What is Self-Fulfilment? A report on a Socratic Dialogue  Stan van Hooft

I facilitated a Socratic Dialogue on ‘What is Self-Fulfilment?’ in August 2000 in Melbourne, Australia. While consensus was not reached in the dialogue (at least in part because it comprised only one day’s discussion), the nature of the disagreements and of the insights that had been won on the way to them was of very profound interest in our understanding of ourselves as complex human beings living in social contexts.

What follows is a report on the main lines of the discussion along with a commentary from myself designed to highlight the philosophical themes and also some aspects of the dialogue process. I comment on both of these matters firstly because, as a philosopher, I cannot help myself from doing some philosophy. If, as a dialogue facilitator, I have to bite my tongue and not contribute to the content of the dialogue, I can at least indulge my philosophical inclinations in this commentary. And I comment on the dialogue process in order to help myself and my readers learn more about it. I have written my commentary in italics to distinguish it from my report of what participants in the dialogue said. I have also changed the names to protect anonymity.

I assume some knowledge of the dialogue process in my readers. The key point is that, in a Socratic Dialogue, a general question is approached by way of a detailed discussion of a particular example offered by a participant in order to throw light on that question. In the too limited time-frame of a single day, I tend to structure the dialogue loosely into four phases as follows:

Phase one: 9.30-11am
Elicit examples from the real life experiences of participants and choose one to focus upon.
morning tea

Phase two: 11.30-1 pm
Explore the example and articulate its ‘core statement’.
lunch

Phase three: 2-3.30 pm
Ask the question, how is this example an instance of the question?, or, how does this example bear on the question?
afternoon tea

Phase four: 3.45-5 pm
Seek to answer the general question.

I have found that the last phase is seldom as fruitful as the third, so I sometimes give the third some more time after the afternoon tea break. I judge that on the day. I also find that a consensus answer to the question is usually not possible in one day, so I often do what Karin Murris did at the recent conference in Loccum: I ask each participant to write their own answer and then to read it to the group. That should be the last exercise and provides closure for participants even without consensus. The participants in this dialogue will be called John, Mary, Charlene, Helen, Peter, Horst, Jennifer, Bruce, Valerie, and Judy.
Phase one: offering examples

The discussion began with participants offering examples from their own lives which were thought by the example givers to bear on the question. The following examples were offered:

Charlene: After ten years of marriage and family, I returned to study in education. I experienced a thrilling emotion of self-fulfilment when I obtained my first teaching position.

Notice that in this example, the self-fulfilment is described as an emotional moment or episode during which Charlene felt self-fulfilment.

Mary: I returned to study at the age of fifty-six because it had never previously occurred to me that I could do it. When I successfully obtained my BA degree from university, I was self-fulfilled.

In this example it is not clear whether the self-fulfilment is described as occurring at a moment and as being an episode or whether it is an ongoing condition which emerged gradually and of which Mary became aware when she graduated. I tend to interpret the example as episodic because the self-fulfilment seems to come at the culmination of a period of struggle and effort.

Judy: I felt self-fulfilled after the birth of my son. At that moment I achieved what I had always been yearning for.

Once again, a culminating moment after effort, but in this case, there is also the hint at an ongoing and deep need which this moment met. This example was not explored further so it would only be speculative to suggest that some kind of maternal or parenting instinct might have been the underlying yearning of which the successful birth was the culmination. I mention this thought because it raises the question of what the relation might be between self-fulfilment and the structures of desire which are a part of one’s self.

Jennifer: As a birthday present, my three teenage children painted a picture of the family as a whole. This gave me a feeling of self-fulfilment because the children validated my own belief in my accomplishment as a parent and in my integrity.

This example also presupposes that self-fulfilment is a feeling which occurs at a particular moment. Further, it offers an explanation as to what might be causing this feeling. We will return to the latter issue. But it is interesting to note first that the dialogue process, in calling for examples, tends to encourage those who are not the first to offer an example that follows the pattern that the first one sets up. So Jennifer, too, offers an episode when she feels particularly self-fulfilled. Moreover, the guidelines for examples themselves encourage the offering of incidents or episodes rather than ongoing states or feelings. In this way a non-episodic analysis of what self-fulfilment is is less likely to arise in the dialogue process.

