

When is Work Worthwhile? A Socratic Dialogue Experience Lucy Traves

In March I joined a group of others at a retreat centre in rural Surrey (the same retreat centre that Nigel Laurie wrote of in *Practical Philosophy* 2:3 (Laurie,1999)). My intent is not to duplicate Nigel's article, but to give an account of my feelings about and reactions to the experience. By so doing, I hope to give a flavour of the experience, and perhaps explore the excitement, power and limitations of the technique, and the euphoria and frustrations it can create.

This was my first experience of Socratic Dialogue, I had done no real research and due to a communications hitch had done no background reading either. I was a totally raw recruit. In all honesty I had signed up in the first place because a friend had convinced me I would enjoy the experience, rather than out of a huge desire to participate. I feared I was in for three days of philosophical juggling and games playing, which would leave me feeling inadequate, and very badly read! But I was very much looking forward to three days of mental stretching. I am lucky enough to have a job which is very mentally demanding, but filling my mind with something different is always enjoyable.

The movement of a dialogue can be seen as being like an hourglass, or like a spiral, rather as nuclear physics can describe things as being both a wave and a fixed point. The dialogue starts with a question: in our case, 'When is work worthwhile?'. The question is known beforehand, and each participant is asked to think of an illustrative example. Our group brought a wide range of examples from both domestic and public sphere, highlighting differences in our views of 'work'. We then had to choose which of these examples to pursue. There is no predefined selection method; it is up to each group to find a consensus. For us, the key selection criteria seemed to be:

- empathy: that is could we get inside the example, understand why it was an illustration of what makes work worthwhile?
- interest: did we really want to talk about it for the next few days (in fact all the examples satisfied this criterion)? and
- simplicity: would we have enough time to explore it thoroughly?

I don't want to give the impression that the criteria were defined in advance: rather, they emerged from the choices people made and their justifications of these choices.

Once this process was complete (we were told that sometimes this can take up the whole of the dialogue) we spent a considerable time reviewing our chosen example. The review involved writing the example out at its most concrete level, without using any abstract terms such as 'love' or 'beautiful'. This has the effect of slowing down thought, something that was very difficult for me (as was the rule about not interrupting other participants – hoots of laughter from my nearest and dearest when I told them about that particular rule), as my mind has always moved fast, bouncing from one topic to another. One of my tutors once remarked that my essays were structurally akin to someone throwing wine over a table. My work demands quick, sometimes split-second decisions, which reinforces this tendency. As a result, I had to work hard not to let my mind race forward ahead of the dialogue itself. This paid dividends outside the dialogue, aided by

the retreat centre (I found myself able to glory in the garden). The fast pace of my work, embodied in radio, television and newspapers (normally my lifeblood) was kept outside. I could almost hear my blood pressure reducing.

Retelling the example can be a considerable strain on the example giver, as it is elucidated by them being questioned at some length about potentially very personal thoughts and feelings. I was glad to see that great care was taken by everyone in the group to ensure the example giver was not caused undue discomfort. This process of retelling may sound a small task that one could whiz through in half an hour. However, like many seemingly small things, once closely examined it became larger and larger: someone used the analogy of the Mandelbrot set, a fractal image that becomes more complex the more you explore it. One could quite see why some dialogues run for a fortnight.

With the example nailed down to our satisfaction, we then moved on to write a core sentence in the form 'work is worthwhile *for the example giver* when...'. The answers to this core sentence led us to make a list of assumptions about what makes work worthwhile as illustrated in the example. Every example we highlighted had to be bound to a reference in the text. We were then able to move from the assumptions to principles, the 'rules' that are true in all cases.

This is the logical end of the dialogue, and of the process of regressive abstraction. However, many dialogues do not reach this point. The whole process raised the question for me, "Is the purpose of the dialogue to bring out our unarticulated knowledge in the form of the principles, or the dialogue itself?"

What I would term the temporal problem was one of the most frustrating things about the dialogue. There was a split in the group between those who were keen to 'crack on' and get to the end, and those who wished to let each part of the dialogue take as long as needed. It should be clear from my preceding paragraphs that I was in the latter group, and although I had sympathy for those who wanted to see a 'full' Socratic Dialogue, analogies of sausage-making machines grinding out principles were never far from my mind.

