

Chapter 1. The New Protreptic: Philosophical Dialogues on Values

One of the main sources of inspiration for VISION originates with protreptic, a philosophical form of dialogue that examines existential and values-based dimensions of life. Protrepic is rooted in the European philosophical tradition dating back to ancient Greek philosophy, namely the now-lost *Protreptikos eis ten philosophian* (*Accompaniment to Philosophy*), written by Aristotle around 310 BC. In the early 2000s, Ole Fogh Kirkeby, a professor of Management Philosophy at the Copenhagen Business School, adapted his research on Greek philosophy into what he called the new protreptic—an approach intended for use in the humane education of modern-day leaders (Kirkeby, 2009, 2016). The new protreptic has since been used in and adapted to different areas of practice, including coaching and leadership training, education, and some areas of social work. It was from these adaptations that the idea of examining how protreptic could be useful in social work, education, and advocacy for a sustainable future took hold. Embarking on such a journey, a basic knowledge of protreptic proves helpful. Therefore, in this chapter, we present the perspectives and background of protreptic, closing with an overview of how VISION can be used for protreptic reflections in education and advocacy.

Mirrors for princes: The etymology and history of protreptic

Linguistics serves as a cornerstone to Kirkeby's (2016) work, more precisely the etymology of words and values. In etymology, the goal is to understand the deeper meanings of something through its history of meaning and how that meaning has been used and developed over time. As such, a person's choice of words is never coincidental, Kirkeby (2016, p. 36) claims, and a protreptic dialogue examines and clarifies the background of those word choices, bringing the person towards a deeper self-understanding and self-awareness. A good place to begin is with the etymology of protreptic itself. '*Protrebo*' means 'to confront with' (gently but insisting) or 'to urge', and, according to Kirkeby (2016, p. 40), protreptic traces can be found in two traditions in European history.

The first tradition positions philosophy as a field in which human beings can find their true self, as seen in the writings and thoughts of, amongst others, Seneca (*Exhortationes*, written between 40–65 BC), Cicero (*Hortensius*, 45 BC), and Plato (*Alcibiades*, written between 393–388 BC). Traces of protreptic can also be found in the Christian tradition, namely in the letters of Paul. Kirkeby (2016) also mentions that similar traditions and practices of self-examination are found elsewhere, in many cultures and religions around the world, given that it is a general human trait to search for understandings of the self and its relation to the world around it.

The other tradition is related to the purpose of protreptic, namely, to 'soften the tyrant'. Aristotles' original work on protreptic was dedicated to King Themison of Cyprus and consisted of suggestions and advice pertaining to the ways in which he could control vices and promote virtues through ethical reflection. Ultimately, this would allow him to balance and manage the important and powerful tasks necessary for a king to rule. As such, it represented an early version of the genre of didactic political writings, referred to as the *mirrors of princes* (in Latin, *specula principum*). It was within this tradition that thinkers such as John of Salisbury (1159/1990) and

Thomas Aquinas (1267/1949) formulated their thoughts and advice on good leadership for kings and future rulers, reflecting the values and political landscapes of their time.

At the time of Aristotle, philosophers were interested in creating a just society, which required leaders to think and act not only for their own benefit, but in order to achieve the common good. The idea of the common good was central to Aristotle, an idea which is also a cornerstone of the new protreptic. Therefore, protreptic is not just about reflection and dialogue for its own sake. Instead, protreptic requires an individual to know themselves more deeply, thereby shaping their actions in a more reflective and deliberative way. As such, action is built into the method.

Consciousness and awareness as collective processes

Beyond inspiration from Aristotle and linguistics, various theories of the self and awareness have supplied the new protreptic with insights and vocabulary to understand how consciousness works. In particular, the thoughts of Sigmund Freud and his theoretical model of mental structure is worth mentioning, specifically the unconscious, pre-conscious, and conscious (Freud, 1915, cited in Kirkeby, 2016, p. 82). Based on these distinctions for consciousness, albeit with a sceptical distance from many other elements of Freud's work, Kirkeby (2016) argues that a protreptic analysis of values and an exploration of their etymology can serve as a bridge between the conscious and the pre-conscious parts of mental structures. Such an analysis can bring forward those parts of ourselves of which we are not consciously aware, but which are somehow imbedded in our mental structures. The internal and external dialogues a person has with themselves and others, along with the primary verbal examinations of a value or word upon which such dialogues are based, may potentially widen their perspectives and deepen their self-awareness. This can lead to what Kirkeby (2016) described as 'self-gravity' ('selvtyngde', our translation). Self-gravity is a self-made word (*neologism*) from Kirkeby, describing a state of being that feels like having solid ground beneath one's feet (Kirkeby, n.d.). The idea is that, when rooted in your values in such a reflected and conscious way, it also brings about a sense of being the 'master in your own house'.

