

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

“Every significant philosophical controversy is a controversy over principles. We are all in agreement on the application of these principles to experience and to life; it is only when we begin to philosophize about them in abstracto that differences appear.”

-Leonard Nelson, “The Critical Method”

The purpose of this essay is simple enough: to remind, along the lines of the Nelsonian Socratic tradition, that actual philosophy is not necessarily a purely academic enterprise. Rather, actual philosophy consists in hard work done by a community of sincere inquirers (although, coincidentally, such community might emerge in academic setting). In order to philosophise, such community encounters an actual problem within their *shared everyday experience* and tries to tackle it down through philosophical means. To demonstrate this, I am going to show three important and interconnected problems for academic philosophy: 1) it deals with academically cultivated rather than actual problems; 2) it provides no method for understanding of abstract theoretical positions; 3) it impedes participation of non-institutional thinkers. All three problems stem for a single triviality: academic philosophy begins and ends with what we can call, after Leonard Nelson, “*in abstracto*” philosophising. My approach would eventually leave experience with three important roles to play in a Socratic Dialogue. First, experience grants a common ground on which to start a philosophical investigation. Second, because it provides a concrete starting point, experience grants the group understanding of abstract philosophical points (unlike academic philosophy, which takes abstract principles to be the Alpha and the Omega). Third, experience supplies the Socratic group with a criterion on how to pick an actual philosophical problem/question and ultimately helps the group to reach an actual solution/answer.

1. The gap between sincere beliefs and doctrinal beliefs

„Let us therefore distinguish between the philosophical convictions that form, unconsciously, the basis for all our judgments and evaluations, and (on the other hand) the procedure by which we state these convictions as such and fit them into a system. If, in other words, we discriminate between philosophy as a natural disposition and

philosophy as a scientific discipline, we can then say that no philosophical idea, in the sense of the first of these terms, is actually the subject of controversy, but that all difficulties in this matter arise when philosophical principles are stated without specific application in abstracto.“ (Nelson 1904 (1949), 106)

I will start by delineating the type of philosophical problem that is a prerogative of academic philosophy in order to contrast it with what I called “an actual philosophical problem”. Let us consider a simple case: the omnipresent debate between realism and antirealism in contemporary philosophy. This debate pervades almost all dominant philosophical domains – from Philosophy of Mind to Ethics. An antirealist is likely to hold the thesis that no entity exists beyond our method to ascertain its existence. A realist, on the contrary, would usually claim that, of course, an entity might exist independently of our method to ascertain its existence. Both theoreticians make claims that seem to be experience-independent. At the same time, the debate between such claims is a fit example of *in abstracto* philosophising as it pits two highly abstract positions (or “principles”) one against another without showing the actual concrete problem leading to such theoretical controversy. Why should a philosopher pick one of these positions? A position obtained solely via *in abstracto* philosophising does not allow comprehensive explanation of why one picks this position because the very adherents of such position do not properly understand their incentive for adopting it. Indeed, the lack of consensus within the realism vs. antirealism debate could also show that whichever position is adopted, its adoption is a manner of uncertainty and arbitrariness. Let us demonstrate the same point by using a clearer example, given by Nelson himself:

“[...] If we were here to discuss the meaning of the philosophical concept of substance, we should most probably become involved in a hopeless dispute, in which the skeptics would very likely soon get the best of it. But if, on the conclusion of our debate, one of the skeptics failed to find his overcoat beside the door where he had hung it, he would hardly reconcile himself to the unfortunate loss of his coat on the ground that it simply confirmed his philosophical doubt of the permanence of substance. Like anyone else hunting for a lost object, the skeptic assumes in the judgment that motivates his search the universal truth that no thing can become nothing, and thus, without being conscious of the inconsistency with his doctrine, he employs the metaphysical principle of the permanence of substance.” (Nelson 1929 (1949), p. 9)

Our skeptic friend clearly seems to disagree with their own theoretical position: their behaviour clearly indicates that they believe in the metaphysical claim that substance is permanent. However, such disagreement in turn refers to a lack of understanding on part of the sceptic of their own *in abstracto* position. Such cases can often be observed in academic setting. Panpsychists treat their natural and artificial setting appallingly, thusly disregarding the fact that such setting might possess conscious states. Solipsists continuously fail to use their mind's powers in order to create better reality for themselves (as surely reality is nothing more than the activity of one's own mind!). Sceptics, as Nelson demonstrates, act as if they are sure of the truthfulness of at least some of their beliefs. Moral antirealists seem to take part in common ethical trends without further ado, rendering themselves undistinguishable from moral realists. Kantian aesthetes might be observed to exclaim "Oh, that steak is simply beautiful!". Cartesian dualists judge about other minds on everyday basis while affirming that a mind is known solely by means of introspection. This infelicitous list goes on and on, demonstrating time and again the contrast between propounding a theoretical *in abstracto* position and having sincere beliefs that might be used to formulate a genuine philosophical problem.

