Selling Socrates, or 
the Unexamined Life and the University

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Abstract
This article starts from Martha C. Nussbaum’s claim that the dominant understanding of (higher) education as a commercial undertaking needs to be countered by Socratic pedagogy. Nussbaum makes this claim both in her recent Not for Profit (2010) and her earlier Cultivating Humanity (1997). For her, the future of democracies is at stake.

Nussbaum’s claim starts an investigation into my own teaching practice at an Institute of Higher Education in the United Kingdom. First, I consider some of the consequences of the marketisation of higher education for this practice. Secondly, I consider a particular practice of Socratic dialogue, namely that developed by the German philosopher and mathematician Leonard Nelson and others. I will conclude that this form of Socratic Dialogue indeed provides an alternative to the growing marketisation of Higher Education, but questions Nussbaum’s confidence in Socratic Dialogue as a tool for promoting democracy. I will also argue why it is essential, as well as difficult, to introduce practice into this debate.

Schlüsselwörter
Socratic Dialogue, Higher Education, Leonard Nelson, Marketisation, Martha C. Nussbaum
In her recent *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010) Martha C. Nussbaum counters the growing marketisation of Higher Education with a plea for a more Socratic pedagogy. A similar argument is found in her earlier, and more extensive, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (1997). Nussbaum’s plea does not stand on its own. For instance, Alasdair MacIntyre’s *God, Philosophy, Universities* (2009) has also been understood to argue that »the modern university lacks ... the Socratic move from aporia to a constructive conversation that takes seriously questions about meaning and purpose’¹.

Socratic pedagogy for Nussbaum starts from Socrates’ dictum »the unexamined life is not worth living«². She is confident and clear about what Socratic pedagogy may and should do. Thus, she asserts in *Cultivating Humanity*:

> »We have not produced truly free citizens in the Socratic sense unless we have produced people who can reason for themselves and argue well, who understand the difference between a logically valid and a logically invalid argument, who can distinguish between the logical form of an argument and the truth of its premises.«³

For Nussbaum, anyone lacking this form of reasoning is likely to defer to authority and to peer pressure. Such people will not be clear about what they want, they will be »easily influenced«, and »often treat one another disrespectfully« (Nussbaum 2010, 49-54).

In these assertions three things stand out for me. First, Nussbaum puts forward clear criteria for Socratic pedagogy: it should produce people who can reason in a particular way. Secondly, the required reasoning is described mostly in formal

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1 Gary 2011, 564. Significantly, Socrates is hardly mentioned in MacIntyre’s book.
terms, that is in terms of validity and truth. Thirdly, without this kind of reasoning one is likely to defer to authority. Nussbaum’s confidence in the outcomes of Socratic pedagogy is illustrated in an example she provides in Not for Profit. Rewriting the Mytilenian Debate from Thucydides’ History of the Peloponnesian War, she despairs that a massacre was prevented by chance rather than reason. If only Socrates had been there, some people would have resisted the bloodthirsty rhetoric of the demagogue Cleon (Nussbaum 2010, 50). In retelling the story, Nussbaum suggests that she knows what people undertaking Socratic self-examination will think, and what they should think. Through Socratic questioning some people will get clarity about what they want, and they will choose rightly against bloodshed.

Nussbaum’s claims about Socratic dialogue are the starting-point for my investigation into a particular teaching practice of Socratic dialogue. This Socratic Method, as first created by the German philosopher and mathematician Leonard Nelson (1882-1927), is now widely practised in a number of countries, most prominently Germany, the Netherlands and Britain. I will argue that the emphasis on practice is essential, for it is in practice that the limitations of Nussbaum’s claims become obvious. However, it will also become clear that the emphasis on practice asks for a different form of argument.

My argument proceeds as follows. I first present Nussbaum’s plea, which I contrast to aspects of the marketisation of higher education that determine the context in which I am working. I then introduce the Nelsonian practice of Socratic Dialogue. In the subsequent section, I show how this practice provides an alternative to the marketisation of higher education. I end with a short reflection on the nature of an argument from practice.

The Marketisation of Higher Education

Nussbaum describes the current situation in (higher) education in dramatic terms. In Not for Profit she speaks of »the silent crisis«, as well as a »cancer«, and she writes that the »future of the world’s democracies hangs in the balance.’(Nussbaum 2010, 1 & 2 respectively) This future is being jeopardised by those who act as if

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4 This means too that an important part of the literature is in German and Dutch. Where possible I have provided references to English translations, or relevant articles in English.
»[education’s] primary goal were to teach students to be economically productive«. History is praised for seeing »rightly« that the humanities are »essential for creating competent democratic citizens« (Nussbaum 2010, jacket cover). Such citizens have acquired three abilities which are explored later in this book: »the ability to think critically; the ability to transcend local loyalties ... the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person.«

