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PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUE AND THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

INTRODUCTION

Socratic discussion is a form of philosophical dialogue and its popularity is one of the signs of a returning interest in philosophical dialogue or discussion.¹ Reviving interest in philosophical dialogue, that is to say in tackling philosophical questions by means of discussion, is, however, not restricted to the socratic method. There are more signs that we are entering a dialogical period again. The practice of philosophy for children—originating in the pioneer work of Matthew Lipman—and philosophical counselling, both forms of philosophical dialogue, are spreading too.

Academic philosophy is nowadays mainly published in treatise form, in imitation of a scientific tradition and under the pressure of the exigencies of journals. Nevertheless, several interesting pieces of philosophical thinking have been published in dialogue form even in our time, or have clearly been influenced by the dialogue form.²

In this paper I will first reflect on the significance of dialogue in the history of philosophy and I will argue that the present socratic tradition is no exceptional deviation from the main course of philosophical thought, but constitutive of at least one aspect of it. I will take my examples from the European, but also from the Chinese tradition because I am familiar with the latter, and I will largely neglect the Indian tradition because I know very little about it. I will then turn to the intrinsic relation between dialogue and conception of philosophy, concentrating especially on the socratic dialogue and its relation to truth, and show that adoption of the socratic method as constitutive for our conception of philosophy implies a particular view on the relation between thought and reality. Finally, I will try to delineate what philosophical dialogue is about, what kind of truth it tries to find out.

¹ I will use the terms ‘dialogue’ and ‘discussion’ interchangeably.

² Particularly interesting examples can be found in Douglas R. HOFSTADTER & Daniel C. DENNETT: *The Mind's I. Fantasies and Reflections on Self and Soul*. Toronto, Bantam Books, 1981. Traces of the dialogue form can clearly be found in the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, e.g. in his *Philosophical Investigations*.

DIALOGUE IN THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

Written dialogue is a persistent literary form in the history of philosophy, often, but not always, as a reflection of an existing tradition of actual philosophical dialogue. By ‘philosophical dialogue’ in this paper is meant the practice of philosophy by means of oral communication and the written reports of such conversations. In its literary form dialogue usually takes place between two persons, but this is no principle: dialogues between more than two people can easily be found, e.g. in Plato’s works.

Oral dialogues can have various aims: their function can be instruction, but dialogue can also be a means of deciding between two opposite views, of tackling a particular problem in co-operation with others, of exchanging views, of persuading others, or of reaching a decision. That is to say, dialogue can be instruction, discussion, formal debate, conversational exploration, etc. Philosophical dialogue aims—in contrast to dialogue in general—at reaching some common insight, that is to say its function is a cognitive one. This insight may of course at the start be hidden from all the participants—in which case the dialogue takes the form of a search—, or one of the participants may have this insight from the beginning, in which case we have to do with instruction or persuasion.

Form and function of philosophical dialogue change in the course of the history of philosophy. One of the reasons for the development of philosophical dialogue is the changing relation between the dialogue as a literary form and actual dialogical practice. I will not always draw a sharp boundary between the two.

In the broad sense of dialogue defined above, a minor but important part of philosophical literature is written in dialogue form. Examples from antiquity are the dialogues of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca, the Indian *Upanishads*, the *Analects* of Confucius and the *Mencius* or *Mengzi*. All these works have the form of conversations between people, and dialogical parts or traces of dialogue can frequently be found in other philosophical works. Even after antiquity the dialogue has remained a persistent literary form: a number of classics of philosophy have been written in dialogue form or show clear traces of a dialogical tradition. Other popular genres are closely related to the dialogical tradition: philosophical letters, addresses, *monologue intérieur*. Some of the dialogues of antiquity—in the East as well as in the West—are among the most widely read and commented classics in philosophy.

