

1. semester

What is the significance of consensus in Socratic Dialogue?

The air was stifling and stuffy. A tired arm was reaching out for the window handle, hoping to feel a refreshing breeze twirling around the room. The cans had been drunk up and put aside a long time ago. Remnants of raspberry tea were desiccating to rose madder rings at the bottom of small cups made out of china. Emptied was the packet of gummy bears, emptied the biscuit assortment, emptied the different coloured breadboxes. Some heads had been lying in limbs on the desk, others had been tilting down from the back of the chair, looking through the window.

„So, this is it?“ Lisa asked unassertive. The others eyeballed her with curiosity. „This is a reasonable life?“ Everyone kept silent, thinking, pondering. Leon tried to answer her question with a more or less convinced, „probably“. Although they had been contemplating the question concerning a meaningful life for hours, the persuaded image of all participants had turned to a state of obscurity. „If you look at our memoranda“, the discussion leader reciprocated, „are you satisfied then yet?“ Next to various arrows, question marks and crossed out notes the points 'development', 'reflection', 'own happiness', 'sanity' and 'emotion' were inscribed on the board. All members were able to focus on their individual consideration and effectively concentrate again by and by. Eyes met across the room, heads nodded assiduously. „Summing up, that's it“, said Leon, vocalising his workmates notions, „that seems to be the essence of every meaningful life“. The tired quiescence had transformed to a positive conviction. „Thereby, you just achieved consensus. I am very glad about that. What do you think, shall we compare your results to the others on the same topic?“, replied the discussion leader. He received interested acknowledgment as an answer. He opened the book 'Das sokratische Gespräch in Theorie und Praxis' by Detlef Horster and read the foreign results aloud: „Vitality, development, ability to love, belief“ (cf. Horster 1994: p. 70). A ruminative „hmm...“, slipped out of Lisa's mouth. She stared incredulously at the notes, because the point 'belief' had been crossed out at an early point of discussion. The points 'ability to love' and 'vitality' were also missing completely, respectively diverging from their own conclusion. „After all“, she claimed, „our conclusion makes more sense, doesn't it?“

Albeit the raised question of comparative rightness, the actual question of higher importance posing right here is concerning the *significance of consensus in Socratic Dialogue*.

To begin with, it is necessary to specify the term 'consensus' in this context, because, as the German philosopher Rähme already asserted, not just one but two different ways of consensus can be found in Socratic Dialogue.

In the first instance it is the accord, which appears even before any discursive reasoning. It is the consensus concerning the Socratic Dialogue's paradigm. All participants agree simply based on their voluntary and readily attendance at the dialogue and the relating procedural framework to the idea of reaching a reasonable consensus. The persistence of this pre-consensus preengages all entrants to truthfulness, personal endeavour to be comprehensible as well as reciprocating criticism and fairness during discourse (cf. Rähme 1996: p. 143-145).

Moreover due to this pre-consensual level, unanimity respecting the belief in the possibility of finding an argumentative achievable truth, namely argumentative consensus, is inevitably given. The argumentative consensus is the second type of specified consent and hereinafter unless otherwise indicated, meant with the term 'consensus'. Consensus is rightfully attributed with special significance on the fact that it forms the direct guiding destination of every Socratic Dialogue. By means of intersubjective discursive argumentation or rather communication, members strive for a certain state of agreement, whose substance cannot be amplified by adscription or reduced by subtraction and is ideally weighing as *true*¹.

However, is an association of mere people really able to bring out a notion's *generic and transcendental truth* just by intersubjective discursive communication?

Here the question of the possibility of correctness and truth already arises by virtue of potential sources of error, which cannot be eliminated. Those sources can be found for example on a subjective level, for instance in strongly diverging or even insufficient experience or in an adversely affected mental condition.

Leonard Nelson as well as Gustav Heckmann², hereby to some extent categorising in theory and practice, have found different solutions solving this particular issue.

