis for social action — ie to enhance self-confidence in our ability to reason and to deal rationally with our emotions, and to **conduct our lives** accordingly.

Participants may not reach definitive **outcomes** in the form of agreed answers. This need not lead to disappointment because a positive experience of participation in cooperative thinking is of major importance and can be very rewarding as a **learning process**, and have **profound meaning for one's life**.

In order to fulfil these aims, it is essential that all participants attend throughout from the beginning of the dialogue to its end.

#### *Procedures*

The Socratic Dialogue normally uses the following procedures:

1. A well formulated, general question, or a statement, is set by the facilitator before the discourse commences.
2. The first step is to collect examples experienced by participants in which the given topic plays a key role.
3. One example is chosen by the group, which will usually be the basis of the analysis and argumentation throughout the dialogue.
4. Crucial statements made by the participants are written down on a flip chart or board, so that all can have an overview of the discourse.

#### *Rules for participants*

There are eight basic rules for participants in the Socratic Dialogue:

1. Each participant's contribution is based upon what s/he has experienced, not upon what s/he has read or heard.
2. The thinking and questioning is honest. This means that only genuine doubts about what has been said should be expressed.

3. It is the responsibility of all participants to express their thoughts as clearly and concisely as possible, so that everyone is able to build on the ideas contributed by others earlier in the dialogue.
  4. This means careful listening by everyone to all contributions. It also means active participation so that everyone's ideas are woven into the process of cooperative thinking.
  5. Participants should not concentrate exclusively on their own thoughts, they should make every effort to understand those of other participants and if necessary seek clarification.
  6. Anyone who has lost sight of the question or of the thread of the discussion should seek the help of others to clarify where the group stands.
  7. Abstract statements should be grounded in concrete experience in order to illuminate such statements. This is why a real-life example is needed and constant reference back to this is made during the dialogue.
  8. Inquiry into relevant questions continues as long as participants either hold conflicting views or have not yet reached clarity.
2. Examples should not be very complicated ones; simple ones are often the best. Where a sequence of events has been presented, it would be best for the group to concentrate on one event.
  3. The example has to be relevant for the topic of the dialogue and of interest to the other participants. Furthermore, all participants must be able to put themselves into the shoes of the person giving the example.
  4. The example should deal with an experience that has already come to an end. If the participant is still immersed in the experience it is not suitable. For example, if decisions are still to be taken, there is a risk that group members might be judgmental or spin hypothetical thoughts.
  5. The participant giving the example has to be willing to present it fully and provide all the relevant factual information so that the other participants are able to understand the example and its relevance to the central question.

## Appendix 2

### *Rules for facilitators*

1. The main task of the facilitator is to assist the joint process of clarification so that any achieved consensus is genuine. Consensus is only achieved when contradictory points of view have been resolved and all arguments and counter-arguments have been fully considered; the facilitator has to ensure this happens.
2. The facilitator should not 'steer' the discussion in one particular direction nor take a position in matters of content.
3. The facilitator should ensure that the rules of the dialogue are upheld, for instance watch that particular participants do not dominate or constantly interrupt the dialogue, whilst others remain silent.

### *Criteria for suitable examples*

1. The example has been derived from one's own experience; hypothetical or 'generalised' examples ('quite often it happens to me that ...') are not suitable.

### A Brief Survey of the Literature on the Socratic Dialogue

This is an attempt at a bibliographic essay on the Socratic Dialogue, which does not pretend to be exhaustive in any way. The main purpose of it is to show that there is a budding literature on the actual practice of this form of dialogue in several countries. After referring to the original meaning of 'Socratic Dialogue' as a literary form, we proceed to the new meaning—not a literary form but an actual practice, which started some eighty years ago in Germany and has been cultivated ever since. We start with the founder of that practice, Leonard Nelson, and then survey the further developments of the method in the after-war period, as they are described in papers and books. The literature is not homogeneous, either in style or in the views expressed. Most of it is plainly written and unpedantic; and although some parts of it is more scholarly than others, there is a tendency not to go too far astray from actual experience and practice. As everything alive, not all people writing on the Socratic Dialogue agree with each other on how best to use it or indeed on what it is. But such a state of affairs is more an asset than a liability if all Socratics are open-minded and ready to learn. We

shall be glad if our modest attempt furthers that purpose.

