

## THE DIALOGICAL FORM OF PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE: STRUCTURING THE DISCURSIVE FLOW IN SOCRATIC DIALOGUE

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**ABSTRACT.** Based on the transcript of a fragment from a philosophical practice session carried by Oscar Brenifier, I flesh out several aspects of this dialogical form of philosophical practice. First, it is a form of interaction grounded in the interlocutors' interaffectation. Second, the main mechanism of carrying through the dialogic interaction is the practitioner's repeating the other's words, writing them down, and then questioning them, thus extracting them from the other's discursive flow and making them shared objects for an intersubjective gaze. Third, this form of dialogue is asymmetrical: while the other is providing the "content", the practitioner is responsible for explicating it.

**Keywords:** Socratic Dialogue; Philosophical Practice; Discursive Flow; Discourse Analysis; Intersubjectivity

The account presented in this paper derives mainly from my exposure to Oscar Brenifier's version of philosophical practice. Brenifier, a contemporary French philosopher active in the field of philosophical practice, is committed to a form of oral and

improvisational philosophical discourse, anchored in mutual presence and response to the other's presence. The response is not only to the other's explicit words – but to the whole intricacy that is implicit in the other's bodily presence, moods, hesitation.<sup>1</sup>

The main "role model" that Brenifier tries to embody in this form of philosophical practice is Socrates. He explicitly uses Socratic strategies of questioning, derived from Plato's dialogues, adapted to various communicative contexts, including the format of a "private meeting", but also that of a workshop.

For this paper, I transcribed the opening fragment of a dialogue between Brenifier and a person who accepted to have a public dialogue with him during one of his one week seminars. The approach I am going to use for analysis derives from Wallace Chafe's take on discourse analysis<sup>2</sup>, emphasizing the phenomenologically relevant aspects of the conversation slightly more than Chafe does and adding philosophical reflection to the analysis of the discursive flow. Typically,

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent account of Brenifier's practice, see Oscar Brenifier, *La consultation philosophique*, Alcofribas, 2018, available on <http://www.pratiques-philosophiques.fr/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/LA-CONSULTATION-PHILOSOPHIQUE.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Wallace Chafe, *Discourse, Consciousness, and Time. The Flow and Displacement of Conscious Experience in Speaking and Writing*, University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Brenifier’s dialogues in the genre of “philosophical consultations” are recorded for the use of participants. The one I am analyzing was also uploaded on youtube – so, if you are interested in what followed the segment I transcribed, you can watch the full hour<sup>3</sup>. In the transcript, I divided the segment that I am analyzing in seven “moves” or interaction sequences, each of them with a definite beginning and ending, and which can be assigned a “topic”. These seven moves, as we shall see, are not isolated and discrete; what appears in one leaks into the next one, and everything that *was* said continues to shape the newer discursive interventions through mechanisms of “fixating” what was said, repeating it and “offering it back” to the interlocutor.

The context, as it can be seen from watching the first moments of the recording, is an ambiguous one. Two people are sitting on a couch. The first reaction to witnessing a scene like that would most likely be “they are having a private conversation”. Only the conversation is not private: it is done in front of a camera, and it was uploaded later online. Both participants seem to be aware of that, even if this is not mentioned explicitly in the video. So, with a term I borrow from Alva Noe, it is already a “second-order practice”<sup>4</sup> – a practice that presupposes the familiarity with an the “everyday practice” of “having a conversation”, but is not *only* a conversation. It is at least a *showing* of something that is possible in conversation by exhibiting the features that a conversation has, by making them visible / “watchable” at a later point.

- 1.
- (a) Oscar: Ok.
- (b) So, Janet.
- (c) So...
- (d) do you have a question right now
- (e) something like a question
- (f) or not really a question?
- (g) Janet: A=h
- (h) I have a question about smoking.
- (i) Oscar: Ok go ahead
- (j) what is your question.

