Dialogue and Discussion: Reflections on a Socratic Method

Abstract: This article starts from the observation that Socratic dialogues in the Nelson-Heckmann tradition can create a sense of belonging or community among participants. This observation has led me to the current argument that Socratic dialogue offers an alternative to more prominent forms of conversation, which I have called 'discussion' and 'discourse of uncritical acceptance'. I explain the difference between these forms of conversation by considering the role of experience in Socratic dialogue and the requirement that participants put themselves in each other's shoes. My argument is structured according to the different phases in a Socratic dialogue and placed within the literature on this method, as well as Hannah Arendt's writing on imagination.

Keywords: Socratic dialogue - Leonard Nelson - Gustav Heckmann - Hannah Arendt - Imagination

Introduction

In this article I reflect on my experience as a facilitator and participant in Socratic dialogues in the Nelson-Heckmann tradition. I facilitate these dialogues as part of a module for a BA in Philosophy, as well as in different community centres. My reflections originate in an observation made by a student. After the last session of one of the first dialogues I facilitated, the student noted how the participants had grown closer together as a group. This comment has stayed with me. As a facilitator and participant, I have since observed and experienced what I would provisionally describe as a growing sense of belonging among participants in these dialogues, even when there is little agreement on the topic of investigation. A community is created or strengthened, sometimes only for the duration of the dialogue, while on other occasions it lasts longer.

The observation made me question how this form of Socratic dialogue can be considered distinctive, and different from other forms of conversation. I shall consider if and how the observed sense of belonging can be described or explained by considering two distinguishing characteristics of Nelson-Heckmann dialogues: the emphasis on experience and the requirement to put oneself in the position of another. I realise that it is difficult to fully describe the observed sense of belonging and even harder to sustain the claim that it is created by Socratic dialogue. Do participants indeed experience this sense of community and if so, what is it exactly, and can it be attributed to this particular practice of Socratic dialogue? It is not my intention to provide a definitive answer to these questions in this article. I am not even certain that such answers are possible or desirable.[1] Rather, I intend to explore aspects of the method and thus draw attention to an alternative form of conversation.

The argument comes with a difficulty because it is about a method which is not familiar to many. The terms 'Socratic method' and 'Socratic dialogue' describe a wide variety of practices, ranging from ruthless questioning in Law Schools to critical thinking exercises with children. Yet, in this article, they denote a distinctive method, that does not necessarily match other understandings of 'Socratic'. Moreover, Leonard Nelson claims that his method cannot

[1] Nor do I want to argue that Socratic dialogue should replace all other forms of conversation. Cp. too Helga van den Elshout 2003 for a different account of what makes a dialogue Socratic.

be explained, but instead should be *experienced*, and experienced over a period of time. In support, he quotes the following famous passage from Plato's *Seventh Letter*:

> It does not at all admit of verbal expression like other studies, but as a result of continued application to the subject itself and communication therewith, it is brought to birth in the soul, as suddenly as light that is kindled by a leaping spark, and thereafter it nourishes itself.[2]

Participating once, or reading about Socratic dialogue, cannot replace this 'continued application'. Nelson suggests that therefore it would not even suffice to stop his lecture and engage in Socratic dialogue. All he, or for that matter I, can do, is 'to direct your attention to this method of teaching and thereby to promote an appreciation of it.' (Nelson 2004, 127)

This article introduces the method of Socratic dialogue by following the structure of a Socratic dialogue. It is divided into five phases: first one needs to find participants; next a question is formed; then experiences are told: one experience is chosen; and a judgment is formed. It should be noted that in an actual Socratic dialogue, these five phases cannot always be as clearly distinguished as I set them out here, and the judgment is often considered only the starting-point for the conversation.[3] Throughout this article I also present a philosophical underpinning of Socratic dialogue using the work of Hannah Arendt. As I shall argue in the first section, there is a need to find a new philosophical underpinning, as practice has moved away from its traditional Kantian background. Arendt's work provides, moreover, a wider context for my reflections.