In line with this dramatic opening, Nussbaum does not specify who her opponents are, beyond the vague description of »educators for economic growth«. There is no actual reference to resources. This omission is surprising. In both Cultivating Humanity and Not for Profit Nussbaum insist on the importance of teaching students to consider the opposite argument through the often quoted example of Billy Tucker. In such omissions, especially Not for Profit appears to be more Platonic myth than Socratic argument. This impression is confirmed when considering Nussbaum’s central claim, i.e. that the humanities are indeed necessary for creating or even producing »competent democratic citizens«. This claim is of course hostage to fortune. Even if we can agree what a competent democratic citizen is, it will not be possible to verify that they have been created or produced through education. There are too many obvious examples of people with humanity degrees who are neither critical, nor able to transcend local loyalties and express empathy, just as there are critical, emphatic people without humanities degrees. More importantly, students who think for themselves may question the civic order they are part of – even question democracy. Indeed, some of Socrates’ students rebelled

5 Nussbaum 2010, 7. The same three abilities are discussed in her earlier work, Cultivating Humanity. (1997, 9-11)
6 Nussbaum 2010, 23 see also p. 21. The same is true in Cultivating Humanity for the »progressive intellectual circles [who] say that rational argument is a male Western device...« (Nussbaum 1997 19; cp. 37, 39).
7 Billy Tucker is the student whom Nussbaum meets as the desk clerk in her gym. Billy is reading Plato, and has been asked in a philosophy class to defend a position that he does not hold. This position changes between Cultivating Humanity and Not for Profit: in the former he has been asked to take position in a debate on dr. Kevorkian., whereas in Not for Profit, he is asked to argue against the death penalty. (See respectively Nussbaum 1997, 17, cp. 52, and Nussbaum 2010, 52. See also Billy Tucker’s first appearance in Cultivating Humanity (Nussbaum 1997, 4ff.).)
8 Nussbaum 2010, 72. It should be noted that Nussbaum does not always use creating and producing. For instance, on p. 7 she writes: »These abilities are associated with the humanities and the arts.’ (emphasis added)
against the Athenian democracy. Moreover, the verbs »create« and even »produce« have the unfortunate connotation of depriving students of their freedom.

The popularity of Not for Profit suggests that the humanities need someone like Nussbaum, a contemporary »Athena« - the goddess of both wisdom and warfare. And while her main premise immediately troubles me, it is also inspiring to read a fierce defence of Socratic thinking, and to be introduced to an alternative history of thinkers who have tried to develop this kind of thinking. I was particularly struck by the description of Socratic thinker as »one will take responsibility for one’s own reasoning, and exchange ideas with others in an atmosphere of mutual respect for reason« (Nussbaum 2010, 54). This description fits the ideal of a Socratic Dialogue, which I shall discuss in the next section. Before I do so, however, I introduce first how the political background in England is determining teaching, as my argument proceeds from practice.

Nussbaum’s heroic battle seems far removed from the nitty-gritty of British politics. Higher Education has been prominent on the political agenda in recent years, with the publication of the Browne Review (2010) and the Higher Education White Paper (2011), the abolishment of government teaching funding for most subjects, the introduction of higher tuition fees, as well as consequent developments like the creation of New College of the Humanities, a private, profit-making university. Especially, the rise in tuition fees has been severely criticised. The criticism has been haunting the Liberal Democrats and especially its leader for not keeping their election promise. It has also

9 Cp. Arendt 1978, 175: »In the circle around Socrates, there were men like Alcibiades and Critias - God knows, by no means the worst among his so-called pupils - who had turned out to be a real threat to the polis...«. See also Simpson 2011, 595.
10 This is how Iris Murdoch once characterised Nussbaum, according to Maria Antonaccio. (Antonaccio 2012, 264).
11 Because of devolution the situation in Scotland is different from that in England, Wales and Northern Island. This is not the place to consider these differences, though it should be noted that Scottish universities are not unaffected by the changes made south of the border.
12 As recent as September 2012 the leader of the Liberal Democrats found it necessary to apologise, not so much for not keeping the promise as for making it in the first place. The spoof version that was immediately created suggests that this apology was not very effective. (Both versions can be found on YouTube.)
been argued that the rise would discourage certain groups of society from participating in higher education.\textsuperscript{13}

Yet, as Stefan Collini has argued, the recent political decisions do not just affect the finances of individual students. They also signify a more fundamental change in attitude to Higher Education. In particular, they show an alarming indi-ference to teaching, which is not of recent making, but goes back to the 1980s. The distinction then introduced between funding for research and funding for teaching and the establishment of the research assessment exercise (RAE) »fostered a culture within universities that rewards research disproportionately more than it does teaching«, Collini argues. They meant the end of the »devoted university teachers of a generation or more ago who were widely read and kept up with recent scholarship, but who were not themselves prolific publishers«. Moreover, teaching was affected because a growing number of students attended university, but spending per student was cut considerably.\textsuperscript{14} Yet, the issue is not just that there is not enough money to teach a larger number of students, but that a particular understanding of teaching dominates. Education is treated as a product, bought by individuals for their private consumption. And as consumption good it has its place in the national and global economy.

