

SCULPTING REFLECTION AND BEING IN THE PRESENCE OF MYSTERY. PERSPECTIVES ON THE ACT OF PHILOSOPHIZING IN PRACTICE WITH PEOPLE RECOVERING FROM CANCER

ESCULPIENDO LA REFLEXIÓN Y EL SER EN PRESENCIA DEL MISTERIO. PERSPECTIVAS SOBRE EL ACTO DE FILOSOFAR EN LA PRÁCTICA CON PERSONAS QUE SE RECUPERAN DE UN CÁNCER

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Abstract: The method of Socratic dialogue has been known for its regressive abstraction since Nelson and Heckmann. This method raises awareness on the implicit assumptions and ideas behind the interpretation of human experiences. My recent Socratic Dialogue Groups (SDG) with people recovering from cancer revealed additional perspectives on philosophical reflection. The dialogues among the participants brought out an ontological exigency within reflection that moved beyond purely epistemological thinking. The objective of this article is twofold: First to elucidate the act of reflecting philosophically within my SDGs and secondly to accent the ontological dimension of reflection. My analysis of the process of reflection will draw on Marcel's philosophical reflection and notion of being.

Key words: socratic dialogue, the act of philosophizing, reflection, experience, being, cancer rehabilitation

Resumen: El método del diálogo socrático ha sido reconocido desde que lo implantasen Nelson y Heckmann por su potencial de abstracción acerca de hechos pasados. Este método despierta la conciencia sobre las asunciones e ideas implícitas que se encuentran detrás de las interpretaciones de las experiencias humanas. Mis grupos de diálogos socráticos con personas que se están recuperando de un cáncer revelan inflexiones filosóficas adicionales a este tipo de evidencias. Los diálogos entre los participantes manifestaron una necesidad ontológica en relación a la reflexión, la cual fue más allá de las necesidades puramente epistemológicas que aparecen en estas dinámicas. El objetivo de este artículo es doble. En primer lugar, analizar el acto de reflexionar filosóficamente dentro de mis grupos de diálogo filosófico; en segundo lugar, subrayar la dimensión ontológica de la reflexión. Mi análisis del proceso de reflexión se fundará en las reflexiones filosóficas de Marcel y la noción de ser.

Palabras clave: diálogo socrático, el acto de filosofar, reflexión, experiencia, ser, rehabilitación del cáncer.

Introduction

Socratic dialogue is increasingly being applied within a variety of professional disciplines in today's society, such as within medical ethics,¹ social work,² education³ or business.⁴ Socratic dialogue is defined by a group of dialogue partners addressing a philosophical question.⁵ Philosophical questions go to the root nature of existence, knowledge, reality, values, mind, beauty, etc. and thus concern the “general principles of human knowledge, e.g. 'What is wisdom?'”⁶ In a Socratic dialogue group (SDG)⁷ the dialogue partners use “the instrument of reflection about experience which is available to every participant of the dialogue. Hence, questions which can be answered by means of other instruments are dropped out.”⁸ As reflection is crucial to the manner in which we

¹ See for example: AIZAWA, Kuniko., ASAI, Atsushi & BITO, Seiji: “Defining futile life-prolonging treatments through Neo-Socratic dialogue,” in *BMC Medical Ethics*, vol. 14:51, December 2013 .

² See for example: PULLEN-SANSFAÇON, Annie: “Socratic dialogue and self-directed group work: strengthening ethical practice in social work,” in *Social Work with Groups*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2012, pp. 253-266.

³ See for example: KNEZIC, Dubravka, WUBBELS, Theo, ELBERS, Ed & HAJER, Maaïke: “The Socratic dialogue and teacher education,” in *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 26, 2010, pp. 1104-1111.

⁴ See for example: SKORDOULIS, Rosemary & DAWSON, Patrick: “Reflective decision: the use of Socratic dialogue in managing organizational change,” in *Management Decision*, vol. 45, no. 6, 2007, pp. 991-1007.

⁵ GRONKE, Horst: “Socratic Dialogue or Para-Socratic Dialogue? Socratic-Oriented Dialogue as the Third Way of a Responsible Consulting and Counseling Practice,” in BRUNE, Jens Peter, KROHN, Dieter (eds.): *Socratic Dialogue and Ethics*. Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005, pp. 24-35.

⁶ BERLIN, Kopfwerk: “The Methodology of Socratic Dialogue: Regressive Abstraction - How to ask for and find philosophical questions,” in BRUNE, Jens Peter, KROHN, Dieter (eds.): *Socratic Dialogue and Ethics*. Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005, pp. 88-111.

⁷ The Socratic Dialogue Group follows a specific procedure: Participants choose one single philosophical question for the group to dwell on; each participant tells the others about a self-lived experience illustrating the chosen question; the group decides on one of these experiences which then becomes its focal point; next follows a meticulous analysis of this experience that will be increasingly abstract and identify principles and eventually common traits between all the experiences; finally the group will frame a series of sentences that capture their understanding of the chosen question. See also BRUNE, Jens Peter & KROHN, Dieter (eds.): *Socratic Dialogue and Ethics*. Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005.

⁸ The quotation by Gustav Heckmann (who further developed the Socratic method after Leonard Nelson) continues: “Such instruments are: 1. experiments, or observation or measuring in nature or in the lab. 2. empirical inquiries as usual in social sciences. 3. historical studies. 4. psychoanalytical method which aims to uncover the *individual* mental problems of a human being,” HECKMANN, Gustav: *Das Socratische Gespräch. Erfahrungen in philosophischen Hochschulseminaren*. Frankfurt am Main: dipa-Verlag, 1993, p. 14f. See also KROHN, Dieter: “Theory and Practice of Socratic Dialogue,” in SARAN, Rene, NEISSER, Barbara (eds.): *Enquiring Minds. Socratic Dialogue in*

address experiences in Socratic dialogue, it becomes important to cast light on this mesmerizing and multidimensional tool of the mind and what it gives access to within the realm of existence.

Many prominent scholars and practitioners other than Nelson and Heckmann have published on the method of Socratic dialogue and the methodology of SDG.⁹ These expositions, however, most often leave the actual reflective process of philosophizing within a SDG scarcely documented and studied. In surveying the literature of Socratic dialogue groups employed by philosophers in various milieu, I would like to draw attention to the article “Moving through Dialogue”¹⁰ by Gronke and Nitsch who have done a thorough examination of the thought process of their SDGs within Tegel prison in Berlin.¹¹ Chapter five in Hansen's book *Den filosofiske dialoggruppe*¹² similarly guides us through the thoughtful steps and argumentative proceedings within groups he led consisting of managers of, supervisors and teachers from Danish *daghøjskoler* (full time education for adults). In both studies they show the reflective evolution that the participants went through. Besides this evolution I have chosen to focus on the nature of reflection by conceptualizing the inner dynamic of the thought process.

In order to better understand how philosophical reflection contributes to a beneficial and constructive dialogue within the context of cancer rehabilitation, we need to further explain the nature of this kind of thinking, how it plays out

Education. London: Trentham Books, 2004, p. 17.

