

OSLO PHILOSOPHY OLYMPIAD 2012 – LIMITS OF FREEDOM

“Doing a philosophical dialogue on freedom here and now”
Friday 18 May 2012, 16.00-17.20 and 17.40-19.00

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Part One: Preamble

What is a philosophical dialogue? It's a structured discussion – not a debate. Structured as in the Socratic-Platonic dialogues. In this discussion there is a group and a leader and they have different roles: the leader asks the questions and the group answers the questions. There are two basic rules: 1) the leader should flag no opinions of his own and 2) the participants must be willing to have their opinions examined by the leader or by the other participants.

To take part in such an exercise is to *do* philosophy, and one possible definition of doing philosophy is to *think without personal pride or prejudice*, that is, without letting one's knowledge, tastes, sentiments, emotions, attitudes etc. determine one's thinking. Indeed, to philosophise is to wilfully suspend all that make us special and singular. Philosophising is, therefore, as Socrates so aptly put it, an *“exercise in dying.”*

Or to formulate it with regards to the theme of this Olympiad: *only by accepting limits to our personal freedom (of expression) can we experience philosophical freedom, that is, only then can we be liberated by philosophy from ourselves.* This sounds strange perhaps but makes perfect sense with regards to Socrates. For him man consisted of body and soul and the aim of philosophy is to relieve the soul of the body. For Socrates, therefore, freedom means to move from a materialistic or egocentric to an idealistic or selfless state of mind.

Socrates was the first to practise philosophical dialogue in Western culture and for a long time he had few successors. He was widely admired but that was mostly in writing. Philosophy as an *oral practise with anyone* – with philosophers, non-philosophers, children, youth, old people etc. – more or less died with Socrates. It was not until the 20th century that philosophers and pedagogues started to pull philosophy out of the ivory towers and into schools, kindergartens, museums etc.

But the modern rebirth of Socratic practise was a rebirth with a difference. For Socrates, philosophical practise was all about searching for truth. He believed that truth really existed, and that philosophical dialogue was the only way to pursue truth. Two thousand years later, however, the concept of truth has suffered devastating blows from both science and philosophy. Truth, as a consequence, has become relative and individualised.

So today philosophy is no longer a viable path to truth. Rather it has morphed into a sceptical practise for people who cannot believe in the reality of truth. Being philosophical today means to reflect in an *open* and *tolerant* manner, that is, without questioning certain fundamental values that underpin modern society (like openness and tolerance). One does not want philosophical (critical) examinations of such values as they might result in “politically incorrect” answers or denial of “politically correct” answers. “Reflect loosely on everything, think critically only about non-controversial issues,” seems to be the motto of the modern relativist philosopher.

In this intellectual climate Socrates soon becomes a thorn in the eye. He is no longer regarded as a liberator of the human soul but instead as a crafty manipulator who hides behind a deceiving veil of irony. And despite his eloquent and amiable façade, his questioning is considered insensitive since he pays more attention to thoughts and ideas than to the persons of flesh and blood who entertain the ideas.

It is true that Socrates was not so interested in each individual. He never became personal or intimate with his interlocutors. But he was genuinely interested in their ideas. He loved ideas, loved philosophical problems just as “normal people” love solutions, love themselves, just as a man loves a woman. To love ideas was his way of relieving the soul of the body.

Now, let’s revive the Socratic spirit of philosophy and do an “exercise in dying,” an exercise where we forget about our knowledge, competencies, needs and preoccupations in order to think together as a group, in short, an exercise in *Socratic ignorance*.

On a practical level, this means that we listen carefully to all questions and answers and if we decide to speak, we do so in short and concise sentences. No dissertations. (That was yesterday.) No grand theories. No elaborate speeches. No fancy or complicated words. Just plain thinking as a child would have done it. Indeed, it’s a useful rule of thumb to ask yourself before you speak: would a 12-year-old have understood what I am about to say?

Part Two: Philosophical dialogue

Activity in both sessions

- Two minutes group work to formulate questions about freedom
- Collect questions from the group
- Choose a question
- Analyse and problematise answers

Session One

Questions posed (# of votes)

- Is freedom possible? (1)
- Is there anyone you can say is free? (0)
- Can you be free and happy at the same time? (1)
- What are the limits of freedom? (2)
- Is total freedom achievable? (9)
- Does our freedom depend on us? (7)
- What is the opposite of freedom? (1)
- Can you be free without society? (4)
- What does it mean to be free of oneself? (5)

Extract from dialogue

Is total freedom possible? First answer: yes. How? By doing what you want. But no one can do just as one pleases. There are always limits... Second answer: yes. How? By abolishing all limits. But there is one limit that can never be abolished: choice. We cannot escape choice and by choosing we limit our freedom and our possibilities. Then one student points out that choice *is* freedom, i.e. that there is no freedom without choice. So we got a nice paradox there.

Evaluation of session

This philosophical dialogue was different from other types of dialogue because:

- it went deeper
- the leader persisted in asking questions
- the exercise limited itself to examining pure reason (logic and conceptual relationships), it did not bring into the discussion non-philosophical circumstances and contexts (for instance political)
- it helped us track the discussion back to the beginning
- it was non-associative (logical rather than psychological)

The session was similar to other dialogues in that we gave counter-arguments.

Session Two

Questions posed (# of votes)

- Are my actions determined (cause and effect)? (3)
- Does freedom really exist? (2)
- Why is it important to be free or not? (4)
- Can you choose to be free? (3)
- What constitutes a free action? (0)
- Am I responsible for my actions? (1)

Extract from dialogue

Why is it important to be free or not? First, we asked why they chose this particular question rather than one of the other. What distinguished this question from the other questions? Answer: it has to do with *values*. What concept in the question points at values? Answer: “important.” Can we derive anything from the fact that a person is preoccupied with values? Answer 1: that he or she *wants* something. Answer 2: that he or she is a *moral* person.

Then we had an answer to the main question (“why is it important to be free or not?”): because freedom creates happiness. So happiness is important. Yes. But aren’t there other things that can create happiness too? Are there different ways to happiness? Yes, for instance drugs, religion, love. But these are uncertain ways. Also, freedom does not necessarily lead to happiness.