The literary form of the Socratic Dialogue emerged in Athens around the time of Socrates' death. We know the names of a good dozen of authors who wrote Socratic Dialogues, but apart from a handful of fragments we only possess those written by Xenophon and Plato. They both wrote a version of the speech given by Socrates (*Apology*) to defend himself against a charge of impiety, which include brief dialogues between him and his accusers. They also both wrote an account of a dinner (*Symposium*) in which Socrates merrily engages in conversation with his friends. Besides, Xenophon wrote quite a long Socratic dialogue on the subject of estate management (*Oeconomicus*) and a collection of very brief dialogues on several moral issues (*Memorabilia*). As for Plato, he is the undisputed master of the genre, having written no less than 19 relatively short Socratic dialogues (*Euthyphro*, *Crito*, *Protagoras*, *Hippias Minor*, *Gorgias*, *Charmides*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Meno*, *Lysis*, *Euthydemus*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Hippias Maior*, *Theatetus*, *Cratylus*, *Parmenides*, *Philebus*) and a very long one on the subject of politics (the *Republic*). The term 'Socratic Dialogue' refers in this context exclusively to a literary form in which the main character is called 'Socrates', having a more or less faithful relationship to the historical Socrates. Both Plato and Xenophon wrote other dialogues, in which Socrates is not the main participant, although they are otherwise not essentially different from those already mentioned.

Our own little dialogue uses the term 'Socratic Dialogue' with a different meaning. It refers not to fictional pieces in which someone called 'Socrates' appears, but rather to real conversations among several people according to certain aims, rules, and procedures, of which we present our version in Appendix 1. This new meaning was certainly inspired by some of Plato's Socratic dialogues, yet this does not mean that the fictional conversations contained in them follow those rules. In any case, a form of Socratic Dialogue which is recognizably related to the rules set forth in Appendix 1 was practised by the German philosopher Leonard Nelson (1882-1927), first in some of his seminars at Göttingen University shortly after World War I, and then within his political groups until his death in 1927. An account of the method, and the first source of the new meaning of the term 'Socratic Dialogue' is a paper he gave at the Göttingen Pedagogical Society in 1922, subsequently published in 1929. That paper, entitled 'The Socratic Method' was translated into English in 1949, and is now available in the *Occasional*

*Working Papers in Ethics and the Critical Philosophy*, volume 1, April 1998, pp. 42-62.

The tradition started by Leonard Nelson was cultivated by his friends, disciples, comrades, and followers after his death up to the present. One of them, Gustav Heckmann (1898-1996), was perhaps its most dedicated practitioner and the single most powerful factor in its further development and its current widespread practice in Germany, the Netherlands and Britain. In particular, he is responsible for two important innovations in Nelson's method, viz. the use of the blackboard or the flip chart to fix in writing certain statements, thus making them available to the whole group as shared property, and the device of a 'Meta-Dialogue', introduced in order to allow the group to discuss problems, both intellectual and emotional, which arise from the conduct of the dialogue. Heckmann's ideas and experiences with the Socratic Dialogue are described in his book, *Das sokratische Gespräch: Erfahrungen in philosophischen Hochschulseminaren* (Hannover, Hermann Schroedel Verlag, 1981; reprint in Frankfurt am Main, dipa-Verlag, 1993), which is unfortunately not available in English. A short update of the book, centred on the 'Meta-Dialogue' is contained in the paper 'Über sokratisches Gespräch und sokratische Arbeitswochen', by Gustav Heckmann and Dieter Krohn (*Zeitschrift für Didaktik der Philosophie*, fascicle 1, 1988, pp. 38-43).