⁹ BOELE, Dries: “The benefits of Socratic dialogue. Or: which results can we promise?” *Inquiry. Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines*. Spring vol. XVII, no. 3, 1997, pp. 48-70; GRONKE, Horst: “The Different Use of Socratic Method in Therapeutic and Philosophical Dialogue,” in BRUNE, Jens Peter, GRONKE, Horst, KROHN, Dieter (eds.): *The Challenge of Dialogue*. Münster: Lit Verlag, 2010, pp. 43-56 (see also GRONKE, 2005 & 2002); HANSEN, Finn Thorbjørn: *Den sokratiske dialoggruppe. Et værktøj til værdiafklaring*. København: Gyldendal, 2000 (see also HANSEN, 2002); KESSELS, Jos: *Die Macht der Argumente*. Belz-Verlag, 2001; KROHN, Dieter: “Theory and Practice of Socratic Dialogue,” in SARAN, Rene, NEISSER, Barbara (eds.): *Enquiring Minds. Socratic Dialogue in Education*. London: Trentham Books, 2004, pp.15-24; PIHLGREN, Ann: *Socrates in the Classroom. Rationales and effects of philosophizing with children*. Doctoral dissertation. Department of Education, University of Stockholm, 2008; RAUPACH-STRAY, Gisela: “Das Paradigma der Sokratischen Methode in der Tradition von Leonald Nelson (1882-1927) und Gustav Heckmann (1898-1996),” in KROHN, Dieter, NEISSER, Barbara & WALTER, Nora (eds.): *Das Sokratische Gespräch in philosophischer und pädagogischer Praxis*. Frankfurt am Main: dipa-Verlag, 1999.

¹⁰ GRONKE, Horst & NITSCH, Uwe: “Moving through dialogue – free thinking in a confined space. Socratic dialogue in Tegel penal institution,” in *Practical Philosophy*, Autumn 2002, pp. 13-24.

¹¹ See also BRUNE, Jens Peter & GRONKE, Horst: “Ten years of Socratic dialogue in prisons: its scope and limits,” in *Philosophical Practice: the Journal of APPA*, vol. 5, no. 3 (special editor: Horst Gronke), 2010, pp. 674-684.

¹² HANSEN, Finn Thorbjørn: *Den sokratiske dialoggruppe. Et værktøj til værdiafklaring*. København: Gyldendal, 2000.

and how it engages its participants. This understanding will also help to differentiate philosophical reflection from other kinds of reflection as well as specify the subject matter of Socratic dialogue and thus the existential range of it.

As a part of a research project funded by the Danish Cancer Society, I facilitated three Socratic Dialogue Groups¹³ at the Center for Cancer and Health in Copenhagen between October 2012 and May 2013. The focal point of this article is not to discuss the method of a SDG but to examine perspectives on philosophical reflection that were brought out within the format of Socratic Dialogue Group. The objective is thus to describe, demonstrate and analyze the act of philosophizing by the use of examples from my SDGs and to draw attention to the significance of an ontological horizon within the reflective process of Socratic dialogue with people recovering from cancer.

Unraveling the insides of their experience and searching for essential components in their chosen question led my groups to an elusive yet evocative quality within the act of philosophical reflection that left the strictly critical approach and epistemological mindset of reflection inadequate. This quality highlighted a way of philosophizing that can be illuminated by the French philosopher and playwright Gabriel Marcel's dwellings on concrete ontology, particularly his study on the nature of reflection and the unverifiable, logically inexplicable character of being or being as mystery.¹⁴ His concept of secondary reflection permeated my SDGs in a variety of ways contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of what takes place within the SDG's thought process and providing a rich source for the portrayal of the philosophical journey travelled in my SDGs. Attending to the ontological dimension of reflection will illuminate a less scrutinized component of Socratic dialogue that may prove to be imperative for its existential value and help make the act of philosophizing richer and fuller within cancer rehabilitation.

Using my SDGs as a reference point, I will investigate the enactment of philosophical reflection within cancer rehabilitation. Instead of proceeding with each SDG showing how they philosophized, I will illustrate their philosophical thinking using examples that most clearly captures this act. This decision is based on the similarities between the groups in their practice of reflecting philosophically. By focusing on the act and trajectory of philosophizing and not the individual groups, I avoid repetition.

¹³ There were a total of 17 participants. All were either in the very last stages of their treatment, cured or chronically ill. We would meet once a week for two hours or more at a time. Two groups consisting of six participants met six times and one group consisting of five participants met five times. The majority of the dialogues were filmed (of course with the permission of the participants).

¹⁴ MARCEL, Gabriel: *The Mystery of Being. Volume I: Reflection and Mystery*. South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine Press, 1950 (see also MARCEL, 1940 & 1976).

The Creative Act of Reflecting Philosophically on Experience

The kind of thinking that a SDG appeals to is an act of creative thinking. It is similar to the process of creating a piece of art, a sculpture for example. When a sculptor begins a new piece, he has only a mass of material in front of him, for example a chunk of clay. There is no form yet, no expression, no communication. As his inspiration moves him, he tunes into the material, i.e. the clay, by entering a negotiation with it where he tries to bring out the essence of himself and that of the clay at that particular moment in time. When he starts out, he does not know where he will end up, i.e. what the final piece will look like; it evolves bit by bit and may even surprise him. Out of the creative interplay between the artist and the clay, a new piece of art eventually emerges. Artistic expression thrives on an openness, an availability¹⁵ within the artist where he allows for the unpredictable and unexpected that may lead him in new directions. He works with disorderly material and the fabric of imagination. His intuition is imperative for his work process as is his ability to listen without resistance.¹⁶ If he controls the process with clear intentions of where he wants to end up, it is highly plausible that he will turn the sculpture into a stale and unoriginal piece. He must allow for the plasticity of thought like participants reflecting on lived experience in a SDG.

Sculpting reflection is like playing with clay and the dialogical process in a SDG is the making of a sculpture. The creative, open (in Marcellian terms 'available') roaming of philosophical reflection was identified by many participants in their interviews that I conducted following the SDGs. Laura called this kind of reflecting for being in "an open phase" where "one is allowed to say something that one is not even sure of" but state it anyway in order to "investigate it" fully to see what one's notions on life and living include and exclude. Anne captured the creative nature of reflection when she says that a thought is "thrown on the table, then people tried to pick it up and bring it forward." Another participant, Emma, worded the creative constitution of the reflective process this way "we know that we are going forward but we don't know what it is we are going to reach" or "you sit and model thoughts together"

¹⁵ See MARCEL, Gabriel: *Du Refus à l'invocation*. Paris: Gallimard, 1940. Marcel's concept of *disponibilité* is difficult to translate. Usually the word is translated as availability. However, Marcel expresses with his concept more than just being available. Being *disponible* in the Marcellian sense refers to a spiritual hospitality, an existential humility, a readiness to respond or more precisely an essential openness towards life events, towards others and other mindsets (making room for the outside in the inside).

¹⁶ ISAACS, William: *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*. New York: Currency, 1999.

as Laura explained her impression of the curious, investigative process in her group.

A SDG invites thoughts to be thrown up in the air to see if it can cast light on the theme. Thoughts are assessed, tested and adjusted by comparing them to the chosen story and later to the other stories within the group and then juxtaposed with the participants' notions of the chosen concept (i.e. the philosophical question). Reflection is sculptured as the group moves along: nobody “knows the answers and you see the road as you walk on it,” as Anne remarked calling the Socratic process a “creative [...] discussion on the conditions of living.”

