

What role does the experience of the participants play in Socratic Dialogue?

What can experience mean?

Experience can be understood in at least three different ways and so my answer will be threefold (see Kambartel 1972):

The first meaning is that of **perceiving** something with our senses. The second meaning is to **judge** (and therefore generalise) this experience. The third meaning is to be or to become experienced (**skilful**) in the field the experiences came from.

In my answer I will tell you about some of my experiences (Kambartel's first meaning) with the Socratic Dialogue (SD), connected with the importance of working with experience (second meaning) in an SD. I will also describe the effects I believe it had on me and therefore could have on others (third meaning).

My brief answer to the leading question is that **true insight** can only be achieved through understanding the experience of all participants (including mine) in a deep and critical way. This will not only improve my communication skills, but will change me as a person. It is like a **two-compound glue**: only experience and generalisation, mixed together, will let the truth stick to you (as an insight) and you to the truth (truthfulness & lived integrity) – best by doing it together, because the more the merrier.

Starting with experience: A story of a memory

An SD starts with an example for the Socratic Question¹ from the life of a participant (the example-giver). When I myself was example-giver for the first time, I was overwhelmed. I had already participated in Socratic Dialogues several times before, but never as the example-giver. I knew that most of the time the little details of the example would turn out to be the most fruitful, that the example giver would not himself at first be aware of their importance. I therefore **tried to tell everything** I could remember and it was very chaotic, because of the picture-like and associative way personal memory² works. The other participants could not easily understand my over-complex narration. So the facilitator stopped me and gave me a hint about how to tell only the essential part: the one conflict I had to deal with in the situation. With

¹ “What do we mean by soul?”(2014) was the question of the SD my examples refer to.

² Böttger (2010) points out the blind spot; that in SD **the example is in fact a piece of memory** and memory is not a true copy of what happened, but something structurally changed. Shaw (2016) shows that **memory is structured like a narration** with causal coherence. Therefore many details get changed to fit in this schema, my perceptions and thoughts are filtered every time I try to remember from the point of view and moral values I nowadays have. This is an **epistemic problem**, pragmatically resolved by this circumstance: we act according to our **memory – we do not have an alternative** to choose from.

this advice I was able to re-structure my narration. I was very happy about that.

The next step overwhelmed me again. I had to **write down the most important parts** of my oral narration on the flipchart. Apart from describing the conflict, what parts were worth writing down? This time the facilitator guided me in a very strict way, she questioned me and then mostly formulated my answer in her own words that I then wrote down. When the writing was completed, I just felt relief.

Looking back it feels less like being helped and more as if **words had been put in my mouth**. I could have resisted more but it was a very stressful situation for me and the easiest way was just to agree – trusting the facilitator to pick the good parts of my example (cf. Heckmann 1993, 88ff). However I myself was not able to think of the details of formulating – so I was thankful for the help.

Later I realized what really happens when the example is given. The example giver tells **a true story**³ from his life as first person narrator in which he resolves a conflict that is somehow connected to the leading Socratic Question of the SD. In every action-driven narration, the conflict is at the centre. So the first hint helped me with oral narration and if the participants did not understand, they asked for and I gave further information - it was easy to respond to the prompts. But in the writing down, I needed a layout for my narration.

In my search I found the General Narrative Theory (Koschorke 2012, 66f), which describes the **layout for narrations** as answers to the following questions, one after another⁴:

- What was it about?⁵ (topic and context of the story)
- Who⁶ was involved? (staff of the story)
- When did it happen and where? (setting: time and space of the plot)
- What did happen? (plot of the story)

³ The enlightenment is often described as a historic transition **from myth to reason** (cf. Nestle 1940, 1-5), but I think we need the movement from narration to logic and back for every true insight (cf. Koschorke 2010) especially if we have no selfmade experience for it. Stories exchange and widen our experience (cf. Matuschek 2008) and reason helps us to gain insight from them.

⁴ When I speak of my memories, I have to put them in **linear order**, for this is a basic principle of any language (cf. Saussure 1916, 82ff) and **words are always generalisations**: The unique chair I sit on right now, I can't grasp totally in words without experience as context (Seiffert 1969, 32ff). Writing is another step of generalisation for it needs verbalising the context too (cf. Raible 2004).

⁵ Usually this key phrase is written down on the flip chart at the very beginning of the SD, when all participants tell their examples – as an anchor for memory but also as **a headline for the story**.