The process of the marketisation of education is more complex than I shall be able to account for here. It has for instance been argued that the trust of the Browne Report in the market to regulate quality is unjustified. Markets do not offer neutral regulation. They are political, often unstable, and they enforce existing inequalities.\textsuperscript{15} One can also question and critique the different processes which made universities ready for the market: modularisation, ever increasing quality control, the creation of pre-established learning outcomes, and the assumption that students are best qualified to judge education.\textsuperscript{16} It has been argued that these develop-

\textsuperscript{13} As Collini argues, this criticism is not completely justified. Some of the proposals promise a fairer provision for students from poorer backgrounds. (Collini 2010.)

\textsuperscript{14} As Collini notes, even the Browne Report admits that »between 1989 and 1997 alone … universities experienced a drop in funding per student of 36 per cent.« (Collini 2010)

\textsuperscript{15} Collini 2010; Apple 2005, 12. In fact, even the Browne Review recognises the limitations of the markets, as it seeks to correct the student consumers« limited interest in subjects like science and medicine. (Collini 2010)

\textsuperscript{16} For an analysis of the modular system, see Brecher 2005. For an analysis of the steps
ments have resulted in an understanding of reason as instrumental (Howie 2005, 3; cp. Hutchinson & Loughlin 2009, 39), and thinking as subject to testing. (Howie 2005 4; cp. Howie 2009, 7). It may not surprise that the articles cited often express a tone of despair, as well as the occasional yearning for a past that I doubt ever was.  

This research deplores the deep influence of these changes. They have pervaded the academic world and pervaded academic practice. This can be clearly seen and experienced by considering one of the elements listed above: the increasing emphasis on quality control. As Frank Worthington and Julia Hodgson (2005, 96) and Michael W. Apple (2005, 11) argue, quality control with its emphasis on what can be measured is part of the process that allows higher education to be subjected to market regulations. Quality control manifests itself in regular audits, such as the Research Assessment Exercises (RAE, now Research Assessment Framework (REF)) and teaching audits, including institutional reviews every so many years and the publications of information about programmes and institutes of higher education.

Quality control may be all-pervasive, but it is not clear, as Worthington and Hodgson argue, what it actually measures (2005, 96). The recently introduced Key Information Sets (KIS) provide a good illustration here. Thanks to these sets a prospective student can now compare the overall student satisfaction of 775 different courses in Philosophy needed to make any service fit the market, see Apple 2005 as well as Howie 2009. For an analysis of current forms of resistance to quality control as »ineffective because they are mainly covert and also unethical because they include practices that result in »peer exploitation«, see Worthington & Hodgson 2005. (Quotation on p. 97). On the introduction of quality, see also Apple 2005, esp. 14-15. Collini provides a devastating critique of the actual phrase used in the Browne Report with regard to students as consumers: »Students are best placed to make the judgment about what they want to get from participating in higher education.« Looked at more closely, this statement reveals itself to be a vacuous tautology because of its reliance on the phrase »want to get«. By definition, individuals are privileged reporters on what they think they want.« (Collini 2010)

17 See Howie’s final (desolating) verdict: »Mass education then reproduces the status quo and helps to produce the personality structure which affirms the world as it is. It reinforces a state of dependency, anxiety and ego-weakness.« (2009, 17) In an earlier article she writes: »Through the conversion of the learning process into a product, critical reason has been converted into instrumental reason, imagination into passive pedantry, practical virtue into skills accumulating and credit transfer; in effect learning has been converted into mental dry rot.« (Howie 2005, 5). With Apple I doubt whether it is worth to harp back to a past that may never have been. (Apple 2005, 23).
at universities in the United Kingdom. The top five of these, taught at four different universities, have an overall satisfaction rate of 100%. Yet, the meaning of this top score is not easy to discern. It is obviously important that students are engaged with their course, but engagement is not the same as satisfaction. As Collini (2010) points out:

»I would hope the students I teach come away with certain kinds of dissatisfaction (including with themselves: a »satisfied« student is nigh-on ineducable), and it matters more that they carry on wondering about the source of that dissatisfaction than whether they »liked« the course or not.«

If good education leaves students in some way dissatisfied, as Collini argues, the top score of 100% is not a desired outcome. Yet, what score would be - if not 100%, then 85%, 50%? To be clear, I am not arguing that students cannot be trusted to comment on their courses. What I question is, whether student satisfaction can be a measurement of quality in education.