Bruce: I moved down from Queensland some years ago but had problems adjusting and coping with family change. I got involved in study and business. After a year, I felt I had
made progress and growth and this gave me self-fulfilment.

Subsequent remarks by this example giver indicate that this self-fulfilment was not based on a moment of realisation that he had coped, but was an ongoing state which gradually came to accompany his making progress and his experience of growth.

Valerie: During the war, I nursed soldiers with very traumatic injuries and as a result I wanted to put all thought of war behind me. For example, I adopted pacifist views and never joined returned service organisations. Then recently, I was asked how I felt about the Japanese and I found myself able to discuss war and my commitment to pacifism for the first time. I was proud because someone had asked me about my experiences and because I was able to put forward the idea that soldiers are victims no matter which side they are on. This was self-fulfilling.

A lot of interest was shown in this example and it was almost chosen as the core example for the dialogue. It was another case of a moment of fulfilment following a long period of struggle and, in this case, silence.

Helen: My husband wanted to do the vacuuming round the house. But I felt it was my job and part of my self-fulfilment at home. I feel I need to create order in the house.

While it was not chosen, this example was seen to be interesting because it sees self-fulfilment as an adjunct of an ongoing way of life or habit. Rather than an emotional accompaniment to a moment of achievement, it is a feature of one’s habitual tasks. Perhaps it was because the task of vacuuming was habitual, or because it was seen as central to Helen’s role as a housewife, that she felt she would be unfulfilled if she were not to perform it. Self-fulfilment would here be seen as a function of the expectation one places upon oneself or which others place upon one, rather than as a form of pride resulting from effort or struggle.

Peter: I came to see that although I had accomplished much (good family, good job, etc.) my life still did not seem complete. It lacked a spiritual dimension. Experiencing a spiritual part of myself (for example, in prayer) brought a glimpse of self-fulfilment.

It became clear as it was elaborated that this example of self-fulfilment was not based on a feeling of self-satisfaction at having discovered a spiritual side to oneself. Rather, it was more of a hope. There was an intimation that embarking on a spiritual quest would gain one some sense of self-fulfilment and this, in itself, was already somewhat fulfilling.

Horst: When I was about ten years old, I played violin in my family’s string quartet and was widely applauded. This gave me a pleasurable feeling of self-satisfaction which I regard as self-fulfilment.

Horst gave the group not only an incident in which there was an episodic feeling of self-fulfilment, but also a definition as to what this was: namely, a pleasurable feeling of self-satisfaction. Even though Horst’s example was not taken up, his definition was reiterated by him and discussed later in the dialogue. Indeed, it transpired that this definition was something of a theory as to what self-fulfilment was and how it might be explained: a theory learnt from books. So far as the dialogue process is concerned this raises an interesting question of how sharply the authentically held views of participants can be
distinguished from the theoretical perspective that they adopt and which the dialogue process discourages participants from making use of.

Given that there was much of interest in each of the examples, the group had some difficulty in choosing which one it wanted to concentrate on for the purposes of the discussion. In the event, the group decided, in a strategy dialogue, to select the example by majority vote. It was Jennifer’s example that was selected. Choosing an example by majority vote is usually discouraged by facilitators, but the discussion of all the examples with a view to choosing one had already gone on for some time and it was a single day dialogue. Most participants found each of the examples interesting and were, I think, also concerned not to offend anyone by seeming to reject their example. This is why I initiated a strategy dialogue in order to break the impasse and accepted the majority view that a vote be taken.

Phase 2: exploring the selected example

The purpose of this phase of the dialogue is to allow all participants to have an understanding of the example, in as concrete a set of terms of possible, so that they can intuit and understand the self-fulfilment that Jennifer felt in this incident.