The written dialogue does, of course, not always represent an oral discussion. The popularity of authors like Plato certainly induced later philosophers, like Cicero, to present their philosophical deliberations in dialogical form. On the other hand, there may have been frequent discussions in a period which preferred the treatise form in its publications. The relations between literary form and oral tradition may shed additional

light on the conception of philosophy in a particular period. We have, however, to leave this intriguing point aside in this paper.

In early antiquity written dialogue certainly reflected real conversations, and there is an easy explanation for that fact. In ancient Greece as well as in ancient China there was an intrinsic link between the origin of philosophical thinking and the beginnings of formal education, which had the function of preparing disciples for public and political life. A teacher or ‘master’ had a number of disciples and instruction took place orally, if only for the simple reason that there existed few written texts. Some of the oldest philosophical dialogues—like the *Analects*³ of Confucius—simply reflect that instructional practice, and have been written down by disciples who naturally wanted to preserve the words of the master as purely as possible. Even in these cases there is, of course, some discussion about the relation of the written records to the actual dialogues as they have taken place.⁴

There may be various reasons for writing down philosophical opinions in dialogue form, that is, to choose the dialogue as the literary form of a philosophical exposition. Because of its theatrical effect the dialogue is an attractive form of publication for the reader: it represents argument and counter argument in a lively manner and it shows something of the characters involved—which is particularly interesting when they are historical personalities also otherwise known. So one reason for the persistence of the dialogue in the history of philosophy may be literary fashion. But the dialogue form can also be chosen to pretend the reader has to do with the ‘real’ words of the master’. Doubts may be removed from the reader’s mind if he receives the words of the master himself.

The dialogue form can be attractive for the author too, because it disguises his real opinions and merely presents arguments. Caution may have been a motive for Hume in his *Dialogues on Natural Religion* and for Maurice Joly in his *Dialogues aux enfers entre Macchiavelli et Montesquieu*, in which he criticises the politics of Napoleon III. These considerations, however, are valid for science too, witness Galilei’s *Dialoghi sopra i due sistemi del mondo*. Nevertheless, in the history of science the dialogue has been very soon replaced by the treatise form and no serious scientist will consider publishing his findings in dialogue form.

³ For a translation see: CONFUCIUS: *The Analects (Lun Yü)*. Transl. w. an introd. by D.C. Lau. Harmondsworth, Penguin Bks., 1979.

⁴ Intentionally, I use the word ‘reflect’ and I do not mean to say that the dialogues of Plato, Confucius or Mencius are literal notes of conversations. Doubts on the reliability of the Platonic dialogues have often been cast. In the case of Chinese Antiquity, even parts of the *Lunyu* or *Analects* of Confucius may be later additions which simply adopt the literary form of dialogue because they pretend to be ‘the words of the master’. For this ‘accretion theory’ of the *Analects* see: A. Taeko BROOKS & E. Bruce BROOKS: *The Original Analects : Sayings of Confucius and His Successors*. New York, Columbia Univ. Pr., 1997.

Of course, also in the history of philosophy dialogues were succeeded by works published in treatise form. A transition is formed by dialogues like Plato's *Politeia*, the greater part of which consists of long expositions by Socrates under a thin guise of dialogue because they are regularly interrupted by questions. Even worse is the second important preserved work of Chinese philosophy, the *Mozi*⁵, which for the greater part consists of a number of thematical treatises introduced by the formula 'Master Mozi said', which, however, does not much more than legitimise what follows. The next stage are the works of Aristotle in Greece and of Xunzi in China, collections of thematic treatises without any reference to a speaker.

This development does not mean, however, that dialogue in philosophy died an early death. In the Greek-Roman world it returned in the dialogues of Cicero, and in Chinese antiquity in the conversations of Mencius⁶ and in the often imaginary, but very funny dialogues of Zhuangzi.⁷ Cicero may have been using the dialogue merely as a convenient literary form, but there can be no doubt that some of the dialogues in the Mencius⁸ and the dialogues between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi in the *Zhuangzi* reflect a actual debating practice, even if they are no transcripts of discussions which have really taken place in exactly that form.