In Nelson's theoretical principles of the Socratic Dialogue, the discursive, argumentative consensus solely appears as implement to attain to an 'immediate knowledge', a fact that corresponds with the concrete intention of Socratic Dialogue, namely to convey

¹ The expression of truth does not mean truthfulness in this context for the reason that the aspired ambition is basically not lying in the perception of truth of the group as subjective institution comprising of subjective members but more in a transcendental quintessence. This issue will find its explication and is, as shown in the following, posing problems, especially in Gustav Heckmann's practical conception.

² Leonard Nelson and Gustav Heckmann are considered the developers of Socratic Dialogue. Originally formulated by Leonard Nelson in his famous lecture 'The Socratic Method' in 1922 as method of maieutic education, it was enhanced by his friend and adherent

philosophising as an act in itself. Furthermore, the accord must not supply a universal content of truth but rather be the destination of an exercise to convey the act of philosophising *per se* and advance to immediate knowledge with the tool of reflection (cf. Rähme 1996: p. 148). Immediate knowledge is portrayed by Nelson as unconditionally existent (cf. Nelson 1917: p. 51), non-conceptual, immediately assertoric and independent from the subjective will (cf. Schroth 1994: p. 139).

A short explanation follows in order to achieve better comprehension. Immediate knowledge is unconditionally existent because it is conceded a 'state of transcendental truth' to some extent. The mere hesitation of its existence means in the beginning the ignorance of its veracity. With criticism the sceptic expresses that he is momentarily not capable to confirm whether it is right or wrong. Accordingly, the sceptic is able to adjudicate upon himself to not own that specific knowledge. Following Nelson's line of thought, every judgement is coercively ascribed to a true knowledge, by which the doubter reaches a point where the unknowingness is to be traced back to a true knowledge, which turns out as immediate knowledge (cf. Nelson 1917: p. 51). Nonetheless, the conclusion of all is not the immediate knowledge's truth but more its existence. Even if its truth cannot be founded, implementing a rational legitimation for judgements does forcibly require its truth (cf. Schroth 1994: p. 134).

Non-conceptuality relegates to the close connection between judgement and concepts within the generating process of knowledge. Separated concepts are without any contention and form just via connection a knowledge generating judgement. As a result, every knowledge based on judgement is built up by the connection of terms. Due to the fact that immediate knowledge is not a judgement, its nature must be non-conceptual. The inseparableness of assertion and conception within immediate knowledge illustrates its immediately assertoric character. Only knowledge shaped by judgement follows from the linkage of a conditional true proposition and assertion. Inasmuch it is as already stated above not judgement-like, immediate knowledge must be immediately assertoric.

Non-Conceptuality derives the independence from subjective will. As immediate knowledge is not conceptually determined, thus free from arbitrary combination of terms. Exclusive judgement-like knowledge, which is subject to will, is to arise from terms. Correspondingly immediate knowledge is recognised a status of independence from will (cf. Schroth 1994: p. 139).

Regarding Nelson's epistemology, immediate knowledge plays a central role. Just by its existence generic knowledge is able to subsist, persisting as true, reasonable optimum of

knowledge and moreover as real justification approach for the legitimation of objective validity. To raise its awareness from subconsciousness and pseudoinscrutability is the main task of philosophy, as stated by Nelson (cf. Röd 2009: p. 192).

Summing up, consensus following regressive abstraction is basically not the unification following argumentation, but more a point of contact to guide immediate knowledge from subconsciousness to a state of mental awareness. As this verily works, consensus in Socratic Dialogue offers theoretically the possibility to advance to a non-conceptual, immediately assertoric, independent from the will and transcendently true knowledge.

Heckmann values the consensus' fallibility from a by far more practical and direct point of view. Initially, the meaning of consensus is to be comprehended as pure agreement, not as point of connection to an absolute truth like it had been in Nelsons conception, connecting to the tradition of Kant and the following movement of neo-kantianism (cf. Lütjen 2013: p. 374). Consensual unanimity acquires a significance *ad interim*: „Bis auf weiteres bestehen keine Zweifel mehr an der erarbeiteten Aussage“ [Until further notice there are no doubts concerning the compiled statement] (cf. Heckmann 1993: p. 87). Hence the risk of potential addition or subtraction *can not be eliminated*. This conclusion of fallibility is a forcing maxim that needs to be assumed as long as it is about a practical approach, focussing consensus as discursive accord of result-oriented setting of definition or clarifying of questions and not as connecting factor to immediate knowledge.