The free, open-ended exchange that permits spontaneous responses generates in the words of Karen a joy in creating (*skaberglåde*), a constructive, liberating force that moves the dialogue and the thought process along. The process is never purely abstract as man is an embodied being-in-a-situation,¹⁷ or as Emma so perspicaciously remarked on the relation between thought and experience in the philosophical thinking of her SDG: “we take the abstract and position it within a context.” The context sets our embodied situation from where all experience originates.¹⁸ The reflections that form the dialogue among the participants “are grounded in our body” (Karen) or in our “senses” (Emma) and not just in our heads which means that the dialogue concerns them as these particular beings at that particular time.

There is a long tradition within philosophy to view philosophical inquiry as beginning with human experience. Nelson, Heckmann and Marcel along with Socrates, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and many more in Twentieth Century philosophy are fine examples of this tradition. My research on the three SDGs I conducted concurs with both the Nelson-Heckmann tradition and Marcel's concrete ontology that any disjunction between thought and experience when addressing philosophical questions is to be avoided. Without knowing it my participants' ruminations on their experiences matched this notion and illustrated competently how philosophy is “experience transmuted into thought.”¹⁹ But how exactly does the reflective process work in conjunction with the life-world of participants? How does this dialectic between abstract thinking and concrete experience play out? What kind of reflection is needed to establish a dialogue that can fully engross rehabilitating cancer patients?

¹⁷ MARCEL, Gabriel: *Being and Having*. Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1976. See also MARCEL, 1950.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ MARCEL, Gabriel: *Du Refus à l'invocation*. Paris: Gallimard, 1940, p. 39.

The Diving Bell

The reflective process in a SDG demonstrates the method of regressive abstraction.²⁰ The regressive method proposes philosophy as a critical procedure starting from experience and moving towards the universal. The critical procedure in regressive abstraction attempts to make the underlying concepts, presuppositions and beliefs in our experience explicit and to show how they mark our interpretation of this experience as well as demonstrating that “our thinking is subject to the possibility of error.”²¹ Kopferwerk Berlin explains very fittingly that “the aim of a Socratic dialogue consists in understanding the framework of validity of our decisions and acts, that is, the criteria, values and principles that form the basis of sensible judgments and decisions. Socratic investigation aims at deeper insights (through 'regressive abstraction').”²² Reaching this aim goes through a critical analysis which traditionally viewed is the backbone of the method of Socratic dialogue. The critical analysis within Socratic dialogue is like a *diving bell* transporting the participants to the depth of their experiences, perceptions and ideas to see if they hold water or should be revised or discarded or made more precise.

The dialogues I facilitated exposed not surprisingly the characteristic critical thinking and conceptual analysis of Socratic dialogue where the participants diligently dissect a theme by uncovering assumptions within their judgments, presenting consistent arguments and careful distinctions, proposing detailed definitions and refining their understanding of the theme. The critical analysis that governed their rational and collective inquiry identifying the universal in the particular was viewed by most both as challenging, captivating and creative, even playful. This reflective process within the group is reminiscent of Marcel's writings on the nature of reflection.

Reflection is a fundamental part of human existence but it connects to two different modes of thinking according to Marcel:²³ there is the analytical and observatory act of primary reflection²⁴ that is distinct from the unifying and

²⁰ See NELSON, Leonard: *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy. Selected Essays*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949 & HECKMANN, Gustav: *Das Socratische Gespräch. Erfahrungen in philosophischen Hochschulseminaren*. Frankfurt am Main: dipa-Verlag, 1993.

²¹ NELSON, Leonard: *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy. Selected Essays*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949, p. 114.

²² BERLIN, Kopferwerk: “The Methodology of Socratic Dialogue: Creating Socratic Questions and the Importance of being Specific,” in SHIPLEY, Patricia, MASON, Heidi (eds.): *Ethics and Socratic Dialogue in Civil Society*, Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004, p. 150.

²³ See MARCEL, Gabriel: *The Mystery of Being. Volume I: Reflection and Mystery*. South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine Press, 1950.

²⁴ Marcel often struggled with finding suitable words for his thinking. His thoughts on the nature of

participatory act of secondary reflection²⁵ on human experiences. Primary reflection is a problem solving reflection that remains within subject-object categories. It is an objectifying act, for example that of looking at my body as any other body as opposed to viewing the body as an integral part of me or the body as mine.²⁶ Primary reflection is not a villain but a necessary form of reflection that aims at a verifiable and universal kind of knowledge. Within Socratic dialogue the use of primary reflection, however, would end up in pure abstractions and would not succeed in reconnecting these abstractions to the concrete experience of the participants. In addition, the philosophical question would be viewed as a problem with a solution or in terms of a result whereby the ontological dimension is never within reach.

Secondary reflection contains two elements:²⁷ it is both a critical and creative reflection on primary reflection (Marcel, 1940) where meanings behind experiences are brought forth *and* “the process of recovery of the mysteries of being”²⁸ where the dialogue can disclose a dimension that cannot fully be conveyed by abstract thinking. The metaphor of the diving bell captures the critical perspective of secondary reflection. It portrays a reflective act where the dialogue partners become both spectator and participant detached from their experience and simultaneously engaged in it.

Secondary reflection aims at recapturing a concrete involvement in lived experience. It reconstructs personal experience as a whole while integrating what has been discovered in the reflection on experience. An important part of the

reflection are a good example. In his works Marcel uses different adjectives to designate primary reflection: critical reflection, polemic reflection, analytical reflection and reductive reflection. He settles on primary reflection.

²⁵ Similarly Marcel uses different adjectives to designate secondary reflection: recuperative reflection, reconstructive, superior, profound, and metaphysical reflection. He settles on secondary reflection.

²⁶ Here I am touching on another important distinction in the oeuvres of Marcel, namely the one between being and having (Marcel, 1976). Being is not a possessable object, something that belongs to me, but it can be reduced to this by primary reflection. I can, for example, reduce my body to something I *have* and not something I *am*. Similarly, he finds that philosophical questions are not something we *have* but something we *are*; they are a mode of being. See MARCEL, Gabriel: *The Mystery of Being. Volume I: Reflection and Mystery*. South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine Press, 1950, p. 92.

²⁷ Secondary reflection is a much discussed concept in the literature on Marcel and by Marcel himself. My reading is akin to SWEETMAN, Brendan: *The Vision of Gabriel Marcel: Epistemology, Human Person, the Transcendent*. Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2008 and GALLAGHER, Kenneth: *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1962. See also KNOX, Jeanette Bresson Ladegaard: *Gabriel Marcel: Håbets filosof, fortvivlelsens dramatiker*. Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2003.