In the course of the history of philosophy dialogue returns regularly, as practice as well as literary form. Public discussions and interrogations were an integrating part of academic life in late mediaeval philosophy. Dialogue as a literary form returned with the Renaissance, doubtless in imitation of the philosophy of antiquity, but certainly reflecting an existing practice too.⁹ In Chinese philosophy dialogue returns during the third century AD. in the form of the so-called 'pure conversations'. The intention of the participants here is entirely different from that in antiquity: in a common enterprise they try to formulate some point as concisely and elegantly as possible. These conversations are like

⁵ A recent translation is: Johnston, Ian: *The Mozi. A Complete Translation. Translated and Annotated by* ---. New York, Columbia University Press, 2010.

⁶ See: MENCIUS: Translated w. an introd. by D.C. Lau. Harmondsworth, Penguin Bks., 1976.

⁷ See: *The Complete Works of CHUANG TZU*. Transl. by Burton Watson. New York, Columbia Univ. Pr., 1968. In the case of Zhuangzi, the dialogue form certainly means to express and support his perspectivistic conception of truth.

⁸ Like the famous debate between Mencius and Gaozi on human nature in Book VI-A. Although there is no doubt that this debate reflects the real opinions of the speakers, even here the dialogue may be fictitious and nothing more than a rethorical exercise for the disciples of Mencius. But of course this training was necessary, because real debates of a related form were taking place.

⁹ Even mathematicians engaged in public debates in the period of the Renaissance, presenting problems to each other in the hope of finding a sponsor.

little theatrical sketches performed with the intention of being written down and published.¹⁰

This last example shows that some periods or fashions put rigorous literary restrictions on the form of philosophical dialogue. Quite another kind of restrictions is formed by specific conventions of debate in certain periods of the history of philosophy, especially in the so-called ‘eristic debates’. One form of eristic debate is specifically mentioned by Socrates in Plato’s *Gorgias* in his discussion with Gorgias’ pupil Polos: the two opponents alternatively formulate a question and the other has to give a short answer. Sophisms like the ‘Horned’ betray another convention, in which a challenger poses questions and a defendant has to answer with ‘yes’ or ‘no’. A very similar form is found in the famous *Discourse on the White Horse* by Gongsun Longzi¹¹ in ancient China, where obviously a defendant has to come up with a thesis and subsequently has to answer questions brought forward by a challenger. The same example shows that these sophistic discussions were not always an empty play on words, but often concerned serious philosophical problems.

Periods of dialogue alternate in the history of philosophy with periods in which the treatise form was the almost exclusive literary form. In European history periods in which the dialogue form took an important place were the fourth century BC. in Greek thought, the Italian Renaissance, and the eighteenth century Enlightenment (Berkeley, Hume, Diderot). Very broadly speaking we can say that there are periods in the history of philosophy in which there is a dominant philosophical outlook (Cartesian philosophy, German Idealism) and in which the practice of philosophy is seen as adding to an existing body of philosophical knowledge or insight; and periods in which everything in philosophy is in movement, in which philosophy is in an identity crisis, when it is so to say trying to find its way in the fog and when even the boundaries of the discipline are unclear to its practitioners. It is in these last mentioned periods that we will have to look for philosophical dialogue.

Science, on the contrary, always sees itself as the accumulation of knowledge and therefore dialogue has no real place in scientific literature.¹² We will now more closely

¹⁰ Examples of this kind of conversation can be found in a curious collection of the Chinese Middle Ages, the *Shishuo Xinyu*. See: LIU I-ch’ing, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü. A New Account of Tales of the World*. W. commentary by Liu Chün. Transl. w. introd. and notes by Richard Mather. Minneapolis, Univ. of Minnesota Pr., 1976.

¹¹ See: A.C. GRAHAM, “A First Reading of the ‘White Horse’”, in: id., *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature*, Albany 1986, p. 167-192.

