

What can Kantian philosophy do for humanity? From Leonard Nelson to phildialogues

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Abstract. In this essay, I argue that broadly Kantian philosophy – by which I mean philosophy inspired by Kant’s work, but neither dogmatically restricted to Kant’s own texts nor in any way committed to Kant’s own philosophical errors or personal prejudices – is profoundly relevant to the world of today, insofar as it can promote *radical enlightenment*. Radical enlightenment, in turn, is daring to think, write, speak, and freely act for ourselves, not only as individuals but also collectively via our social institutions, in order to change the world for the better. This should be sharply contrasted with *enlightenment lite*, or *shallow enlightenment*, which restricts critical thinking to narrowly-defined, coercively controlled social and political norms, according to Frederick the Great’s famous dictum: “argue as much as you like about whatever you like, but obey!” In effect, then, enlightenment lite or shallow enlightenment is nothing but “*free thinking*” inside a *barbed-wire playpen*. My argument has three parts. First, from the standpoint of Kantian radical enlightenment, I critically analyze the early twentieth-century neo-Kantian philosopher Leonard Nelson’s account of Socratic dialogical method. Second, I formulate a broadly Kantian, radically-enlightened conception of philosophical conversation, *phildialogues*, that corresponds constructively to my critical analysis of Nelson’s account. And third and finally, I argue that contemporary Kantian philosophers not only *can* but *should* implement and practice phildialogues, for the betterment of humanity.

Keywords: Kantian philosophy, humanity, Leonard Nelson, Socratic dialogue, radical enlightenment

“He who has properly **learned** a system of philosophy, for example, the Wolffian system, although he has in his head all of the principles, explanations, and proofs together with the division of the entire theoretical edifice, and can count everything off on his fingers, still has nothing other than **historical** cognition of the Wolffian philosophy; he knows and judges only as much as has been given to him. If you dispute one of his definitions, he has no idea where to go to get another one. He has formed himself according to an alien reason, but the faculty of imitation is not that of generation, i.e., the cognition did not arise from reason for him, and although it was certainly was objective cognition, subjectively, it is still merely historical. He has grasped and preserved well, i.e., he has learned, and is a plaster

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cast of a living human being [...]. [As] far as reason is concerned, we can at best only learn **to philosophize** [...]. [P]hilosophy is a mere idea of a possible science, which is nowhere given *in concreto*, but which one seeks to approach in various ways until the only footpath, much overgrown by sensibility, is discovered, and the hitherto unsuccessful ectype, so far as it has been granted to humans, is made equal to the archetype. Until then one cannot learn any philosophy; for where is it, who has possession of it, and by what can it be recognized? One can only learn to philosophize, i.e., to exercise the talent of reason in prosecuting its general principles in certain experiments that come to hand, but always with the reservation of the right of reason to investigate the sources of these principles themselves and to confirm or reject them.”

(*KrV*, A 836-838 / B 864-866; Kant, 1997, pp. 693-694)

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infant's cry of fear,
In every voice: in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.
(Blake, 1794, lines 5-8)

“The Socratic method [...] is the art of teaching not philosophy but philosophizing, the art of teaching not about philosophers but of making philosophers of the students [...]. If there is such a thing at all as instruction in philosophy, it can only be instruction in doing one's own thinking [...]. [T]he end of education is rational self-determination, i.e. a condition in which the individual does not allow his behavior [and beliefs] to be determined by outside influences but judges and acts according to his own insight [...]. [Therefore, t]he essential thing is the skill with which the teacher puts the students on their own responsibility at the very beginning by teaching them to go by themselves [...] and by so developing this independence that one day they may be able to venture forth alone, self-guidance having replaced the teacher's supervision.”

(Nelson, 1949a, pp. 1, 11, 19-20)¹

1 Introduction

For the purposes of this essay, by *Kantian philosophy* I mean any philosophical view that is substantially inspired or motivated by Kant's Critical philosophy, including, of course, Kant's Critical philosophy itself (as the self-including, trivial case), but especially classical or post-classical Neo-Kantian philosophy of various kinds, e.g. contemporary Kantian philosophy.

Question: Fine, but is Kant still relevant to the contemporary world? And if so, then more generally, what can Kantian philosophy do for humanity?

Answer: In answer to the first question: Yes! Moreover, I strongly believe that Kantian philosophy – when it is understood in the maximally broad sense, according to Kant's own description, not as “properly learning a system of philosophy”, like the Scholastic Leibnizian-Wolffian mainstream professional academic philosophers of his day, whom Kant criticizes and mocks, but instead as rational human animals “learning to philosophize” – not only can but also should enable and guide us in daring to think, write, and speak for ourselves, in order to change our individual and collective lives, so that we can freely act accordingly, and then change the world too. Or in other words, I strongly believe that Kantian philosophy in its maximally broad sense not only can but also should help humanity towards radical enlightenment.