²⁸ SWEETMAN, Brendan: *The Vision of Gabriel Marcel: Epistemology, Human Person, the Transcendent*. Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2008, p. 59.

work within the group is to synthesize the analytically cut-up components of the dialogue or bringing the dialogue back from the conceptual realm to the concrete realm of existence. In this process secondary reflection does not deny the function of primary reflection; it only refuses its claims on finality or the need to reach an all encompassing consensus at the end.²⁹

Secondary reflection remains, however, stunted if it does not incorporate its ontological dimension. The ontological dimension insists on a recognition of the mysterious and wondrous root of being. This dimension seems to escape the strict notion of regressive abstraction with its logically based analysis. I will return to the relationship between secondary reflection and the ontological dimension in the section "The Wall and the Mystery of Being."

Examining the videotapes of my SDGs revealed that the diving bell existed both in a verbal and a written form which we will look at next.

An Example of the Diving Bell within Conversation: Vitality of Life

The enactment of the philosophically critical reflection was well exemplified by the analysis of the concept of "vitality of life" in one of my SDGs. I will utilize this group's dialogues as a paradigmatic illustration of the Marcellian reflective process within conversation as well as within text. The group consisted of six women with various cancer diagnoses ranging in age from 45 to 68. As the other two groups in my project, the group convened at the *Center for Cancer and Health* in Copenhagen. The group met six times once a week in the course of six weeks and spent 12-14 hours on philosophizing on what is vitality of life. The following exchange of reflections (within conversation and text) is an appropriate illustration of how secondary reflection plays out in a SDG. The participants are gathering the different elements of their original experience in a personal perception of its significance then and now seeking greater insight into

²⁹ The issue of whether to reach consensus on a philosophical topic is debated within the milieu of SDG. Philosopher and mathematician Nelson was of the view that philosophical truth could be worded in a scientific manner whereas the position of his pupil, Heckmann, was that consensus was provisional (see KROHN, Dieter: "Theory and Practice of Socratic Dialogue," in SARAN, Rene, NEISSER, Barbara (eds.): *Enquiring Minds. Socratic Dialogue in Education*. London: Trentham Books, 2004, pp. 15-24). Though there is little debate on the fact that striving towards consensus gives direction to Socratic dialogue, the actual consensus can take on a more firm or a more lax form: Where the former is mostly represented in Germany, the latter form is mostly represented by practitioners in Scandinavia and the Netherlands. My approach is to work with consensus as something negotiated. Thus my SDGs did not imply final answers or rational truths but only expressed where the individual group ended up at that particular time with these particular participants.

vitality of life. After observing it, they unite its elements and relive the experience through the action of thinking together.

The critical dissection of what vitality of life began as soon as the participants agreed on a philosophical question. When the individual participants reflected on what personal story could cast light on the chosen concept (in this case 'vitality of life'), he/she demonstrated indirectly a particular understanding of 'vitality of life.' The understandings of 'vitality of life' that are aired by the participants' stories are examined further by identifying similarities and dissimilarities, by grounding them and finally by extracting essential features that can help describe what exactly 'vitality of life' means to the participants.

The group had a keen eye for using the told experiences that illustrated their initial understanding of the philosophical question to shape the continual molding of reflections on it. One day Alice told the group that in the past week she had been thinking about the connection between happiness and vitality of life and had come to view them as identical. She wanted to explore it with the group. Her story had portrayed a situation that dated six months after the end of her treatment, she had gone outside in the garden of her summer residence (first time she was back there in a very long time) and experienced an intense sense of joy, peace and grace of life. Sitting on a wooden bench looking at the cows in a field further down the path way, smelling the fresh grass and the delicate perfume from the flowers she experienced herself as happy and strong.

Emma and Laura counter-argued immediately against this identification between happiness and vitality of life by reference to the stories that they had shared with the group. Both their stories centered around the day of their diagnosis where sitting in the doctor's office with their spouse they had suddenly been filled with an enigmatic force or an inexplicable strength after being in a state of shock, disbelief and angst. Despite the empowerment they felt coming from this force, the experience did not encompass any sense of happiness. There was no basis in their experiences for Alice's identification and thus it could not be used to explain the constitution of the vitality of life.

Alice and the others listened carefully. She agreed with their defense as did the others and the identification was dropped. This exchange was characteristic of the creative thought process that went on in the group. People would supplement and/or moderate each others reflections and relentlessly have the philosophical question in mind: did this or that thought tell us something general about the concept under investigation, did it bring us closer to the truth of the concept. A thought was thrown up in the air by Alice, looked at by the group to see if it held water, viewed in relation to the other experiences in circulation and bounced off the general idea of the concept and – in this case - discarded in the end. The personal stories provide a common base to bounce off the abstract

thinking of a concept. The important details of their stories were constantly revisited to see if they fit the conceptual framework of their probing and developing understanding. All three experiences (told by Alice, Emma and Laura) and the group's thoughts on them helped adjust and make the analysis more concise. It gave the participants a more detailed and comprehensive picture of vitality of life.

Gradually the dialogues became more and more abstract without ever losing sight of the six stories that were, as they told me, carved in their memory. Karen suggested at one point that vitality of life resembled the kind of cycle we see in nature. Sometimes it is dormant (during the winter and fall) and sometimes it is awake (in the spring and summer). It can increase and decrease in strength. Anne wondered if that was vitality of life. After a short pause she said that she could not see it as a cycle because 'vitality of life' is not a movement. Rather it moves us. She did not see it as process in itself. She saw it more as an underlying substance. This sculpting of reflection took the shape of negotiations among the participants where adjustments and fine tunings are made in the interest of precision of thought, clarification of values, word usages, differentiation of concepts and meanings along with illumination of the experiences that are told in the SDG. Regressive abstraction and critical analysis are certainly indispensable in this process.

An important feature in a SDG is to allow for the participants to be each others' Socratic midwives aiding one another in the delivery of one's thoughts and allowing the participants "to travel into the universe of other people" (Karen) where you see life phenomena from other angles than your own. The above mentioned is an illustration of that. "Something that I found fantastic was that we were allowed to ask each other questions and I was really challenged on my mindset or my convictions" Karen explained in an interview after the ending of her SDG. The mutual midwifery makes for an exploratory stance that is important for the mindset in the group as well as for the thought process. We will return to this exploratory stance later but first we must look at the reflective process that took on a written form.

Vitality of Life Within text

The critical analysis resulted throughout in several large sized post-its that were placed on the wall. As we progressed the number of post-its increased. Besides the ones recounting the chosen story there were a couple of post-its dealing with the dissection and conceptual read of this story. The chosen story belonged to Anne. It recounted the day she received her diagnosis. Sitting in front of the doctor's desk next to her brother, she learned of her incurable bone marrow

cancer. She was chronically ill, the doctor told her before he went on to the treatment plan he had in mind. Going over its details, for example of how her thoughts at first had been spinning like crazy and burst into tears then been taken over by an inexplicable tranquility (or a “fluid tranquility” as she called it), the group examined the elements of the story through the monocles of our concept and exhumed words like passive-active, inner-outer, calm, acceptance and a strong sense of being alive. The concept of ‘calm’ caused a brief conversation about the difference between peace and calm. At first we had written peace on the post-it, then changed it to calm as a result of our reflections because it was more accurate of Anne’s situation. Narrowing in on our theme we would write down words, concepts or sentences that seemed to guide us in the right direction or that would cast light on the crux of our concept.