¹² Which is not to say, of course, that discussion between opposing views has no place in scientific practice.

look what implications acknowledging the importance of dialogue for philosophy has for our conception of the discipline.

IMPLICATIONS OF DIALOGICAL PHILOSOPHY

Granting central importance to dialogue as a vehicle of philosophical thinking excludes a scientific view of the nature of philosophy.

The analogy with science is very strong in certain phases of the development of philosophy. Aristotle's work shows no clear boundary between philosophy and science, but in doing so was a model for philosophy. Attempts to put philosophy on a rigorous scientific basis were undertaken by Descartes, by Kant, and by Husserl, among others. Clearly all those philosophers saw their work as a foundation for future generations of philosophers. Doing philosophy is thus a building activity in which later generations add to what has been achieved by former generations.

Science and scientific philosophy are not only accumulating bodies of knowledge, this knowledge, moreover, has to be seen as unhistorical to be capable of being accepted by later generations. Science is unhistorical in the sense that it does not matter when and by whom a certain insight is gained, only if it can be proven or validated. Even the method of validation is usually seen as irrelevant to the meaning of the resulting insight and concerns only the degree of certainty.¹³ Attempts to put philosophy on a fixed scientific basis have never been successful for more than a short time.

When dialogue is prevailing, insight obviously is closely tied to the situation in which the insight is gained. This does not mean the insight is true only for those who gained it, or for the time in which it was gained, but it means: that the activity of doing philosophy is more important than the results, at least in the sense that having philosophical insight without having made the effort to gain that insight is of little value. Thus there is a clear distinction between philosophy and scientific activity: we cannot leave philosophy to the expert who has gained the insights and simply imparts them to us. We will see later that this distinction between philosophical insight and expert knowledge is basic and not accidental.

At the same time there remains a similarity between philosophy and science if we accept discussion as a means to find some solution to philosophical problems. In dialogue the means we have are ideas, arguments, analyses of concepts, common experience. Deciding on philosophical issues or trying to find out about philosophical questions makes sense only if these means, the means of rational discussion, are sufficient to reach

¹³ Of course this view of the development of scientific thought has not remained undisputed in recent decades.

a conclusion. This means philosophy is a rational activity, but one in which no special observation of reality is necessary. In this respect philosophy is close to, and has often been compared with, mathematics.

PHILOSOPHICAL DISCUSSION

A theory of rational discourse would define the *form* of the discussion by drawing up constitutive rules for rational discussion.¹⁴ We will leave this construction of an ideal type aside here, and instead concentrate on the issue what the acceptance of rational discussion as a means for deciding philosophical questions implies for our view of philosophy. We will restrict ourselves to the specific form of philosophical dialogue which is the socratic discussion. Socratic discussions start from philosophical questions¹⁵, and this fact has consequences for the form of the discussion, but also for the underlying conception of philosophy.

In the first place, the socratic tradition implies more than an occasional talking about philosophy by interested people; in the tradition it is understood that socratic dialogue or discussion is an important, maybe even the only method to practice philosophy. If the communication is to be more than an exchange of views, adherence to discussion implies the conviction that philosophical questions can be settled by discussion and by discussion alone, and the acceptance of rational discourse as an ideal type for such a discussion implies the view, that exploration and argumentation are the means to settle the question.

Acceptance of the socratic method thus implies a very specific view of the nature of philosophy, a view which will not be accepted by every academic philosopher. To put it in a systematic way, this view implies the following points:

1. Practising philosophy is the attempt to answer philosophical questions, which—if necessary—can be further clarified or divided into sub questions during the discussion, that is to say philosophy is regarded as problem-oriented.

¹⁴ Such a theory, which we will not discuss here, is proposed by: Robert ALEXY: 'Eine Theorie des praktischen Diskurses', in: Willi OELMÜLER (Hg.), *Materialien zur Normendiskussion*, Bd. II: *Normenbegründung—Normendurchsetzung*, Paderborn, Ferdinand Schöningh, 1978, p. 22-58, esp. §4, 'Die Regeln und Formen des praktischen Diskursus', p. 36-51.