Several papers and books on the Socratic Dialogue have appeared in German after Heckmann's book. The *Festschrift* for Gustav Heckmann's 85<sup>th</sup> birthday (*Vernunft, Ethik, Politik*, edited by Detlef Horster and Dieter Krohn, Hannover, SOAK Verlag, 1983) contains papers by Hans Lehmann, Peter Kern and Hans-Georg Wittig, Fritz Eberhard, Wolfgang Klafki, Klaus-Rüdiger Wöhrmann, Detlef Horster, Otto-Friedrich von Hindenburg, Gisela Raupach-Strey, and Werner Kroebel. A paper by Detlef Horster ('Das sokratische Gespräch in der Erwachsenenbildung'), expounding some quite controversial ideas about the Socratic Dialogue, was published in separate form as vol. 11 of the series *Theorie und Praxis* at Hannover University in 1986. (See also Horster's later work, *Das Sokratische Gespräch in Theorie und Praxis*, Opladen, 1994.) A symposium on the Socratic Dialogue took place in 1988, and a book containing eight of the papers presented there was published (*Das sokratische Gespräch: ein Symposium*, edited by Dieter Krohn, Detlef Horster and Jürgen Heinen-Tenrich, Hamburg, Junius Verlag, 1989.) In 1989 an informal in-house publication, the 'Rundbrief der Sokratiker', was launched to inform people about new ideas, developments, and topics of actual

Socratic Dialogues. This was replaced in 1994 by a series called *Sokratisches Philosophieren*, which is published by dipa-Verlag in Frankfurt am Main on a yearly basis and also contains formal papers on more general philosophical topics. Of special interest are volumes III (*Diskurstheorie und Sokratisches Gespräch*, 1996) and volume IV (*Neuere Aspekte des Sokratischen Gesprächs*, 1997.) Some of the papers mentioned so far advance interesting, although sometimes controversial proposals for the development of the Socratic Dialogue, suggest its application to new problems or in new settings, and attempt a comparison of this method with other forms of dialogical communication discussed in the philosophical, pedagogical and psychological literature. In similar fashion, Rainer Loska's important monograph, *Lehren ohne Belehrung: Leonard Nelsons neosokratische Methode der Gesprächsführung* (Bad Heilbrunn, Verlag Julius Klinkhardt, 1995), is an extremely well-researched, meticulous and thoughtful study of the Socratic Dialogue as compared with other related methods for the teaching of mathematics at school level. Finally, Ute Siebert's *Das sokratische Gespräch: Darstellung seiner Geschichte und Entwicklung*, published in 1996, is a short history of the German tradition of the Socratic Dialogue, which purports to be the first instalment of a comparative study between the Socratic Dialogue and some African forms of communication.

As we said in the third paragraph, Nelson used the Socratic Dialogue first in an educational setting but very soon extended its application to the more clearly practical purposes of his own political organisations. In fact, he later changed the educational setting itself - from philosophical seminars at university level to his own special rural school, established both for the education of children and the training of future political leaders. Nelson's followers continued these traditions both before and during World War II. A particularly striking example of the use of the Socratic method within organised political activity refers to the question 'What is at stake in our fight against fascism? What are we defending here?', as facilitated by Nelson's disciple, Grete Hermann (1901-1984), with members of the German resistance movement (see Susanne Miller, 'Kritische Philosophie als Herausforderung zum Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus', in *Ethik des Widerstandes: der Kampf des Internationalen Sozialistischen Kampfbundes gegen den Nationalsozialismus*, edited by Sabine Lemke-Müller, Bonn, Verlag Dietz Nachfolger, 1996, p. 42). Nelson's development of a more practice-oriented Socratic Dialogue reaches back to the historical Socrates himself, who emphasized that his

purpose was not just to examine people's beliefs but their lives. (See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a way of life*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1995.) Socrates was not interested in the question 'How ought we to live?' from a purely theoretical perspective; he wanted people to live better lives, more ethical lives; he was interested in action according to ethical values. And so was Nelson.