I would characterize what is happening in the initial sequence as a kind of “checking for a starting point”. The form of the starting point can be “a question”, “something like a question”, or even “not really a question”, but it is still presented as something related to questions. Janet announces it as a question – but does not state it as such: she states the *topic* of a question. So, she does not take Oscar’s initial invitation as an *invitation to state her question*, but as a *preliminary check whether she has thought of something that can work as a starting point for the following dialogue*. In a way, this first sequence is similar to sound check at a concert. In (1 i-j), Oscar accepts to go with the starting point that Janet announced – inviting her to explicitly state her question.

What is implicit in an interaction like this? First of all, both participants are responding to each other, and their responses are affected by what the other is saying. The speech of both conversation partners is made possible by the presence and speech

<sup>3</sup> Oscar Brenifier. Why Do I Keep Smoking when there Is No Reason to Smoke, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8c\\_6R5exx0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8c_6R5exx0)

<sup>4</sup> Alva Noe, *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature*, Macmillan, 2015.

of the other. Both participants have an implicit understanding of these roles, and of the shape of such an interaction.

Also, we can notice that, although the *form* of the interaction is established through Oscar's invitations / elicitations of Janet's speech through the asking of questions, the *topic* or *content* is brought to the conversation by Janet.

- 2.
- (a) Janet: ...Why do I  
(b) why keep smoking when...  
(c) Oscar: (*writes down the question, speaking at the same time*)  
(d) Why do I keep smoking  
(e) when  
(f) Janet: when  
(g) there is no reason to smoke.  
(h) Oscar: when there is  
(j) no reason to smoke.  
(k) When there is  
(l) no reason to smoke.  
(m) (*long silence, finishes writing*).  
(n) So  
(o) I'll read you again the question  
(p) Why do I keep smoking  
(q) when  
(r) there is no reason to smoke.  
(s) Is that it?  
(t) Janet: Yea.  
(u) Oscar: Ok.  
(v) We're good.  
(w) Yes.

In sequence 2, we have, first of all, the introduction of writing into conversation. According to Noe's analysis, writing is already a second-order practice itself – something that presupposes the previous engagement with the first-order practice of speaking. The most elementary function of writing is to record something that was said or thought. At the same time, writing – with the exception of stenography – is slower than speech.

And Oscar takes full advantage of that, both slowing down the tempo, and recording the said. Another thing we might notice here is the repetition of the other's words: they are both written down and repeated *at the same time*, even several times. In hearing his interlocutor, writing down what she is saying and repeating it to her, Oscar is *at the same time* checking whether he got the other's words and having his interlocutor hear what she is saying in another's voice. We might also notice that this segment of the interaction closes just like the previous one, by Oscar's approval. A *movement* in the sequence of the conversation is *finished*, and Oscar is stating that it is finished, so it is possible to move on to the next one. In this sense, he is also taking upon the role of *managing the flow of the conversation*. An important aspect related to this managing of the flow is the choice of what to record. In (2 a-b), Janet hesitates between two versions of the question she is going to ask – “Why do I [keep smoking when there is no reason to smoke]” and “Why keep smoking [when there is no reason to smoke]”. In effect, this is a hesitation between asking the question as a *personal* one versus an *impersonal* one: she starts it as a question related to “I” and then, without finishing it, attempts to reformulate it as an impersonal question. The break of the writing into her speech makes possible both a pause and the recording of the initial version of the question – a version she then accepts as a starting point implicitly in (2 f) and explicitly in (2 t), without ever returning to the version present in (2 a).

The two most important aspects that we can notice in this segment – added to the question-orientation that was already obvious in the first sequence – are the intrusion of writing into conversation and the

repeating of the other's words. In repeating the other's words and writing them down, they become something that does not simply belong to the other, but is *shared* by both. It is not a practice of "simple listening" to the other, like in other forms of dialogic practice, or letting the other speak and "inhabit" her discourse. Writing them down and repeating them makes them intersubjectively acknowledged as *being there*, as objects for both interlocutors to dwell with.

