

## Socratic Dialogue as a Tool for Teaching Business Ethics

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## Background and Justification

- The polis
- The sophists
- Virtues
- Socrates
- Contemporary parallels

## Incoherence

poets and philosophers for the most part do not distinguish in their account of these relationships what is universal and human from what is local and Athenian... for Athenian man... [h]is understanding of the virtues does provide him with standards by which he could question the life of his own community... Nonetheless he also recognises that he possesses his understanding of the virtues only because his membership in the community provides him with such understanding. The city is a guardian, a parent, a teacher, even though what is learnt from the city may lead to questioning of this or that feature of its life. Thus the question of the relationship between *being a good citizen* and *being a good man* becomes central. MacIntyre, 1985: 133

## Incoherence and TBE

- Disconnect between assessment and life
  - Focus on mark in a particular course
  - Ethics as applied & relevant throughout life
  - ‘Good student’ versus ‘good person’
- Modules and compartmentalisation
  - Ethics reserved for one module
  - Ethics as a subset problematic
  - Nature of ethics & nature of management

## Socratic Dialogue

- One feature – the elenchus
- A simplified version:
  - Stage 1: pursuit of a complex question
  - Stage 2: conventional answer
  - Stage 3: counterexamples
- Example of Cephalus in the *Republic*

## An Illustrative Role Play

- Participants: Delphi, Oracle; observers.
- ‘What does it mean to do business ethically?’
- **Oracle** ‘Get Delphi to agree to a definitive answer to this problem’
- **Delphi** ‘Get Oracle to acknowledge problems with his/her definitions, give specific examples where it won’t work’
- **Observers** take notes, give feedback at the end (may moderate and encourage)

## Oracle's prompt sheet

'You know Delphi waffles on a bit when it comes to ethics in business, and that though he / she has some good arguments, they always try to duck out of defining something. Your goal is to get Delphi to agree to a definitive answer to this problem. Try to come up with the ideal answer, one that covers all the angles. Don't be discouraged if an answer doesn't work (it is a tricky problem), just develop it a bit better, or move on to something new. Below are some arguments you might want to develop to get a good definition, but you should also try and come up with some definitions of your own. Good luck!' + **arguments**

## Delphi's prompt sheet

'You know Oracle has some good ideas about what is ethical in business, but is often too simplistic. You don't want him / her to think they have found 'the' answer. Your goal is to get Oracle to acknowledge problems with his / her definitions, so try to think of specific examples when it won't work, or is inconsistent with other ideas about ethical business. If Oracle agrees a definition doesn't work and wants to try something new, agree to explore that. Below are some questions you might want to put to Oracle (if relevant), but you should try and come up with some counterarguments of your own. Good luck!' + **arguments**

## Observer's prompt sheet (abbrev)

'Oracle has arguments that (s)he can use to develop a definition, and Delphi has examples of problematic questions, and is encouraged to use specific examples. You are not merely a passive observer, but your role is to take notes on their conversation, so that in the discussion that follows, you can summarise the key ideas, and give a sense of how the argument went, as well as offer constructive feedback (+ questions). Try to be encouraging and show that you are interested. *If either gets stuck, you might encourage them using the prompt sheet (next slide), if they've missed something out, or if something comes to mind you could suggest it yourself. Encourage Oracle to keep going, by summarising what was good in his / her argument so far; encourage Delphi to think of specific examples.'*

## Prompts

Oracle's definitions	Delphi's questions
Doing business ethically is doing things when no-one gets hurt, or at least where you minimise the total amount of hurt	Can you measure pain and suffering in the same way you measure money? (think of a specific example)
Doing business ethically means protecting the interests of shareholders – if a company goes bust it can't do business	Aren't some things principles – i.e. no matter what the costs and consequences it's wrong? (think of a specific example)
Doing business ethically means telling the truth, paying one's debts and looking after one's employees	What about when different goals (employee welfare, customer service, profit etc.) are in conflict? (think of a specific example)

## Limitations

- Beware the 'knife thrust'
- Small groups may be better
- Power imbalance
- Negative connotations – patriarchy, monopoly on knowledge
- Suggested focus on the technique, not the character

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