After World War II, the dissolution of Nelson's political organisation in Germany was causal in the restriction of the use of the Socratic Dialogue first to higher education and then to a kind of voluntary adult education, mostly in the form of residential courses for several days. The *spiritus rector* behind this work was Gustav Heckmann. However, some interesting changes have been occurring, especially in this decade, which mimic Nelson's own original development. On the one hand, a group of German educators, either trained by Heckmann himself or familiar with his work, have been experimenting with the Socratic Dialogue both within more formal educational settings and in secondary schools. On the other hand, a Dutch philosopher, Jos Kessels, originally trained in Germany within Heckmann's group of collaborators, has been pioneering the use of the Socratic Dialogue in different kinds of organisations—public and private, profit and nonprofit, product-oriented and service-oriented—in the Netherlands. This controversial new development is described in his recent book, *Socrates op de markt: Filosofie in bedrijf* (Amsterdam, Boom, 1997), which refers the reader to some earlier papers (see also Dries Boele, 'The "Benefits" of a Socratic Dialogue, Or: Which Results Can We Promise?', in *Inquiry: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines*, vol. XVII, no. 3, Spring 1997, pp. 48-70). Both the German and the Dutch extensions (documented in vol. IV of the series *Sokratisches Philosophieren*), constitute a beautiful example of the vitality of Nelson's tradition of Socratic Dialogue.

Finally, it can be argued that there is as yet no clear discussion of the place of the Socratic Dialogue within the tradition of Critical Philosophy which leads from Kant to Nelson and his followers. Nelson himself urged again and again that Critical Philosophy needs to be constantly renewed and further developed by each new generation. The two tasks may belong together in such a way that one cannot tackle one whilst ignoring the other. A systematic attempt at clarification of the issues involved in relating the Socratic Dialogue to the critical tradition and updating our approach to that tradition is the main aim of a series of papers by Fernando Leal in the *Occasional Working Papers in Ethics and the Critical Philosophy* (see 'The Future of the Critical Philosophy' and 'What is the Link

between the Critical Philosophy and the Socratic Dialogue' in volume 1, as well as 'The Relation between Value Conflicts and the Socratic Dialogue' in the present volume).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This was at the first international conference, held in Britain, on 'Socratic Dialogue and the Critical Philosophy'. The second international conference took place in the Netherlands in 1998 on 'Socratic Dialogue: The Dutch Experience'. A third one is to take place in the year 2000, in Germany. These conferences are sponsored by the Society for the Furtherance of the Critical Philosophy and the Philosophical Political Academy.

<sup>2</sup> We have included as Appendix 1 our version of a more formal statement of 'Aims, Procedures and Rules for Socratic Dialogue' and as Appendix 2 a bibliographic essay about the relevant literature.

<sup>3</sup> Nelson himself experimented with the dialogue form in a text he wrote during the first world war. In it, four people discuss the threat of proposed war-time legislation to academic freedom, reflecting on the defects of the German school system and debating the taking of action in defence of freedom, without which basic values held dear are endangered (see Leonard Nelson, 'Von der Zukunft der inneren Freiheit: Ein Gespräch', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. VIII, pp. 365-386, Hamburg, Felix Meiner, 1971). We hope our attempt is no worse than Nelson's.

<sup>4</sup> The authors wish to acknowledge the kind and valuable comments made on the first draft of this paper by Silvia Leal and Isabel Leal Chase.

## A DIALOGUE ON THE SOCRATIC DIALOGUE – ACT 2

*Fernando Leal and Rene Saran*

### Prologue

Act 1 of this Dialogue appeared in Volume 2 of the *Occasional Working Papers in Ethics and the Critical Philosophy* (April 2000). The Editor has now invited us to contribute Act 2 according to our own lights. In continuing our dialogue, we identified two possible themes:

1. In writing Act 1, we had noted some disagreements between us which at that time we did not develop fully because the focus of Act 1 was the questions put by the fictional Anna, who represented the concerns of a person new to Socratic Dialogue (SD). Act 2 could then be dedicated to the exploration of the extent to which our disagreements are deep and real or rather merely superficial.
2. By contrast Act 2 might address the new questions Anna might raise following her actual experience of participating in a Socratic group.