⁶ My background is partly given in the **introduction round**, which also is a blind spot in the theory of the SD. Many important things start here, not only what someone's name is. It is the start of self-revelation which continues and deepens in giving the example from one's life. The better this start, the more willing I am to open myself deeply – otherwise I would be reserved towards strangers. Therefore a bad introduction does great damage to the fruitfulness of the SD. Space forbids me to go deeper here, but I think to ask the participants here, why they came to this SD, is of utmost importance, it links both objective and persons at once (the Latin derived word 'interest: inter-est' shows this relation: that which is the important "being"(est) in between (inter) me and the matter in question in the SD).

- What were the consequences right then and later on? (effects of the plot)

This general structure still helps me nowadays as I can focus on formulating the content of my experience in a more understandable manner.

The experience of the example-giver: a life changer

What I had to tell as example-giver was not easy either. I talked about the death of my beloved grandmother which had happened a few months before the SD. I had not only to relive the **painful memories** at the start, but also to arrive at the conclusion: that nothing can be said for certain through reason about if, how and where her soul now might be – answers I longed for. But to have told everything in the most **authentic way**, without withholding any shameful thought or feeling and reasoning with all my might, brought me relief and peace with it. My facilitator told me afterwards that she thought this was a **borderline case**. It was fruitful for all the participants to find answers to the Socratic Question "What do you mean by soul?" but there was an impending danger for the group to stop arguing about the topic and to start giving me comfort.

There is an ongoing argument about this topic to **divide the SD from any form of therapy** (cf. Krohn/Kessels 2010). The goal of the SD is truth, the goal of therapy is a better person. It is undeniable that in a good SD the example-giver opens himself in a deep way (to his inner experience, thoughts and feelings) and in the process of clarification in the SD he can and often does change his core beliefs in some part to what he now believes is true (and therefore to be better). This change to the better through reason can be seen as the, or at least one, main goal of the SD. Which is the case mainly, in my eyes, for the example-giver (cf. Raupach-Strey 2002, 184ff). In general it can be said in any educational context to be undoubtedly the main goal to help someone, through insight, to deal better with the world and to make him more autonomous through strengthening his own judgement and awareness in the long run (cf. Siebert 1996, 81-85).

Gisela Raupach-Strey (2002, 399ff) analyses this very carefully but concludes that there has to be a strict difference between SD and therapy. This strict difference⁷ is that truth is the only main goal of the SD (ibid. 169). But she herself points out the **two-peaks of the SD** (ibid. 2002, 175; 402), which are the truth on the one side and the person on the other. The person is only a negative limit in the search for truth (ibid. 184ff; 278). The person's dignity has to be untouched (ibid. 541), e.g. if they

⁷ Raupach-Strey (2002, 192) also mentions the manner of the examination (reasonable communication, not comforting) as a distinction. I would add the content of the examination: a common experience in everyday life that every participant can put himself inside (no meditation experience or individual trauma in my personal biography) and the reasonable (not handicapped) participants. So both peaks, **objective-truth and self-autonomy** (ibid, 51) can shine.

refuse to talk about their reasons or feelings in more detail (maybe because of shame). In every SD I participated in I experienced this as a loss and a break in the way to the truth (as long as the intention of the questions was aimed at insight of the matter in question). For me someone refusing to answer breaks the central rule to be authentic⁸ and is fleeing from the burden of reason.

Otherwise I know there is no way to force someone to be authentic (cf. Thun 1981, 99ff): Ordering "Be authentic!" is just useless. So to allow the persons questioned to say 'stop' at least marks the line until their answers can be fully trusted and does not get them to give answers they think the other participants would like to hear (group pressure). The Socratic metaphor of **birth pain** (Theaitetos 148e) fits here: to get true insight out of someone can be an (emotionally) painful⁹ process for them in which the persons themselves start (in a way) a new life. But in the end it was a relief for me that gave me happiness directly after the SD and ongoing calmness in the matter until today.

Raupach-Strey (2002, 51f) also speaks of the backside of the "trust in reason"(Nelson, 1908, 10) that is called "**demand on reason**", which demands that I change my beliefs according to my (new) insights, which can be understood as an interpretation of Socrates' so called logos-principle or virtue-knowledge (cf. Birnbacher 2013, 29f): we act according to what we believe is true (Kriton 46b; Protagoras 358c). When not defending SD against therapy but promoting its good influence on the participants, she even speaks of the SD as a form between truth and self-knowledge (1989, 117).

I think a good SD changes me for the better and that the gain of new deep insights in a matter (that is truth) cannot be separated from me as a person – every truth that humans can reach is always bound to them **as persons having this truth**¹⁰ and therefore thinking, feeling and acting accordingly.

