



PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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Special Issue on Socratic Dialogue

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Nemo Veritatem Regit

Nobody Governs Truth

Editorial: Philosophy Nanosecond

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It's a great privilege to publish this special issue on Socratic Dialogue (hereafter SD), guest-edited by Horst Gronke. In the context of philosophical practice, the phrase "SD" does not denote the elenctic colloquies recorded (or invented) by Plato. Rather, it connotes the open-minded spirit in which Socrates deliberated with others, along with his commitment to discovering truth. In our context, SD denotes a method, or rather a cluster of methods, which are informed by the rationalism of Plato and Kant, but whose methodology was first articulated by the 20th century German philosopher Leonard Nelson.

This methodology was subsequently put into practice by German devotees of Nelson, a group currently led by our guest editor, Horst Gronke. The methodology has also evolved somewhat since Nelson's day, thanks to innovators such as Gustav Heckmann and Jos Kessels. In Germany, practitioners are self-specialized into one of two main streams: philosophical counselors under the aegis of Gerd Achenbach, and Socratic dialogicians in the traditions of Nelson and Heckmann. As you will read in Horst Gronke's *Introduction*, Socratic dialogicians eschew and moreover abhor Teutonic authoritarianism and its corollary cults of personality.

In the Netherlands, as in the USA, the pioneering generation practices across a spectrum, entailing what APPA recognizes as four areas: client counseling, group facilitation, organizational consulting, and (other) educational programs. Practitioners may come to specialize in one or another area, or may indeed straddle the spectrum. That said, the method(s) of SD are useful, if not indispensable, to practitioners of every stripe.

I first heard of SD in 1994, at the First International Conference on Philosophical Counseling, which Ran Lahav and I co-organized at UBC. Ida Jongsmma and Dries Boele were conducting short versions of SD as part of their contributions to the program. I remember several excited North American practitioners rushing up to me one morning, saying, "You must participate in one of these short SDs—they're amazing!" I did not doubt their words, but was overwhelmed by organizational duties. I subsequently participated in some short SDs in The Netherlands, and found them amazing indeed. So I later invited Ida and Dries to facilitate "full" SDs—two-day dialogues—in New York. Dries then trained a core group of American practitioners in facilitation, or at least in his version of the Dutch method.

Urban legend had it that the Germans were facilitating SDs over a period of two or three weeks, cloistered in the Black Forest, punctuating their daily sessions with hikes (not to mention hams and cakes). Legend also had it that formal SD in Germany required prior mastery of a voluminous set of rules, and that during the dialogue itself a designated "referee" was present to ensure adherence to them.

While our Dutch colleagues were well-schooled by the Germans, Holland boasts no forest that takes three weeks to hike through. The Dutch moreover incline toward succinct practicality rather than elaborate formalism, and so they boiled SD down from two weeks to as many days. In the process, they also distilled the rulebook to a short list, which can be smoothly enforced by the facilitator. Since Holland has a culture that prizes virtue, encourages pluralism, values free-thinking, yet loves consensus, Dutch society proved fertile ground for transplanted SD. After all, Holland is a country that celebrates an annual "Philosophy Month" every April; thus two or three days of SD nestle comfortably enough in its ethos. Dutch

practitioners have made considerable hay with SD, facilitating dialogues not only for themselves and their colleagues at fashionable venues like Ida's former Hotel de Filosoof, but also for civil servants, corporate cultures, prison inmates, the professionals and laypersons alike.

I trust that our American colleagues have already raised an eyebrow or perked up an ear at the phrase "Philosophy Month," a national happening in the Netherlands. At this writing, the American public has yet to celebrate "Philosophy Nanosecond." Still, things can change, especially if APPA's practitioners have any say, which of course we do. Even Descartes might agree that there's *surely* room for noetic improvement on these TV-ridden, big-pharma-saturated shores. So after importing SD from Holland, I further adapted it—not to the average American attention span (speaking of nanoseconds)—but to Manhattan's frantic lifestyle, which frequently entails events such as 15-minute peripatetic lunches, or 30-second pitches to producers. I managed to condense SD down to four hours, which on a good day with a viable group gets a robust result. And for the past dozen years, I have facilitated SDs of varying length—4 hours minimum to 2 days maximum—for many and varied groups from coast to coast, and indeed around the world. But nowhere is there more untapped potential than in the USA.

Let me regale you with you a recollection. One of my most memorable SDs was with a group of philosophy students, drawn from the philosophy clubs at Baruch College and The City College of New York (both of CUNY). Why memorable? Because of something a student said at the end. You should bear in mind that SD is to philosophical practice as Zen is to Buddhist practice: namely, a powerful method that stands (or sits) outside of text. Zen practitioners do not study sutras *über alles*. Similarly, and even more strongly, participants in an SD are forbidden, by rule, to make reference to texts. An SD is not a contest of erudition. It is an exercise in which each participant both thinks for himself or herself, and listens to the others. The success of an SD does not depend at all on what Plato or Kant or Nelson thought about the question at hand; it depends only, and vitally, on what each and every participant thinks. Thus participants in an SD become philosophers themselves, speaking their own minds, in counterpoint to studying only what other philosophers have written, and regurgitating their words. Do you see what this might have to do with education? So a philosophy club student approached me at the end of our SD. He was enthralled by the experience. He said "A two-day Socratic dialogue should be part of every undergraduate liberal arts education in the USA. I cannot conceive how anyone could study at a university for four years, and call it an education, without devoting at least two days to SD."

Out of the mouths of undergraduates, who are best-qualified to know! In turn, I was enthralled by his inspiration. If this dream ever came true, just imagine how many philosophers would be put to work, facilitating SDs for undergraduates in universities from coast-to-coast. Given that an SD of this kind should have no more than 10 participants per group, multiple facilitators could be employed for months on end on a given campus, and not even make a dent in the student body. The students themselves would have a truly Socratic experience of education, thinking for themselves in the presence of a skilled midwife, who assists them at the birth of their innate wisdom.

In that vein, I gladly commend this special issue to the capable hands of Horst Gronke and his distinguished colleagues. I first met Horst at a conference he ran in Berlin in 2005, and have been impressed with his and his colleagues' work ever since. SD is highly portable, from campuses to corporations, from civil services to houses of correction, from cafes to cruise ships. As you read the contributions herein, assembled and guest-edited by Horst, I am confident that you too will be inspired, not only by SD's intrinsic virtues, but also by its untapped potential in the land still awaiting "Philosophy Nanosecond."

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Aims and Scope

Philosophical Practice is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

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APPA Mission

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a non-profit educational corporation that encourages philosophical awareness and advocates leading the examined life. Philosophy can be practiced through client counseling, group facilitation, organizational consulting or educational programs. APPA members apply philosophical systems, insights and methods to the management of human problems and the amelioration of human estates. The APPA is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization.

APPA Membership

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a not-for-profit educational corporation. It admits Certified, Affiliate and Adjunct Members solely on the basis of their respective qualifications. It admits Auxiliary Members solely on the basis of their interest in and support of philosophical practice. The APPA does not discriminate with respect to members or clients on the basis of nationality, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, age, religious belief, political persuasion, or other professionally or philosophically irrelevant criteria.

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