- 3.
- (a) Oscar: But
  - (b) Let me first ask you something.
  - (c) Why
  - (d) do you want to ask
  - (e) such a question?
  - (f) Janet: Because I have many reasons
  - (g) to NOT smoke.
  - (h) Oscar: Ok.
  - (i) *(writes down, speaking at the same time)*
  - (j) So I have many reasons
  - (k) not to smoke.

This making of the other's words into objects is carried forward in the third segment of the interaction: Janet's question is itself called into question, and this presupposes its *becoming-object* for both her and Oscar. Questioning about the reasons for asking the initial question becomes possible through *putting aside* Janet's question which has become an object – what Oscar does in (3. b) by saying "let me first ask you something" – and asking a new question of his own. In asking what is Janet's reason for asking that question, Oscar *relates the question back to her subjectivity as that in which her question originates*. When a question is asked, it carries within itself more than it is as such; it appears in a context of relevance

for a subject. It contains and brings forward, without stating it, something implicit, which is explicated in the response to Oscar's question. In being written down and repeated, Janet's words become objects again.

- 4.
- (a) Oscar: Now. . .
  - (b) Let me ask you something. . .
  - (c) Suppose somebody
  - (d) has many reasons
  - (e) NOT to do something
  - (f) and no reasons
  - (g) to DO that thing
  - (h) ok.
  - (i) Anything.
  - (j) Right?
  - (k) Janet: Yea.
  - (l) Oscar: But that person
  - (m) in spite of many reasons
  - (n) not to do it and no reason
  - to do it
  - (o) still DOES that thing.
  - (p) Anything.
  - (q) How do you qualify
  - (r) that kind of person
  - (s) or that kind of thinking.
  - (t) How do you call it?
  - (u) In general?
  - (v) Janet: ...Crazy.
  - (w) Oscar: Crazy.
  - (x) Ok.
  - (y) *(writes down)*
  - (z) Crazy.

In the fourth segment of the interaction, Oscar again initiates a question of his own through saying "let me ask you something". But if in the third segment he was relating Janet's question back to her subjectivity, now he is moving in the opposite direction through presenting a hypothetical "other" – "somebody" – that would be in the situation described in her previous response. It is not the same kind of "free-

floating” impersonality of no one in particular that was implicit in (2 b). In the “othering” carried through in (4 c-u), he is inviting Janet to think about herself *as if she were another*. Not only her words become objects for both, but the part of her subjectivity that was explicated in the previous segment is transformed, through discursive means, into a “somebody” she is invited to label “in general”. The response is a harsh judgment: Janet would label someone else that would be in her position as “crazy”. We notice that Oscar is, again, using her words in building the “picture” of that somebody, in inviting Janet to think of herself as if she were a stranger – and, again, is checking whether they are intersubjectively on the same page.

In the next segment, Oscar is again feeding an object – “the crazy one” – back into Janet’s subjectivity, asking her if she would attribute the label “crazy” to herself.

- 5.
- (a) Oscar: So
  - (b) somebody who does a thing
  - (c) with no reason to do it
  - (d) and many reasons against it
  - (e) is a crazy person.
  - (f) Ok?
  - (g) So right now
  - (h) are you a crazy
  - (i) in what you’re describing?
  - (j) Janet: Yea.
  - (k) Oscar: Yes. Ok.
  - (l) (*writes down*).

Then, aware that the way we appear to ourselves when we think about ourselves (or others) “from the outside” – what Janet just did – and the way we *feel* ourselves from the inside are usually incommensurable (we can note that this incommensurability of perspectives is elaborated at length by Michel Henry, who takes it as central for his account of subjectivity<sup>5</sup>; the same distinction is operative in philosophical practice, but, unlike in Michel Henry’s work, the “truth” of one’s subjectivity is taken as what appears in the “cold light” of the intersubjective gaze, instead of what remains restricted to the autoaffection), Oscar asks whether she would assume the label of “crazy” *in good faith* in thinking about herself *as herself*. This is introduced through a “but”, in (6.a), with an intonation break that makes obvious the fracture in what the other is expressing:

- 6.
- (a) Oscar: But
  - (b) do you think you’re crazy?
  - (c) Janet: (*smiling, with a playful tone*)  
No.