New ways to start the show of inner experience: a theater stage with my own choir

The question of **personal identity** is answered by the tradition of Enlightenment (from Socrates virtue-knowledge to Kant's categorical imperative to Nelson's

⁸ For Raupach-Strey (2002, 190) it is important that the speaker does not get hurt by questioning too deeply into personal matters. Thun (1981, 116ff) looks the other way: the speaker has to watch out not to hurt the listener by being too straightforward and getting misunderstood on the relationship side as an aggressor. To me this **selective authenticity** (politely holding back in speaking out the truth to get closer to the truth together) always feels quite paradoxical – but no hurt person can talk or comprehend objectively, for people are not computers transmitting information.

⁹ Plato's picture of **the electric ray** (Menon 80d) shows this painful loss of orientation.

¹⁰ This is one meaning of "Kant's Copernican Revolution"(1797, AA III) to me, but I also believe, like Siebert, (2001, 243f) that human reason is able (at least to some degree) to understand the world we live in as it is (truth) and this makes searching for the truth possible across cultures – culture is only a way of coping with that world. Nelson's (1922, 51) "self-confidence of reason" with "**enlightened realism**"(Tetens 1995, 29f): the real world pokes me around till I get it figured out the right way.

balancing law) as an act of reason in which truth shows the way by making all my thoughts coherent and demands of me, as a unity in reason, to act in a certain way (cf. Raupach-Strey 2002, 165). So Kant (1797, A99) uses the picture of an inner court, where reason makes the judgement after hearing the arguments for the (case of) defence and prosecution. Nowadays research (cf. Precht 2007) shows that identity is more like the meeting of an "Inner Team" (Thun 2004a).

When in an SD I recall the situation and my thoughts and feelings that led me to my decision, it is more like **a choir of inner voices** arguing for and against but usually not by giving clear facts in the form of syllogisms but all sorts of speech acts (cf. Thun 1981). Some voices give reasons (factual side), some make demands (appeal side), some try to harmonise for the sake of good relationships (relation side) and some try to make me put aside some of these to stay in line with my old principles (self-revelation). Some voices are louder and some come very late and while in an SD some that I have never heard before show up.

The meeting of the Inner Team (cf. Thun 1998, 29f) is a more realistic metaphor and a very effective method to describe and collect the rich world of inner experience. As a method it uses visualisation by drawing e.g. a theatre stage and putting persons with a name badge, a speech bubble with the key message of the respective voice on it. When the stage is filled, the speakers are grouped together (by who supports whom). The loud voices are put in front, the quiet voices at the back. This method allows me to speak about my **motives as third persons**. This distance makes it much easier for me to open up while the drawing makes it easier to express myself in a first approach.

Normally this inner meeting happens only in new situations that we did not have to deal with until now and usually with pressure to act. But the ideal of Thun (1998, 151ff) is that - with enough practice (like an SD can give) - we are able to reach an **inner consensus** which makes us feel in tune (2004, 30ff).

A role play can be used to deepen the understanding of these conflicting voices. Participants impersonate a voice and argue with the other voices to reach the decision they believe is right. I have only read about this method but it seems to me to enrich the SD a lot. Because it builds a bridge that helps me to express my experience (drawing) and a way for the other participants to put **themselves in my shoes (role play)**. It can lead to new insights for me and helps them to better understand my example.

Until now the main method of the SD I am aware of is that of formulating precise sentences and writing them down as judgements on the flipchart. It is undoubtedly necessary to do that to generalise and to deepen my understanding of the

matter in question. But I remember that, at some point in the SD about the soul, we talked a lot about the necessary parts the soul of a person consists of. I argued that the 'non-bodily-part of a person's identity' has to be a necessary part of the soul of that person. I had studied philosophy and had attended a seminar on logic, so for me it was clear what the abstract technical term 'necessary' means in this case: Without the necessary part there is no soul (of a person) and with only the one necessary part (e.g. the 'non-bodily part of a person's identity') there can be no soul either (it would be just the 'non-bodily part of a person's identity'). But no matter how hard I tried explaining, some of the other participants always ended up misunderstanding 'necessary' in the sense of 'in itself sufficient' part of the soul (which leaves no place for anything else at all) and therefore argued against it – because the soul obviously consists of more than only the 'non-bodily parts of a person's identity' (like the soul of my grandmother consists of more than just her thoughts and feelings and memories as attributes).