The reason why we have opted for the first theme is that the climate within which SD is being developed is one of ‘experimentation’. New developments galore are flowing from different individuals and organisations into a powerful river of ideas and possibilities. We would like in Act 2 to contribute our thoughts to the resulting general debate. For all we know, at a later stage we may be catapulted into Act 3. So keep watching this space.

### Scene 1

Rene comes downstairs and sees Fernando sitting quietly by himself in the coffee lounge.

*Rene:* My dear Fernando, you seem lost in thought. May I interrupt you?

*Fernando:* As a matter of fact, I was thinking about our conversation with Anna last night. I’m sure we both noticed that the two of us disagreed a couple of times.

*Rene:* Yes, I do remember.

*Fernando:* I was wondering how substantial our differences actually are.

*Rene:* Why don’t we find out? Have you got time now?

*Fernando:* Great. Two heads are better than one.

*Rene:* What were our apparent disagreements?

*Fernando:* I seem to remember that you considered the process and outcome of a Socratic Dialogue as of equal importance, whereas I have always thought the process more important than the outcome.

*Rene:* The outcome being?

*Fernando:* The actual answer to the original question, or at least to one of the subsidiary ones.

*Rene:* Perhaps your emphasis on process has to do with something you have often expressed in the past – that the current practice of SD puts too much weight on the striving for consensus. After all, an answer only emerges when all members of the group have agreed to it.

*Fernando:* Exactly, Rene, for myself the process of really trying to understand the example giver – what I call deep listening – is what matters, and not rushing forward to seek an answer to the question. I am always amazed at the powerful feelings of frustration people give vent to because of lack of results.

*Rene:* In some cases such frustration is caused by the impatience people feel when the exploration of the example takes an interminable length of time. Such people come to the dialogue expecting results because of their intense interest in the question.

*Fernando:* That's an important point. People have different expectations from SD and they may forget the central role of the concrete example.

*Rene:* What exactly do you mean by 'central role'? I accept the central role, but you seem to mean something different from myself.

*Fernando:* Yes, I think that quite likely. For me, once the example is chosen, the nature of 'the game' is changed.

*Rene:* What do you mean by that. You surely don't see SD as a game?

*Fernando:* Well, some games can be very serious – even Plato thought so. When the example-giver spells out her experience, something like 'truth' may be revealed.

*Rene:* You mean an inner truth?

*Fernando:* Inner? You almost make me feel uncomfortable because speaking of inner truth is disturbingly similar to saying things like 'my truth', 'your truth', 'the truth for me', 'personal truth' – a step towards a relativist position.

*Rene:* I certainly don't mean that! I mean that the example-giver is trying to explain her own insights about the nature of the experience, which is often a long and searching process as it is hard to describe one's inner experiences, and perhaps even harder for others to understand.

*Fernando:* Yes, I see. It is indeed hard to understand another person, it requires very careful listening, rather different from everyday listening. A lot of patience is called for, frustration is out of place and the striving for consensus can be a hindrance.

*Rene:* Do you think we have now embraced all the points about which we possibly disagree?

*Fernando:* There was actually one more. I said that any kind of question could be the starting point for a SD, whereas you thought only special questions are suitable.

*Rene:* Yes, philosophical, ethical, mathematical and epistemological questions.

*Fernando:* That's exactly my problem, I don't understand what you mean with all these fancy words. It's all Greek to me.

*Rene:* Of course, they originate from Greece!

*Fernando:* Yes, I know, but they still need explaining.

*Rene:* Having added the point about type of question, aren't we ready now to formulate our agenda?

*Fernando:* Let's try. We have:

1. Process v. outcome;
2. Consensus and deep listening;
3. The role of the example-giver;
4. Question of truth;
5. What kind of questions are suitable

*Rene:* OK, that sounds a more than adequate agenda. Let's go and have some lunch now.

## **Scene 2 – Process and Outcome**

*Fernando:* When talking to Anna I said the process of SD is more important than outcome, and I remember you saying that they are equally important.

*Rene:* I wonder what I meant!

*Fernando:* Well, let's first agree on what we mean by an outcome.

*Rene:* It need not be the answer to the question.

*Fernando:* I agree.