Phase One: Finding Participants

Socratic dialogues in the Nelson-Heckmann tradition take place in institutes of higher education as well as in community centres, businesses, prisons and living rooms. They are usually advertised, or they are offered as part of a curriculum, and participants are given a general idea of what to expect. In this respect they differ from Socrates' conversations in Plato's writings in which Socrates usually just starts speaking to friends he meets in the street or at a party.

There is no simple way to invite participants to a dialogue which they will only understand once they have experienced it. I normally use two different approaches. The first is to introduce the method by outlining that it allows for a different conversation from those participants are more likely to be familiar with. I have called these 'discussion' and 'discourse of (uncritical) acceptance'. What follows should not be considered a taxonomy of conversation, but an indication of the significantly different atmosphere of a Socratic dialogue, which one may experience when participating.

[2] Nelson 2004, 126, quoting Plato, *The Seventh Letter*, 341cd. As Dries Boele argues: 'Practical philosophy must be experienced.' (Boele 2003, 49)

[3] For a different account of the different phases in a Socratic dialogue, see for instance Bolten 2003, and Kopfwerk Berlin 2004.

Socratic dialogue is first of all different from 'discussion'.[4] It moves away from an emphasis on winning and losing, and from practical concerns to the importance of the conversation itself as a shared undertaking. As Kristof van Rossem argues, 'participants try to understand each other and engage in a common enterprise.' (Van Rossem 2006, 48) In discussion, in contrast, two or more positions are thought in conflict with one another and the goal is to convince the other and *win* the argument. Extreme examples of this kind of conversation I consider Prime Minister's Question Time, or discussions on Fox News. Such conversations are characterised by their adversarial nature of challenges and refutations. At its best, this kind of refutation helps sharpen arguments, at its worst, it turns into a shouting match.

The second form of conversation is one where a difference of opinion is not pursued at all. Its proponents use commonplaces like 'Everyone is entitled to their own opinion'. Examples of this kind of conversation come from awkward seminars, where students will not explore or challenge each other's positions and arguments, as well as from conversations where, for often good reasons, people are determined not to offend. At its best this kind of conversation allows for differences to exist, at its worst it suggests a lack of intellectual curiosity. It can also silence much needed criticism. I shall call this kind of conversation 'discourse of (uncritical) acceptance'.

These broad outlines suggest that Socratic dialogue differs from each of the two kinds of conversations above, in that it does not accept two assumptions that discussion and discourse of (uncritical) acceptance share. First, they both assume that reconciliation or rapprochement is not desirable or even possible. The more adversarial form of discussion looks for weaknesses in the opponent's position. This position is proven inconsistent, or even unsound and its presenter may be ridiculed. The 'discourse of (uncritical) acceptance', on the other hand, does not try to reconcile difference, but allows these to persist. Second, underlying both are practical outcomes: debating politicians need to make decisions for the country or their community. In the case of the discourse of (uncritical) acceptance the lack of inquiry can be prompted by a desire to live peacefully together, or the concern for one's position in relation to others or to authority. Socratic dialogue, in contrast, aims for mutual understanding and agreement, and does not concern itself immediately with practical outcomes.

The method can also be introduced by relating its extraordinary history. The method of Socratic dialogue central to this paper was first developed by the philosopher and mathemati-

[4] Here I am using a distinction by Van Rossem, who provides an insightful table of characteristics for discussion and dialogue each (2006, 49). Of course, as he adds, 'any conversation has a bit of both'. I shall not reproduce the full table here, but limit myself to a few distinctions:

'Discussion (means 'shaking out')	Dialogue (means 'knowing through')
...	
Aimed at decisions and actions	Aimed at insight in the value of judgments
...	
Attacking and defending	Investigating and checking
...	
Convincing	Investigation
...	
Defensive or offensive attitude	Attitude of taking the others' point of view
Answering	Questioning
Speed	Slowness
Individually orientated	Community orientated'

cian Nelson. Nelson's Socratic method is inspired by Immanuel Kant, Jacob Fries, and by Plato's dialogues, as well as by Nelson's desire to train political activists. (Birnbacher & Krohn 2004, 10) The method is, as Nelson explains in his 1922-lecture, 'the art of teaching not philosophy but philosophizing, the art not of teaching about philosophers but of making philosophers of the students.' (Nelson 2004, 126)

After Nelson's early death at the age of 45, his students continued his work, and even facilitated and participated in dialogues as part of their resistance in the first years of the National Socialist regime (Miller 2000). After the war Gustav Heckmann especially developed the method of Socratic dialogue further. His contribution can be summarised as follows:

> Heckmann's contribution to the development of the method of Socratic Dialogue consists, among other things, of his detaching the method from the specific neo-Kantian background assumptions with which Nelson linked it, and providing Socratic Dialogue with a broader basis. … With Heckmann, the method of Socratic Dialogue acquires a more independent role. Nelson's idea that the consensus reached in a group dialogue can be identified with 'the truth' is weakened. (Birnbacher & Krohn 2004, 11)

With Heckmann the neo-Kantian background of the Socratic method becomes less prominent. This becomes clear when, for instance, considering the possible outcome of a Socratic dialogue. Few people nowadays assume, as Nelson did, that participants can find 'universal truths'. (Nelson 2004, 135) Instead, it has been argued that the truth is provisional and true only for this particular group at this particular time. Thus, Heckmann talks of 'proven for the time being'.[5] Others argue that participants may receive a glimpse of the truth in the dialogue. (Kessels 2005) The lessened significance of the neo-Kantian background is also evident from the fact that when explaining method and rules, facilitators usually consider pedagogy rather than philosophy. Relating the Socratic method to Arendt's work, as I aim to do in this article, can thus provide an alternative philosophical foundation and explanation of the method.

Phase Two: The Question

Participants typically number between six and twelve. When they have gathered in someone's living room, in a community centre, or a classroom, the facilitator may want to verify that they are there of their own volition. Their willingness is important, for even though Socratic dialogues can be very enjoyable, they are rarely easy. For this article, I will need to assume that students in Higher Education attend a course, especially a course in philosophy, freely.[6]

The philosophical question that is central to the dialogue has often been decided in advance, in order to save time. The question should be answerable by experience and reason alone. Examples of such questions are: what is friendship? What does it mean to be a member of a

[5] Heckmann 2004, 112. The translator has even added quotation to this phrase.

[6] This assumption is certainly not without its difficulties, but these are complex and need treatment in a separate article. The assumption underlines governmental policy papers such as the Browne report. (Browne 2010; cp. Collini 2010) Its opposite, the assumptions that students do not attend a course freely, I consider even more problematic.

community? When is one allowed to lie? etcetera. (Cp. Kopfwerk Berlin 2004, 149-155) The participants act as each other's midwives, questioning and probing positions. The facilitator does not contribute to the content of the dialogue, and in this respect differs from Socrates in Plato's dialogues. Through interventions he or she helps the participants in their investigation.[7]

Phase Three: the Experience

At the beginning of the dialogue participants are asked to relate an experience which they consider relevant for the question. Thus, in reply to the question 'What is friendship?' they can offer an incident or event, where they experienced or witnessed friendship - or the lack thereof. In answer to the question, 'When is one allowed to lie?' they can think of instances when someone lied to them, or they lied themselves, and would judge this acceptable - or not.