Now “*Aufklärung*” means “enlightenment”, as in *The Enlightenment* (e.g. see Bristow, 2017); but what is the concept of enlightenment as such? Here is the pith-&-marrow of what Kant had to say about this fundamental cognitive, moral, and sociopolitical concept in his

¹ Henceforth, citations of Nelson (1949a) will be internal to the text of my essay.

seminal 1784 essay, “What is Enlightenment?”: “*Enlightenment is the human being’s emergence from his own self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to make use of one’s own understanding without direction from another. This immaturity is self-incurred when its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapere aude! Have the courage to use your own understanding! is thus the motto of Enlightenment*” (*WA*, AA 08: 35; Kant, 1996, p. 17).

Following Kant’s lead and elaborating a little, I will say that the concept of enlightenment as such says that (i) because we are, by virtue of a unified set of innately-specified cognitive, practical, and affective/emotional capacities, autonomous rational human animal agents possessing dignity, i.e. persons, but (ii) because, tragically, against the backdrop of various more or less brute, goading material conditions of physical nature, human history and social-institutional or political culture, we have also freely – even if unreflectively and self-deceivingly – put ourselves into a longstanding condition of cognitive, practical, and affective/emotional passivity, robotic subservience and mental slavery, and thus into a longstanding state of self-incurred moral and intellectual immaturity, (iii) therefore, in order finally to advance beyond this tragic immature condition and to satisfy the categorically normative demands of our rational human nature as persons, we ought to dare to use our own understanding and think for ourselves, or as the classical slogan has it, *sapere aude!*

But, unfortunately and fatefully, whether intentionally or not, Kant’s seminal essay is highly ambiguously *written*, in such a way as to permit two sharply different readings of the concept of enlightenment, depending on whether one interprets it, as most casual readers, scholars and Kantian or non-Kantian philosophers do, in the light of (i) Kant’s neo-Hobbesian liberal Statist political philosophy in “The Doctrine of Right”, or instead, as a few contrarian “Left Kantians” (e.g. see Hanna, 2017a) do, in the light of (ii) Kant’s uncompromising non-egoistic, non-consequentialist, autonomy-driven, dignitarian ethics in the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*, his post-Statist, spiritually-inspired moral cosmopolitanism in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, and his defense of the absolute autonomy of philosophy in *The Conflict of the Faculties*.

According to the first interpretation, which I call *enlightenment lite*, or *shallow enlightenment*, according to Frederick the Great’s famous dictum – or diktat –, you ought to “argue as much you like about whatever you like, but obey!” Correspondingly, enlightenment lite is committed to an essentially instrumental, empiricist conception of cognitive and practical rationality, an essentially deterministic or at least compatibilist metaphysics of free will and autonomy, an essentially egoistic utilitarian conception of ethics, an essentially individualist conception of social life, and an essentially intellectualist or dualist conception of the nature of the human mind.

But on the contrary, according to the second interpretation, which I call *radical enlightenment*,² or *heavy-duty enlightenment*, you ought to dare to think and act for yourself and, in so thinking and so doing, thereby exit the State in order to create and sustain a cosmopolitan moral community that Kant calls the “ethical community”; hence radical enlightenment is a Kantian version of philosophical and political cosmopolitan anarcho-socialism (e.g. see Hanna, 2017b). Correspondingly, radical enlightenment is committed to an essentially non-instrumental, apriorist conception of cognitive and practical rationality (e.g. see Hanna, 2015), a natural libertarian, source-incompatibilist metaphysics of free will and autonomy (e.g. see Hanna, 2018a), an essentially dignitarian, respect-based conception

² In Jonathan Israel’s (2001) excellent but also highly controversial book and its two sequel volumes, he traces the origins of the very idea of a radical enlightenment project back to Spinoza, pantheism, and metaphysical monism. I certainly agree with Israel that Spinozism is at least one important source of the radical enlightenment tradition. But I also think that Kant’s contribution is more fundamental. E.g. see Beiser (1987). Kant’s own contribution to the specific controversy about Spinozism is presented in “What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?” (*WDO*, AA 08; Kant, 1996c).

of ethics (e.g. see Hanna, 2018b), an essentially enactive and embedded conception of social life (e.g. see Maiese and Hanna, 2019) and an essentially embodied conception of the human mind (e.g. see Hanna and Maiese, 2009).

Now the ideological allure of the first or enlightenment lite/shallow enlightenment interpretation of enlightenment is so powerful that you may find it hard to believe that there even *is* a second or radical enlightenment/heavy-duty enlightenment interpretation of enlightenment. If so, I hereby invite you, as a self-consciously critical philosopher, to put the all-too-familiar enlightenment lite/shallow enlightenment interpretation in abeyance for a very brief moment and recognize that the radical enlightenment/heavy-duty enlightenment interpretation practically leaps out of these three juxtaposed texts:

“When nature has unwrapped, from under this hard shell, the seed for which she cares most tenderly, namely the propensity and calling to *think* freely, the latter gradually works back upon the mentality of the people (which thereby gradually becomes capable of *freedom* in acting) and eventually even upon the principles of *government*, which finds it profitable to itself to treat the human being, *who is now more than a machine*, in keeping with his dignity” (*WA*, AA 08: 41-42; Kant, 1996, p. 22).