An important note following this individual self-awareness is that, in the end, knowledge refers to a collective process (Kirkeby, 2009, p. 35). The quality of the event, through contact with others, evokes awareness. This relates to what Kirkeby referred to as the principle of *translocutionarity* (another neologism), which states:

I do not know what I mean until I hear what I myself am saying. I do not know what I do until I experience myself doing it. I do not know what I know until we experience ourselves performing it.
(Kirkeby, 2009, p. 35)

This underscores how, through contact and interaction with others, we eventually become ourselves and that we, as human beings, are co-dependent in the process of creating awareness.

Values as motives of action

In the new protreptic, values are defined as the motivating factors influencing an individual's actions, essentially serving as the underlying reasons for their behaviour. Etymologically, the term 'value' is derived from meanings such as 'to turn towards', 'to be drawn by', or simply 'to be strong'. Values are synonymous with concepts such as 'ideal', 'norm', 'maxim', and 'attitude'. Amongst these, 'ideal' aligns most closely with 'value' in its etymological roots, given that both pertain to something that is 'perceived' (Kirkeby, 2016, p. 180). An individual's perception and understanding of life are reflected in their collection of values and their worldview. Engaging in a protreptic dialogue serves to clarify this collection of values, elevating it to a more conscious level and enabling the individual to manifest it as their own. This process involves assembling what can be referred to as a personal '*garland of values*' ('*værdikrans*', our translation), another neologism introduced by Kirkeby (n.d.).

Whilst the new protreptic shares many similarities with therapy and uses some of its vocabulary, it is quite different from (a Freudian understanding of) therapy. Thus, there is no interest in trauma, repressions, personal stories, and narratives. Instead, the values are believed to serve as the underlying motivation behind a person's actions. Values are intimately connected to fundamental needs, given that they simultaneously interact with and are influenced by an individual's drives, desires, and tendencies, frequently residing in the more subconscious aspects of the self (Kirkeby, 2016, p. 177). In the tradition of the *mirrors of princes*, the idea was that vices or deadly sins should be controlled by virtues (see also Olden-Jørgensen, 2006), and in protreptic these control mechanisms lie in the process of enhancing the importance of virtues through a protreptic analysis. When systematically analysed in this way, it becomes clearer how values are more than or a mere means to achieving individual happiness and avoiding pain. Bringing them forward to a more conscious place, always in light of a common good, renders values fit to act as foundations for life. In this process, the values one bases their life upon must also be investigated in light of from whence these values originate. As a part of any analysis, we must therefore remain critical of the values an individual is exposed to through their upbringing, along with those values taken from or internalised through one's cultural and societal context. This process of reformulating values and making them one's own, sometimes turn values that were, at first glance, extremely important into something less prioritised and vice versa. This process is natural when values are seen from a new, mature, and more detached perspective. Thus, the process in the new protreptic focuses on strengthening the positive sides of the values in a person's life, making choices easier and eventually leading to the possibility of certainty. This results in feeling certain that you did the right thing, and just knowing what is right can bring about contentment and a peace of mind. But these feelings are more than simply individual benefits given that they might also prepare an individual to overcome the need to judge others (Kirkeby, 2016, p. 186).

The values of the facilitator

A person who works with values in this way will be more capable of assisting others in their search for a more well-founded worldview. Therefore, protreptic facilitators should have done the work themselves and should know their own values, which will allow them to avoid making the central person a means rather than an end to a dialogue. If a facilitator does not subject their values to such inspection, there is an inherent danger that they will use values as a cover for hidden motives or the fulfilment of basic needs, thus deceiving both themselves and others (Kirkeby, 2016).

Both Kirkeby and his colleagues Kim Gørtz and Mette Mejlhede emphasise in their practical book *Protreptic in Practice* (2015) that facilitating such dialogues requires a strong ethical foundation, because working with an individual's worldview is a powerful thing to do. Rooted in respect,

otherness, companionship, openness, and humility remain crucial. It is also important to recognise how working with values and strengthening them can manifest in such a strong way for an individual that their newfound solid ground and values become something for which they will fight or even die. Respect for the powerfulness of the method is therefore rather important, including recognising its inherent potential for manipulation (Gørtz & Mejlhede, 2015; Kirkeby, 2016).