If it is not clear what quality control measures, it is also dubitable whether its presence results in improvement. Nevertheless, even though quality control seems incongruous with academic practice and devalues central academic values, academics have done little to resist its introduction. Even though it is inimical to academic work and academic pride, most academics have made this aspect part of their work. Worthington and Hodgson present a number of reasons to explain this phenomenon. To name one, as the information is public, academics do not want to loose face, either as individuals or as institutions. Moreover, its terminology of »improvement«, »enhancement« and »moving forward« is not easy to resist:

»Those who do so, suggesting for example that the primary purpose of education is (or should be) to develop critical thought, find themselves framed

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18 Poignant detail is that two of the courses are taught at Keele University, where the Philosophy department only just averted closure in 2011.
19 For these statistics and more, see http://unistats.direct.gov.uk. For another example, a critical analysis of the Research Assessment Framework as a measure of quality, see Howie 2002.
not as radicals but as conservatives, whose views are thus seen as an attempt to preserve an outdated intellectual value-system that is incongruous to the needs of equity, consumers and the new global economy.«

Lastly, academics think of their work as vocational and rarely assess it critically in the context of labour processes, especially since they are still allowed some work independent of quality control (Worthington and Hodgson 2005, 100, 106-107). Thus, quality control has become part of academic practice and functions as a form of self-regulation. Yet, this form of self-regulation risks loss of self-worth, freedom and trust. The system weakens trust in academics as professionals, though I would haste to add that in daily practice it is likely not to be as bleak and totalitarian as some have suggested. Nevertheless, the influence of quality control cannot be underestimated.

It was only when starting my research on these issues, that it became clear to me how deeply this dominant language of marketisation had intruded in my own thinking. A simple example would be that I had adopted the use of »added value« on Open Days without much thought. The marketisation of higher education is then not just forced upon academics, by dark forces like the »educators for economic growth«, it is actively incorporated by them. As Worthington and Hodgson argue, there has been little resistance in the academic community. What resistance there is, is often peer-exploitative (Worthington and Hodgson 2005).

Quality control is one aspect of the large and complex process that is the marketisation of Higher Education. Quality control introduces an understanding of education that is inimical to a practitioner’s understanding, and yet it has met little resistance. Nussbaum’s »silent crisis« seems an apt description - at least until recently. Yet, the crisis is perpetuated not just by policymakers, but by individual

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21 Worthington and Hodgson cite the example of Morley (L. Morley, 2003. Quality and Power in Higher Education Maidenhead: Open University Press)): »Following Foucault, [Morley] claims that quality is a metanarrative; a totalising form of governmentality; a regime of power/knowledge involving normative working practices, various evaluations, classifications and judgments about academic work that are designed specifically to re-engineer academics’ professional identity and subjectivity.« (2005, 98)
academics. The intrusion of quality control into the daily practice of Higher Education suggests to me that a response needs to come from practice, i.e. the practice of Socratic Dialogue that I introduce in the next section.

**A Practice of Socratic Dialogue**

»Socratic method« and »Socratic Dialogue« describe a variety in practises, ranging from ruthless questioning in Law Schools to critical thinking exercises with children. It is therefore important to introduce my particular practice, which is that of Socratic Dialogue in the Nelson-Heckmann tradition. An obvious starting-point for introducing this method is Nelson’s seminal text, »Die sokratische Methode« (»The Socratic Method«).\(^{23}\) Nelson was a German mathematician and philosopher who, inspired by Socrates, Immanuel Kant and Kant-interpreter Jakob Fries created his own Socratic method. The method has been consequently developed by Nelson’s students, especially Gustav Heckmann (1898-1996). Current practice differs from Nelson’s in a number of ways, and I shall indicate those where needed.\(^{24}\)

Nelson’s text is based on a lecture given in 1922 to the Pedagogical Society in Göttingen. It is a rich text, even though Nelson dampens expectations from the start, when he announces that philosophy is not like any other subject and that he cannot really talk about the Socratic method. He quotes Plato’s Seventh Letter, and compares himself to a violinist »who, when asked how he goes about playing the violin, can of course demonstrate his art but cannot explain his technique in abstract terms.«\(^{25}\) Yet, just one demonstration would not suffice, because »only ›continued application to the subject itself and communication therewith‹ kindle the light of philosophical cognition.«

From the start, then, it is clear that Nelson’s Socratic method does not suit current developments in higher education. There is, for instance, no guarantee that

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\(^{24}\) On the development of the method, see for instance Heckmann 1981 and Klafki 2002.

\(^{25}\) Nelson 2004, 126. The quotation from the Seventh Letter runs as follows: »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.« (Plato, *Epistles* R.G. Bury, tr. in Loeb Classical Library (London, 1929), VII, 531.)
continued application within the limits of one module is sufficient to »kindle the light of philosophical cognition.« Indeed, there is little recognition in contemporary academic practice of the fact that some insights come only after a long time, even long after graduation. Nor is there much recognition that a lack or lacuna in understanding, a troubling perception, an inconsistency, are all central to the learning process. Moreover, Nelson states explicitly that he cannot explain his method. He cannot make clear what is to be expected, nor how any achievement can be demonstrated. As Dries Boele argues: »Practical philosophy must be experienced« (1997, 49).