“A *juridico-civil* (political) *state* is the relation of human beings to each other inasmuch as they stand jointly under *public juridical laws* (which are all coercive laws). An *ethico-civil* state is one in which they are united under laws without being coerced, i.e. under *laws of virtue* alone [...]. In an already existing political community all the political citizens are, as such, still in the *ethical state of nature* and have the right to remain in it; for it would be a contradiction (in *adjecto*) for the political community to compel its citizens to enter into an ethical community, since the latter entails freedom from coercion in its very concept. Every political community may indeed wish to have available a dominion over minds as well, according to the laws of virtue; for, where its means of coercion do not reach, since a human judge cannot penetrate into the depths of other human beings, there the dispositions to virtue would bring about the required result. But woe to the legislator who would want to bring about through coercion a polity directed to ethical ends! For he would thereby not only achieve the very opposite of ethical ends, but also undermine his political ends and render them insecure. – The citizen of the political community therefore remains, so far as the latter’s lawgiving authority is concerned, totally free: he may wish to enter with his fellow citizens into an ethical union over and above the political one, or rather remain in a natural state of this sort [...]. THE HUMAN BEING OUGHT TO LEAVE THE ETHICAL STATE OF NATURE IN ORDER TO BECOME A MEMBER OF AN ETHICAL COMMUNITY” (*RGV*, AA 06: 95-96; Kant, 1996b, pp. 131-132).

“When it is a question of the *truth* of a certain teaching to be expounded in public, the teacher cannot appeal to a supreme command nor the pupil pretend that he believed it by order. This can happen only when it is a question of action, and even then the pupil must recognize by a *free* judgment that such a command was really issued and that he is obligated or at least entitled to obey it; otherwise, his acceptance of it would be an empty pretense and a lie. Now the power to judge autonomously – that is, freely according to principles of thought in general – is called reason. So the philosophical faculty, because it must answer for the truth of its teachings it is to adopt or even allow, must be conceived as free and subject only to laws given by reason, not by the government” (*SF*, AA 07: 27; Kant, 1979, p. 43).

In any case, a striking contemporary example of enlightenment lite/shallow-enlightenment is Steven Pinker’s (2018) *Enlightenment Now*; and, for better or worse, I have recently developed and defended radical enlightenment/heavy-duty-enlightenment in *Kant, Agnosticism, and Anarchism* (Hanna, 2018c).

At the outset, I asserted that Kant is still directly relevant to the contemporary world, and also that Kantian philosophy in the maximally broad sense not only can but also should help humanity towards radical enlightenment. More specifically, I want to argue that (i) by starting out with the early twentieth century Neo-Kantian philosopher Leonard Nelson's version of Socratic method and applying the concept of radical enlightenment/heavy-duty-enlightenment to it, then (ii) we can derive a specifically Kantian version of philosophical conversation that I call *phildialogues*, that (iii) contemporary Kantian philosophers can employ, in order to liberate and awaken ourselves and the rest of humanity from what William Blake, with fire-tongued poetic accuracy, called our "mind-forg'd manacles."

2 On Leonard Nelson's "The Socratic Method"

It is regrettable that there is no *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on Leonard Nelson, the early twentieth century German Neo-Kantian philosopher, mathematician and socialist, which suggests – since mathematics is well-represented – that contemporary mainstream North American professional academic philosophers have little or no interest in Neo-Kantianism, or socialism, or both. Nevertheless, there is a substantial article on Nelson in the eight-volume 1967 McMillan *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and here is its terse introductory sentence: "Leonard Nelson (1882–1927), German critical philosopher and the founder of the neo-Friesian school" (Henry-Hermann, 1967, p. 463). Far more revealing, however, is what Brand Blanshard and Julius Kraft write in their respective Foreword and Introduction to the (I think) only fairly representative collection of Nelson's writings so far published in English:³ "All Nelson's pupils who remained in Germany were engaged, as long as they were not imprisoned, in underground or other illegal work against Nazism (Blanshard, 1949, p. vi); "A future political history of Germany will have to record how, out of [Nelson's] Academy and the youth groups connected to it, came a number of heroic men and women who fought against the National Socialist regime, and who, since the downfall of that regime, have borne with equal courage their share in the struggle for a new and better order in Germany" (Kraft, 1949, pp. ix-x). As a consequence of the convergence of Neo-Kantianism and progressive (or even radical) politics in his work, Nelson's 1929 essay, "The Socratic Method", based on a lecture presented in 1922, is not only philosophically fascinating but also truly metaphilosophically important.

At the same time, and curiously, given Nelson's own Neo-Kantian rigoristic commitment to truth-seeking and logical consistency in thinking, the essay has several significant *prima facie* flaws. Nelson's main claims are (i) that the basic purpose of the Socratic method, as implemented in teacher-student dialogues, is to make it really possible for students to dare to think for themselves (Nelson, 1949a, pp. 1, 11, 22), (ii) that the characteristic inferential process of real (i.e. authentic, serious) philosophical thinking is the regress from individual things or actual facts, as initially described by true judgments, to non-empirical general concepts that express both semantic presuppositions of those judgments and also the causally or metaphysically necessary conditions of those individual things or actual facts (also known as "abduction," or "inference-to-the-best-explanation"), thereby making the meaning and truth of those initial judgments really possible (also known as "transcendental explanation") (*ibid.*, pp. 9-11), and (iii) that the primary mental capacity exercised in philosophy is the will (*ibid.*, pp. 29-30). I fully agree with all three of those theses. But at the same time Nelson also claims (iv) that the Socratic teacher of philosophy, via teacher-student dialogues, must never lecture or even explicitly ask questions, but only ever raise deep difficulties or doubts

³ There was, however, a translation of the second volume of Nelson's *Lectures on the Foundations of Ethics, System der philosophischen Ethik und Pädagogik*, published by Yale University Press in 1956, under the title *System of Ethics*.