A protreptic dialogue thus strives for generality and anonymisation, whilst avoiding psychologising. Such dialogue also inspires the focal person(s) to accomplish a mental turn towards their norms, values, ideals, thoughts, and practices, whilst also always respecting their secrets. There are no confessions, exceptionally unstable grounds must be respectfully bypassed, and there should be no interest in guilting or shaming. The focus lies on what brings out the strengths and power in a person, that which can push a person forward for their own sake and for the sake of the common good. Thus, the facilitator must always bear in mind that the focal person alone knows their own right path (Gørtz & Mejlhede, 2015; Kirkeby, 2016).

The ability to meet the focal person with attention and determine what that person needs to move closer to these states of being deeply depends on intuition and an ability to sense what is needed. A solid experience with protreptic dialogues can sharpen these senses and abilities, such as hearing what is not said or even what is going to be said next as well as listening with advanced awareness to the moods of the focal person. Furthermore, the structure of a protreptic dialogue is described as a composition and compared to creating music—together.

Examples of values in the new protreptic

According to Kirkeby (2016, p. 205), the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has recognised a set of fundamental and universal values across the globe. He noted that these values are also regarded as foundational principles in Greek philosophy. These core values include goodness, truth, justice, and beauty, each of which serves as the basis from which other fundamental values can be derived. *Goodness* is then related to values such as love, imagination, care, compassion, tolerance, forgiveness, gratefulness, faith, and goodwill. *Truth* relates to wonder, knowledge, certainty, perception, endurance, truthfulness, functionality, stability, generality, possibility, and necessity. *Justice* relates to responsibility, community, hope, togetherness, recognition, loyalty, solidarity, sympathy, decency, respect, autonomy, and a sense of utopia. *Beauty* relates to greatness, generosity, attention, courage, harmony, self-control, creativity, a visionary will, and a careful will to shape.

Kirkeby (2016) asserts that individuals residing in a society or structure which allow them the freedom to engage with their own set of values will ultimately align with the fundamental values previously mentioned. Consequently, freedom is incorporated as a central value in the new protreptic alongside the other four values. For Kirkeby (2016), the capacity to translate these values into actions embodies the concept of *phronesis*—that is, practical knowledge. This reflects the practical application of making values tangible and actionable. Ultimately, values hold significance given how we utilise them, their manifestation as the solid foundation upon which we stand, and their role in enabling us to contribute to the common good. Throughout dialogues in the new protreptic, these five values frequently serve as focal points for examination, particularly towards the end, since they facilitate reflections leading to the essence of the matter, where a sense of stillness or even reverence may occasionally arise (Gørtz & Mejlhede, 2015; Kirkeby, 2016).

Adapting the new protreptic in VISION

The new protreptic has served as a huge inspiration within VISION. In essence, protreptic promotes a communication paradigm of ‘we thinking’ rather than ‘me thinking’, based on the idea of the common good dating back to Aristotle. The mindset and approach to dialogues from protreptic are largely adapted within VISION. However, some elements are emphasised more than others, the most important of which include the fundamental outlook from protreptic on the common good, the understanding of awareness building as a collective process, the clear focus on the quality of an event, the ability to be present in the process on the terms of the other(s), and the critical questioning of power positions related to the mirrors of princes. Within VISION, this highlights a focus on community, interdependency, conviviality, reciprocity, sensibility, care, coexistence, and responsibility, whilst aligned with an overall focus on sustainability in the URGE project. Furthermore, it places sustainability as the potential common good to strive for, with a strong orientation towards political and social justice, accountability, and civic mindedness to help achieve collective prosperity. We describe this in further detail in Chapter 2.

There are also some elements of the new protreptic which have been developed further within VISION, because of the target groups and field in which it is aimed. In social work on the micro-level, protreptic is adaptable without requiring more substantive changes, focusing on dialogues aimed at meeting the focal person as a human being. To help facilitate this kind of verbally based dialogue, VISION provides a cue card that can be used when that kind of dialogue is possible. This tool is largely adapted from the works of Kirkeby (2009, 2016) and Gørtz and Mejlhede (2015).