One post-it had our chosen philosophical theme “Vitality of life is ...” which in the process of our dialogues needed to be accompanied by other post-its on “Vitality of life is conditioned by ...” and “Vitality of life gives rise to ...” The post-its served as tools to structure the critical thought process and make the theme more sharp, distinct and nuanced. The participants found it important to point out that vitality of life could not be mobilized automatically by themselves as a willed action by the intellect but was conditioned by factors outside of their control. They meditated on how it seemed to imply a surrendering or a letting go. We compared the phenomenon of surrendering to the phenomenon of devotion or enthusiasm and concluded that this element of surrendering was characteristic of all the six stories. Laura, for example, described her experience of being informed of her diagnosis, resisting the fact and the unwillingness to let go of her control until she surrendered to it. She aptly illustrated this experience with vitality of life by uttering “No, no, no yes.”

In addressing what vitality of life is, the participants came to the adjacent question about what it gives rise to. This too was written on a post-it and hung up. The group discussed the difference between survival instinct and vitality of life examining how the survival instinct fights tooth and nail in favor of life/survival (“I will beat this cancer”) and sets out strategies for this survival while vitality of life incorporates death and mortality as fundamental conditions to embrace. They argued that vitality of life acknowledges the fragility and brutality of life and how this understanding can direct someone in their life orientation and clarify their values and priorities. Vitality of life can thus give rise to ‘empowerment’ or ‘robustness’ though it is not in itself empowerment. Equally, it gave rise to the courage to face life-changing events or to be bold in trying new things (for example, challenging one’s fear of speaking in public). They also recognized how vitality of life gave rise to a humility towards life along with a more sturdy selection process as for people to frequent or how to

spend ones time but still without viewing these aspects as explaining vitality of life itself.

From the fluidity of the reflective dialogue sediments settled as we got near the end of our sessions by narrowing in on a (preliminary, never final) response to the chosen question. Out of the dialogues grew some highly abstract sentences that were chiseled and rechiseled until the participants ran out of time and settled on the following sentences “Vitality of life is when a feeling occurs in a situation that may be good or bad but it makes you get in contact with yourself and your mortality; you surrender to the conditions of life and allow for the will of life itself to emerge”³⁰ knowing very well that they had not exhausted the concept. For an outsider most of these sentences may appear abstract, condensed, make little sense or come across as being insufficient but an outsider has not been a witness to the entire process of forming these sentences based on the sculpting of reflection during six meetings.

The participants recognized the sentences as abstract but they did not conceive them as such. To the participants the sentences are hooked up to a process covering a multitude of trial and error, dismissal and approval, testing and attesting before reaching their sentences. They have dissected the chosen concept and the experiences they picked as representations of it. They read their sentences through the foregoing meticulous analysis. They see the abstractness as embodied by experience and their dialogue and read them through their many hours of joint reflection where both experience and their thinking together regulated their increasing insight into what constitutes vitality of life.

Writing key notions and concepts on post-its making our thought process visible made a more detailed analysis possible. The participants adopted this rather textual approach and seemed to thrive in the joy of working with words: “I like to immerse myself in words” Alice commented at one point in my interview with her. Laura expressed how the mixture of listening and working out suitable sentences was beneficial to her: “I love the somewhat nerdyness [of SDG] ... it is not irrelevant where you put the commas. It can change the whole meaning if you put an 'and' instead of a 'but.’” At the end of the SDG Emma echoed a sentiment in the group when she commented on the dwelling on one single philosophical question that “it is amazing to experience that one question can turn into so much.”

³⁰ These sentences magnificently illustrate how this group reached the ontological dimension of secondary reflection. More on this dimension in “The Wall and The Mystery of Being.” See below.

The Dialectic Dance

The critical analysis within a SDG also expresses a reflective activity that metaphorically is an upward moving spiral travelling between the concrete and the abstract, between the particular and universal, between the individual and collective. The groups journeyed through a dialectic that moved "... up from life to thought and then down from thought to life again, so that [one] may try to throw more light upon life."³¹ This spiraled dialectic increased its content (i.e. insight into both the told experiences and the chosen concept) as the meditations progressed and the groups zoomed in on what they found to be the essentials. Next we shall further examine this dialectic.

Sculpting reflection in the SDGs existed on various planes that both worked separately and were intertwined. One process of the act of philosophizing is the digging to the deepest level of understanding possible as illustrated in the metaphor of the diving bell. Reviewing the video-taped dialogues, I observed how our reflections also took a specific dialectic form. One dialectic was carried out between the personal experience and conceptual understanding within the individual participant. Another and simultaneously running dialectic was carried out between the six communicated stories and the whole investigative thinking process within the sociality of the SDGs. These two movements weaved in and out of each other and could be hard to discern. Together the two dialectics created what I call a reflective or a *dialectic dance* that will, if you are lucky, generate "a damn interesting discussion" where "you are challenged on your conceptual world" Anne remarked and where I can "become more refined in my way of perceiving my life and my experiences" as Susanne explained her intensified existential attention by virtue of the dialogues. If I may continue with my metaphor, I would say that it is a dance where the dance partners tune into the music playing out within the participant and within the group. It is a dialectic dance between individual introspection and collective contemplation. This dance between the interpersonal and intrapersonal cognitive process³² shapes the dialogue.

The focus of the dialectic dance is always on the chosen philosophical question illuminated through thoughts and personal stories faithfully following the lines of secondary reflection. The question shines like a lighthouse sometimes brightly, sometimes dimly and guides the dialogue. The dialectic

³¹ MARCEL, Gabriel: *The Mystery of Being. Volume I: Reflection and Mystery*. South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine Press, 1950, p. 41.

³² PIHLGREN, Ann: *Socrates in the Classroom. Rationales and effects of philosophizing with children*. Doctoral dissertation. Department of Education, University of Stockholm, 2008.

dance is, however, not easy to recount as Socratic dialogue floats creatively. Sometimes you take two steps in one direction, then you backtrack the next or you try out an entirely new avenue only to return to your starting point though now with a more sophisticated perspective on it, or you find out that you are at an impasse and have to drop the particular idea that brought you there. Though philosophical dialogue is a slow and painstaking process, many participants commented on the dialectic dance in their interviews as showing them a constructive way of thinking and an important part of the experience of being in their SDG. Anne illustrates the interplay between individual introspection and collective contemplation in her interview and how the interplay can change your individual outlook on yourself: “It is up there [viewing the personal story from a universal perspective] that you are moved to another place [another way of thinking] and then you can look at yourself from that other place to where you are now, wearing other glasses and with our whole discussion in the background, you can then move down and look at yourself again.” Earlier in her interview she remarked that this change in outlook is conditioned by the dialogue being lifted out of its embodied, individualized situation to identify common existential traits within their stories. One participant stated that the act of philosophizing released him from his body without losing it by placing him in a shared human sphere “and that is liberating” (Sean). Another participant characterized the dialectic dance as a pendulum (*pendulering*) that swayed between what went on inside the participants and what went on within the reflective process between the participants and explained how the free swinging of the pendulum was necessary for the dialogue to progress and blossom.