(*aporiae*) about what is being proposed by the students (*ibid.*, pp. 21-25), (v) that students, by means of this aporetic discursive strategy, must be forced to think for themselves (*ibid.*, p. 15), (vi) that philosophy is exclusively conceptual, propositional, and linguistic in nature (*ibid.*, pp. 30-33), (vii) that philosophy is exclusively a science (*ibid.*, pp. 7-8), consisting of “the sum total of those universal rational truths that become clear only through reflection [...] [t]o philosophize, then, is simply to isolate these rational judgments with our intellect and to express them in general judgments” (*ibid.*, p. 10), and (viii) that the paradigm of scientific cognitive activity for philosophy is the formal science of mathematics (*ibid.*, pp. 39-40).

One striking problem with thesis (iv) is that Nelson himself, as a Socratic teacher, here purports, by means of lecturing and the raising of explicit questions, both presented in an essay, to argue conclusively that the Socratic teacher of philosophy must never lecture, raise explicit questions, or present philosophy in a written format, whether essay or systematic treatise. Moreover, Nelson himself was the author of a three-volume systematic treatise entitled *Lectures on the Foundations of Ethics* (*Vorlesungen über die Grundlagen der Ethik*: 1917, 1924 and 1932), and another unpublished three-part treatise entitled *Lectures on the History of Metaphysics* (*Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Metaphysik*). Therefore (iv), as it stands, must be mistaken and, on the contrary, the following revised thesis must be true: (iv*) the Socratic method consists of aporetic discourse, together with lecturing and the raising of explicit questions; furthermore, non-aporetic philosophical activities, especially non-dialogical individual philosophical thinking and creation that yield written or spoken lectures and other written texts; these include Plato’s dialogues, essays and systematic treatises like those written by Kant, Fries, and Nelson himself.

An equally striking problem with (v) is that since the goal of Socratic method is to make it really possible for students to dare to think for themselves, which is an expression of their free agency, hence also of their free will, and since according to (iii) the primary capacity that is exercised in philosophy is the will, this cannot possibly be coerced or compelled, since that is a subjection of one’s free will to someone else’s will, or slavery (whether physical slavery to authoritarianism and physical coercion, or mental slavery to hegemonic ideology, false belief, and fallacy, as in Blake’s “mind-forg’d manacles”) and heteronomy. Therefore (v), as it stands, must be mistaken and, on the contrary, the following revised thesis must be true: (v*) the Socratic method must always and only help and scaffold or shape the students into daring freely to think, feel, and act for themselves. Another way of putting (v*) is that the Socratic method must always and only help and scaffold the students into being autonomous thinkers, as opposed to their being either heteronomous physical or mental slaves or monsters of rigoristic will-power.

Moreover, if the primary capacity that is exercised in philosophy is the will, then it cannot possibly be the case, as (vi) asserts, that philosophy is exclusively conceptual, propositional, and linguistic. Relatedly, Nelson (1949a, p. 17) explicitly says that Socratic method in the sense he is describing is as much Kantian and/or Friesian as it is Socratic and/or Platonic. Therefore, again, although this time for different reasons, it cannot possibly be the case, as (vi) asserts, that philosophy is exclusively conceptual, propositional and linguistic in nature, since a fundamental Kantian thesis, fully supported by Fries, is that human cognition is inherently dual, both capacity-dualist and content-dualist, insofar as our innate cognitive capacities, faculties or powers are fundamentally divided into (a) the non-discursive faculty or power of sensibility, which yields intuitions and images/imaginational content, which are essentially non-conceptual (e.g. see Hanna, 2001; 2005; 2008; 2011; 2015, ch. 2; 2016; 2021c), and (b) the discursive faculty or power of understanding, which yields concepts and conceptual content. So, contrary to thesis (vi) as it stands, the following revised thesis must be true: (vi*) philosophical cognition and philosophical reasoning must be every bit as much sensible and essentially non-conceptual as they are discursive and conceptual, propositional and linguistic.

Moreover, since the cognitive capacity for sensibility yields intuitions and images/imaginational content, and since, by (ii), the starting points of all characteristically philosophical inferences, the individual things or actual facts, are represented only by means of intuition, then it follows that the starting points of all philosophy are yielded only by means of intuition, and that intuitional cognition and intuition-based reasoning are necessary elements of philosophy. Indeed, since philosophy characteristically generates synthetic a priori truths, that state non-analytically (i.e. non-logically) necessary connections between the non-empirical general concepts that are the semantic presuppositions of true empirical judgments about actual facts and individual things, and that also thereby express the causally or metaphysically necessary conditions of those actual facts and individual things, and since for Kant a proposition is synthetic if and only if its meaning and truth are partially determined by empirical intuition (synthetic *a posteriori* truths) or pure intuition (synthetic *a priori* truths) (cf. Hanna, 2001, esp. chs. 4-5; Hanna, 2021a), then intuitional cognition and intuition-based reasoning are not only necessary elements of philosophy but also partially constitutive elements of philosophy.