The centrality of experience is based on Socrates' practice and his famous dictum 'The unexamined life is not worth living' (*Apology* 38a). Nelson brings in an additional reason:

> 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 sceptics would very likely soon get the best of it. But if, on the conclusion of our debate, one of the sceptics 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 to his philosophical doubt of the permanence of substance. (Nelson 2004, 134)

Nelson makes experience central to philosophical dialogue, not just because experience is important to investigate, as Socrates would have it, but also because it directs the conversation away from hypotheticals. The emphasis on experience allows for different argumentation. The experience offered in response to the question 'what is the meaning of substance?' would be the sceptic relating the occasion where his overcoat went missing. The experience thus does not need to be anything sensational. Indeed, I find that simple examples often work best. Yet however simple, the example comes from personal experience and thus Chatham House Rule applies. (I.e. outside the room one can discuss what was said, but not who said it.)

The central role of experience is not always appreciated by participants. (This is, incidentally, especially true of trained philosophers.[8]) Some participants will express reluctance to explore their experience, as they consider it too limited a starting-point. They prefer to start from a standard definition instead and argue that a singular experience will not provide an overview or all-encompassing insight into the topic of conversation.

These are important objections. Depending on the situation a facilitator will decide on the best way to explain that while other methods have their value, it *is also worth* investigating experience, and that such an investigation can lead to more general insights. Arendt's work

[7] It is now generally acknowledged that such interventions are not strictly neutral or objective. (Cp. Van Rossem 2006, 49)

[8] Cp. Nelson (2004, 149-150) who is quite severe on the philosophy student; cp. too Altorf 2013)

provides an additional argument. Experience is central to Arendt's phenomenological hermeneutical approach. Phenomenology is, as the name suggests, concerned with phenomena, or appearances, i.e. not with 'things as they are, but with how they appear to us, or our experience of them'. (Smith 2013) Different people will experience things differently and for Arendt this is crucial for our sense of reality. We may agree that there is an elephant in the room, but not what it looks like, or why it is there. In our disagreement, we affirm its existence as something more than an individual's fantasy. In contrast, when no one acknowledges the elephant in the room, I may start doubting my assessment of a situation and thus of reality. For Arendt, our sense of reality depends on sharing a world with others.[9]

For Arendt, Marieke Borren explains, lived experience differs from the notion of experience in the tradition of (strong) empiricism:

> Arendt holds that incidents, facts, and events are not immediately clear to us. Experiences require interpretation in order to convince or disclose their explicit meaning. For (strong) empiricists, experience points to a collection of mere sense data that refer to entities existing independently from the perceiver or observer. (Borren 2013, 233)

Borren argues that for Arendt '[e]xperiences require interpretation'. Nelson's example of the sceptic can illustrate this. The absence of the coat indicates that the sceptic lives in a world where coats do not always stay where we leave them. When recognising the experience, it will be interpreted. For instance, the focus will be on the absence of the overcoat rather than background noise, or the weather outside, unless of course the sceptic links the absence of the coat to the weather. All the same, the experience is also open for further or diverging interpretations: is this the work of a prankster, or a sign of a cruel universe where it does not rain unless one is without coat or umbrella?

Arendt thus shows both the importance of, and the need for investigating experience. It is important to share individual experience and take it serious as material for investigation, because it contributes to our sense of reality. There is also a need to investigate experience, because its meaning is not always immediately clear to us. Others can help us understand it, or challenge our initial understanding.

Phase Four: Choosing one Experience

Once a number of experiences have been told, the participants in a Socratic dialogue will choose one of these for their dialogue. The limitation to one example is introduced for practical reasons. It focuses the conversation by providing a factual event that grounds the conversation. The other experiences remain in the background, and can become part of the dialogue at a later stage.

The example is selected using a number of criteria: it needs to be concrete (i.e. it needs to be clear where and when it happened and the example-giver needs to play a part in it), it needs

[9] Borren 2013, 230. Borren makes clear that Arendt's insight is best understood in the context of her writing on totalitarianism, which aims to isolate people and replace their individual experiences with a 'single rational truth'.

to be limited (otherwise it will take too long to tell), and it needs to be emotionally closed (it should not concern a situation in which the example-giver is still emotionally involved. A Socratic dialogue is a philosophical investigation and has no immediate therapeutic goal[10]). The example also needs to be relevant, i.e. it needs to be in some way related to the question. Sometimes this criterion creates fierce discussion, in which participants disagree what the example is about. Significantly, disagreement can be confirmation that the example is relevant, when it leads to further investigation of the question.