¹⁵ I leave out discussions about mathematical and physical questions, as they are regularly held, because I especially want to go into the relationship between philosophy and rational discourse. For the application of the socratic method in teaching mathematics, see: Rainer LOSKA: *Lehren ohne Belehrung. Leonard Nelsons neusokratische Methode der Gesprächsführung*. ('Teaching without instruction. Leonard Nelson's Neo-Socratic Method of conducting discussions.') Bad Heilbrunn, Verlag Julius Klinkhardt, 1995. This Ph.D.-thesis also gives an extensive survey of the socratic method and its historical background as such.

2. The answer to a philosophical question or solution of a philosophical problem is no individual creation, but has to be accepted by others, in principle, by all people capable of rational thought.¹⁶
3. Acceptance of an answer to a philosophical question follows, if all the participants have been convinced by means of rational discourse, in which argumentation is the only means to establish a consensus.

This can be put in another way: the acceptance of the socratic method excludes a doctrine of privileged access to philosophical truth or insight. By ‘privileged access’ I mean a special method or way, which has to be mastered before philosophical insight becomes accessible, a way, which requires some special training or even initiation, and which can possibly not be mastered by everyone. In extreme cases it cannot even be articulated. Such an ‘esoteric’ view mostly implies that philosophical insight has to be gained individually, not as a concerted enterprise. It is an irony of history that the two great masters of presentation of philosophical dialogue as it is described here, Plato and Mencius, were both defendants of a doctrine of privileged access, and would probably not have accepted discussion as the definite means to settle philosophical questions.

To clarify what rational discourse is not, we will have to see how a doctrine of privileged access came to arise and what it means. A special method can be anything. If we believe Robert Eno¹⁷, in the case of the early Confucians it meant participation in the traditional ritual dances. What insight meant in the case of the Confucians and why it could only be reached in this particular way is less clear, but is of no concern here. Judging from what Confucius says in the *Analects* the insight gained cannot even be clearly articulated in a general way. I would call the Confucian doctrine one of moderate privilege: in principle anyone could join the community, but he had to go through the very special training to achieve insight on his own.

A step further goes Plato’s philosophy. Philosophical insight is not only tied to a specific training, but—if we take Plato’s exposition in *The State* or *Politeia* as his opinion—insight concerns a special level of reality, inaccessible not only to the uninitiated, but to the senses as well. Privileged access is necessary because reality is split into two levels, one of which is accessible to everybody, but the second, the focal point of real insight, only to those who have followed a special training. It may be even inaccessible in principle to most human beings, as the cast structure of the utopian society

¹⁶ I.e. philosophical questions are decidable and answers to them are not simply a matter of fashion, spirit of the time, or individual temperament.

¹⁷ See: Robert ENO: *The Confucian Creation of Heaven: Philosophy and the Defense of Ritual Mastery*. Albany, State University of New York Pr., 1990.

certainly suggests. In any case the way of insight has to be gone individually, as the metaphor of the cave demonstrates.

If we accept this so-called ‘metaphysical split’ in reality, then special access becomes almost inevitable. Conversely, this means that acceptance of rational discourse implies the rejection of the metaphysical split in reality. It implies—to put it into other words—some kind of realism, in which our daily experience and knowledge of the world around us are relevant for philosophical insights. And—because of point 2) above—this world has to be a common world.

The socratic method seen from this angle is the common attempt to find out about our common world. Find out what? Find out what can be found out by rational discourse only, without special means like a laboratory, specialised knowledge, intuition, mystical union, or whatever real or imagined means of knowing exist. Socratic method is the attempt to find out about the background of our common experience.

NELSON’S FOUNDATION OF THE SOCRATIC METHOD

Rational discourse of course cannot add to our factual knowledge of the world of our experience: only observation can do that. So, what does philosophy add? Philosophical thinking can only clarify the conceptual framework of everyday experience.