Within that maxim lies the prophylactic recognition of potential sources of frailty. Aside from subjective causes, like the already mentioned adversely affected mental condition or diverging experiences, conditioned by either cultural or other aspects, those sources manifest as objective-realistic. Two different types of objective-realistic sources of frailty do subsist emerging as imperfection of the participants argumentative disposition as well as the everlasting unattainability of a question's response due to the parameter of time. Although members intend to do so, based on the fact that it is naturally impossible to mention every feasible non-fictive argument to a certain topic in a real dialogue, the existence of an essential assumption missing is never to be excluded. Therefore, the way to consensus turns out theoretically irrational from the perspective of completeness and as an everlasting work in progress.

Furthermore, consensual judgement of a concept is liable to the prevailing spirit of time. What is defined as 'freedom' nowadays, may it be genuine harmony, the ambition of a Socratic Dialogue, the idea of its meaning is able to differ in past and future. Especially

as the preceding example is of terminological nature. For instance, the consensual answer to the question of the necessity of religion would have been the same or a similar by no means two hundred years ago.

This change of content is rooted in the diverging proposition of concepts and judgements, which thinking depends on. The content of assertion is constant and can be potentially assigned to every statement, what makes the difficulty of truth a matter of justification, which is linked to proposition and hence, to experience. If the same zeitgeist is inherent to every dialogue's associate, the accord will be correspondingly adapted.

Summarising, the regressive path of abstraction cannot lead to a pure and taintless conclusion, although it might be intended.

With this in mind, the opening example could act as reference. In two different Socratic Dialogues the results deviated based on subjective and objective sources of frailty, albeit having an identical opening question.

Regardless, the proof that consensus cannot provide a generic truth is produced. The actual question is, why the benefit of consensus is not to deny and what significance it has.

Firstly, is to state that even though the propositional content is as a result of fallibility, theoretically irrational and liable to matters of time, thus impossible to set as transcendentally true, a certain convergence in asymptotic manner happens. In general, the indestructible opportunity of interpreting a false conclusion as authentic is still given. Via sensible thinking and the endeavor of weighing all possible arguments the risk of failing can at least be minimised. Subsequently, the terminological capriciousness is reduced in the direction of the pursued truth, contributing to a clarity of notion and thought on a subjective level (cf. Nelson 1996: p. 35f.). The consensus approximating to a term becomes a preliminary substitute of the actual subject. In addition, as long as the being of an objective, transcendental-true core is excluded, as in Heckmanns perspective of interim validity, consensus does not become a mere substitute but more an interim mutable definition itself. This is due to the missing borders of an ideal and the limitation by diffuse propositions disguised by experience. Ideally the approximated concept is adapted in its provisional clarified state and spread, though not in its fallible meaning but rather with the purpose of inspiring others to deal with it beyond the borders of Socratic Dialogue.

However, the oblique intention, namely to convey philosophy as action, is the essential

justification of Socratic Dialogue. Consensus takes place as goading motivation. To form consensus is, as already mentioned, the straight destination worked towards. Whereby the discourse conducted, considering the member's true or false attributive characteristics, transmits and strengthens abilities like critical reflection, rational treatment of experience or argumentative forthrightness (cf. Boele 1994: p. 65-69). Fundamental abilities that correct philosophising comprises of.

To this effect, the social aspect must be regarded. Due to the fact that consensus is an intersubjective issue, aiming on objective certainty, the personal will is put aside for the good of progress and truth. Above the level of argumentation acceptance and openness can be formed, that can play an important role in education, for instance in elementary pedagogy, probably bearing essential fruit. The motivational condition occupies a special role, because pupils acquire their own and nearly self-reliant performance, independent from the teacher. Already accomplished experiments, as supervised by the German teacher and member of the centre for educational research and teacher-training in Paderborn Mechthild Goldstein, for example, fortify this consequence (cf. Goldstein 2000: p. 54).

Besides, the significance of judgement-like harmony has a value above the level of a single Socratic Dialogue.