But, because protreptic is based on verbal communication, the method can in some cases have implications when using it in social work and social work advocacy beyond the micro- and case-based levels (see Chapter 3 on advocacy for further details). This can occur initially when service users are unable to communicate verbally, either in limited ways or entirely. Secondly, because it is highly verbally dependent, individuals from diverse backgrounds and power positions do not always experience equal access to participation in a group- or community-based dialogue, such that the development of verbal language skills can be related to and dependent upon the life circumstances of a person, leaving some participants in vulnerable starting points.

Furthermore, in social work practice with a global perspective and a focus on sustainability, a pragmatic ontological horizon proves useful. Based on the international definition of social work practice (IFSW, 2014), the profession must include all relevant sources of knowledge and

traditions. Writings and thoughts about being, self, self-awareness, mental structures, and consciousness have strong traditions in most Indigenous, religious, and philosophical traditions around the world, which Kirkeby (2016) also mentioned. But, where the new protreptic relegates this notion to a footnote, it is natural for a method in social work to further emphasise these elements. As Heather Boetto (2019) explains, social work in a sustainability perspective must include holistic perspectives, including focusing on coexistence, co-dependency, and responsibility on a much broader scale than we have been accustomed to, widening the perspective in ethics for social work (see Chapter 2 for further details). These perspectives offer valuable insights if the aim is sustainability, both for human beings as well as other species and the planet itself.

This leads to a critical standpoint specifically in relation to the linguistic focus in Kirkeby's (2016) work, calling for a deeper analysis. Notably, Kirkeby's choice of focus rather explicitly lies on the capacity to grasp the world through and with words. As he explains, something is not real for a person until they hear themselves say it (Kirkeby, 2016, p. 35; Kirkeby, 2009, p. 35). The body is valued yet understood through an etymological lens as representing the origin of words, meaning that most words can be backtracked to pre-language sounds, which communicate relations, senses, and actions. Thus, it becomes possible to talk about a '*sense of gravity*' and about '*being the master of one's own house*'; it is something realised in a bodily way. As such, the body, the senses, and intuition are highly welcomed in the new protreptic. Still, the tool for Kirkeby is verbal—an explicit choice or distinction made throughout his work.

Given this verbal focus, an important task in the development of VISION has focused on widening the toolkit to include nonverbal and creative tools to help bridge the gap between the pre-conscious and the conscious parts of the self in multiple ways, especially when working with groups. These alternative tools and exercises can be found in Chapter 9 and may be used when it is necessary to create a more equal playing field for participants and/or adapting ways of thinking into a less verbally dependent process. Such instances may occur when a group represents a high degree of diversity, may not share the same language, or may explore their own values in varying verbal and nonverbal ways. These are still based on the philosophy of protreptic, but they use nonverbal communication and creative and bodily inspired approaches. They are developed to either supplement the verbal dialogue or replace it entirely and are inspired by different traditions such as the arts, mindfulness, yoga, and theatre amongst others. Here, the heritage of protreptic is that they are intended to support a quality of care, conviviality, and reciprocity during the process and in the presence of participants, thereby strengthening the relationship between them and their willingness to listen to each other.

This chapter was about...

VISION can be used for protreptic-inspired reflection through:

- Building 'self-gravity'. The protreptic-inspired way of reflecting together within VISION can help individuals and groups establish a more solid foundation for their values.
- Improving facilitations skills. A solid foundation for one's own values helps to differentiate between one's own opinions and those of another, thereby allowing an individual to serve more strongly as a facilitator grounded in one's own values.

- Building collective awareness. VISION enhances the awareness built through interaction and contact with others and can be used to work with processes in groups and communities.
- Establishing togetherness. VISION's focus on 'we thinking' and the quality of the event, emphasises the need to be present together, and to listen and learn together. This also fosters a sense of cohesion and togetherness within a group.
- Improving listening skills. Because VISION also emphasises intuition and listening for the needs of others and because there are no right or wrong answers, VISION encourages both facilitator and participants to listen to each other with deep respect.
- Including holistic perspectives. VISION raises awareness of the ethical dimensions of human interactions by always relating the values examined to a common good and related to the values of goodness, truth, justice, beauty, and freedom found in all corners of the world.
- Creating equitable ground. The generality and anonymisation within VISION, including avoiding psychologising, helps create a space for meeting each other in a more equitable space.
- Exploration of etymology. The etymological root of a word often hides dimensions of its meaning, of which we were not consciously aware, bringing analytical depths to a dialogue.

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