Nelson's essay is strikingly short on examples of the Socratic method in action; but one of the few examples, used twice, is the famous "Grand Inquisitor" section in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* (Nelson, 1949a, pp. 2, 13). This in turn is a vivid and indeed self-evident counterexample to (vii): philosophy cannot possibly be exclusively a science, if one of the best examples of Socratic method is to be found in Dostoevsky's brilliant novel. Moreover, in an earlier essay published in 1918, Nelson (1949b) explicitly says that philosophizing is an "art" (*Kunst*). Contrary to what (vii) states, then, the following revised thesis must be true: (vii*) philosophy must contain not only an irreducibly scientific component but also an irreducibly artistic component.

Now as Kant points out in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, artistic activity requires the cognitive production of what he calls an "aesthetic idea", by which he means, "[a] representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though *without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., concept, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible* [...], [and] [o]ne readily sees that it is the counterpart (pendant) of an **idea of reason**, which is, conversely, a concept to which no intuition (representation of the imagination) can be adequate" (*KU*, 05: 314; Kant, 2000, p. 192, *italics* R.H.). In this way, aesthetic ideas are at least trans-conceptual in inherently going beyond the content of concepts, even if not strictly speaking essentially non-conceptual. This in turn entails that philosophical cognition and philosophical reasoning must include not only the essentially non-conceptual content of intuition or imagination, but also the trans-conceptual content of aesthetic ideas of imagination as necessary and indeed partially constitutive elements. And from this it directly follows that (viii) cannot possibly be correct, because if philosophy must contain an irreducibly artistic component, and thereby must also contain the trans-conceptual content of aesthetic ideas of imagination, then the formal science of mathematics cannot be the (i.e. one and only) paradigm of philosophical cognitive activity, even if, as Kant holds, mathematics is also grounded on the essentially non-conceptual content of our pure forms of intuition, the representations of space and time (see Hanna, 2006a, ch. 6). Correspondingly, on the contrary, the following revised thesis must be correct: (viii*) not only is the formal science of mathematics a paradigm for philosophical cognition, but also at least some art-forms (e.g., novels or poetry) must be at least as paradigmatic for philosophical cognitive activity as mathematics. This revised thesis, in turn, is partially captured, for example, by Novalis's profound remark that "poetry is the hero of philosophy" (e.g. see Reginald [also known as Hanna], 2018).

Relatedly, one of the most important features of Plato's Socratic dialogues, explicitly pointed out especially by Plato-interpreters in the Straussian tradition – e.g. Drew Hyland (e.g. see Hyland, 1968) – is that the dialogues themselves are as much works of art as they

are philosophical investigations, and that they contain many layers of meaning. Very frequently, in fact, a Socratic dialogue will include various features that help and scaffold the fully attentive, sensitive and imaginative philosophical reader into critically digging and exploring deep beneath the surface-structure or surface-content of the dialogue, and daring to recognize that this structure and content in fact to some extent undermines itself and thereby yields more profound philosophical insights that are at least implicitly available to all of us, if we resolutely do the required work.

Finally then, in view of Nelson's serious regard for and study of the Socratic dialogues, and also in view of his explicitly stated thesis (i) that the basic purpose of the Socratic method, as implemented in teacher-student dialogues, is to make it really possible for students to dare to think for themselves, one might indeed wonder about the curious fact of Nelson's apparent commitment to the obviously (or even blatantly) flawed theses (iv) through (viii). More precisely, one might indeed wonder whether Nelson's apparent commitment to those theses was quite intentionally only exoteric, and also whether this intentionally exoteric commitment was actually more profoundly intended to help and scaffold/shape the fully attentive, sensitive and imaginative philosophical reader into recognizing that these theses are not only all false as stated, but also that they all need to be creatively reformulated along the lines I have proposed above, as theses (iv*) through (viii*), in order to understand the nature of real philosophy: that is, authentic, serious philosophy, as opposed to inauthentic, superficial philosophy – for example, in the 18th century, the Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy, and, in the twentieth and twenty-first century, mainstream professional academic philosophy in general and post-classical Analytic philosophy in particular (e.g. see Hanna, 2021b; 2021c). In diametrical contrast to these inauthentic, superficial philosophers, real philosophers are *rational rebels for humanity*.

Given Nelson's brilliance as a Socratic and Neo-Kantian real philosopher and teacher and his intellectual and moral courage as rational rebel for humanity, I am fully prepared to grant him that more profound intention. That being so, then what Nelson is really saying in "The Socratic Method" is (1) that Kantian real philosophy is the smooth fusion of the deepest insights of Socrates and Kant, and (2) that we cannot become Kantian real philosophers and rational rebels for humanity until, as free, principled, and authentic/serious practical agents, we have actually and resolutely gone through the intellectually, perceptually, imaginatively, emotionally, morally and politically arduous life-process of daring to think and enact this very thought for ourselves.

Now I want to use Nelson's neo-Kantian notion of Socratic method, in the light of radical enlightenment/heavy-duty-enlightenment and real philosophy, to develop a specifically Kantian version of philosophical conversation I call *phildialogues*.