*Rene:* It could be the answer to a subsidiary question, one that arises from the group as part of their efforts to understand the initial question or the example.

*Fernando:* But in any case outcome seems to me to be a general statement on which the group agrees.

*Rene:* Yes, a group sometimes reaches intermediary answers.

*Fernando:* During the process of seeking such answers people talk about what they really believe, about most deeply held values and give their reasons – all of which reveals their general attitudes.

*Rene:* Yes, general attitude. I wonder whether a good starting point for our dialogue might be our good friend Nora's [*if possible Vol 3 might include extracts from the Nora Walter interview by Peter Brune and Uwe Nitsch*] concern about the Socratic attitude, which she distinguished from the SD *per se* and sometimes found missing both in the group work and in the way people dealt with each other during meetings of the Socratic circle.

*Fernando:* Aha, so Socratic facilitators and participants don't always display the Socratic attitude. This is relevant to the question frequently posed by our Editor: what actually is the impact of participating in SD group work on how people conduct their lives. Rene, haven't you often made claims in this regard?

*Rene:* Yes, that's true. A reason why I value SD is that it is one method which enables people to lead fuller lives as rational autonomous beings, capable of reflective, critical thought and of coping self-confidently with the many dilemmas facing all of us in family, community and society.

*Fernando:* Whew, that's a mouthful. How on earth can that be achieved. It's a really worthwhile and beautiful goal. But the golden question is how?

*Rene:* People in general don't necessarily possess the skills to lead their lives like that. Participation in SD groups is an activity which can help them develop such skills – careful listening, understanding others, not being judgmental or confrontational.

*Fernando:* You seem, then, to take the view that it is a matter of skill. This implies quite a few things. For instance, that they can be learnt; that the learning process is more practical than theoretical, that it is difficult to make them explicit by means of an accurate description...

*Rene:* Yes, like cycling! One learns by doing.

*Fernando:* I wonder whether you are prepared to say that in principle everyone can learn these skills by means of participating in SD. Otherwise the ideal of developing rational autonomous human beings through this one method is an elitist one.

*Rene:* No, I don't think it is elitist, but paradoxically I also believe that there are some fine people around who have no use for the Socratic method.

*Fernando:* It's just possible I am one of them, so why am I having this dialogue with you?

*Rene:* Don't you agree that in writing this we are working as two friends who have a long track record of enjoying the shared process of asking each other questions; trying to express our deepest values and beliefs; listening to each other carefully and patiently; really understanding each other by giving and receiving a reasoned account of our words and deeds.

*Fernando:* That is exactly what Nora must have meant. That describes exactly the Socratic attitude. I suddenly realise that over the years we have actually been conducting *Socratic conversations*.

*Rene:* Is that so different from engaging in a Socratic Dialogue?

*Fernando:* I have the feeling I am a much better partner in a Socratic conversation with one or at most two other people.

*Rene:* Oh dear, we have enough problems finding Socratic facilitators – it's not an easy task to be one.

*Fernando:* Ah, Rene, you're again thinking about organising the thing. Socratic conversations don't need organising, don't need a facilitator nor a particular venue. In fact, they can't be organised. They just happen.

*Rene:* Yes, I can accept that but the conditions have to be right. My hunch is that it usually happens between good friends who have already developed some of the skills we spoke about.

*Fernando:* Exactly Rene, and that's why I believe you when you tell me that you learnt these skills from your years of participation in SDs. When I met you in the early eighties you already had them. Our Editor always wants to know what the evidence is for your claim about the impact on people of practising SD. For me you are the evidence.

*Rene:* When we met, you also had the Socratic skills; where did you learn them?

*Fernando:* The answer will not surprise you, it was from a book!

*Rene:* But we just asserted that skills are not learnt from books but by doing.

*Fernando:* Well, I had to re-invent the wheel. It was like this. At 16 I read a thick book called *Plato's Dialogues*, and I was completely entranced. I thought to myself: this is it! That's the way to conduct a conversation. I spent the next ten years trying to realise it among friends and relatives.

*Rene:* Were you successful?

