

Report from a Socratic Dialogue on the Concept of Risk

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Introduction

The term 'risk' is used in a wide range of situations, but there is no real consensus of what it means. 'Risk' is often stipulatively defined as "a probability for the occurrence of a negative event" or something similar. This formulation is however not very informative, and it fails to capture many of our intuitions about the concept or risk.

One way of trying to find a common definition of a term within a group is to use a Socratic Dialogue (SD). This method is fairly new, and it is rather different from the original Socratic dialogues (at least if we are to judge from how they are described by Plato). The best explanation for the name ought to be that it is inspired by the original Socratic dialogues. The SD in its modern form was originally developed as a tool for enabling laymen to perform rather advanced concept analyses under the supervision of a professional philosopher. The formal goal of the method is to find a common way of perceiving of a particular term, or at least to find out exactly how the members of the group differ in their understandings of the term, and why. The largest gain from the process has in practice turned out to be a higher awareness among the participants of different ways of understanding the term, and the ideas and intuitions behind it. This has turned out to be very useful in educational settings, but the method has also been used with great success both in research, and in e.g. business, public administration and nongovernmental organisations.

In the present case, a Socratic dialogue on the concept of risk was performed within the framework of a Ph D-course about risk and uncertainty at the Swedish University of Agriculture in Alnarp, Sweden. The participants on the course were all quite familiar with practical issues relating to risks. Both from the course work, and from their own research.¹

The method

The first step in an SD is to find a concrete, actual example that the participants in the dialogue agree is a useful illustration of the term that is the object of discussion.

The participants suggest different cases. They then chose one after having discussed the pros and cons of the different suggestions. It has turned out to be a great help for non-philosophers to have a concrete and actual example to start from even though the discussion gets more and more abstract as the SD continues. It has also turned out that already during the first phases of suggesting, discussing and choosing an example, much of the ground for the further discussion has been laid.

The next step is to let each one of the participants point out what in the chosen example makes it a good illustration of the concept in question.

This gives us a list of sentences that can be used as a basis for the next round of discussions. Each sentence is discussed in relation to the following question: "If we are to find a general (or situation specific, depending on the aim of the SD in question) definition of the term X, is there anything in this sentence we can use – what, why or why not?" The sentence

¹ Thank you very much to Krisitina Blennow for initiating and organising the workshop.

is closely scrutinized and often one or more (sometimes every) word of the sentence is discussed by the group in relation to the question above.

After each sentence is scrutinized, the participants get a chance to formulate a tentative definition. The tentative definition does not have to have any word in common with the sentence just discussed, but it has turned out that the definitions suggested almost always benefits to a high degree from the preceding discussion.

When all sentences are discussed, we will have a longer or shorter list of tentative definitions that are used in the next part of the SD. These tentative definitions are treated much like the sentences in the previous part. Each tentative definition is discussed, and the participants get the opportunity to put forth a new tentative definition after the discussion. There is one difference however: The participants are also required to say whether they think the tentative definition in question (the one presently discussed) is satisfactory as a definition, or whether it should be discarded. The answer should always be motivated.

As this part of the SD proceeds, some formulations will stay, and some will fall out. Often there will be some formulations that some participants definitely think should be part of the definition, while others think they should definitely not be part of the definition. This way, it will be clear what aspects of the term that is the object of the SD, there is consensus around, and which there is not. The consensus that is found is not just a consensus, but a considered consensus. I.e. it has emerged from a very thorough process. It will also be clear to a very high degree of exactness, where the disagreements are concerning the formulations about which consensus has not been reached. Finally, not just the finally emerging formulations, but the whole process will hopefully stay in the mind of the participants and help them in their future thinking about the term in question.²

Participants

Maria Birkedal, Southern Swedish Forest Research Centre, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

Mulatu Geleta Dida, Department of Crop Science, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

Nicklas Forsell, Department of Forest Resource Management and Geomatics, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

