

Socrates and Conservation Ethics

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Image



By W. (Bill) Wei

Before you start madly flipping back through your notes from your first-year philosophy classes, rest assured that, no, Socrates did not conduct any dialogues about conservation ethics.

Conservation as we know it, did not exist at that time. In fact, it wasn't until 400 years later that Pliny the Elder complained about the cleaning of a painting by Aristiedes ([Keck 1984](#)). What Socrates was doing, however, was using the life experiences and perspectives of his dialogue partners to understand and define basic human virtues. One such virtue, ethics, is a cornerstone of the field of philosophy. While Socrates might have asked "what does it mean to live ethically?", we, as members of the conservation field, can tweak the question and ask "what does it mean to work ethically in the conservation of cultural heritage?"

Discussions within conservation on codes of ethics—how they are to be applied and whether or not a conservator’s work/training is up to “ethical” standards—continue to be quite lively to this day. These codes not only revolve around the specific virtue of being ethical but also around a number of other terms which appear, undefined, in many Western codes of ethics; these terms include “respect,” “integrity,” and “authenticity.” If he had encountered one of our current debates, Socrates would have certainly wondered how, or even if, the participants could define such terms.

Let us fast-forward 2,400 years after Socrates’ death to the present day. The IIC has been organizing Socratic dialogues to answer those questions which Socrates may have asked. But unlike the one-on-one dialogues which Socrates had with his pupils, the IIC dialogues make use of methods developed by German philosopher [Leonard Nelson](#) in the early 20th century ([Kessels, et al. 2009](#)). Participants are asked to try to define a term such as “ethical” or “respect” using personal experiences as examples. Participants then investigate each other’s answers in the form of a “question-dialogue” with the goal of coming to a better understanding of the term, if not a definition.

This modern Socratic dialogue has a structured form in which all participants actively contribute. In order to understand each other’s experiences and opinions, participants pose open, informative, and non-judgmental questions. These are questions which begin with the words “what,” “who,” “when,” “where,” “why,” or “how.” The sole purpose of this question-dialogue is to understand what each participant has experienced and said and to understand differences in opinions. The purpose is not to convince someone of a particular argument or to determine right from wrong. The moderator assists the participants, ensuring that their questions are truly informative and that questions are neither steering the answer nor being judgemental about a certain viewpoint. The method thus provides a safe, open environment for participants to better understand each other’s views, and perhaps even their own, on decision-making in their work.

Given its philosophical nature, a Socratic dialogue could go on until everyone dies. However, this author, as a moderator, has found it more practical to end the dialogues at the pre-arranged time. To give participants a reference point for continued thought, at the conclusion of each dialogue, each is asked to write in one or two sentences what the essence of the dialogue was for them personally, what each participant took away from it.

For example, in one of the first IIC dialogues, participants were asked to complete the sentence, “In my conservation work, I once had to deal with ethics when ...”, with the underlying question being, “what does it mean to work ethically as a conservator?” Two example responses are as follows:

“Conversations (everyone having a voice) to calibrate the varying value perceptions and judgements towards a shared and agreed common goal are essential.”

“It seems to me that ethical issues in conservation mainly rotate around two poles. On the one hand, the relationship with the object, which symbolizes an 'other-ness' of some kind (the past, a different culture, etc.), on the other hand, the relationships with different people involved in conservation, who may represent an 'other-ness' because of their various points of view and opinions on the object.”

The IIC is currently conducting two series of dialogues. The first consists of five lecture/dialogue workshops aimed at heritage professionals with more work experience. This series was developed as a result of the IIC Conservation and Philosophy Symposium: Intersection and Interactions held in 2020. During each workshop Dr. Lisa Giombini (assistant professor, Department of Philosophy, University of Roma Tre) first gives a lecture on how philosophers think about the term in question. This author then moderates a Socratic dialogue on that term.

The second series of dialogues, designed for students in conservation and young heritage professionals, is being co-organized and moderated by this author and IIC Fellowship and Membership Engagement Manager, Ellie Sweetnam. Participants are asked to consider a number of fundamental questions pertaining to the conservation and preservation of cultural heritage such as “what is it that you, as (future) heritage professionals, want to preserve for future generations, for which generations, and why?” These questions were based on those posed during a 2019 ICOMOS workshop on [future heritage management](#). It was surprising that even seasoned professionals were initially stumped with these questions, having never thought about them. The goal behind this series of dialogues is, thus, to get young professionals to start thinking about these important questions at the beginning of their careers.

The fourth in the series of lecture/dialogue workshops, and the last in the series of student/young professional dialogues, will be held in spring 2024 for IIC members. The final lecture/dialogue workshop will then be held in fall 2024. Based on the feedback from participants, initial planning has begun for a new series starting in 2025. Announcements and registration for the workshops and dialogues will be posted on the IIC website shortly.

Author Bio

Dr. Wei is an independent consultant, formerly senior conservation scientist (retired) at Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE). Besides technical research, one of his major interests is how conservation decisions are influenced by the differing perception of objects by heritage professionals and the public. As a trained Socratic dialogue moderator, he has organized over sixty dialogues internationally since 2011.

(See the whole article in the February-March 2024 "News in Conservation" Issue 100, p. 30-34)