2. Understanding texts vs. understanding problems and solutions

„Our aim, however, is not simply to reflect; if reflection is to have a purpose, it must be directed toward adequately significant problems. This does not imply that philosophical investigations are justified only if they serve a useful purpose. Philosophical inquiry, like any search for truth, is an end unto itself. But this higher interest in truth, which is independent of all usefulness, is nevertheless concerned with the relation of our thinking to reality, and only those intellectual efforts can appear valuable to it that further our knowledge of reality. In philosophy, too, the importance of the problems is determined by the extent to which their solution contributes to our knowledge of reality.“ (Nelson 1918 (1949), 94-95)

When debating *in abstracto*, as we have seen, one does not necessarily deal with an actual problem (since non-doctrinal behaviour clearly indicates what the actual problem is, for instance, a missing overcoat). Then, as I sketched above, a doctrine follower does not really understand why they deal with their *in abstracto* problem in the first place. Nothing in their everyday life refers to the problem of whether or not substance is permanent yet academic behavioural standards force two or more general views on this

problem and presuppose that adherents to different views should debate in order to progress academically. Indeed, there might be cases in which academic philosophers have an everyday, actual correlate for their academic works. A Cartesian dualist might be cheated on a contract by a crafty fraudster and might use this fact as to justify her belief in the inaccessibility of other minds.

This, however, does not solve the understanding problem, since the particular experience (“getting cheated on a contract”) is simply a piece to be placed in an already available theoretical framework (“Cartesian dualism”). The framework itself seems to be disconnected and independent of this experience. Indeed, philosophical theories, or *in abstracto* positions, are often taken by the great majority of philosophers to be independent from experience. This is merely an illusion, as even a theoretician needs experience in order to be able to work on/with a philosophical theory. In academic setting, this experience is the experience of reading texts. However, this is not to say that such theoreticians have experienced *a philosophical problem* when they had read Descartes, for instance. Maybe Descartes did experience such a problem, yet all the theoretician does is to get themselves acquainted with how Descartes responded to the problem. However, the connection between the problem and Descartes’ work remains obscure and beyond what the theoretician understands since they only access a theoretical framework (embedded in a text) and not the experience that brought about the construction of said framework.

Thus, if one’s work in philosophy is limited to reading texts, one’s expertise is doomed to lack of understanding on why the texts are the way they are. The problems that the texts respond to are beyond the texts: they are in the long lost experience of their authors. Of course, an academic might coincidentally turn out to be in possession of a similar experience but the connection between their experience and a favoured philosophical doctrine can never be demonstrated: its existence can only be a matter of speculation. In summary, an academic philosopher systematically deals with texts and their commentaries, but only coincidentally might deal with philosophical problems and their solutions.

3. The isolation of non-institutional thinkers

“When we learn that Heraclitus asserted the flux of all things, this knowledge is no more philosophical than the knowledge that he lived in Ephesus or that Alexander the

Great marched to Babylon. For this reason philosophy cannot be learned from the history of philosophy. The most accurate and comprehensive knowledge of the history of philosophy does not bring us a step nearer to even the simplest philosophical cognition; and nothing is more fatuous than the wish to make a philosopher of oneself through a study of the history of philosophy.” (Nelson 1918 (1949), 93-94)

Philosophy is an academic discipline. However, it is not *only* and *merely* an academic discipline. Being acquainted with a body of texts is not equal to practising philosophy. Consider a simple case: Thales is often said to be the first (European) philosopher. If so, Thales surely did not get acquainted with a number of written works as there were no philosophers before Thales whose works Thales might have read in order to become a philosopher. Hence, his practice in philosophy had nothing to do with reading philosophical texts. Why should then one assume that a philosopher is necessarily an academic figure? Surely, one can do philosophy without getting into university and reading the great philosophical classics.

However, in order to do that, one has to obtain an incentive to do philosophy. This incentive might be their missing overcoat and their sudden urge to look for it. Why would they do that? After all, the coat might simply be gone or never existed in the first place. We do not look for missing unicorns (at least in most cases). There might be something special in the missing coat situation. In this situation one gains experience that one might share with their peers in order to understand what the problem is. One might engage in a discussion about this situation and find a solution together with other inquirers. However, none of that would be possible without the experience of losing one’s overcoat and the ability to share this experience with others.

Conversely, academic philosophers do not need a particular case in order to receive incentive to philosophise, nor do they need fellow inquirers when they write theoretical contributions. They only need an academic title and/or an institutional blessing. Such approach to philosophy is undoubtedly restrictive: only an institution grants the status of a philosopher. “Laymen” are to be dubbed non-philosophers and are to be kept away from philosophy, so sayeth the Institution. This perspective is certainly undesirable as it lowers the number of thinkers in a society and such society would only suffer in various aspects should the purely academic view of philosophy reign unchallenged.

4. The Socratic solution: creating more thinkers

The above-described problems for academic philosophy stem from a common cause: academic philosophers seem to be restricted to their *in abstracto* modus operandi. In order to remove that cause, one should first look for an actual (and concrete) problem that needs philosophical attention.