The difficulty demonstrating the dialectic within the mind of the participants is of course caused by the mere fact that it is an invisible, interior movement. It only takes on a gestalt when verbally expressed. The more overt dialectic between the stories and the joint reflection on a concept faces its own difficulty in terms of demonstration though it is a lot easier to show this part of the philosophical inquiry. One option is to provide a transcribed version of the dance. However, the moving forward-backtracking-forward is a thought process that can stretch out over many pages covering maybe 20 minutes of exploring one aspect of the question. Within the confines of an article, I find that a summation of the dialogue is more illustrative than a transcribed version.

Before arriving at our response to the chosen philosophical theme of vitality of life (see above), the group had examined several other sentences on its way. In connection with viewing vitality of life as a state where one is at one with oneself or where one feels the pulse of life within, the group came to the sentence: “vitality of life is an experience (*oplevelse*) in a situation that can trigger other feelings where one feels alive.” Anne had suggested a distinction

between the concept, vitality of life, and the situation in which it occurred. The situation could trigger other feelings other than vitality of life. One story triggered a sense of happiness; another triggered a sense of anxiety. But both stories were picked to illustrate vitality of life. What Anne implied was that if they were to identify what 'vitality of life' is, it could not be explained by describing it through happiness or anxiety. Vitality of life, Karen intervened, could be seen as a constant while we are born and die; as individuals we go in and out of it though we don't seem to be able to choose the moment for its occurrence. Susanne replied that it seems as if there is a merging between what is outside and inside of us when we experience vitality of life, a merging of my life and Life. Karen starts to compare the intense sensation of being alive, of being within Life, with all the stories to see if this description holds. One story after the other was found to match the description. The experience of tranquility in Anne's story, the beauty of nature in Susanne's, the primordial woman in Emma's, the rebirth in Alice's, the bubbling joy in Karen's and the primeval force in Laura's story all fit the experience of presence within one's life while living. The dialectic dance enabled the group to think in tandem, through each other, despite each other and with each other.

The dialectic dance cast light on both the individual and collective thought process. When Anne explained the thought process she said that "you start somewhere, then maybe you say something, and then it is kicked around when the others reflect on it, then you yourself think on and find out that you have moved to another spot. Well, you know I think it was the sum or the product of the collective reflection that caused one to move individually." The participants are asked to continually analyze and "to play ball with each other just with thoughts" (Anne) to figure out where they stand individually and collectively both in relation to their own story, the stories in the group and the philosophical question they picked.

When we move beyond the personal stories yet without ever completely losing sight of them in the exploratory exchange where thoughts, ideas and arguments are thrown in and out of each other, the participants can merge to become one thinking entity creating a reflective flow: "We were in a common field; it was not a question about whether I was now reflecting on something. It was like we became a joint organism (*en samorganisme*) [...] it was like sharing a joint brain" as Karen voiced it. In the perpetual yet playful and creative ping-pong the participants became a choir tuning into the essence of a concept; it became irrelevant "who said what or what I said" (Karen) because what counted was getting to a multilayered and richer understanding of our question. No one laid a claim on the concept under investigation. When a dialogue reaches this level of human interaction it mimics Marcel's understanding of being as a being-

with where "we" testify to the other as a thou by responding to the other as presence.³³ (Marcel, 1940; 1950; 1976). A reflective choir consists of the joint singing but each singer contributes with their unique voice. What makes a choir is, in fact, the 'avec' (the 'with' in being-with). The individuality of their voice blends in with the overall lifting of their singing to its inspiring and creative expression. Similarly, the dialogue intends to lift the reflection to a constructive, nourishing and upbuilding way of thinking of concepts and experiences. The dialogue becomes a life affirming expression of human kinship that binds me to others (in the group), or an expression of communion.³⁴ Being each others midwives in the dialectic dance allows for an I-thou relation³⁵ where a sense of equality and communion among the participants is created.

By prodding and poking, circumnavigating and re-examining experiences, thoughts and concepts, availability³⁶ becomes crucial for creative sculpting of reflection in Socratic dialogue. Availability is an astute attention towards the other(s) and opening of the mind exposing reflection as engagement (secondary reflection). Availability is a precondition for being present and reaching the level of communion. Marcel writes: "When somebody's presence does really make itself felt, it can refresh my inner being; it reveals me to myself, it makes me more fully myself than I should be if I were not exposed to its impact."³⁷ Presence in a dialogue avoids "communication without communion."³⁸ Both metaphors (the diving bell and the dialectic dance) exemplify the critical evaluation of the philosophical theme under investigation by the Socratic group. They elucidate defining but different features within the creative act of philosophizing. But in order to allow oneself to be transported by the diving bell or to accept the offer to dance, availability is necessary. This availability will also make the ontological dimension within reflection more visible which we will address next.

³³ MARCEL, Gabriel: *Du Refus à l'invocation*. Paris: Gallimard, 1940 but see also MARCEL, 1950 & 1976.

³⁴ MARCEL, Gabriel: *The Mystery of Being. Volume I: Reflection and Mystery*. South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine Press, 1950.

³⁵ MARCEL, Gabriel: *Du Refus à l'invocation*. Paris: Gallimard, 1940 but see also MARCEL, 1950.

³⁶ MARCEL, Gabriel: *Du Refus à l'invocation*. Paris: Gallimard, 1940.

³⁷ MARCEL, Gabriel: *The Mystery of Being. Volume I: Reflection and Mystery*. South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine Press, 1950, p. 205.

³⁸ Ibid.

The Wall and the Mystery of Being

Sculpting reflection on the backdrop of dramatic events such as a cancer diagnosis revealed a side of the act of philosophizing that is different from the traditional analytical, intelligible and logically construed thinking. In our collegial and investigative venture of understanding the essentials of concepts and experiences, we would often find ourselves in situations where we hit, for lack of a better term, a *wall*³⁹ that indicated a limit for our rational understanding and language.⁴⁰ It was like we were touching a sphere we could not see but that we intuitively knew existed. People would comment after many hours of conceptual analysis “there is something indefinable here,” “I don't feel there are any words to properly describe it” or “I am not quite sure what this is.” It kept escaping us like trying to catch an eel in water but we were nonetheless drawn towards it like a moth to a flame.

Through the method of regressive abstraction as developed by Nelson and Heckmann we had over many weeks gradually spun conceptual generalizations and abstract connections between the stories told in the groups and narrowed in on our philosophical question: what is vitality of life. Yet we found ourselves with an unmistakable sense of not being at the depth of our stories or the chosen philosophical question. The wall we encountered appeared impenetrable from within the framework of logical reflection. Drawing on Marcel we could interpret this point in our dialogue as reaching the realm of mystery of being. The elusive yet captivating subject matter that the participants slowly uncovered in digging out implicit assumptions and understandings can be brought to light

³⁹ My metaphor of the wall could be similar to what Hansen alludes to when he speaks of “the Socratic silence” (HANSEN, Finn Thorbjørn: *Det filosofiske liv. Et dannelsesideal for eksistenspædagogikken*. København: Gyldendal, 2002, pp. 325) in Socratic dialogue groups that he conducted. Among scholars and practitioners within philosophical practice, Hansen comes closest to my thoughts of incorporating and emphasizing a specific ontological dimension in Socratic dialogue. He has, however, developed the idea of “an existential dimension” and in later writings of a “perspective of being” within philosophy of education and educational and professional guidance (see HANSEN, 2002; 2005; 2009) targeting professionals and not patients, rehabilitation or health care as such.