The following further details about the Jennifer’s example were disclosed:

- The picture that the children had painted was of the house, the kids, Jennifer herself, with a mail-box, and pets, and other details. It was a warm and humorous picture showing a united family. Although the house was painted backwards, it was a detailed ‘snapshot’ of the family.
- The eldest child was a foster daughter taken into the home five years earlier.
- Jennifer had left and divorced her husband many years earlier.
- She had lacked self-esteem and there were times when she felt she had made mistakes.
- There had also been much suffering in her life.
- The kids had thought she was too much of an idealist (especially for fostering a third child). The two biological children had had to struggle to accept the foster child.
- She felt that the picture was an unexpected validation of her life decisions which came from outside herself. It told her that the children accepted her despite her limitations.
- When she received the gift, she burst into tears of joy.
- Jennifer felt self-satisfaction and a sense of achievement.
- Jennifer said her guiding values were integrity and honour and that the gift had validated these.
- It had also put the sufferings of her life into perspective.
- She did have a sense of accomplishment: namely, that of creating a family.
- Because the picture had come from others, her feeling of self-satisfaction was not just subjective.

Apart from some grammatical massaging, the points above are transcriptions of what I wrote on the flipchart. They contain concrete descriptions as well as abstractions. One can see from the drift of these observations that the group has gone beyond merely seeking factual information about the incident and has started to explore its...
psychodynamics, as it were. Notions such as validation, self-satisfaction, self-esteem, integrity, and honour were written up without explication and clearly take the elaboration of the example beyond the realm of factual and concrete description. It is my practice as a facilitator to put such abstract notions up on the flipcharts if they are spoken by the example giver because they can then become the object of further inquiry by the group later. They are often fleeting indicators of what the core statement in the example will turn out to be and, if they are not recorded, the stimulus that they provide to further discussion can be lost. The danger, of course, is that they also encourage participants to wander off into abstract and theoretical speculations about what self-fulfilment might be before the dialogue process has fully prepared the ground for such deeper inquiries.

The details of the example that were disclosed also suggested that one of the problems in the family had been that the two biological children had been angry at the late addition of a new and older member to the family whose special needs could only be met at the expense of theirs. Such thoughts are psychoanalytic rather than philosophical and were not pursued. However, they were important since, if they were right, then the picture showing a unified family would indeed be a very significant sign that the adjustment problems had been confronted and that Jennifer’s decisions had led to a good outcome. Jennifer would then have every reason to feel proud of what she had accomplished. And this, in turn, raises the conceptual question of whether self-fulfilment is the same as such a feeling of pride and accomplishment.

**Phase 3: exploring the question in the light of the example**

The group now confronted the question, ‘What is self-fulfilment in the example?’ In this phase of the dialogue process the group understands enough about the example to be able to place itself into Jennifer’s shoes and to intuit Jennifer’s reactions as if they were participants in the example themselves. While many group members still ask the example giver for validation of their interpretation, it should be their own understanding projected into the example that now comes to articulation. The so-called ‘core statement’ that is being sought in this phase of the dialogue would be the judgement, shared by everyone in the group, that, in the example, self-fulfilment consisted in whatever the groups decides it consisted in. Some facilitators understand the ‘core statement’ to be the example-giver’s own interpretation, whether it be offered when the example was first offered or after it is explored by the group. In this case, it might then consist of something like Jennifer’s saying that self-fulfilment was the validation she received from her family of her pride in her struggles and in her adopting that child. I find that the attempt at formulating a core statement at this second phase can be too distracting and time consuming, preferring the hints that appear in the dot points to a single statement. The time for developing a single statement is when the group asks how the example bears on the question in phase three of the dialogue. At this stage the thinking is still not so abstract and still sufficiently linked to the example to allow a core statement that both summarises the insights yielded by the example and also begins to point to an answer to the more abstract form of the dialogue question. Another form of the question that guides this phase of the process would be, ‘How does the example exemplify self-fulfilment?’

**Answer 1** In the example, self-fulfilment is confirmation that the foundation of family unity had been achieved.

Later discussion revealed that this answer gave, not an analysis of what self-fulfilment was in the example, but of what it was caused by or based upon. This answer gives the reason for Jennifer’s being self-fulfilled.
Answer 2  
In the example, self-fulfilment is ‘a pleasing sentiment of approbation’.

This was a quote from Philippa Foot which Horst offered (thereby showing that he had done his homework on the topic, but not on the dialogue rule that one should not use theoretical statements from books. However, it transpired that this formulation accorded with his own considered view. Horst thought that although this formulation did not appear in the elaboration of the example, it was a valid interpretation of what was said there. That the group did not take up this suggestion but left it hanging as a tangent indicates that they did not necessarily agree with this. Perhaps this answer should not have been recorded on the flipchart since it did not win the approval of all of the others.)