*Fernando:* I failed miserably because basically I had to play a one-person game. Despite this, I learnt one skill – to listen endlessly and carefully to my different conversational partners.

*Rene:* So the Socratic spirit was one-sided. My early experiences were quite different. At about the same age I was already experiencing Socratic groups.

*Fernando:* Yes, I remember how I was bawled over when I first read Nelson's Essay [Reference to Vol 1 of *OWPECP*] on the Socratic method and discovered that the thing which I searched for as a youngster was being practised in modern times. But even that was meanwhile history – half a century earlier.

*Rene:* How did you get to know, then, about SD practice in post-war Germany?

*Fernando:* It was only when I met Susie Miller that I was told that SDs were being held in Germany there and then. Soon I found myself in one being facilitated by my new friend Paul Branton.

*Rene:* You know that he was my very special friend, in fact I was married to him for nearly 40 years.

*Fernando:* A Socratic marriage if ever there was one [Rene laughs]. But to be serious, what do you think is the value of a Socratic conversation?

*Rene:* There is a personal and a more social side.

*Fernando:* Let's start with the personal. It's usually the basis for the more general.

*Rene:* OK. I have always found Socratic conversations with one or two friends, especially round the kitchen table, not only enjoyable but also invaluable in helping me to shape my life, develop self knowledge, face difficult decisions.

*Fernando:* Yes, I well remember we two have had conversations like that.

*Rene:* The value to me is also that I recognise that I am not a solo thinker.

*Fernando:* None of us are. All thinking takes place in a dialogue, and all thoughts come out of a dialogue.

*Rene:* Sounds like process and output!

*Fernando:* Right, Rene. Even when you read a book you're in dialogue with the author.

*Rene:* So one can even have a dialogue with the dead?

*Fernando:* For me the good authors are not really dead. In fact some of them seem more alive than the living.

*Rene:* How interesting, it reminds me that I often felt when reading historical documents I was in dialogue with people very much alive.

*Fernando:* I'll tell you a story. My brother and sisters were playing on the beach whilst I was immersed in Rousseau's *Social Contract*. They rushed into the room asking me to join the fun. I looked up and said: 'Do you really think you can compete with Rousseau?'

*Rene:* What did they say?

*Fernando:* As they left, my brother said 'I don't think so'.

*Rene:* This kind of engrossment also occurs in conversation between the living.

*Fernando:* That's exactly what I think the Socratic conversation is about.

*Rene:* If you're right, Fernando, and the essence of thinking is dialogue, my personal reason for appreciating Socratic conversations merges with my social reasons.

*Fernando:* What are those?

*Rene:* We're all social beings may be some more than others. So to have developed skills which enable us to converse with each other in a meaningful way, to achieve mutual understanding, has enormous value be it in family, community or the wider society.

*Fernando:* Surely all people communicate regardless of having these skills?

*Rene:* Yes, but they frequently miss each other's points, don't really listen to each other, have horrific rows which often seem pointless.

*Fernando:* I suppose these things have their uses?

*Rene:* Yes, an explosion of words may bring people to their senses.

*Fernando:* Given we've just talked about the social uses of Socratic conversation, I'd love now to turn to teaching. When I first met you, you invited me along to one of your Master's classes.

*Rene:* Oh yes, I do remember – it was my course on public decision-making in education.

*Fernando:* I loved seeing you at work. If I may be permitted to coin a new expression, I think it was *Socratic teaching* at its best.

*Rene:* You seem to use the adjective 'socratic' very liberally: first we talk about Socratic conversation, then I had a Socratic marriage and now I was engaged in Socratic teaching.

*Fernando:* But I mean it, Rene, you're the most Socratic person I know. Are you by any chance Socrates re-incarnated?

*Rene:* Charge not accepted.

*Fernando:* But to be serious, I would like you to tell me what principles underpinned your teaching and from where you got the idea.

*Rene:* Now that I'm retired, I am at liberty to give away the secret. No one can fire me anymore for the fact that I was a bit of a rebel.

*Fernando:* What's your formula, then?

*Rene:* I think it is far more important to encourage students to think for themselves, to ask good questions, than to pack them full of information.

