

# Ethics and Socratic Dialogue in Civil Society

Patricia Shipley and Heidi Mason (eds).  
Munster, LIT Verlag, 2004, pp. 234  
ISBN: 3 8258 7925 9

*Review by Sarah Davey*

This is another publication from the Society of the Furtherance of Critical Philosophy following on from their *Enquiring Minds*. Like the earlier anthology, *Ethics and Socratic Dialogue in Civil Society* aims at giving an overview of the method of Socratic Dialogue as Leonard Nelson intended it and how this approach to philosophical inquiry can be applied to practical situations. While *Enquiring Minds* was focused primarily on philosophy in the classroom, the most recent publication shows how Socratic Dialogue is useful, as the title suggests, in civil society. The two volumes should be read in conjunction with one another to give a solid selection of papers on the practical applications of Nelson's methodology.

The book is in two parts; 'Reflections on Civil Society' and 'Dialogue in Practice'. The first part is obviously a more theoretical tour of civil society and democracy as a whole. The second part, as the title suggests, shows how Socratic Dialogue has and can be applied in different situations, showcasing practical examples of where Nelson's methodology has been applied globally. This part engages authors from a wide range of cultures and backgrounds from Japan to Belarus, from education to medical ethics training, where situations call for different demands on dialogue. All articles are united in stressing the need for a dialogical approach to their various cultures in maintaining democracy through dialogue.

To begin, Thomas Meyer sings the praises of Socratic Dialogue as a means by which dialogue can be accessible to all. While he comments on the problems of negative globalisation and modernity as a whole, he notes that although there are many disadvantages to the changes, they also bring new hope for a form of global governance whereby we can discuss common values through global dialogue. This paper is met by Hugh Busher who sees Meyer's hopes for dialogue and global democracy as utopian and asks the bold question - why democracy? While those of us in the business of democratic education strive to promote democratic values, Busher suggests that perhaps there may be other ways of going about governance. By wanting one global set of values he argues that we may be taking away some of the diversity that gives different global communities their identity.

The other papers in the first part of the publication address similar topics, discussing the merits of global governance and the freedoms that it brings, and these discussions are met with commentary from other authors. While these papers all go some way to include Nelson's method as the practical application of dialogue, it is clearly the second part of the book that highlights Socratic Dialogue's place in civil society. There are many papers from diverse backgrounds in the second part of the book so I will not mention them all in this brief review, suffice it to say they come from a broad range of countries and have applications in many arenas.

The paper by Dimitri Kletschko and Ute Siebert is particularly notable for highlighting the benefits of implementing Socratic Dialogue in countries experiencing civil distress, such as Belarus. While the authors are not as ambitious to say that dialogue will solve the problems for the country that is building itself after a history of civil unrest and confused identity, it does show how using Socratic Dialogue in educational institutions can reveal the 'true interest' of the citizens thereby inspiring them to continue to build stability in the country based on their own interests.

A paper to come out of Bulgaria by Aneta Karageorgieva similarly shows the importance of implementing philosophy in schools in order to create a positive civil environment. She connects the method of Philosophy for Children to environmental ethics. Karageorgieva recognises her training in America, but unfortunately despite the promotion of what appears to be the Philosophy for Children methodology, there is no mention of Matthew

Lipman or the program that the author seems to subscribe to.

Karin Murriss explores the practical problems of implementing Socratic Dialogue in schools. She gives some suggestions for going about this, which may contribute, to the dialogue method becoming further from the original method (which could annoy some purists). She suggests connecting philosophy to games, offering some useful ideas such as discussing the implications of choosing teams in sports and why there are some students who don't make sports teams etc. She gives helpful hints about connecting philosophy to the curriculum.

From Japan, Toshiro Terada shows that implementing philosophy in the classroom is not simply a curriculum issue but a cultural one. Japan is a culture not based on dialogue, and obvious difference is mostly 'swept under the carpet'. The dialogue that is encouraged in classrooms is debate where there is a clear winner. Approaches to dialogue encourages competitiveness hence consensus as a feature of the Socratic Dialogue is problematic in Japan. Despite being competitive, participants are unwilling to have conflict, therefore consensus is reached easily but not a genuine consensus that comes from rigorous examination. Terada suggests a shift in the idea that truth is reached when consensus is reached.

Perhaps one of the most pivotal chapters in the book is authored by Kopfwerk Berlin and outlines the actual process of Nelson's methodology. This begins by highlighting the importance and the difficulty with starting a Socratic Dialogue. The question that is chosen for the dialogue must be philosophical in origin and applicable to the participants' lives. There are many steps that are outlined in this chapter to decide on a suitable question and the authors offer ways of going about this. The second step in beginning a Socratic Dialogue is to realise the conditions within which we are working, i.e. are the participants volunteers, what is their motivation for doing a Socratic Dialogue, what is their social standing? Asking questions about the conditions will also influence the kind of question and dialogue that will ensue (an important implication for any inquiry facilitator). The next phase of the dialogue methodology is also of concern to the authors; they highlight the importance of choosing and explaining the concrete example that is used as an anchor for the dialogue. They give detailed criteria about the choosing of such an example to help facilitators guide the participants. Their tips on how to facilitate are particularly helpful to people wanting to create Socratic Dialogues of their own. The authors come from the point of view of facilitators and give helpful strategies to aid in the facilitation of Socratic Dialogues. They detail the traps that facilitators and groups may fall into. Their analysis is by no means complete and they end the article with the request for input from other Socratic facilitators. This inclusion reflects the dialogical nature of not just the activity of Socratic Dialogue but also its development.

Most importantly in this collection papers acknowledge the place of other dialogue forms in promoting democracy and values. Philosophy for Children, Bohmian Dialogue among other approaches to 'doing philosophy' also have a place in a democratic society despite the fact that they promote different ways of going about it. Possibly the only criticism is the lack of definitions of terms used in the book. While papers focus on the Socratic approach to dialogue, they are not simply restricted to Leonard Nelson's Socratic Dialogue. I would have preferred the title to be amended to 'Socratic Method' which would include not just Nelson's approach, but also the other methods that are used in the publication, most notably Philosophy for Children that is most likely a derivative of Matthew Lipman's program. It is commendable that these different approaches are used, but they should be given the recognition that they deserve as this promotes a wider application of philosophical approaches rather than just Nelson's method. Doing so may just promote further dialogue between proponents of different methods of philosophical inquiry.

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