The one remaining criterion is the most difficult: the example needs to be of interest to everyone. This does not mean that it needs to be very complicated or sensational, though less experienced groups do sometimes choose those examples. Rather, the example needs to be *philosophically* interesting, i.e. it needs to allow for *philosophical* investigation.

A second and even more important aspect of the criterion that the example needs to be of interest to everyone is that participants need to be able to recognise the experience, to put themselves in the shoes of the example-giver. This is important because once the example has been chosen, retold and written down on a flip-chart, participants are expected to do exactly that, to put themselves in the shoes of the example-giver, so that not just one person's, but everyone's experience is under investigation.

This requirement is often questioned by participants. They argue that they cannot put themselves in someone else's position, because they were not there, or they would respond very differently to the issue at hand. Some even hold that it is impossible in principle to put oneself in someone else's position. Others question what it means: do they have to imagine themselves as the other (as a woman, as a man, as someone with perfect eyesight, or 6 feet tall)?

In an actual dialogue the facilitator will need to decide how to address these important objections in a way that both encourages philosophical investigation and does not divert the investigation into a discussion on method. That is, the facilitator cannot disregard these concerns and *also* expect and embody an investigative attitude. (Van Rossem 2006, 49) At the same time, he or she should keep in mind that most - if not all - participants are there to investigate the question, not the method.

Experience in facilitation can again help here, as well as further understanding of the underlying assumptions in these objections. Let me starts with the objection that it is not possible to know what someone else experiences. This objection is usually based on the assumption that only the experiencer has access to his or her experience. In dialogues I have facilitated philosophically schooled participants have occasionally mentioned Thomas Nagel's 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?' (1974), and argued that we cannot know what another experiences, just as we cannot know what it is like to be a bat.

Yet, on closer look, Nagel's article seems to confirm rather than deny the possibility of putting oneself in the position of someone else. Nagel may doubt our ability to know what it is

[10] This does not mean that emotions or feelings play no role at all in the conversation. (See for instance Gronke and Sparnaay 2004.)

like to be a bat *for a bat*, as we can only know the human version of what it is like to be a bat. Yet, the same does not apply to humans. Humans can recognise the experience of someone else, if they have had a similar experience: 'It is often possible to take up a point of view other than one's own ... one person can know or say of another what the quality of the other's experience is.' Nagel also adds: 'The more different from oneself the other experiencer is, the less success one can expect with this enterprise.' (Nagel 1974, 325, 326). In a similar way, a facilitator may suggest to participants that in daily life we constantly assume that we can recognise each other's experience. If participants are unable to work with one example, they should be encouraged to look for another.

If it is indeed possible to put oneself in the position of another, what is required of the participants? I find it helpful to think of the following distinctions. Putting oneself in the position of another is an imaginative change in space and/or time, which takes one of two forms. We can imagine ourselves in the other person's situation, or imagine that what is happening to that person is happening to us in our situation. The distinction between these two can be a matter of emphasis or personal preference. For instance, it may be easier to imagine oneself being bound in Plato's cave, than to imagine the shackles coming to your chair. Or, a glance at one's coat on its hanger near the door can make the experience of the sceptic all the more vivid.

Especially at the start of a dialogue, some participants imagine themselves as bystanders, rather than in the position of the example-giver. This perspective often reveals itself when participants start offering advice. (Bolten 2003, 35-36) It can come from unfamiliarity with the method or an understandable reluctance to investigate one's own experience. It is indeed difficult to do so and one makes oneself vulnerable. (Bolten 2003, 39). For a facilitator it is then important to encourage a more investigative approach, in which the experience of all participants is under discussion.