A further question was raised at this point about whether self-fulfilment was a process or an accomplishment. Bruce had noticed that many of the examples, including Jennifer’s, involved moments of joy and elation after periods of doubt, hardship, and struggle. This is the accomplishment view of self-fulfilment. But Bruce wanted to know whether there might not be an ongoing feeling of self-fulfilment that one retains after these joyful moments so that self-fulfilment becomes a lasting quality of one’s existential being for an indefinite period after the fulfilling episode. Jennifer did agree that she continues to have feelings of heightened self-worth as a result of the birthday gift. In this way the group began to see that self-fulfilment, even if it were seen as an emotion, might not only be episodic, but might also be a continuing mental state.

Although deeper exploration of the relevant concepts need not yet occur at this stage of the dialogue process, the group is inching towards an important Aristotelian insight here. Aristotle’s notion of *eudaimonia* (often translated as ‘happiness’ but also translatable as ‘self-fulfilment’) is of a state that a person can be in without knowing it and which can be a constant quality of a life that is lived well. This would be a non-episodic notion of self-fulfilment but in a more radical sense than the group had uncovered to this point. The group thought self-fulfilment could be an ongoing state because it could continue after emotional moments of realising that one had achieved something. But Aristotle thinks self-fulfilment is an ongoing state because whenever one acts well one constitutes oneself as self-fulfilled, whether or not one realises it at the time. It may be that later in life, as one reflects back over one’s achievements and failures, one realises that one had been self-fulfilled the whole time. In this account, self-fulfilment is neither an emotion nor an episode. The group might have been able to explore this train of thought more fully if it had chosen Helen’s example.

Another question that was raised in the course of the discussion of Jennifer’s example was whether self-fulfilment was the same as self-satisfaction. Jennifer had seemed to say so in her account of her example. If self-fulfilment follows from, and is validated by, one’s own effort, struggle, and suffering, then it might indeed be the same as self-satisfaction. But some felt that self-satisfaction could have negative ethical connotations. We sometimes describe a person as self-satisfied who has actually accomplished very little and may even be a nuisance to others, but who does not know this and remains self-deceived. A self-satisfied person in this sense is not virtuous and takes pride in themselves without justification. Some participants thought that self-satisfaction was purely subjective in this way and lacked external validation. Moreover, Horst’s thought that it was important to notice that one took pleasure in oneself when one was self-fulfilled applied even more obviously to self-satisfaction. Self-satisfaction seems to be a hedonistic and egoistic state and one of which some members of the group did not approve.
In contrast, it was felt that self-fulfilment is a state which is validated by others. It may indeed involve being pleased with oneself and being proud of oneself, but, to be genuine self-fulfilment, it is also necessary that it be acknowledged by others and so become more objective. Moreover, some thought that this approval by others indicated that self-fulfilment is necessarily linked to altruism in some way. As opposed to the egoism inherent in self-satisfaction, self-fulfilment could be achieved if one was doing some good for others which others could acknowledge and validate. If this were true then mere accomplishment was not enough to ground self-fulfilment. It would also have to be the accomplishment of something which was for the benefit of others.

Once again, the group was approaching some important Aristotelian concepts here. For Aristotle it was indeed the case that happiness or self-fulfilment could only be achieved if the activities that constituted such happiness were noble ones. Only by doing the right things in the right way could one be virtuous and constitute oneself as self-fulfilled. On the other hand, Aristotle does not require that the nobility of one’s actions arise from their being altruistic or from their being validated by others. Such actions often will be so validated but their nobility arises from their being an expression of the finest motivations of which humans are inherently capable.

However, some members of the group were vehemently opposed to this line of thought. Bruce seemed rather cynical about any moral or ethical concepts and was very suspicious of any analysis of self-fulfilment that made it essential that the accomplishment upon which it was based be a moral one. Even if Jennifer’s example had been a morally positive one, it would also be possible, he said, for a criminal to feel self-fulfilment as a result of robbing a bank.