3 Phildialogues

In the real-world originals of the Socratic dialogues, all participants met face-to-face and in real space and real time in a leisurely setting.⁴ But nowadays, in a world that is fundamentally driven from above by what I call *the military-industrial-university-digital complex* (e.g. see Hanna, 2021c), hence fundamentally threatened all-around by what by what I call *The New Apocalypse* (e.g. see Hanna and Paans, 2020), and currently gripped from below in the roll-out and fall-out of the COVID-19 pandemic, this is often difficult or even practically impossible to manage. Moreover, because it is often difficult or even practically impossible for spatially widely-distributed groups of people in many different time-zones to meet in person, even by means of face-to-face conversation technologies like Skype, Zoom or Teams (although this would be the ideal case), therefore, in order to liberate ourselves and others

⁴ Made possible, of course, by Statism and chattel slavery; but that is another story for another day.

from our “mind forg’d manacles” and to wake up from the sleep of reason in a contemporary context, we not only can but also should be conducting philosophically-enabled and philosophically-guided dialogues, either face-to-face or non-face-to-face, and either real-space-and-time or online, with people living in any place and in any time-zone, about issues that really matter.

These are “phildialogues”. Phildialogues are the precise *opposite* of angry, anxious people clustering in their digital echo chambers on social media, or shouting insults at each other over the internet. A phildialogue uses classical critical reasoning and discussion methods drawn from (i) ancient Greek philosophy (especially Plato’s Socratic dialogues, especially insofar as Socratic method has been constructively reinterpreted by Nelson), (ii) the seventeenth and eighteenth century radical Enlightenment (especially as found in the works of Spinoza, the French *philosophes*, and Kant), (iii) mid-twentieth century emancipatory pedagogy, especially the Brazilian philosopher of education Paulo Freire’s (2007) classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and (iv) from late twentieth century and early twenty-first century work on facilitation and principled-negotiation-&-participatory-decision-making (also known as “direct democracy”) – including Roger Fisher’s and William Ury’s (1981) *Getting to YES*, Sam Kaner’s (1989) *What Can O[rganizational] D[esign] Professionals Learn from Grassroots Peace Activists?*, Elinor Ostrom’s (1990) *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, Allan Kaplan’s (2002) *Development Practitioners and Social Process: Artists of the Invisible*, Kaner’s (2007) *Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* and Peter Block’s (2008) *Community: The Structure of Belonging* – in order to work towards humanity’s individual and collective radical enlightenment.

How do phildialogues work? As I indicated above, nowadays phildialogues are rarely face-to-face in real space and time and are often widely distributed over the spatial locations and time-zones of many participants, conducted online and extended over some non-trivial duration in time, e.g. several days, several weeks or a month. Ideally, they are conducted face-to-face online in real time (in the current jargon, “synchronously”), by means of technologies like Skype, Zoom or Teams; but failing that, they are conducted by means of synchronous non-face-to-face interactive group text-messaging or by asynchronous non-face-to-face interactive group text-messaging +/- decision-making tools of some sort, e.g. facilitated meeting-and-decision-making technologies such as Loomio. In any case, each phildialogue is facilitated by two Kantian philosophers: (i) *an enabler*, who acts as a more-or-less neutral (i.e. more-or-less non-participant) *editor* of the discussion and (ii) *a guide*, who acts as a participant *leader* of the discussion.

In turn there are five simple rules for conducting a phildialogue (see also Klein, 2012):

1. *The unpacking rule for participants*: unpack each of your contributions (posts) into a *single* issue, idea, or argument, that does not replicate a point that has already been made elsewhere in that phildialogue.

2. *The disagreement rule for participants*: if you disagree with an idea or argument, then create *new* contributions (posts) that present your alternative ideas or counter-arguments.

3. *The live-and-let-live rule for enablers/editors*: existing contributions (posts) should be edited by the editor only to *strengthen* them.

4. *The honest broker rule for enabler/editors*: the role of the enabler/editor is *not* primarily to evaluate the merits of a contribution (post), but *instead* primarily to help phildialogue participants ensure that each of their contributions (posts) is framed in a way that makes it most helpful to the entire phildialogue community.

5. *The procedural rule for editors and participants*: each phildialogue is aimed at collective learning, collective wisdom and ultimately collective action, which in turn unfolds according to a general procedure for *principled-negotiation-&-participatory-decision-making*.

Principled negotiation is negotiation in which all members of a group of people sincerely try to reach agreement about some controverted (and often highly controversial) issue, in such a way that everyone's basic interests are mutually satisfied to the greatest possible extent. And *participatory decision-making* is principled negotiation for groups of *any* size, leading to collective decisions about proposals for group action.

What follows is the description of a general procedure for *principled-negotiation-&-participatory-decision-making*. For purposes of convenience, however, I will just call it *collective decision-making* from here on in. Every such process of collective decision-making is a phildialogue, with all members of a group of people discussing various proposals for group action, *one proposal at a time*, with the following nine features:

1. The group uses a five-valued array of options for taking a position on any given proposal, including two degrees of agreement, one neutral or as-yet-uncommitted value, and two degrees of disagreement, namely –

- Strongly Agree
- Mildly Agree
- Abstain
- Mildly Disagree
- Block or Walk

– any of which is registered by each member of a group at any point in a given dialogue about a given proposal being considered by that group.