The Dutch facilitator Dries Boele further investigates this requirement with a very perceptive distinction between *zich verplaatsen* and *zich inleven*. (Boele 2003, 161-169) The distinction is probably best translated as the distinction between *putting* oneself in the other's position and *imagining* oneself in the other's position[11]: participants are asked either for their response given to *the situation*, or *the experience of the situation*. The former is described above, where for instance we put ourselves in the situation of the sceptic, who did not find his or her coat, or that we will not find ours now.

For the latter, imagining oneself in the position of someone else (*zich inleven*), Boele explains, participants are asked to look at their own experience and see if they have an *experience* that is similar.[12] Boele points out that when people are in the same situation, they do not

[11] The term *zich inleven* is difficult to translate. 'To empathise' creates difficulties because this term has a particular meaning in the work of Arendt, as will become clear in the next section. 'To immerse' moves away too far from the original meaning and suggests that one's own perspective is left behind. 'To imagine' seems the best solution. To avoid any confusion, including the suggestion that 'to put oneself in another's position' does not involve imagination, I have added the Dutch original in brackets.

[12] Boele adds sound methodological reasons for preferring the second option. Putting oneself in another's position asks for hypothesis and is in that sense antithetical to Socratic dialogue and its emphasis on experience. Moreover, it can lead to giving each other advice rather than investigating the issue at hand.

necessarily experience it in the same way. For instance, the unexpected halt of a lift may frighten one passenger and not affect the passenger standing next to him or her. Similarly, the sceptic and I may not care about our coat in the same way. I find the experience of losing my coat unsettling, for I am always cold, whereas the sceptic could be oblivious to weather conditions and will consider losing a coat merely a nuisance. If I am then asked to *imagine* (*zich inleven*) myself in the position of the sceptic, I should for instance look for an experience where I lost something and found it merely a nuisance.[13]

The above suggests that this act of imagination (*zich inleven*) is complicated to describe. At the same time, it is quite close to something we do regularly. This exercise of the imagination, I would argue, allows one to say something like: 'I know what that is like. I had that when …' It creates thus a complicated combination of sameness and difference: a similar experience can be experienced in different situations *and* it can be interpreted differently.

In the practice of dialogue it may not be always possible or even desirable to distinguish exactly between the different forms of imagination outlined above (*zich verplaatsen* en *zich inleven*). Yet, it is important (especially for the facilitator) to keep these distinctions in mind. They make clear how everyone's experience is under investigation, and not just that of the example-giver. They also suggest which differences in opinion are in particular fruitful for further investigation. For what will spur on the investigation is not so much, or not only, the different ways in which we experience a situation, but the different ways in which we interpret the same experience. It is important to recognise differences in experience, but these are up to an extent non-negotiable. The sceptic and I will not experience losing our coats in the same way (and why should we?). Difference in interpretation, on the other hand, we often welcome. For instance, when we are overcome by sadness, we can find our experience expressed differently or even better in a poem or a story, than in our own words.

Arendt provides a helpful philosophical framework for this exercise of the imagination. She mentions imagination in a number of articles and books.[14] Her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* provide both a description of imagination and argue for its ubiquity. I provide only an outline of her argument here, before I move to an understanding of imagination that is closer to Socratic dialogue. For Kant, Arendt argues, imagination is a faculty that makes present what is absent. This definition of imagination is in itself not surprising or controversial, as Arendt makes clear. (Arendt 1992, 79) Arendt also shows how for Kant imagination is present in all cognition, as it is an essential ingredient of perception. (Arendt 1992, 81)

A different aspect of imagination appears in Arendt's 1954 essay 'Understanding and Politics'. In this essay, Arendt is concerned with understanding. She is looking for understanding, in particular understanding of totalitarianism, and yet she finds that the tools for understanding were lost in totalitarianism: '… the very event, the phenomenon, which we try - and must

[13] Note that the allegory as told in *The Republic* does not ask for this kind of imagination, but assumes that we are the ones that will escape.
[14] A commonly used source is her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (1970), as well as a much earlier article, 'Understanding and Politics' (1954) and 'Truth and Politics' (1967). The Kant Lectures provide a useful definition of imagination, as well as insight into its ubiquity.