The theoretical foundation for the Socratic method as it is practised now was laid by the German Neo-Kantian philosopher Leonard Nelson.¹⁸ Nelson distinguished three kinds of knowledge:

- Scientific knowledge consisting of generalisations and gained by *induction*, starting from factual knowledge by observation;
- Mathematical insight consisting of relations between abstract concepts and gained by the *deductive* method, starting with axiomatic relations between primitive concepts.
- Philosophical insight consisting of the conceptual presuppositions of everyday experience and gained by *regressive abstraction* from those experiences.

Although mathematics and philosophy both consist of insights of reason (conceptual insights), the way philosophical insight is gained is the direct opposite of the way of mathematics. Mathematical truths are of an analytical nature, as are the truths of logic.

¹⁸ Cf. Leonard NELSON: *Gesammelte Schriften in neun Bänden*. Hrsg. v. Paul Bernays u.a. Bd. IV: *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*. Hamburg, Felix Meiner, 1972. Especially §31ff. Nelson’s view on the practice of philosophy and on the socratic method can be found in two essays: ‘Von der Kunst, zu philosophieren’ (‘The Art of doing philosophy.’), in: *Ges. Schriften in 9 Bdn.*, I: *Die Schule der kritischen Philosophie und ihre Methode*. Hamburg, Felix Meiner, 1970, 219–245. And: ‘Die sokratische Methode’ (‘The Socratic Method.’), *ibid.*, 269–316.

Outside the domain of logic, however, philosophical truths are synthetic, they are discovered by means of reason solely, but they do not find their foundation in reason alone.¹⁹ Nelson compares his conception of philosophical insight with the Platonic theory of *anamnesis*: philosophy does not produce any new truths, but consists in the discovery of truths already present in reason and underlying every experience. The aim of philosophy is gaining insight, not knowledge.

*Die philosophische Wahrheit ist aber von besonderer Art. Sie ist keine Sache der Kenntnis, sondern eine solche der Einsicht, Man beherrscht sie nicht durch Gelehrsamkeit, sondern durch Selbstdenken. Daher ist nicht sowohl die Philosophie, als vielmehr nur die Kunst, zu philosophieren, lernbar... Daher läßt sich auch aus der Geschichte der Philosophie keine Philosophie lernen.*²⁰

Philosophical truth, however, is of a particular kind. It is no object of knowledge, but of insight. One does not master it through learning, but through one's *own thinking*. Therefore one cannot learn philosophy, but only the art of doing philosophy... For this reason one cannot learn philosophy from the history of philosophy.

Philosophy—although it produces no new knowledge—is concerned with *truth*. The philosophical truths belong to the structure of reason itself and so can be discovered by investigating into the presuppositions of everyone's own experience, in principle by "looking inward". Philosophical truth is, so to say, already present:

*Der Fortschritt in der Geschichte der Philosophie besteht lediglich in der Ausbildung der Methoden, wodurch es immer besser gelingt, die eine und gleiche philosophische Wahrheit, die, mehr oder minder verworren, im Geiste eines jeden liegt, zu begründen.*²¹

Progress in the history of philosophy consists solely in the development of methods by means of which can increasingly be proven the one and only philosophical truth, which more or less unclear lies in the mind of everyone.

How do we know if we have discovered the truth, considering the fact, that the philosophical truths are notoriously difficult to discover? We can never be certain that we did not deceive ourselves or did go to the bottom. Here the Socratic method comes in: if we can reach consensus in a discussion, in which all participants in co-operation try to find out the truth in the matter, than we can at least be reasonably certain that we are on the right track, even if the discovered insights remain open for later revision. Because

¹⁹ 'Von der Kunst, zu philosophieren', *ibid.*, p. 223.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

philosophical inquiry is the discovery and rational foundation of the dimly perceived principles underlying the possibility of every experience, philosophical insight can only be gained in the concerted effort of those who have this experience, in principle all rational beings. A condition for this is not only consensus, but complete clarity regarding the involved conceptual relationships. The Socratic discussion thus appears as more than the occasional co-operation between people interested in the same problem: it defines the essence of philosophical thinking.