The solution was a **metaphor¹¹ of the soul as a fruit basket** and the parts of the soul as fruits like an apple that belonged in the basket, leaving space for other things like oranges (e.g. immortality) or bananas (e.g. no space extension). If the fruit basket is full, we have all necessary attributes for the soul and therefore all the fruits together are sufficient to distinguish soul from all other things in the universe. We all eagerly contributed to fill the basket afterwards – it was a very 'fruitful' SD.

True insight is the interweaving of experience with generalised judgements – forwards and backwards. That can be tested: Can you make something understandable for me? Visualisation (cf. Thun 2004) in any way helps me here a lot. To **lock out¹² visualisation**, role play (cf. Siebert 1996, 69), thought experiments (cf. Raupach-Strey 2002, 128) and metaphors would violate this Socratic Principle (cf. Heckmann 1993, 17). For me the Socratic Principle says that insight needs not only analytical speaking¹³ and writing but also pictures (drawings and metaphors) and to some degrees action (role play) because they are closer to the experience and they can be used as a means to better understanding. They also can be used to play around and

¹¹ **Metaphors** (cf. Jäkel 2003, 40f) are an important way to insight, we use them all the time in every day and in science language often without even recognising them **as bridges to wisdom**(cf. Keller 2009): This bridge is necessary for insight, for it is a way to break fixed patterns of thinking by reducing an abstract thought of a complex aspect of reality to a simple perceivable thing from the experience of the user of the metaphor (and his audience) – by shared properties or behaviour (cf. Gabriel 2015, 53ff & 2019, 15ff & 44ff). To be precise, the phrase I used is **a comparison** ('A like X') with the advantage that it has no logical truth contradictions (Skirl & Schwarz-Friesel 2013, 12) for it clearly marks the comparison unlike a full metaphor ('the soul is a fruit basket') which is obviously not true in a plain sense – and only can be true in a metaphorical sense (by sharing some attributes like being a containing vessel).

¹² Roß (2005) points out that argumentation in SD is much more than logical coherence: Tetens (2004) shows the **richness of arguments** (including metaphors and thought experiments).

¹³ I think Horster (1994, 55-67) cuts SD too short (cf. Siebert 1996, 75f) by overstating the analytic part (in working with words). Leal (1998) points out that **"the examination is not of words but of lives"** and so no one can have a true SD without a change for his life (and in his identity) – this interpretation has my full consent regarding the seriousness of the SD and Socrates' logos-principle (Kriton 45b).

entertain, but so can speech (e.g. jokes or fantasising thought experiments with little connection to everyday life¹⁴) – so misuse is not a general lockout argument for any means. But to exclude methods means to give away **a step in the ladder of abstraction** (Hayakawa 1939, 241) and therefore to make understanding harder than it already is.

Why so serious - Experience as beginning and end in the search for truth

I already stated that an SD always starts with the clarification of the example for the Socratic Question. Then the examination of the example follows: first by clarifying the reasons behind the actions of the example giver in the example, then by the other participants judging them. The judgement reveals the reasons behind the reasons. Going deeper behind reasons reveals rules behind the reasons and going down to the bottom reveals basic principles (cf. Gronke 2004a, 37f). The best possible ending is a consensus in some of the principles and their rules that answers the Socratic Question and is therefore likely to be nearer to the truth. This view of the products (usually written down as abstract judgements on the flipchart) as ongoing generalisation is shown by Kessels (1997; 2001, 54ff) in an hourglass model. Raupach-Strey (2002, 53-57) describes the course of an SD as maieutic, a process of helping each other think, which reminds me that not only abstract statements are produced, but all the time we refer back to the given example or to other examples from the everyday life of the participants (cf. Gronke 2004b, 10ff) – these parts are often done in talking rather than written down on the flipchart. But it's this **interwoven connection** (cf. Kopfwerk Berlin 2005, 109) that creates true understanding, therefore the flipchart of an SD does not contain the important result of the SD: the insight (cf. Raupach-Strey 2004, 16).

The process of finding the truths in our own memory by reasoning about them the founder of the SD called "**regressive abstraction**" (Nelson 1922, 33), for we regress to the rules and principles of our experience that we are unaware of¹⁵. There is a point, when reasoning (asking and judging) stops. This is the point of tentative truth which we can reach in this SD (always depending on the participants' experience) – therefore later on it can be found faulty or in need of supplementation, at least in some points¹⁶.