try - to understand has deprived us of our traditional tools of understanding.' (Arendt 2005, 310)

Arendt describes understanding as 'an unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world.' (Arendt 2005, 307-8) She links this activity to imagination, which is understanding or from which understanding springs. Her wording is poetical, when she writes at the end of the essay that imagination

> enables us to see things in their proper perspective, to be strong enough to put that which is close at a certain distance so that we can see and understand it without bias and prejudice, to be generous enough to bridge abysses of remoteness until we can see everything that is too far from us as though it were our own affair. This distancing of some things and bridging the abysses to others is part of the dialogue of understanding, for whose purposes direct experience establishes too close a contact and mere knowledge erects artificial barriers. (Arendt 2005, 323)

Imagination is both a *bridging* exercise for what is too distant, and an exercise in *distancing* ourselves from bias and prejudice. The outcome is to 'see everything that is too far from us as though it were our own affair'.

This quotation provides a good description of the use of imagination in Socratic dialogue. The first part describes the imagination of the example-giver. He or she should be 'strong enough' - this adjective is very appropriate, for it is not always easy to be the example-giver - to no longer lay superior claims to an example. The example-giver should not change the factual nature of the experience (and this includes feelings etc.), but neither feel sovereign in interpreting it. The second part applies to the other participants, who need to be 'generous enough' and 'see everything that is too far from us as though it were our own affair'. Participants should try and make the example their own. If they cannot do so, a different example should be chosen.

Phase 5: The Judgment

The next phase in the Socratic dialogue is judgment, which some facilitators consider to be only the start of the actual dialogue. The example-giver and sometimes every participant are asked to provide a judgment that relates the question to the example. In this phase it is important to stay as close to the example as possible. As Hans Bolten argues, it is usually not difficult for participants to express an opinion or to provide a general judgment. The difficulty lies in forming a judgment that is closely related to and comes out of the experience under discussion. (Bolten 2003, 41)

The judgment made may not be – as Bolten observes – anything special. The sceptic could for instance say, 'I was surprised, because I expected my coat to be near the door, where I left it.' That is not an earth shattering insight, but it is very different from the position taken in the original, purely speculative debate ('his philosophical doubt of the permanence of substance'

(Nelson 2004, 134; cp. above)). An important aspect of the dialogue is to establish what opinions we actually hold (*quid facti*). Other participants may provide yet other judgments.

Forming the initial judgment introduces the important aspect of determining the reasons for holding this opinion (*quid juris*). Establishing those reasons will introduce philosophical positions. The sceptic may argue that he or she has never observed any coat disappearing spontaneously (a form of empiricism), or that without the assumption that a coat does not move spontaneously the world does not make much sense (a form of transcendental philosophy). Socratic dialogue thus provides an entrance into philosophical debate, through an investigation of our own experiences.

A detailed comparison between this phase and Arendt's writing on judgment will have to wait for another paper, not in the least because Arendt's writing on this topic is notoriously difficult.[15] In lieu of a full paper, I note a few things. The judgment phase can be related to a third occurrence of imagination in Arendt's work. In *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* Arendt describes imagination as 'enlarged mentality':

> [The "enlargement of the mind"] is accomplished by "comparing our judgment with the possible rather than the actual judgments of others, and by putting ourselves in the place of another man". The faculty that makes this possible is called imagination. … To think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains one's imagination to go visiting. (Arendt 1992, 42-43)

With Socratic dialogue in mind, one may note the importance Arendt attaches to imagination, here as preparation for judgment. It is also helpful to recall the distinction between *putting* or *imagining* (*zich inleven*) oneself in the position of someone else, especially in the context of Arendt's emphatic argument that imagination is not empathy.