Few people nowadays will completely accept Nelson's Kantian view on the nature of philosophical thinking as the search for truths embedded in reason as such. However, it is important to realise, that the socratic method makes sense only when doing philosophy is regarded as a common attempt to discover the foundations of our experience. It implies some form of realism and a view of philosophy as finding out about or understanding reality.

PHILOSOPHICAL TRUTH

To gain a clearer view of the implications of the dialogical endeavour, let us explore the notion of philosophical truth a little bit further. What do we mean when we contend that philosophical truth is somehow hidden in the recesses of our rational faculties? Can we mean that truth is somewhere there, ready to be discovered under a pile of falsities or irrelevancies? And does the process of dialogical inquiry consist in simply comparing what we find in our minds, throwing away what differs and keeping as possible truth about reality what we find to have in common? Superficial notions about the relation between truth and consensus may suggest such a view, which we have, however, to reject energetically.

Truth consists—as does falsity—of propositions or judgements on reality and judgements of propositions are of a linguistic nature.²² There is some discussion about the question whether our mind contains ready-made propositions, but they certainly are not the content of the reasoning faculties as such. The rational faculty contains no judgements, but makes judgements. If the faculty of reasoning by its very existence implies the truth of certain judgements, this does not even imply that the corresponding truths are somehow represented in the mind. Truths *of* reason are no more truths *in* reason as the covered miles are in the driving skill.

Despite Nelson's psychological turn in Kantianism, philosophical truth can only refer to insights which are not analytical, but which are nevertheless reached on the basis of

²² I leave aside the difficult question, whether a judgment simply is a linguistic expression, or whether the judgment is something lying behind the expression and merely expressed in language.

common reasoning. But not on the basis of reasoning alone. Philosophical insights concern the presuppositions of experience. In the course of a Socratic inquiry we have to ascertain, not only if the principles discovered are common ground, but also if they really are the principles of experience. Because we cannot proceed by axiom in philosophy, the only way to do this is starting from experience and looking for general principles underlying experience.

This point of departure has important philosophical consequences too: it implies that philosophy is seen as the clarification of our daily experience and intuitions. Practising philosophy in a socratic discussion leaves our daily world intact as it is and does not try to convince us the world is somehow completely different from our immediate understanding. It deepens our daily understanding, it does not supplant it.

The Socratic method as it is practised implies the conviction that consensus about the answer to philosophical questions is possible. Even if we avoid the term ‘truth’ for this consensus, it is clear that ‘finding out about reality’ comes very close to this. Practitioners of other types of philosophical discussion will possibly think this goes too far and prefer a divergent discussion, because they do not think consensus is possible in principle. The problem then is: why discuss at all? A clear justification for the Socratic method is the conviction that we can reach a common insight.

DAILY EXPERIENCE

In the foregoing we repeatedly spoke of ‘daily experience’ as a level of reality accessible in principle to all who share the faculty of reasoning. Daily experience in a literal and concrete sense, however, is clearly very different for the university teacher, the philosophical practitioner, the factory worker, the salesman, the peasant, the consultant, the IT-technician. There barely is any common experience on the basis of which we can develop common rational insights. Common experience only means that we live in a common world, meet each other, try to understand each other, live together, sometimes have common interests. But this common world is no more than the shell inside of which our very different lives are enacted.