⁴⁰ Similarly to Marcel's wariness to all systematic presentation of his philosophy, in fact he found it impossible, I find myself hindered by the very same tendency to rigorously systematize philosophical reflection. Writing this article exemplifies the seemingly ineradicable objectifying bend of language that makes the wording of my findings in regards to this wall difficult to express let alone to verbalize what the realm of Being that the participants encountered actually is. Discussing these findings in a scholarly manner seems as challenging as discussing ontological issues for the participants. We seem to reduce some aspect of lived experience to something governable and logical where this very aspect defies the compartmentalization and control of language.

by Marcel's distinction between problem and mystery.⁴¹ The distinction correlates his primary and secondary reflection respectively. The distinction explains two modes of relating to being that is important in our dealings with the issue of philosophical reflection. A person addresses a problem in an impersonal, objective manner and is thus detached from the question under investigation, for example writing up new software for computers or finding one's lost car keys. These questions comprise solvable problems. Within the realm of mystery we cannot detach the subject or the questioner from the question as they merge to become one.⁴² What am I? What constitutes my free will? What makes up an act of love or hope? What is vitality of life? These questions are examples of mysteries of being.⁴³ Mysteries are, as opposed to problems, unsolvable but they are knowable.⁴⁴ (Marcel, 1976: 118). They are knowable through the embodied act of engaging in experience as exemplified via secondary reflection.

Secondary reflection has the potential for exposing the realm of mystery as an ontological engagement in the essence of personal experiences with human existence. Philosophical concepts such as 'vitality of life,' 'joy,' 'responsibility,' 'free choice,' 'meaning' or 'loyalty' intellectually intrigued the participants in my SDGs but the conceptual elaboration of lived experience that illustrated these concepts reached only the parameters of the cognitive subject and eventually the elaboration came to a halt because it could not adequately address the paradox that there is "a depth in being which surpasses and includes us"⁴⁵: The philosophical phenomena of life, such as vitality of life or joy, showed a depth that cannot be conceptually possessed or verified in any objective manner. The mysteries of being are inexhaustible and indemonstrable as well as void of a final answer; the group was, for example, fully aware that their final sentences were not final. Yet still the mysteries make us wonder because they ruminate deep within and seem to be calling us, asking for our attention and engagement. They are not fully penetrable by the cognitive, epistemological mind yet the human mind is enraptured by them.

There is a blind spot in thought. When the wall is encountered by the participants, it is this blind spot that they encounter. Being at a loss despite hours

⁴¹ Marcel being aware of its philosophically troublesome connotations struggles with the word mystery and is never completely satisfied with it but fails to find a better one. He sometimes resorts to calling mystery the meta-problematic (see MARCEL, Gabriel: *Being and Having*. Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1976).

⁴² MARCEL, Gabriel: *Being and Having*. Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1976, see p. 117.

⁴³ MARCEL, Gabriel: *The Mystery of Being. Volume I: Reflection and Mystery*. South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine Press, 1950.

⁴⁴ MARCEL, Gabriel: *Being and Having*. Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1976, see p. 118.

⁴⁵ GALLAGHER, Kenneth: *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1962, p. 5.

of ruminations on our question yet still feeling that they were “face to face with Being,”⁴⁶ brought them a recognition that echoes Marcel's in Being and Having: “In a sense I see it. In another sense, I cannot say that I see it since I cannot grasp myself in the act of seeing it.”⁴⁷ What secondary reflection is guided by here is a blind⁴⁸ intuition⁴⁹ that brings about an affirmation of being where the individual can find “himself in the presence of something entirely beyond his grasp. I would add that if the word 'transcendent' has any meaning it is here – it designates the absolute, unbridgeable chasm yawning between the subject and being, insofar as being evades every attempt to pin it down.”⁵⁰

Living amidst uncertainty, danger and drama made most of my participants experience an existential abyss with varying intensities. To many of them, however, this abyss had awakened a longing to live life fully⁵¹ and to explore what an open, authentic existence exactly entails as for future life orientation, good judgment calls and actions to be taken. Without wording it as such, the participants had in their meeting with the mysterious dimension of lived experience also (re-)connected to a yearning from within for reflecting on what it means to be, or an ontological exigency.⁵² The ontological exigency is an appeal, or a call, deeply embedded in each individual's quest for truth and plenitude.⁵³ Thus the existential drama of their illness experience had in many created a need to have their existential appetite be “nourished” and get some “spiritual ... human food” as worded by Alice when describing her thirst for fullness of being.

⁴⁶ MARCEL, Gabriel: *Being and Having*. Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1976, p. 98.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Marcel's concept, *intuition aveuglée*, is translated with “blindfold intuition” which does not capture Marcel's meaning. Blindfold suggests that intuition is clear and known and a blindfold blocks that vision whereas blind intuition indicates a presentiment of the realm of being that has not yet been consciously processed. It is blind because it cannot be directed or controlled by the will of the subject.

⁴⁹ MARCEL, Gabriel: *Being and Having*. Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1976, p. 121.

⁵⁰ MARCEL, Gabriel: *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*. Northwestern University Press, 1973, p. 193.

⁵¹ The need among cancer patients to live more fully are supported by the findings of other researchers' work with cancer patients. See for example: la COUR Karen, JOHANNESSEN Helle & JOSEPHSSON Staffan: “Activity and meaning making in the everyday lives of people with advanced cancer,” in *Palliative Support Care*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2009, pp. 469-479 and HENRIKSEN, Nina, THORNHOJ-THOMSEN, Tine, HANSEN, Helle Ploug: “Illness, everyday life and narrative montage: the visual aesthetics of cancer in Sara Bro's diary,” in *Health*, vol. 15, no 3, 2011, pp. 277-297. See also personal accounts of this: BROYARD, Anatole: *Intoxicated by My Illness, and Other Writings on Life and Death*, New York: Clarkson and Potter, 1992; STOLLER, Paul: *Stranger in the Village of the Sick. A Memoir of Cancer, Sorcery, and Healing*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004.

⁵² MARCEL, Gabriel: *The Mystery of Being. Volume I: Reflection and Mystery*. South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine Press, 1950.

⁵³ MARCEL, Gabriel: *Du Refus à l'invocation*. Paris: Gallimard, 1940, p. 198.

The ontological exigency opens up to a rationally inscrutable and ineffable sphere within human existence like the aesthetic experience of Alice sitting on a bench in her garden or the paradoxical inner tranquility experienced by Anne shortly after her doctor has informed her of her incurable, chronic cancer in her bone marrow. Concrete experiences that upon thorough and systematic scrutiny turned out to carry within them an intangible and indefinable component. Yet being in the presence of this mystery carried validity and meaning to the participants.