Nelson’s method is inspired by his understanding of Socrates and Kant (2004, 129). The starting-point of the dialogue in experience is an example of his indebtedness to both Socrates and the work of Kant and Fries. Yet, insight into the significance of experience is found most instantly not in these works, but in Nelson’s well-chosen example:

»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 con-

26 Cp. Collini on student satisfaction above. (Collini 2010)
28 For the Kantian-Friesian background, see for instance Nelson 1970, esp. volume 1, pp. 9-78, which has been translated into English in Nelson 1949. See also Kessels 1994, 1-28. For the influence of Socrates, cp. for instance Gorgias 495a, where Socrates admonishes his conversation partner Callicles not to abstain from hypotheticals: You’re breaking your original promise, Callicles. If what you say contradicts what you really think, your value as my partner in searching for the truth will be at an end.« Similar points is made in Protagoras 331c. See also Kessels 1994, 4 and Bolten 2003, 20-21. The Gorgias is for me of particular interest, because in this dialogue Socrates discusses rhetoric as the exact opposite of his own method of dialectics. Throughout the dialogue, one finds comments on method. What is more, Socrates is obviously not always practicing what he preaches. (See in particular 505cd, cp. 475e-476a). It should be noted that Nelson does not think the Platonic dialogues perfect examples of the Socratic method. On the contrary, for him it shows the method with all its faults and diversions. (Nelson 2004, 130; cp. Nightingale 2000, 81-82).
clusion 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).

Experience, which relates to a philosophical question, is central to a Socratic dialogue. It disallows a philosophical dialogue to take certain highly hypothetical turns. Instead, it asks participants to consider personal convictions, as expressed in examples from daily life. In Nelson’s example, the philosophical question would be »what is substance?«, or »is substance permanent?«. The experiences do not need to be anything exceptional. On the contrary, the simplest of examples can start the most profound philosophical dialogues.

Socratic dialogues in the Nelson tradition often (but not always, and not necessarily) have the following form. A small group of people (ideally between six and twelve) share an interest in a philosophical (or mathematical) question. This interest or willingness to participate is as important in a Socratic Dialogue as the ability to reason. By a philosophical question is meant a question that can be answered by the use of reason alone. Examples of such questions are: What is friendship? What are the limits of tolerance? What is courage? Are there unselfish acts? Am I allowed to lie? How do I know that a statement is correct? What is professional integrity? What is learning? etcetera.

The facilitator - unlike Socrates - does not comment on the content of the dialogue, but merely helps participants investigate this question through an example given

29 Examples also need to be simple in order to allow for focus in the dialogue. Thus, an particular instance of running for the tube or eating sweets can work often work better than examples that involve a number of people and happen over a period of time. Of course, if participants can only think of complex examples, these will be used - though it may take much longer to come to any understanding. For some very good examples in a variety of practices see Delnoij & Van Dalen 2003.

30 In the Platonic Dialogues, Socrates often explicitly verifies the willingness of his conversation partners to engage in a dialogue with him. (See for instance Gorgias 448d, cp. 461d-462a. Protagoras 335c. Cp. Bolten 2003, 16 & 21)

31 On philosophical questions, see Kopfwerk Berlin 2004. A question is not always provided. In longer dialogues (for instance week long dialogues run in Germany, or weekend dialogues at the International School of Philosophy in Leusden, the Netherlands) only a theme is indicated, and the question is often created as part of the dialogue.
by one of them, taken from his or her own experience. This example is one which interests the other participants and which they can recognise. This means that not just the experience of the example giver, but everyone’s experience is under investigation.\(^{32}\) Through discussing this example, participants aim to form a judgment on the issue at hand (\textit{quid facti}), which will then need to be verified (\textit{quid juris}).\(^{33}\) Participants will need to make clear, first, what position they actually hold, and secondly what reasons there are for holding this position.

As Hans Bolten (2003, 39) shows, it is often not easy for participants to express their opinion in relation to a particular experience. The issue is not that participants cannot voice opinions. They usually have more than sufficient opinions at hand. The difficulty lies in making explicit an intuitive connection between the experience and the central question. As the example of the sceptics looking for their coats suggests, the experience may even contradict explicitly held positions. Thus, one needs finely tuned perception, and in expressing an opinion one makes oneself vulnerable. Both judgment and verification take time and there is no guarantee that the dialogue will bring an answer to the initial question, not even in week long dialogues.