Practising philosophy is trying to understand how all these different lives fit together in a common reality, is to have the ‘eye on the whole’ in the phrase of Wilfred Sellars.²³ “Philosophy in an important sense has no special subject matter which stands to it as other subject-matters stand to other special disciplines.”²⁴ There is, this means, a radical

²³ Wilfred SELLARS: ‘Philosophy and the scientific image of man’, in: ID.: *Science, perception, and reality*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

difference between philosophical insights and understanding in any other area of human thought:

*Wir verlangen von der Philosophie, daß sie uns zur Beurteilung der Tatsachen des Lebens Regeln gibt, deren wir bedürfen, um überhaupt besonnen handeln zu können. Solche Besonnenheit erfordert, daß wir Einsicht in die letzten Zwecke und Ziele des menschlichen Lebens haben. Und eben diese Zwecke soll uns die Philosophie kennen lehren.*²⁵

We expect from philosophy that it will give us rules to judge the facts of life, which we need to be able to act in a thoughtful way. Such a thoughtful attitude requires insight in the ultimate objectives and aims of human life. And just these objectives philosophy has to teach us.

To be able to ‘act thoughtfully’ we have to discover the ultimate aims and objectives of human life, which obviously can be derived from the principles underlying our common experience—Nelson is not very clear about this. Again we can ask: are those principles somewhere present in the common substance of our diverse worlds of experience, like the grain in the wood, or the songlines in the Australian desert, ready to be discovered by the seeing eye or the listening ear? Can we regard these various worlds of experience as the diverse manifestations of one and the same underlying reality?

It is difficult to imagine that a common experience, which is not experienced, is nevertheless somewhere there. The reality of which philosophy promises to find out the truth is not a definite area of experience to be explored, but a common experience which still has to be constituted. The ‘shell’ in which our various areas of experience fit, is not an object lying around somewhere, but a task to be fulfilled. In this respect philosophical reasoning is something very different from the instrumental reasoning in specific areas of experience. The reality of which philosophical practice tries to find out the truth, is not given.

May we at least expect that if we start from our diverse experiences and by rational dialogue try to establish the underlying principles of our common world, there will be a straight and clearly recognisable path to go? Well, we simply do not know before we have found out. Even if we assume that reality as a whole obeys rational principles, and even if we depart from a narrow concept of reason, there is no guarantee that we will end up with one definitive, univocal and unambiguous reality. In this special sense reality is open and unfinished.

²⁵ ‘Von der Kunst, zu philosophieren’, *ibid.*, p. 224.

This is not a relativistic stance: we do not construct reality, we find out about it. Reason constitutes reality, it does not create it. What exactly is the relation between our thought and Wittgenstein's 'rock bottom' of experience we cannot find out beforehand, we can only speculate about it. We cannot step outside of ourselves to observe the relation between ourselves and the world. Philosophy in dialogue is the never-ending attempt to reach that rock bottom.

On the other hand our analysis means that philosophical dialogue—be it to the exact rules of the socratic discussion as we know it or otherwise—is something very different from a discussion method defined by a number of regulative rules, which could be practical and useful in other situations.²⁶ Philosophical dialogue is a specific attempt to live in a common reality with other rational beings; it is practice and serves no other purpose.

*Das philosophische Forschen ist, wie das Suchen nach Wahrheit überhaupt, Selbstzweck. Aber jenes höhere, von allem Nutzen unabhängige Interesse an der Wahrheit bezieht sich doch auf das Verhältnis unseres Denkens zur Wirklichkeit und läßt nur diejenigen Geistesbemühungen als wertvoll erscheinen, die unsere Erkenntnis der Wirklichkeit fördern.*²⁷

Philosophical inquiry is, as all search for truth, its own intrinsic aim. But this higher interest in truth, which is independent of any utility, in the last resort has a bearing on the relation between our thinking about reality and confers value only upon those endeavours of the mind, which foster our insight in reality.

²⁶ For the distinction between constitutive and regulative rules, see Gisela RAUPACH-STREY, 'Grundregeln des sokratischen Gesprächs', in: D. KROHN u.a. (Hg.), *Neuere Aspekte des sokratischen Gesprächs*, Frankfurt a/M, dipa, 1997.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 234.