As I mentioned earlier, the group from before circled around an aspect of 'surrender' within the concept of vitality of life. Karen remarked that we surrender to something to which I replied "to what?" "Something. I am not sure" Karen said. Anne and Susanne suggested that this 'something' may connect to how we are linked to each other. "Yes, There is energy between us" Karen added. These thoughts spurred a talk on how 'energy' may play a role in what binds us together and how what binds us can make us get in touch with vitality of life, for example all participants were united in having an illness experience with all that it entailed. Emma interjects that to her (and her story) a unifying energy was not an issue but a will to life was. This will to life exists despite our free will indicating that vitality of life desires itself, upholds itself. We see it in the seasons, in the stars above or the planet turning. "Like photosynthesis" Karen remarks to which Anne replies with a question "but is that vitality of life? Is that not a survival operation?" After a ponderous silence Emma brings in a metaphor that I had mentioned before (building the bridge between my life and Life) because it brings in the outer-inner distinction that we had previously talked about as important for our concept. Laura links Emma's comment to the idea of giving up controlling Life to open herself up, instead, to what Life (outer) intends with her life (inner). All during this part of the dialogue we seemed to wander around vitality of life without capturing it yet this part was clearly captivating. People were charged and engaged, focused and contemplative. They had not exhausted the question but felt that there was more to it. What this 'more' exactly comprised of, was unclear.

The exchange resonates with Marcel's notion of secondary reflection.⁵⁴ Secondary reflection is not an abstract, academic kind of reflection foreign to everyday living inasmuch as it "has its roots in the daily flow of life."⁵⁵ Marcel and the Nelson-Heckman tradition line up in viewing experience as the

⁵⁴ See MARCEL, Gabriel: *The Mystery of Being. Volume I: Reflection and Mystery*. South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine Press, 1950.

⁵⁵ MARCEL, Gabriel: *The Mystery of Being. Volume I: Reflection and Mystery*. South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine Press, 1950, p. 77.

scaffolding for philosophical reflection but despite this similarity, there is no conversion between regressive abstraction and secondary reflection. Their starting point for reflection is similar (i.e. concrete experience) but the manner of reflecting emphasizes different aspects. Regressive abstraction relies heavily on neo-Kantian reason in its practices of conceptual analysis, argumentative consistency, formulation of definitions and identification of principles and judgments within concrete experience. Though these are practices that are indispensable for Socratic dialogue and certainly aimed at morally educating the students to think for themselves and discover their own values and virtues,⁵⁶ they run the risk of discounting or at least not sufficiently bringing out an ontological dimension of reflection. The reason for this lies primarily in the fact that regressive abstraction is a technical strategy whereas secondary reflection expresses a passionate engagement in the art of living; the sort of engagement that characterizes people who have gone through an existential ordeal such as cancer. Secondary reflection is more of a way of thinking about and being in the world that moves beyond the language of systematic analysis and rational justification. Secondary reflection underlies how the subject is intimately engaged in the questions being posed and examined.

Encountering the wall thus bears testimony to a bigger issue at work within SDG in a cancer rehabilitation setting which is the issue of being as mystery: Secondary reflection can trigger the thirst of being more fully in life (the ontological exigency) which Alice speaks about or it can position participants at the limit of conceptual knowledge after many hours of systematic scrutiny glaring at something beyond logical argumentation (mystery of being accessible through secondary reflection), or both experiences can transpire. The Marcellian perspective allows us to transcend the wall and make way for the ontological dimension to flourish more freely in Socratic dialogue. However, achieving it within a SDG is not a given.

In Socratic dialogue we may learn the challenging skill of philosophizing and we may become better and more consistent, independent thinkers by using the traditional model, i.e. become good craftsmen who are more conscious of how we understand the content of the concepts we employ. As stated my participants found a highly satisfying resource in the act of philosophizing together. But we must not ignore the risk involved in a principally epistemological enterprise which consists in omitting an important dimension of reflection on life issues; a dimension that includes the participants' search for

⁵⁶ The method of Socratic dialogue originates from the world of education and is well studied within philosophy of education. Similarly to Socrates, Nelson and his followers used and use Socratic dialogue within teaching philosophy.

renewed narratives and a sense of ontological being, of floating in the inscrutable and ineffable sphere within human existence. The ontological dimension does not dismiss the validity or important role of the epistemological one, nor does it dismiss testing the logical coherence within judgments in Socratic dialogue with people recovering from cancer. Rather, it supplements it and makes for a more fulfilling experience. There was much satisfaction and joy within the SDGs in adopting a rationally analytical stance on a philosophical concept while, at the same time, allowing for what emerged as essentially an inexhaustible sphere. Alice worded this duality as being in a state of “bliss” (*salighed*) while others would speak of the mutually fruitful interplay between observing life at a distance (being the spectator) and engaging in life (being a participant).

The creative roaming of contemplating on a philosophical question is crucial for a Socratic dialogue or the dialogue will be reduced to being “abstract in an indifferent way,” for as Anne also remarked “we do not sit and discuss philosophy just for the sake of discussing philosophy” referring to the avalanche of questions about life and death that cancer had caused. Spinning the mental wheels for no practical or personal reason does not ring true when one is faced with actual, pressing issues relating to how to re-interpret oneself in life (personally, professionally, socially, etc.) post cancer. These questions are more than abstract questions that can be dissected from the outside, at a distance. They speak directly to the participants' whole way of being in the world. The participants were engaged in the questions in a way that dissolved the distinction between them as subjects and the questions as if outside them. It positioned them in the presence of mystery as opposed to the realm of problems.

Sortie

The act of philosophizing in my SDGs molded reflection like a sculptor molds clay. Sculpting reflection, I observed in my groups, is created both via the Nelson-Heckmann tradition of regressive abstraction and meditations on what it means to be. Or to put it differently: The dialogues exhibited different but defining features of the act of philosophizing: the detachment and engagement of secondary reflection, communion through thinking together and the ontological weight of experience. These features did not appear in a hierarchical order but wove in and out of each other with fluctuating intensity.

Within cancer rehabilitation Socratic dialogue encourages both a Kantian *Sapere Aude* (independent consistent thinking) advocated by the Nelson-Heckmann tradition and Marcellian reflection reconnecting overtly to the idea originally defended by Socrates of examining one's life in order to live a better

one. Though participants found the conceptual dissection and definitional precision in our Socratic dialogues both challenging, enriching and even playfully enjoyable, their illness experience had triggered fundamental questions about their being-in-the-world that can be confusing and unmanageable to deal with on your own. Through an intimate engagement in the act of philosophizing due to the drama of a life threatening illness experience, the participants simultaneously ventured into an underground stream scarcely perceptible by logical cognition or conceptual analysis but nevertheless intuitively sensed as placing them in the presence of the mystery of Being (here).

If Socratic dialogue is to have an existential and moral relevance to people recovering from cancer, it must offer itself as a vehicle to a sharpened ontological awareness and attunement of their sense of being, and not only practice their skills in critical reasoning, their independent thinking or conceptual dwelling. A Socratic dialogue within cancer rehabilitation should never lose sight of the search for fullness of being and life orientation that is implanted in the illness experience. The ontological dimension of philosophical reflection addresses fundamental questions about what it means to be that are raised by many people dealing with a serious cancer illness and the existential mark it leaves behind. The ontological dimension within the act of philosophizing deserves to be unequivocally acknowledged and fortified in Socratic dialogue with people recovering from cancer. By being attentive to the special circumstances that arise when a person has been faced to face with his/her own mortality, the facilitator allows for a space where a different kind of reflection can assist their healing process as whole human beings.

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