2. Every registration of a position carries with it the option to change or update your position at *any* time in the dialogue.

3. Everyone follows *the basic principle of mutual respect and tolerance*: No one is ever coerced in any particular sub-cycle or overall process of decision-making, either with respect to their own position or with respect to their other contributions to the dialogue and, more specifically, no one is ever forced to walk or punished for blocking or walking.

4. *Mild disagreement* always entails going forward with the current proposal if there is sufficiently strong support for it.

5. *Sufficiently strong support* means that there is close to or more than 50% strong or mild agreement with the proposal within the group, and no blocks.

6. *Blocking* means not merely a strong disagreement with a given proposal, but also that one block is enough to defeat a given proposal in any given sub-cycle of a particular process of collective decision-making.

7. Every blocker must also offer, or support, or at least refrain from blocking, an alternative proposal in the next sub-cycle of the same collective decision-making process.

8. Every participant is permitted only a fairly small finite number (e.g., 5) blocks in a particular collective decision-making process, and if s/he uses up all his or her blocks, then s/he must also walk away from that collective decision-making process and thereby exit it.

9. Walking away from/exiting a particular collective decision-making process can be done at any point in the process, not only after the permitted maximum number of blocks.

4 Seven potential problems for phildialogues: Lessons from teaching introductory ethics

Recently, I wrote up and self-published a revised-&-updated version of my lecture notes for an Introductory Ethics course that I taught for almost twenty-five years, as a little book, or primer, under the title *Morality and the Human Condition* (Hanna, 2000b). As I was writing it up, I was also vividly reminded of the face-to-face real space and real time class- or smaller-group discussions I had conducted or facilitated over two-and-a-half decades. Suddenly it became clear to me that this experience had direct implications for phildialogues. During the first few years I taught the course, I included sections on the standard controversial or

otherwise hot-button applied ethics issues of the day – abortion, animal ethics/vegetarianism, capital punishment, gun-abolitionism or gun-control etc. – but eventually it became clear to me that, due to at least seven persistent problems in our class discussions of these issues, this was mostly wasted effort, so I switched the focus of the course to more-or-less the version that I recently revised-&-updated.

But what is of central importance for the purposes of the present essay, is that I think that these seven persistent problems also have direct application to all discussions of controversial or otherwise hot-button issues, whether publicly or privately organized, whether face-to-face in real space and real time, or whether via online open discussion platform or via online facilitated meeting-and-decision-making technology, or whether online face-to-face and synchronous, online non-face-to-face and synchronous, or online non-face-to-face and asynchronous. Hence these seven persistent problems also apply directly to phildialogues as potential problems for them.

The first persistent problem is *the backfire effect*, although it did not actually have a handy social-scientific label during the first two decades of my teaching. The backfire effect is that presenting ideologically-blinkered and mind-manacled people (true-believers, trolls, yahoos, zealots etc.) with adequate evidence or cogent counterarguments to their claims only hardens their commitment to their false beliefs, increases their cognitive resistance to rational correction and makes them angry (or even angrier) to boot (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010; Lewandowsky, *et al.*, 2012). Now it *is* in fact really possible to design and implement rational techniques for successful cognitive debiasing, thus overcoming the backfire effect, by “affirming worldview” and “affirming identity,” and then proceeding to phildialogues. But the further persistent problem in this connection is that any such process of successful cognitive debiasing within the framework of effective phildialogues is slow, time-consuming and energy-absorbing (Lewandowsky, *et al.*, 2012).

A second persistent problem that, unlike the backfire effect, is not often described or even noticed, is what I will call *the amnesia problem*. Even if you manage, by means of cognitive debiasing techniques together with phildialogue, to get people to open their minds somewhat in the course of a given dialogue/discussion, nevertheless, as soon as they go away from the actual discussion for a few days, and sometimes even only for a few hours, when they come to resume the discussion, it is as if their memories had been entirely wiped clean in the meantime, flipping them back to their previously-held views: therefore, basically you have to start from ground zero in every single discussion that involves controversial or hot-button issues.

A third persistent problem is what I will call *the know-it-all-windbag problem*. Many or even most discussions are dominated by a few know-it-all-windbags, who not only relentlessly draw attention to themselves and their own agendas, thereby using up valuable time, but they also frighten away other possible contributors by mocking them etc., unless you take serious steps to rein them in, or even (as politely as possible) shut them up, and include other voices. But the process by which you curate and guide the discussions in order to ensure that it is not taken over by the know-it-all-windbags puts everyone on edge and, at the same time, as soon as they recognize that you are reining them in or trying to shut them up, the know-it-all-windbags also tend to become even *more* conversationally aggressive.