The dialogue proceeds by means of \textit{elenchus} (»shame, reproach«) and \textit{anamnesis} (recollection), both notions which play an important part in Plato’s dialogues. Socrates’ conversation partners claim to know what they talk about, and yet when questioned they find themselves stumbling and contradicting themselves. The consequent shame allows them to acknowledge the limitations of their knowledge and to start pursuing genuine knowledge (Cp. Kessels 1994, 5-9). At the same time, the experiences are held to contain knowledge that needs to be made explicit. Since Kant this kind of knowledge is characterised as \textit{a priori}, it is presupposed in our opinions.\(^{34}\)

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\(^{32}\) In practice, the force of argument is rarely experienced in equal measure, which is why it is very interesting to be the example giver, but not always easy. On this notion of recognition, see Boele’s insightful distinction between \textit{zich verplaatsen} and \textit{zich inleven}. (Boele 2003, 161-169). The distinction is probably best translated as between \textit{placing oneself in the other’s position} and \textit{imagining oneself in the other’s position}, i.e. one asks the participants for their response given either the situation or the experience of the situation.


\(^{34}\) See Kessels 1994, 8 & 10, and Kessels 1994, 8n.19 for further references.
Participants thus learn intellectual virtues like revisiting one’s ideas, trusting doubt, listening to one another, and persistency. Those virtues are in particular encouraged by what is a very significant as well as controversial rule for this kind of Socratic Dialogue: strive for consensus. In Nelson’s Socratic dialogue this pursuit involves all participants, who function as each other’s midwives. The requirement to have this dialogue can make it an arduous undertaking at times, yet it also forces participants to think independently, and to consider each as equal. In the dialogue, there is no other authority than reason.

The content outcome of a Socratic dialogue is matter of controversy. Few people nowadays assume, as Nelson did, that participants can find unqualified truth. Instead, it has, for instance, been argued that the truth is provisional and true only for the participants here and now. Thus, Heckmann talks of »proven for the time being« (Heckmann 2004, 112) Others argue that participants may receive a glimpse of the truth in the dialogue (Kessels 2003, 196-197).

It is obvious that the Socratic method assumes great confidence in any individual’s intellectual ability, as well as his or her willpower. Indeed, for Nelson the main obstacles to philosophising are dogmatism but even more lack of will: »... it is a fact that one becomes a philosopher, not by virtue of intellectual gifts but by the exercise of the will« (2004, 151). Dogmatism can only be contested by one’s own reason. A student has to see his or her own ignorance. It is at this point in particular that Nelson shows himself an unusual (and again untimely) pedagogue. He starts his class by not even providing a question. Instead, he leaves it to the students to find questions and answers. In the process of doing so he expects them to be confused and even at »wit’s end« (Nelson 2004, 147). The following provides

35 The exact rules differ per facilitator. I use the following five: 1. Speak from experience, 2. Listen to one another, 3. Try to be concise, 4. Express genuine doubt, 5. Strive for consensus. See Van Rossem 2006 for an alternative. See also Saran & Neiser 2004, 171-173 for the rules used by the SFCP.

36 Nelson emphasises the importance of telling one’s thoughts: »Only the compulsion to communicate provides a means of testing the definiteness and clarity of one’s own concepts.« (2004, 153) Yet, the presence of others can lead to great disturbances and Nelson, interestingly, remarks that what is needed above understanding is a »disciplined will«. (See also below.)

37 »To philosophise, then, is simply to isolate these rational truths with our intellect and to express them in general judgments.« (Nelson 2004, 135).
a flavour: »During such a session we may often hear the despairing appeal to the teacher: »I don’t know what it is you want!« Whereupon the teacher replies: »I? I want nothing at all!« (144).

A participant in a Socratic dialogue thus tests his or her own ideas and notions on experience (remember the sceptic looking for his or her coat), and subjects them to further investigation by a group. In doing so, each participant practices Socratic virtues, such as persistence, patience, listening to others, expressing oneself as clearly and succinctly as possible, trusting doubt, deferring one’s judgment, a willingness to revisit one’s own opinion.

A last aspect to mention is that in a Socratic dialogue the question often becomes pressing for the dialogue itself. Thus, in a dialogue on collaboration, participants can find themselves wondering whether they are collaborating in the dialogue itself.38 In a dialogue on learning, participants might find themselves wondering whether they are now learning. It is these so-called »third-order« questions which make the dialogue more urgent for participants, and ask for great expertise of the facilitator. It is at these points that he or she should hold back and allow the participants to work through the problem themselves. It is for this reason too that some topics are less adequate for investigation (such as for instance anger or selfishness).