The stopping point is marked by the inner experience of the ending of serious

¹⁴ Like the philosophical **zombie-thought-experiment** (cf. Kirk 1974 & 2019, Chalmers 2017) which leads to doubt that we can know for sure, other humanlike looking beings do really have feelings or thoughts – which we do and need to do to be able to act in everyday life.

¹⁵ Nelson (1922, 42) calls this interpretation of Plato's "**Anamnesis**" (Menon 81a-d) the liberation from mystic, for insight is making you aware of something you already thought to know (out of everyday life experience with it – but unquestioned experience).

¹⁶ Heckmann (1993, 87) adds this idea that all human doing can fail (fallibility) to the SD.

doubt (cf. Heckmann 1994). The **seriousness** is given by the outward experience of the actions of the everyday (way of) life of the participants (cf. Gronke 2004, 19ff)¹⁷. You can question the stability of matter in general in speech, but if you then search for your glasses and get angry not finding them, you contradict your words with your actions – so your question was not serious to begin with (cf. Nelson 1922, 32; Apel 1989, 55 & 59).

The importance of the SD for me: the experience of Tolerance and Friendship

Before my very first SD I had just finished my seminar paper on J. S. Mill for which I had read his autobiography (1873, ch. VII): He was a gifted genius and he valued his opponents especially for the fact that they saw a part of the truth which he had been unable to see¹⁸ (1859, ch. II). This is the epistemic reason for tolerance which, as I learned later, Heckmann (1993, 119) promoted too. Much later I wrote a paper on tolerance, where Forst (2000) shows the **ethical reason for tolerance: dignity**. I am not more valuable than you and also you not more than me. It is more than putting up with the other, it is respecting him. I believe this to be true, but until today the only place I truly experience this tolerance in action is in the SD.

Often there is much more than respect: in the last ten years, in nearly every SD I took part in, friendships arose. This is one of the most valuable effects of the SD for me. Recently, when I read lot of Thuns' (2010) papers, I found a convincing psychological explication about the **connection between understanding and friendship**:

Every step of maieutics in getting closer to a consensus in the matter corresponds to a step in getting closer to someone as a person. First, by understanding what he did and why he did it, you can then *identify yourself with him in the motives you share*. Second, because we receive communication about another human's life in an act of self-revelation, never only as ice-cold facts, we often have feelings towards the facts. Usually we differ in some motives. The more our motives differ, the harder it is for us to not condemn the other. If we share many motives, there is a danger of slipping into having understanding, in a way of fading out our differences and flippantly over-identifying. Either you are practised or have the help of the facilitator in the SD, but

¹⁷ This foundation of truth in practice is called "**Praxeology**" (cf. Skirbekk 2002) and the "New Realism" (cf. Ferraris 2014; Nida-Rümelin 2018) is based on it: This realism is the seriousness in SD. The idea of self-confidence of reason (Nelson 1922, 51) was extended to the inter-subjective confidence in consensus (Raupach-Strey 2002, 58ff) which both rely on the inner experience of doubtlessness but in the latter can rely on broader social practice (life experiences of all those who give their consent).

¹⁸ There is a proverb of the Dalai Lama that sometimes helps me to temper my urge to talk in SDs in this sense: You talk about what you know, but **by listening you can learn something new**. Even if talking helps shaping one's own thoughts (Kleist 1805), science shows in dialogue we can only do one thing at a time: Either we listen seriously to understand or we talk seriously (Konopka/Meyer/Velde 2013). So there has to be a break between one speaker and the next or else there can be no true understanding in between – but only the urge to shout out one's own thoughts.

you will still be aware of the differences. Third in an SD, to find a consensus, you then argue about the differences. The nearer you get to consensus the closer *you get to true (reasonable) identification.* True agreement in deep matters makes friends - in that sense **friendship is a structural effect of the SD.**

I wish there was space left to show you how I benefited from the following in my personal performance in SDs:

- **the right food** (cf. Lüthi 2002; for the wrong food for the brain see Grimm 2003)
- **"deep work"** without distractions (cf. Newport 2016) on your own¹⁹
- ways of **physical exercise** like jogging (cf. Ratey 2008; Hannaford 2009)

And there is also no space left to tell you about **the most interesting link**, how the inner core of the SD (formulated in the general constitutive rules) is connected to the face of the SD – the way it is actually practised (formulated in concrete regulative rules like punctuality) (cf. Raupach-Strey 2002, 138-147).

Thank you for reading!

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¹⁹ As Heckmann (1993, 14) recommends writing¹⁹ summary protocols for all participants in big breaks, but sadly only some facilitators are usually doing this nowadays.

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