How then can we take interest in an actual philosophical problem? As Nelson stated,

“We demand of philosophy that it provide us with rules by which to evaluate the facts and events around us—rules which we need in order to act at all thoughtfully.” (Nelson 1918 (1949), 86)

Let us then consider the following description of an ordinary, everyday event:

(E) “A dear friend of mine with whom I spent a lot of time in my childhood has started talking behind my back. She seems to gain the favour of people who dislike me and who could help her career.”

No antirealism or realism, no Cartesian dualism, no philosophy *in abstracto* whatsoever is to be found in the description of the event. It is simply an ordinary situation that could happen to anyone. It is described in a language that can be understood by anyone. Moreover, of course, it is a situation that presents problems/questions. How *should* one act in such case? Can they *know* how to act? How do they *know* that the situation is such and such? How are they *supposed to feel* in such case? Certainly, these questions are not of high academic stature, at least on a first glance. Surely, they do not sound as impressive as the *in abstracto* question “Is there non-conceptual mental content?”. The latter is indeed a question that gives no common ground for discussion except for academics who are well versed in texts dedicated to the corresponding topic. Conversely, the problems/questions arising from (E) are precisely of the type that gives birth to an open philosophical discussion because they present the participants with a common, understandable description of an experience. They are of interest to everyone and grant anyone the opportunity to engage in philosophy.

Thus, the first role of experience for a Socratic Dialogue is to give a common starting point for an investigative discussion. It is a description of shared experience: a point to which anyone can relate to, no matter if one possess the very same experience or

simply understands well its description. Perhaps a true Nelsonian would not put the stress on the description but there is no sharing of experience without sharing of its description. This is more of a trivial point so I will just presuppose that “shared experience” covers also “shared description of an experience” (as Socratic Method practitioners often seem to do).

However, I cannot stress enough how important is it to consider *only* shared experience when speaking of the role experience plays in a Socratic Dialogue. An experience that is purely subjective (or “personal beyond description”) does not play any role in a Socratic Dialogue (it is arguable that it does not play any role whatsoever, but I am not going to pursue this lead). After all, if experience itself was to be counted as philosophy material, discussions, and, by extension, Socratic Dialogues, would have been rendered obsolete. We could simply philosophise by dwelling on our experiences.

5. The Socratic solution: ensuring understanding

The second role of experience in a SD is closely related to understanding. Common, understandable, shared experience allows philosophy, so to speak, *to start anew*, granting the dialogue an epistemological successiveness. This in turn endows the Socratic group the ability to understand fully each step leading them towards more general, abstract, and theoretical achievements. (E) might be understandable as an initial point of a Socratic discussion but (E) also guarantees that the later phases of the dialogue (which can be summarised under the term “regressive abstraction”), would be anchored in such understandable initial point.

Of course, the description of (E) might readily be relocated within the limits of various available theoretical debates to serve as a case in favour of a doctrine. Such move, however, is always done at the expense of understanding these very doctrines. It is precisely this sort of understanding of which *in abstracto* philosophising is devoid, and it is the absence of such understanding that gives rise to the variety of infelicitous incongruences between philosophical doctrines and the actual beliefs of doctrine-followers.

Conversely, by starting to construct a theoretical framework that clarifies/explains a shared experience, a Socratic group leaves no general statement unrelated to the initial starting point. Thus, the group is always able to demonstrate the connection between experience and theory *in abstracto*. In summary, shared experience is a permanent point

of reference: a group, floundering in theoretical confusion, might always return to the example and link to it their efforts at abstract philosophising, straightening out their direction and avoiding meaningless debate.

6. The Socratic solution: picking out the actual problems

The third function of shared experience within a Socratic Dialogue is to serve as a criterion through which to assess whether a problem is actual or not, and, by extension, to evaluate whether a problem is worthy of philosophical attention. Along Nelson's lines, this criterion would state the following: a problem that can be traced back to a concrete, shared experience, such as (E), is an actual problem. Conversely, a problem that cannot be related to a shared experience is a purely doctrinal, academically grown, solely *in abstracto* problem.

A good example of the latter would be the following academic philosophical question: "Even though it seems that there are no zombies, it seems plausible to assume that they could have existed. If we make such an assumption, what would it be like to be a zombie?". Needless to say, such problem can never receive a solution/answer and, by extension, can never enrich our knowledge of reality. Why would we deal with in the first place? In contrast, philosophically investigating (E) via the Socratic Method might supply inquirers with important epistemological insights related to friendship, honesty, selfishness, and much more.

In conclusion, armed with the requirement to start from a concrete, shared experience, a Socratic practitioner guarantees that: 1) the group investigates an actual philosophical problem/question and can achieve actual philosophical results; 2) the group understands its own theoretical progress and the philosophical positions it adopts; 3) the group is not restricted to institutional (or "professional") philosophers.

Reference list:

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