So far as the dialogue process is concerned, the group was departing somewhat from the rubric that the discussion should still be about the example. Other examples and ideas were being introduced. Bruce had even introduced a hypothetical example. While I tried to encourage the group to test their ideas against Jennifer’s example or to draw their ideas only from it, it was difficult to maintain that discipline. In order to try to overcome the difficulties uncovered in the discussion, Peter proposed the following answer to the question:

**Answer 3** In the example, self-fulfilment comes from the perceived achievement of what is important to the self.

However, it was pointed out that this answer did not so much say what self-fulfilment was, as what the conditions for its occurring are. Peter might be explaining how it is, causally, that feelings of self-fulfilment arise. Or he might be specifying the conditions under which it is reasonable or appropriate that such feelings arise. Moreover, he did not say whose perception was important here. Was it Jennifer’s own perception of her achievement or was it that of her children that would ground (either causally or normatively) her self-fulfilment? Again, from whose point of view should the importance of what is achieved be established? From Jennifer’s or the children’s? Is what she achieved objectively important or is it only important to her? Or is it important because she has done something for others and been altruistic? In short, is she really justified in being self-fulfilled or is she only self-satisfied?

Horst responded to these doubts by insisting that self-fulfilment was a purely personal matter in which the self is concerned with itself and no one else. Moreover, self-fulfilment is nothing but the pleasure that Jennifer felt in receiving the validation of her struggles from her children. Indeed, he went on to claim that such a feeling of pleasure is nothing more than a biologically caused discharge of hormones in the brain. While some
saw this account as too reductionist, they were still opposed to the idea that Jennifer’s self-fulfilment could only be genuine if validated by others and based on good deeds.

**Phase 4: the general question**

Although consensus seemed a long way off, I was conscious of the time and wanted to push the group forward to a confrontation with the dialogue question in its most general form: What is self-fulfilment? I asked the group to write their own answers on a piece of paper and to read them to the group. From the answers it became clear that there were two fairly intractable camps within the group.

The position of the amoral-reductionists (*my term*) was that there was no difference between self-satisfaction and self-fulfilment. In either case we are pleased with ourselves for some reason and that reason may be a good reason or a bad one in the eyes of other people. It is purely subjective, private, and internal and cannot be adjudged as appropriate or not by others.

The idealist-Aristotelians (*my term again*) on the other hand, insisted that self-fulfilment must be earned in the public sphere as well as the private. One can only be self-fulfilled when one has done something objectively worthwhile which others can validate and in which one is rationally justified in taking pride. As opposed to self-satisfaction, self-fulfilment is partly a social construct arising from one’s publicly acknowledged good works.

There might still be a conceptual issue here as to whether the conditions for calling a state of being pleased with oneself by the term ‘self-fulfilment’ as opposed to ‘self-satisfaction’ are casual conditions or normative ones. Is the state of being pleased with oneself that arises from publicly validated acknowledgment of achievement a causal result of such validation? If so we might suggest that the feeling of self-fulfilment is actually different, and perhaps phenomenologically different, from the feeling of self-satisfaction. Or is the state of being pleased with oneself that arises from publicly validated acknowledgment of achievement a normatively appropriate response to such validation and to one’s own achievement? In this case, the feeling is not simply caused by the acknowledgment event, but is cognitively mediated by the self. The person understands that the praise of others is deserved and feels pleased for that reason. Such a feeling will be phenomenologically different from self-satisfaction because it is based on a different understanding. Moreover, this feeling that the praise is deserved may well be the link between genuine self-fulfilment and the ethical notions that the idealist-Aristotelians in the group were struggling to establish.

A consensual rapport between these two positions was not achieved on the day. However, as with any Socratic Dialogue, there was much deep reflection and much philosophical insight. Many profound philosophical issues were left hanging and many further problems were identified; like the question about the importance of moral notions in our view of ourselves. Such questions deserve further dialogues to explore fully. Most participants expressed themselves well satisfied with the day’s efforts. Perhaps this very dialogue was an occasion for self-fulfilment.

Stan van Hooft (stanvh@deakin.edu.au) is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Deakin University in Melbourne Australia and a frequent facilitator of Socratic Dialogues. He is