The repeated finding of consensus enables an analytic comparison of in different attributive ascriptions structured results. Of course, due to temporal and argumentative irrationality there is still no verification of truth after comparative analysis, but the probability of rightness is at least amplified. More often registered attributes are rather certain pieces of the answer's core, as such being subject to high variation or ones often being crossed out.

In addition, the formulated accord could function as documentation for time-based terminological and propositional alteration, as long as Socratic Dialogues are performed frequently and over a long period. Thus, consensus is accredited value on a level usable for terminological and subject-issue relational³ research.

The path of regressive abstraction is determined by discursive communication and the request of knowledge recognition. As shown by an indirect proof, the regress must assume the opportunity of a consensual judgement.

³ The adhibition of the term 'subject' can be confusing, baring the actual intersubjectivity of Socratic Dialogue in mind. Hereby meant is the result of intersubjective discussion of an institution comprising of subjective members, which is composed in direction of objectivity, though as consensual conclusion accepted by all participating *subjects*. The final relation between subject and issue, described by consensual judgement, regarding itself and temporal alteration is intended.

If the belief of an achievable argumentative consensus in Socratic Dialogue was not given, the conversation would open with the mere recitation of subjective definitions and opinions. Now, a situation can be imagined where all participants have randomly the same opinion, based on identical experiences. Without any discourse the group realises an unexpected though consensual judgement.

In contrast, if opinions are strictly incongruous the *principium non contradictionis* is at stake. It is impossible that one's judgement concerning the same topic is definition A and the other's non-A, since the laws of logic, a common efficiency of language and thought as well as the idea of the entity of truth as such are conditioned. An argumentative discourse would be initiated, aiming at the concept's correctness. Once a common settlement found a consensual judgement is formed.

Epitomizing, if the points above are fulfilled, the *possibility* of consensus must be assumed.

Analogically it is to question, if consensus cannot be reached, despite its existence being conditioned.

The inability to generate an accord must be *per definitionem* in a disagreement. That happens if two parties come to a point where each side represents a notion incompatible with the other's and both blocs are unable to arbitrate dissensus. Reasons for such a situation's appearance could be a lack of or contradictory experience relating to the discussed subject or an incapacity to comprehend the other party's idea.

From the outset is it insurmountable that both fronting arguments shape up as correct, again *principium non contradictionis* comes in. The two remaining circumstances are encounterable as either both perspectives are wrong or at least one is correct. If it suits the case that exactly one argument is accurate, but dissensus is still lingering, conceivable causes would be either the incapability to convey the propositional meaning by constructive pro-argumentation, making the introduced argument understandable assertoric, or the opposition's unreasonableness. Both causes should be ideally prevented or extinguished by the Socratic Dialogue's leader as conciliationoperator taking care of harmony.

On the occasion that both parties are at fault the explanation must be insufficient appropriate experience. Impeccably, this issue is also solved by the leader's purposeful questions. This is due to the true content of the homed in on result, which is on the hand subjectively connoted, though in its core idealistic-objective reasonable. With this in

mind, the leader is able to clarify wrong judgments by irony and productive questioning and depict apocryphically divisive arguments to the participants.

From a practical point of view, denying the true content of the approximated issue's core by denying its presence, the possibility of a conciliation still remains, though must not occur despite all sanity. Consequence of this unbreachable obstacle, specifically of an unattainable balance of evidence, is the abandonment of the current discussed attribute and following the uniformability of consensus. Nevertheless, this issue of fallibility is of a subjective nature and does not exclude the possibility to reach consensus.

Finally, the summarised significance of consensus is this:

Although a transcendental claim of truth cannot be stated to consensus' value, it is coercively necessary. For a start its significance lies in the motivational aspect of ambition-oriented coworking and forms in case of reasonably argumentation to some degree an approximation to a true core of a concept or issue. As the laws of logic and an efficient intersubjective comprehension are in force, it is imperative to respect the probability of a consensual judgement with Socratic Dialogue's paradigm.

Its value can be important for certain fields of research in analytical and comparative respect.

Finally, although its generation cannot be guaranteed, consensus is paradigmatically trink braced to Socratic Dialogue.

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