Aware of the contradiction and of the playful character of the interaction – and expressing bodily this awareness through her smile and playful tone – Janet denies it. Oscar expresses the *joint awareness* of this contradiction in the next segment, mirroring its embodied recognition through a gesture of his own, as if the shared complicity of discovering a contradiction is enlivening the interaction:

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<sup>5</sup> cf. Michel Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, Martinus Nijhoff, 1973.

7.  
 (a) Oscar: Do we have  
 (b) a contradiction here?  
 (c) (*gestures with both hands  
 in parallel*)  
 (d) Janet: (*playfully*) We do.  
 (e) Oscar: We do.

Even the analysis of a short a segment as this can enable us to formulate a few statements which pertain to the dialogical form of philosophical practice itself and which might illuminate several of its characteristics.

First, both its beginning and unfolding would be impossible without the *words of the other*, anchored both in the practitioner's invitation to speak and in his interlocutor's embodied presence. Speaking is grounded in what is implicit, in what makes it possible. The other's embodied, speaking presence carries with itself all the background of what is said: motivations, interest, lived experience. Not only is the saying irreducible to the said, as Levinas noted<sup>6</sup>, but the said *as such* is also irreducible to itself: it still carries in itself what was implicit when it was said, and would usually remain implicit. The practitioner's response to their client is a response that takes into account what is implicit in their speaking embodied presence *together with* what is explicitly stated. In this play of interaffectation, both participants in the dialogue respond not only to each other's words, but to what is implicit in them, bringing the implicit into the observable flow of the conversation. Even if the unfolding of the interaction includes a discursive element, the interaction itself is irreducible to it and it is carried forward by

what lies implicit in the other's words and by the intention to inquire into it.

Second, the said itself is *public* and *intersubjective*, and in the structure of the philosophical practice session, this is emphasized through repeating back to the other her own words and writing them down. Once they are repeated and "fixated", they don't simply *belong to the subject that spoke them*, but *belong in the space opened through the interaffecting of both the interlocutors*. Repeating the other's words back to them and writing down what was said makes them into objects that can be inquired about. Through questioning / inquiry about the words that have become objects, what was implicit in them becomes part of the same cycle of mutual speaking and listening, acknowledging what was said and making it into a new object, available for both. The "forward movement" of the conversation is accomplished, paradoxically, through temporarily "putting aside" what was said and inquiring about what was implicit in its saying. In order to do that, "the said" is objectified through repeating it or writing it down and letting it be there, acknowledged by both. This putting aside does not mean discarding what was said in favor of a "deeper meaning" coming from the other's inaccessible subjectivity: the presence of what was said continues to shape the interaction, but through the transformation that the other's speech suffers through being repeated / written down, it becomes part of what is shared, and the character of its presence changes.

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<sup>6</sup> cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or beyond Essence*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999.

Third, this movement is asymmetrical. The practitioner *invites* his interlocutor to speak, and then *develops* her speech in the direction of what was implicit in it. In the same way as the words of the other are that without which the flow of the Socratic dialogue would be impossible, the practitioner's repeating of these words and questioning them are ensuring the continuation of this flow. This process of deepening and questioning, of detaching from oneself and going back to oneself is grounded in the inter-affecting presence of the interlocutors, going through a series of "movements" (initial saying by the practitioner's interlocutor, repeating and questioning by the practitioner, response of the interlocutor, etc.) with ever renewing content. At the same time, this development is carried on *by the practitioner*, who assumes the role of managing the discursive flow through these interventions. A set of "roles" and "rules" are also operating implicitly in the shaping of the discursive flow – and these rules are anchored in the structure itself of interaction: in order for the dialogue to accomplish this "carrying forward" of the implicit, it *requires* a *focus* on the other and a set of *strategies* for changing the emphasis from "what was just said" to "what was implicit in what was just said".

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