A fourth persistent problem is what Plato’s Socrates aptly called *misology*. Misology is an unreasonable prejudice against, and even the outright hatred of, logic and logical reasoning. Misology goes radically beyond Emerson’s rationally legitimate and witty worry about logical consistency at all costs: “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines” (Emerson, 1957, p. 153). A foolish consistency above all ignores or overlooks the genuine logical phenomena of paradoxes, and correspondingly, it ignores or overlooks what is nowadays called *paraconsistent logic* and *dialetheic logic* (e.g. see Haack, 1996, esp. pp. xiv-xv; Priest, 2001, esp. pp. 151, 159), and

also the nature and rational role of logical reasoning based on the principle of *reductio ad absurdum*. In any case, in the context of the introductory ethics course I taught for all those years, since I had also taught formal logic and informal logic to undergraduates when I was a graduate student, and because I had even written a book about rationality and the morality of logic (Hanna, 2006b), I always included a short section on basic principles of logical reasoning, formal fallacies, informal fallacies, and (in effect) argument-mapping. But when, in the course of our class discussions on controversial or hot-button issues, I would lay out arguments step-by-step (either mine, or those of classical philosophers, or arguments offered by students) for critical analysis, I was all-too-often met with the (sincerely intended) objection, “Oh, you’re *just tricking us into agreeing* by using logic!”, as if logic and logical reasoning, and sophistry, were one and the same.

A fifth persistent problem is the confusion between *dialogue* and *debate*. The purpose of a philosophical dialogue in the Socratic/Kantian tradition is for all participants to learn something from each other and make collective rational progress towards radical enlightenment – and, when collective decision-making is also on the agenda, towards collective decisions and effective action. But people engaged in class discussions about controversial or hot-button issues found it almost impossible to understand that we were engaging in philosophical dialogues in *that* sense, and not engaging in debates, where the purpose is to score debating points, “win” the debate, dialectically crush your opponents, and ultimately impose your own ideas (or your own will) on everyone else. And this was so, even when I repeatedly explicitly distinguished between philosophical dialogues and debates.

A sixth persistent problem is the intellectually deadly combination of what I will call *dialogue-fatigue* and *dialogue-attention deficit disorder*. If the discussion of some controversial or hot-button issue is taking longer than just a few (say, thirty or forty-five) minutes, and perhaps is even extended over several days, and a simple resolution of the issue, as it were “a take-away”, is not delivered immediately or is not delivered at all – as is often the case with truly complex issues – many or even most participants in the dialogue simply get tired, stop paying attention, *lose interest* and are either distracted by irrelevant trivia on the internet (say, sneaking looks at their Facebook pages or Twitter, even when they have been asked to lay aside all their electronic gear until the class ends), or else check out of the discussion altogether. And, once dialogue-fatigue and dialogue-attention deficit disorder have set in and erstwhile participants have gone over to “the dark side” of irrelevant trivia on the internet or have even checked out altogether, then it is practically impossible to get them to rejoin the dialogue.

Seventh and finally, specifically in relation to the internet and non-face-to-face online discussions – as opposed to face-to-face discussions, whether in real space and time or synchronously online – there is another persistently problematic factor that is not often noticed, although it did recently (and rightly) receive some attention in Evan Mandery’s (2019) excellent article, *What Teaching Ethics in Appalachia Taught Me About Bridging America’s Partisan Divide*. I will call this *the face-to-face vs. Facebook effect*. When people are actually in the same real space and same real time together, or even synchronously face-to-face online together, talking, they tend to be quite sensitive to how everyone else is viewing them, and are therefore usually not only quite cautious-&-polite, but also, and what is even more important, are overtly quite sensitive to collective moral norms and principles. Except for the inevitable know-it-all-windbags, of course, but then usually everyone despises them and rolls their eyes or starts doodling or fantasizing about something else whenever they start their relentless “blah blah blah me me me me blah blah blah me me me” etc. But as has often been noticed, in online non-face-to-face contexts, especially on social media and in Facebook-like contexts, and even more so when the individual identities of the non-face-to-face contributors or discussants are further occluded behind pseudonymous user-names, then ordinary and normally quite reasonable people very often become disembodied debater-

monsters, lose the caution-&-politeness and moral sensitivity they would typically have in face-to-face conversational encounters, and turn into morally insensitive, sophisticated trolls, internet bullies and coercive moralist screamers.

5 Conclusion

As I indicated at the beginning of the last section, I think that the seven persistent problems about discussing controversial or otherwise hot-button issues in Introductory Ethics classes are equally persistent and problematic for all philosophical, moral or political discussions of similarly controversial or otherwise hot-button issues, whether publicly or privately organized, whether face-to-face in real space and real time, or whether via online open discussion platform or via online facilitated meeting-and-decision-making technology, or whether online face-to-face and synchronous, online non-face-to-face and synchronous, or online non-face-to-face and asynchronous. Hence, they also apply directly to phildialogues as potential problems for them.

But, to conclude in a rationally hopeful spirit, I do also think that a fully self-critical awareness of these seven potential problems for phildialogues, along with sufficient time, sufficient energy, and several intellectual, emotional, and practical virtues, including tolerance, patience, a robust sense of humor, and sheer rational resilience, can carry Kantian real philosophers and their dialogical communities around these problems, past them, over them, and beyond them, towards individual and collective radical enlightenment. Therefore, all Kantian real philosophers – as rational rebels for humanity in the tradition of radical enlightenment philosophers in general but especially Socrates and Leonard Nelson in particular – not only can but also should be conducting phildialogues.

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