*Fernando:* Let's be Socratic about it – give me an example.

*Rene:* In designing all my teaching programmes I always searched for an approach and a structure which required students to engage actively. Passive learning is useless.

*Fernando:* Details please?

*Rene:* In history, for example, I spent a whole summer vacation devising a time chart which outlined the major events and of which each student got a copy. Each of them then had to choose a biography of some famous person and present to a seminar an account of how that person's contribution and role fitted into the historical context.

*Fernando:* So you made each presenter ask questions in preparing the account.

*Rene:* Yes, I think I developed socratically-influenced methods of teaching.

*Fernando:* Was it your methods then that made you the rebel?

*Rene:* It made students contrast my methods with those used by colleagues, and we all know this can be embarrassing.

*Fernando:* I understand, and after all Socrates himself got into trouble for asking all those questions. But something is now bugging me. My methods of teaching are very similar to yours. And I have always found it difficult to strike a balance between the course requirements in respect of information students need and practising the Socratic attitude. For me the main duty of a teacher is to make students think for themselves but sometimes time constraints stand in the way.

*Rene:* You mean you have to perform the difficult balancing act between transmitting information necessary for the exams and encouraging students to develop their critical faculties.

*Fernando:* The outcome for students here seems to have equal weight with the process of learning how to think independently. But you recall that for me the process has greater weight in SD groups. It would be interesting to ask whether a Socratic conversation is different from both Socratic teaching and SD in that the process has less weight.

*Rene:* Why?

*Fernando:* The people engaging in Socratic conversation have already acquired the Socratic skills to an advanced level.

*Rene:* So where have these good conversationalists acquired these higher level skills?

*Fernando:* Well, I am sure some I have known acquired them in the training ground of SD group work. You, Paul Branton and Nora Walter are for me the prime examples.

*Rene:* I agree, and there are others who probably learnt them from Leonard Nelson – for example Grete Henry-Hermann and Gustav Heckmann – but there must also be other routes.

*Fernando:* Some, like myself, gained the initial inspiration from reading Plato and then sought opportunities to develop and practise the skills.

*Rene:* I remember my mother telling me of wonderful conversations she experienced during her travels with total strangers – a Jesuit priest in Latin America, a Polish communist – where deeper mutual understanding developed in a matter of hours. Perhaps these conversations had a Socratic character. Such people obviously had the skills for Socratic conversation.

*Fernando:* And the same is true of teachers who know how to develop autonomous rational thinking in their students, even though they have never experienced a SD group or even heard of Plato.

*Rene:* May be there are Socratic naturals?

*Fernando:* I'm sure there are, Rene, but nevertheless the SD group work has potentially enormous value because it can – as we've seen before – promote the development of the skills of listening, understanding, speaking to the point, patience etc. that are at the core of the Socratic method.

*Rene:* I'm glad to hear you expressing so explicitly what you, Fernando, value in SD group work. I couldn't agree with you more.

*Fernando:* It turns out, then, my dear Rene, that our disagreement about the relative importance of process and outcome was, after all, superficial not real.

*Rene:* When we talked with Anna I said that outcome and process are equally important...

*Fernando:* And I said that process is more important. But now it's become clear that there is no contradiction because the process is the outcome. It's the training of the minds and the acquisition of certain skills that we are both after.

*Rene:* Good, consensus reached. The result we are both looking for is independent critical thinking for which the listed skills are essential. That happens during the SD process – so the process is actually the outcome.

*Fernando:* By contrast, any particular answer remains provisional whereas the acquired skills and the critical mind are enduring.

*Rene:* That's right, but I'm still concerned about the facilitator who has to handle situations during the SD in which different participants have different expectations. Some in my experience get really frustrated when they feel the answer is miles away.

*Fernando:* As a participant I've seen this happen. What then do you do as a facilitator?

*Rene:* I may explain that the group is not yet ready to formulate an answer, that it requires a lot of patience to lay a sound and clear basis before an agreed answer can possibly emerge.

*Fernando:* This is what Nora Walter meant when she described the SD work as 'thinking together' in a group.