

Starting a Socrates Cafe

In all affairs it's a healthy thing now and then to hang a question mark on the things you have long taken for granted.

Bertrand Russell (1872 - 1970)

So you've decided that starting a discussion group, a Socrates Cafe in your Lodge sounds like a good idea. But you're thinking, now what? How do I do it? The section following is the "How To" guide from the Society for Philosophical Inquiry (www.philosophers.com) the creators of the Socrates Cafe concept. It's quite straightforward and really gives you everything needed to get started.

Before you read that section, however, let's think about how to bring this concept about in a Masonic-based fashion.

Starting any kind of group is difficult and keeping one going even harder. Expect that the first few meetings will be a very small group. It will hopefully grow and then very likely will settle with a core group of regulars.

This is not an activity that would lend itself to being practiced in open Lodge. The best chance for success is perhaps as coffee time before or after regular Lodge meetings. This will keep the atmosphere relaxed and allow everyone to participate. Those who are not interested are not forced to participate in this way.

Make sure you have a Dos and Don'ts handout taken from the information below. This will help everyone get acquainted with the rules and help avoid any embarrassing moments or hurt feelings. Remember, everyone can speak their mind but they must also respect the other persons right to speak theirs. This should be the easy part in a Lodge setting.

Here are some other ideas to consider:

- Hold the meeting outside the Lodge in the local coffee shop. (This might be an interesting recruitment tool. People will see and hear the discussion and want to join in. Which is fine. When the time is right, they can be approached to join Lodge.)
- Hold a Socrates Cafe discussion with other Masonic bodies, e.g., DeMolay, Rainbow, Star and so on. This should be an inclusive activity.
- Partner with one or two other Lodges in your area and build a Cafe group.
- Hold an open Cafe for the community using the Lodge building as the meeting place. This would be another way to show the community what Masonry is about and expand your learning.

Take five or ten minutes and brainstorm more ways to open this exciting learning opportunity up to your Lodge brothers, appendant Masonic bodies and community.

(The following material is copyrighted by SPI and is available at www.philosophers.com)

TIPS ON STARTING YOUR OWN SOCRATES CAFÉ®

By Christopher Phillips and Cecilia Phillips

How to Get Started

How do I find the right place to host a Socrates Café? Libraries, community centers, bookstores, and coffee shops are among the many great places to host a Socrates Café. Independent coffee shops, which are especially dedicated to reaching out to the community, are usually very receptive to the idea. Present the Socrates Café concept to the owner or person responsible for the venue. Feel free to download articles from the Society for Philosophical Inquiry website that you can use when making your pitch for holding the Socrates Café event. Ask if the place could accommodate the group during their slowest day and time so that you won't interrupt normal business activity. Weekday evenings (except Fridays) are usually good times to host the event .

If you're starting a Socrates Cafe® or Philosophers' Club, or another dialogue group that goes by a different name, but that largely shares our goals, please send us information about it (time, place, contact information, etc.). For those starting an ongoing group, please remember that participants propose and choose the questions, and please strive to have many different facilitators.

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How to Facilitate a Socrates Café

Now that you've found a coffeehouse or bookstore or other suitable venue to hold a Socrates Café on a regular basis, one burning question you likely have is: How do I facilitate a Socrates Café?

What kind of question is appropriate?

In a Socrates Café, just about any question can be grist for a meaningful dialogue.

How do we decide on a question for discussion?

Ask the participants for questions. Encourage them to propose for Socratic discourse absolutely any question that is on their minds. Their questions don't at all have to be traditional ones. Read all the questions aloud to the participants, and then ask them to vote for the one about which they feel least expert and most perplexed.

How do I launch a discussion on the chosen question?

At the outset, let a few of the participants respond to the question in any way they please. But just when they think it's safe to assume that this is going to be a free-for-all confab without any underlying method-start probing the question in a Socratic way. That is, examine it for: 1) built-in assumptions, 2) embedded concepts, 3) differences of kind and degree, and logical consistencies and inconsistencies. Then try to seek out compelling objections and alternative viewpoints.

How do I find the question's built-in assumptions?

For example, when a participant asks an apparently deep question like "How can we overcome alienation?" you need to challenge the premise of the question at the outset. You may ask: Is alienation something we always want to overcome? Shakespeare and Goethe may have written their timeless works because they embraced a sense of alienation rather than attempting to escape it.

Where are the concepts embedded in this question?

To probe the question of overcoming alienation, you first need to ask and answer such questions as: What is alienation? What does it mean to overcome alienation? Why would we ever want to overcome alienation? By separating out the concepts and exploring them individually, everyone will get to see the question from a new perspective.

What are examples of exploring "differences of kind and degree"?

In response to the alienation question, you might ask: Are there some types of alienation that you want to overcome and other types that you do not at all want to overcome but rather want to incorporate into yourself? What are some of the many different types of alienation? How do they differ? But also, what are the aspects that link them? Is it possible to be completely alienated?

How do I know there will be alternative views?

You may think you already can predict the responses. But you and everyone else probably will be surprised by just how diverse and eye-opening they will be. In exploring the meaning of the terms they use, participants will reveal and articulate philosophies of basic concepts they might take for granted. This is what makes for a spontaneous and thrilling discussion.

How do I deal with people who monopolize the conversation or who do not show respect for other participants?

Since Socrates Cafes are typically held in public places, anybody is welcome to participate. It is very important to create an environment in which all participants feel comfortable to participate and listen. If one of the participants seems to dominate the discussion and often interrupts others, the facilitator needs to be assertive and make sure that others have their say as well. If necessary, you may want to talk in private with the person and point out gently that he or she needs to be more considerate of others who also want to have their say. You should explain that quiet or shy people may feel intimidated if they are interrupted by more aggressive personalities and that you want to create and maintain a safe, caring, and supportive environment for all the participants.