I don't think it's any coincidence that the members of the 'hastening' group were all from the same business background. The process of the dialogue made it clear that everyone had brought things to the dialogue with them, be it backgrounds, assumptions, common education, attitudes, close friendships and, most strikingly, metaphors. This all hindered dialogue – and our inability to strip ourselves and leap naked into the dialogue was frustrating. In my case I use humour a lot in my writing and conversation – or at least try to! I realise now that some others felt this was a sign of lack of concentration, or even respect.

Although the dialogue was of paramount importance, we all had many conversations with each other while off-duty (it must be noted that we could not talk about the dialogue itself for fear of prejudicing the work that went on within it). These conversations ranged from frankly drunken banter to the profound. Two ongoing conversations I had have had a long-term effect on me. One was about the use of metaphor, which has changed how I use and think about the everyday terminology of my work and the other was about motherhood.

The topic of the dialogue was also of great importance – ‘when is work worthwhile’. I think it’s fair to say that we came to the conclusion that the dialogue was made more complex by having two terms within the question – ‘work’ and ‘worthwhile’ – in need of analysis. In this dialogue, we did not get to the stage of deriving a principle, but did throw up some very rich clusters of ideas. I have been able to look at my own life in that context: since I feel I have a pretty clear idea of what work is, I have therefore concentrated on the thoughts we had about what might make it worthwhile. The main assumptions we derived from our example were:

- that work is worthwhile when it is worthwhile to the person doing that work;
- that work is worthwhile when something of the self is given in it;
- that work is worthwhile when the person is solely focused on the moment when that work is undertaken (an example of this was rock climbing);
- that work doesn’t have to be paid to be worthwhile.

There, you have the logical form of the dialogue:

E x a m p l e s

One Example

Core Sentence

Assumptions

P r i n c i p l e s

An Edwardian belle: a rich bosom of examples, a tiny core sentence of a waist and a billowing skirt of assumptions and principles. Perhaps I’m pushing the hourglass analogy too far! But viewing the dialogue solely in terms of the hourglass can lead to regarding the dialogue merely as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself. At each logical stage the same issues are reviewed and revisited, which is why the dialogue can also be described as being like a spiral: the same ground endlessly recovered but with a deeper richness each time. Some dialogue facilitators prefer not to use metaphors to describe dialogue at all, as their introduction can predetermine how participants view the dialogue. Try it for yourself: find a metaphor of your own. I like the metaphor of the fairground carousel. Travelling round and round in a circle, but at the same time moving up and down between different levels.

As well as the logical form that guides how the dialogue progresses, there are also some structures that determine how it is conducted. All that I have described thus far takes place within the content dialogue. In order that this is focused solely on the issues at hand, a space has been created to handle any other issues that would intrude upon it. At any point a participant can request to move to the strategic level: this is a logical level, a space for questions about the dialogue (and requests for coffee breaks). There is one further level, the meta. This is a space to express one’s feelings: for example “I don’t think you’ve been listening to me for the last ten minutes, you’ve been staring straight out of the window”.

The three levels give the dialogue a lot of power. It means that the content dialogue can concentrate solely on content, rather than having to play out strategic or meta issues. As the group can move to another level at anyone's request it means that such issues can be dealt with speedily. However, it is important not to be too self indulgent in this regard: after all group dynamics can be very interesting in and of itself. We were reminded at one point that the strategic and meta levels are there to aid the content level; as aids to progress the content discussion not as ends in themselves. This is a very useful point to note.

When I came back from the dialogue I could not help but review my own working life in accordance with the assumptions we had evolved and the structure of proceeding dictated by the dialogue. I found that I tried to think more slowly and in a structured way, and that when discussing or debating a matter I try to focus on real life examples rather than hypothetical instances. I also try to structure my intercourse on the three levels, and not let my 'content' discussion be clouded by strategic, or meta issues. Rather, I now prefer to bring them out into the open, deal with them and then resume the content discussion. It has also made me realise that in my work I very rarely give of myself and that doing so is something I find quite fearful. Writing this article is part of the process of slowly hauling myself out of the trench to take the flak!

I am still not sure of the claims made for Socratic Dialogue. Are the derived principles true in all cases or only in the examples brought to the dialogue? However, I found the whole process extremely exhilarating and I feel that I have gained some powerful tools to aid my thought in an everyday context. It is also a very intense way to spend time with people, and the friendships that I have with some of those attending have been enriched immeasurably. Having to return to 'normal' life was as bittersweet as the last evening of a holiday. Would I go again? A certainty. Hope to see you there.

Reference

Laurie, N. (1999) "*What Is Autonomy? A Socratic Dialogue In Practice*" in *Practical Philosophy* (2:3, November 1999)