In the *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* Arendt emphasises that this enlarged mentality should not be confused with empathy, which she understands as a passive acceptance of what others think:

> To accept what goes on in the minds of those whose "standpoint" (actually, the place where they stand, the conditions they are subject to, which always differ from one individual to the next, from one class or group compared to another) is not my own would mean no more than passively to accept their thought, that is, to exchange their prejudices for the prejudices proper to my own station. (Arendt 1992, 43)

It is debatable whether empathy is indeed this passive (cp. Baron-Cohen 2011). More important for the present discussion is Arendt's underlying concern, which is the 'exchange' of one set of prejudices for another. Arendt's objection to what she calls empathy is the threat of

[15] For instance, commentators disagree to what extent the *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* present her own thoughts or should be read as an explanation of Kant (Borren 2013), or to what extent the notion of judgment changes in her work (Hermsen & Villa 1999). For these textual and other difficulties with Arendt's writing on judgment, see the works quoted as well as Beiner's interpretative essay (esp. 89-94).

sameness. It seems to me that this threat is more palpable in relation to *putting* oneself in another's position, than in relation to *imagining* (*zich inleven*) oneself in that position. If I *put* myself in another's position there is the risk of accepting all the aspects of their position. If I *imagine* myself in someone else's position, I am engaging in an exercise of sameness and difference described above. I am thinking of a similar experience though not necessarily in a similar situation. Both Arendt and any Socratic dialogue facilitator would welcome such diversity. It is through this plurality that we learn to be critical of not just the 'prejudices and traditions one inherits', but also our own[16], and that we come close to an understanding of a world that we share.

Coda

At this point, the dialogue has only started, and depending on the agreed time the participants will continue to investigate their positions and arguments, and the underlying suppositions for hours, the rest of the day, or even for a week. I argued at the start that this overview cannot replace the experience of doing a Socratic dialogue. What it intends to do is draw attention to the method and show the distinctive atmosphere of Socratic dialogue, which I relate to the emphasis on experience and the importance of imagination.

The reflections in this article began with my initial observation that participants in a Socratic dialogue often share a sense of belonging. This sense is and remains difficult to describe, yet further insight can be had by connecting it to Arendt's 'to be at home in the world'[17], and to the emphasis on experience and imagination in a Socratic dialogue. Participants in a Socratic dialogue share experiences. The emphasis on experience comes from Socrates' practice as well as Nelson's desire to avoid hypothetical turns. Its significance comes to the fore in a very different way in Arendt's work. Shared experience strengthens our sense of reality and thus our resistance to totalitarianism.

Participants are also asked to use their imagination and put themselves in someone else's position. This does not imply that all think alike. On the contrary, disagreement is to be expected and welcomed, despite the difficulties it can bring. Disagreement allows for deeper understanding and a sense of reality. It is this insight that distinguishes Socratic dialogue from 'discussion' and 'discourse of (uncritical) acceptance'. Whereas the other forms of conversation tend to assume irreconcilable difference and are orientated towards conversation as a means to an end, participants in a Socratic dialogue try to explore experience together for the sake of the exploration. A Socratic dialogue rarely ends in full consensus, though participants might find some minor points of consensus along the way. For the time of the dialogue and often continuing afterwards, a community can come into existence. A community, moreover, which shares experiences from diverse situations and judges those in a variety of ways.

[16] Arendt 1992, 42: 'To think critically applies not only to doctrines and concepts one receives from others, to the prejudices and traditions one inherits; it is precisely by applying critical standards to one's own thought that one learns the art of critical thought. And this application one cannot learn without publicity, without the testing that arises from contact with other people's thinking.'

[17] Arendt 2005, 308; cp. 'phase four'. For an excellent analysis of Arendt's notion of world, see Borren 2009. If this connection can be made, it underlines the importance of any sense of community experienced in a Socratic dialogue in a different way, as it may even help understand the use of Socratic dialogue as a form of resistance in the early years of the Nazi-reign. Cp. Raupach-Strey 2004. This investigation will need to wait for a future article.

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