**Socratic Dialogue in Higher Education**

The above already suggest that this form of Socratic Dialogue does not fit easily - if at all - into a system of Higher Education that is shaped more and more on the model of competitive markets. It is, for instance, difficult to provide those learning outcomes - so favoured by quality control -, that not just make clear what students are expected to achieve, but also how they can demonstrate that they have achieved each one. It is obvious that outcomes cannot be described in terms of content, as this will differ between groups, even when considering the same question. Moreover, often the dialogue ends in aporia. A learning outcome in terms of skills creates difficulties as well. Consider, for instance, the first »outcome« as distinguished by Kristof van Rossem: »you get a feeling of thinking in questions

38 Compare Bolten 2003, 30-31.
instead of answers«.\textsuperscript{39} It is not clear that this outcome can be appreciated by anyone who has not (yet) participated.\textsuperscript{40}

Student satisfaction does not apply either. Indeed, Socratic Dialogue underlines the difficulties of student satisfaction as a means for measuring quality in education. It is of course encouraging to read the positive and encouraging feedback of many who participate in those dialogues. Yet, for some, this practice of Socratic Dialogue makes them realise their dissatisfaction with other forms of teaching (and thus, the »overall satisfaction« with their course may go down). More importantly, in the constant emphasis on student satisfaction, it should be remembered that enjoyment is not the sole criterion for quality – especially not in learning. Learning often includes difficult or painful moments and the examples given attested to that. Socrates’ conversation partners often leave the dialogue annoyed or angry. Nelson would have no need to emphasise the importance of willpower if dialogue were events of pure enjoyment.

Socratic Dialogue is not just ill-suited to the marketisation of higher education. It also provides an alternative in its adherence to Socrates’ dictum that the unexamined life is not worth living. This is most of all obvious in the central place attributed to experience. For me, this aspect is what makes Socratic dialogues both significant and difficult. As explained above, in a Socratic Dialogue, once the question is established, participants are invited to share an experience that is relevant to the question. As Boele points out, a Socratic dialogue is one of the few places that allows one to speak about their experiences. Indeed, it even honours experience by making it central to the investigation \textsuperscript{(1997, 56)}.

This does not mean it is always easy, especially for philosophers, to talk about experience. In this respects Nelson’s insights are often reaffirmed. It is worth quoting him at some length here, as his observations are sharp, and even though I do not fully share his cynical tone:

\textsuperscript{39} Van Rossem 2006, 49. Note that Van Rossem puts the word »outcome« within quotation marks.

\textsuperscript{40} Cp. Harđarson 2012, 232 on the difficulty of independently acknowledging the value of something one does not appreciate.
The first step, obviously, is to have [the student] secure a firm footing in experience - which is harder to do than an outsider might think. For your adept in philosophy scorns nothing so much as using his intelligence concretely in forming judgments on real facts, an operation that obliges him to remember those lowly instruments of cognition, his five sense. Ask anyone at a philosophy seminar, »What do you see on the blackboard?« and - depend on it - he will look at the floor. Upon your repeating, ›What do you see on the blackboard?‹ he will finally wrench out a sentence that begins with ›If‹ and demonstrates for him the world of facts does not exist.

He shows the same disdain for reality when asked to give an example. Forthwith, he goes off into a world of fantasy, or, if forced to stay on this planet, he at least makes off to the sea or into the desert, so that one wonders whether being attacked by lions and saved from drowning are typical experiences among the acquaintances of a philosopher« (Nelson 2004, 149-150).

Often, examples given are too abstract to create a good Socratic dialogue. Participants will provide generalisations. To illustrate, in answer to the question »What is learning?« one participant provided a general account of learning, instead of an example of learning. When asked to be more specific, this participant would rephrase the example in terms of »you learn ...«, and object to the requirement of speaking from experience - yet not because experience was lacking (which would have been relevant criticism of the method). Instead, the criticism was framed in terms of understanding of learning - even though the notion learning was subject of investigation. Participants often express dissatisfaction with the emphasis on experience, as, they argued, experience can tell us only so much - using only one experience of only one person will provide very limited insight into the issue under consideration.

The fact that it is difficult to speak from experience should be an additional incentive to practise Socratic dialogue, as it allows participants to learn how to take their experience seriously. A dismissal of considering one’s experience shows a similar disinterest in, or unfamiliarity with, the virtue of self-knowledge. An all encompassing overview is preferred, or even worse deemed necessary, over insight into oneself. Self-knowledge, understood in a philosophical rather than psychological
way, is knowledge of the concepts one uses and one’s use of concepts. Socratic dialogue honours the experience as well as the rationality of its participants. As such, it forms a force against any attempt to impose authority. The only authority in a Socratic Dialogue is the use of reason as related to experience.

The method seems a good illustration of Nussbaum’s description of Socratic pedagogy as one where people take »responsibility for [their] own reasoning«, as participants investigate judgments and justifications, and they revisit ideas and trust doubt. Yet, what about the link to democracy? Does it also create good citizens? Here, I will consider two possible responses: one from history and one from practice. To start with the former, Nelson did not only develop his Socratic method, but also founded the International Socialist League of Struggle (ISK).41 Members of this league took active part in the resistance against the National Socialists in the 1930s in Germany. As part of this resistance, Grete Hermann, Nelson’s student and erstwhile assistant, travelled through the country to facilitate Socratic Dialogues. She describes their significance as follows:

»We experienced that courage and readiness for resistance can be strengthened by intellectual clarification of values involved therein, and we therefore built this effort into the preparations for illegal work. Thus, until 1937 ... I held philosophical classes with them on the question: What is resistance against Fascism all about? Why are we taking part? What is it we are trying to defend?«42

It is fascinating to find that resistance against fascism can be strengthened by questioning. However, as Susie Miller argues, it is not clear to what extent the resistance was created by questioning and to what extent by strict party discipline (2001, 11).