How can I encourage people to speak?

A good facilitator can create a healthy environment for exchange by setting an example for others. First and foremost, a good facilitator must be a very engaged listener. You need to be actively listening to what each participant is saying at the time; do not project how you are going to respond or what you will ask next. Also, make sure that all the people who want to participate have a chance to do so; look for body language or hand signals from people who want to speak. They may make a gesture to indicate that they have something to say, and after a while they may stop doing it because some time has passed or what they intended to say does not seem relevant anymore. If this happens, you can still give them a chance to voice their ideas by asking them what they think about what was just discussed.

Is it okay to have only one facilitator?

At the beginning, you may be the only facilitator, because you took the initiative to organize the group. However, over time, you should look for other participants who would like to try their hand at facilitating and who clearly grasp the nature of this type of inquiry. Socrates Café is meant to be a refreshing alternative, where an egalitarian spirit allows many voices. So the more facilitators, the merrier. Every facilitator will bring a different style, which will enrich the dialogues and help ensure the group's long-term viability.

Do facilitators have to be neutral or can they express their perspectives too?

Like everyone in the group, the facilitator of a Socrates Café is striving to become a better questioner. As a facilitator, you will see that it is very difficult to be neutral. The kinds of questions you ask in the course of a dialogue are themselves a reflection of your personal curiosity. However, you should strive to some degree to be more neutral than the rest. You are not a teacher, and your purpose is not to lead the group to a certain answer or truth. If you monopolize the discussion, others might feel intimidated or turned off. Your role as facilitator is to help and inspire others articulate their unique perspectives.

In the Beginning

At the outset of each and every Socrates Cafe, you should stress to participants that this is meant to be a thoughtful and reflective philosophical sharing. For this to take place, each participant must need and want to cultivate his/her capacity to become a more careful listener -- indeed, the ability to listen with all one's being to what other participants are sharing is the most important quality a Socrates Cafe-goer can have. Socrates Cafe is meant to provide a refreshing and exhilarating alternative to the way many groups engage with one another -- it is meant to be the exact opposite of the mindless types of debates and diatribes and polemics and which he/she who speaks the loudest and interrupts the most and browbeats the best and engages in the most frequent non-redemptive oneupsmanship "wins," whatever that could mean. Socrates Cafe is meant to cultivate new habits of discourse in which the primary purpose is to inspire each person within the community of inquiry further to cultivate and discover his/her unique point of view, nothing more and certainly nothing less.

Facilitator and Participant Dos and Don'ts

Do be an active and engaged listener.

Respecting the ideas of each participant is a key element of a successful Socrates Café. Be open to what people have to say even if you disagree. The facilitator needs to let the group know that putting down others is absolutely taboo at a Socrates Café.

Do encourage participants to offer specific examples that back up what they take to be a universally accepted view.

The facilitator should try to get them to support their perspectives with cogent, well-constructed, reasoned views.

Do question the perspectives offered by others and try to examine any perceived logical inconsistencies.

The collective goal is for all participants, not just the facilitator, to become a more expert questioner.

Don't allow the dialogue to become a one-on-one back-and-forth between facilitator and participant (or between one participant and another).

Remember: this is a community of philosophical inquirers. So a good facilitator should involve everyone else at every turn.

Do make sure everyone has a chance to speak.

Invite but do not pressure quieter participants to contribute to the dialogue.

Do be receptive to unexpected and unfamiliar responses.

Facilitators should avoid steering the dialogue in a preconceived direction, as if they know better than others what the answers, or questions, should be.

Don't browbeat a participant or put him on the spot in a way that makes him uncomfortable. You should nudge participants into articulating their perspectives as clearly as possible, but if someone doesn't have a response to your further prodding, move on to other participants.

Don't strive for consensus.

In the version of Socratic inquiry practiced at Socrates Café, it doesn't matter if everyone begins and ends a dialogue with disparate perspectives. There's never any need to try to force any sort of agreement.

Do remember the Socrates Café is just one version of philosophical discourse, and it might not work for everybody.

For those who don't seem satisfied with Socrates Café style of discussion, encourage them to form their own groups so they can promote their own kinds of philosophical inquiry.

Don't try to bring the discussion to any sort of artificial closure.

Most Socrates Café dialogues last about two hours. (If held at a coffeehouse or any venue that sells food and drinks, it is of immense benefit to the owner if you take a ten-minute "pause for the cause" after an hour or so of discourse.) A Socrates Café is considered a success when participants leave a discussion with many more questions than they had at the beginning.

Don't ever use readings to start a group discussion.

This is not supposed to be a group based on didactic directiveness. One of the ways we steer away from the traditional "philosophy club" model is that there is no teacher or guide or guru to lead the discussion, but rather a facilitator who simply makes sure that the group as a whole picks a question among those proposed by the group and then makes sure that the dialogue is well-distributed among participants, so that everyone who cares to can take part. A directed or suggested reading beforehand is much too controlling, and too much like other types of groups that are claiming to bring philosophy out of the classroom, but end up bringing the classroom model along with them. While AFTER the dialogue, it is quite appropriate for anyone who took part to suggest to others that there's certain books they may want to take a look at that relate to the topic discussed, so participants can get a more keen sense that they are part of a wonderful questioning tradition that includes great thinkers across the ages and disciplines, this should never be done as a way to jumpstart the dialogue itself. A Socrates Café is meant to bring together as broad a cross-section of people as possible -- emphatically including people who possibly can't read, but who surely have very rich experiences to share in the course of a dialogue -- so directed readings would only be exclusive and elitist and rather snooty, and so anathema to the ends of a Socrates Café discourse.

Can I Use the Name "Socrates Café" Even Though It Is Trademarked?

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