A second link with democracy is found in practice. The method asks participants to look for what they share, in experience and in argument. This is not often asked of people. It is not asked of them in a market economy, but also rarely found in academic philosophy, which is much more confident thinking in opposition. In

41 As well as the International Youth League, and the Walkemühle School. (Miller 2001, 5)
questionnaires following Socratic Dialogues participants often express both delight and surprise at the variety in opinions, and the possibility to entertain these. They find it unusual to experience disagreement as something that does not need immediate solution. It is, of course, also noticed that differences can be difficult, and that it can make the dialogue less than enjoyable. Some participants even go as far as to suggest the exclusion of certain participants: no non-philosopher, no people who disrespect the rules of listening carefully and speaking concisely.

There is, then, an obvious link between this method of Socratic Dialogue and democracy. And yet, I am reluctant to claim that this method creates democratic citizens. It is not just that I consider this argument hostage to fortune, as I argued in the beginning of this article. My reluctance is also closely related to my understanding of the content of a dialogue. In the previous section, I argued that few contemporary facilitators would claim the possible and potential answers to the philosophical questions posed are true absolutely. This means that there is no guarantee that certain values will be affirmed in a Socratic Dialogue, not even those of democracy. Moreover, even if they are affirmed, it is not certain that participants will consequently act in accordance with the new found wisdom.43

The last argument against too close a link between this method of Socratic Dialogue and democracy is also the most difficult to argue, as it is the most personal one. I experience the value of Socratic Dialogue most forcefully as a facilitator or participant in actual dialogues. Dialogues are important simply because of the activity of questioning one’s presuppositions, and thus regardless of the possible use of this questioning later. This is how I understand the Socratic dictum that the unexamined life is not worth living. It does not need the (contestable) claim that »the ability to argue in this Socratic way, is, as Socrates proclaimed, valuable for democracy«.44

This last argument provides the most forceful challenge to both the marketisation of Higher Education and to Nussbaum’s claim that Socratic dialogue creates democratic citizens. The practice of Socratic Dialogue suggests that they are certain

43 Jos Kessels provides an interesting example here. (See Kessels 2003)
activities that are worth in itself, and not just because of external means - be they economy or democracy. This conclusion may not seem all that surprising, and yet it is almost impossible to express in the current climate, where the notion of utility has pervaded all thinking, including those opposing the increasing marketisation.

Nussbaum thus exemplifies the pervasiveness of the discourse of marketisation. Especially Not for Profit is not just a defence of the humanities against marketisation, it is also symptomatic of the problem. In disrespecting opposing argument, and favouring the »creation« or even »production« of critical citizens of the world, Nussbaum’s text shows how deeply engrained the commodification of education is, and how difficult it is to not to heed to the authority of the market. Her book can be read as a commercial: her »product« - the critical citizen - is better than that of its competitors. Yet, if the Socratic urge for the constant questioning of our views is taken seriously, there is no guarantee that the humanities produce critical citizens. Practices like Socratic dialogue thus defy the marketisation in a number of ways. They are time intensive, and thus go against the suggestions to reduce teaching time, as promoted by market thinking. Yet, they also create a space where trust and cooperation are again central notions, and where one’s experience is investigated, as an investigation worth in itself.

Coda

In this coda a note on the nature of my argument. I already quoted Nelson and Boele on the difficulties of arguing for what can only be experienced. Nelson aptly compared himself to the violinist who can only show his art. In his unfortunately unfinished article »Love and the Socratic Method«, Peter Cicchino makes an important distinction between »a public and a personal quality« of assertions made. By public he means those arguments that use logic or empirical evidence. These arguments, as opposed to the personal one, are accessible to all. The personal arguments are »not necessarily accessible to all, or applicable by everyone«. 45

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45 Cicchino 2001, 538. Cicchino provides the following insightful example: »... like most arts, teaching has much the same quality that Aristotle assigns to joke telling. There are generally applicable observations, broad rules of thumb, but ultimately the activity is so context specific that, as a good joke teller realizes, often, to use a contemporary American expression, ›You just had to be there‹« (2001, 539).
Throughout I have been aware of the limitations of arguments that come from practice and experience. Yet, the difficulties of arguments should not prevent them from being made at all. The marketisation of education is pervasive and exclusive, and needs to be resisted. Alternative need to be created in practice, such as Socratic Dialogue, as well as in recognising the arguments that come with it.

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