Kajsa Hylmö, Department of Landscape Planning, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

Bengt Håkansson, Department of Crop Science, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

Carin Nilsson, Department of Physical Geography and Ecosystems Analysis, Lund University

Erika Olofsson, Southern Swedish Forest Research Centre, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

Oriana Pfister, Southern Swedish Forest Research Centre, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

² This section builds on:

1. Personal communication with Maria Ekman and Roger Larsen,
2. Pia Hverven Axell: *Socratic Dialogue as a tool for developing moral awareness in Business Ethics* – lecture at the VIIth International Conference on Philosophical Practice, Copenhagen Aug. 3-6 2004,
3. Saran, Rene (ed) & Neisser, Barbara (ed): *Enquiring minds* Trentham books 2004, and
4. My own experience from using and improving on the method.

Results

Several good and illustrative examples of risk were suggested, and after having discussed the examples during a few minutes, the group unanimously selected one. The chosen example was to bicycle during nighttime with no light on the bike. This example was selected mainly because the participants found that it is an example that everyone in the group can relate to, and because it comprised of more than one risk, and most of them agreed that this was a good thing given the aim to find a general definition of 'risk'.

The answers to what makes this example a good illustration of 'risk', were as follows:

1. *A certain probability for an accident.*
2. *You might be caught by the police.*
3. *There might be consequences from being late.*
4. *A probability of something bad happening.*
5. *Your bicycle might be broken.*
6. *An influence able probability that something bad will happen.*
7. *We do it even though it can have a negative outcome.*
8. *An increased probability that something bad will happen in comparison with another state.*
9. *Getting lost.*

As we can see, the answers ranged from very specific to very general. Answer number 4 expresses what we might call the classic definition of 'risk'.

The answers were then thoroughly and vigorously discussed.

In answer (1), the participants all agreed that the term 'certain' did not contribute anything substantial and should therefore not be part of the definition. 'Probability' was quite extensively discussed and the participants did not agree on whether that was the right word to use. 'Accident' too was discussed, and there were different opinions on whether that was the proper word to use, partly because of the negative connotation of the word. Not all participants agreed that risk has to be limited to negative outcomes. The scope of the word was also discussed. A majority claimed that not all risks (whether negative or not) are about accidents. They can e.g. be about much more subtle or abstract, or at least less "dramatic" phenomena. Even the terms 'a' and 'an' were shortly discussed. One participant pointed out the possibility for more than one outcome of the risk-situation. Therefore, it was thought that terms like 'a' or 'an' were too limiting.

After the discussion, several tentative definitions were suggested:

- 1A. *The probability of an accident.*
- 1B. *Increased probability of something unwanted to happen.*
- 1C. *The probability of something unwanted to happen.*
- 1D. *The probability for different outcomes.*
- 1E. *Something I didn't take into consideration can change my plan.*
- 1F. *The probability for a scenario with an outcome to happen.*
- 1G. *My perception of the probability of a negative event.*

- 1H. The probability of a certain outcome having certain consequences.*
- 1I. A probability of negative outcomes of an action or a process.*

Thereafter, the group discussed the second answer above (2). The group agreed with the participant that pointed out that this answer illustrated the point from the previous discussion that risks do not have to be about accidents. They also agreed however that nothing in this answer was useful in a definition.

The discussion regarding answer (3) was concentrated on the word ‘consequences’. A few participants disagreed on whether a risk has to involve consequences. There was also a continued discussion about what kind of consequences are involved in a risk, especially whether the consequences have to be negative.

After this discussion one new tentative definition was suggested:

- 3A. The increased probability of changed consequences.*

In relation to answer (4) the discussion regarding ‘probability’ continued and involved a discussion about whether a risk is something in the real world or something perceived, and therefore whether the probabilities involved are objective or subjective. The term ‘bad’ was also discussed and there were again different opinions on whether a risk has to be about something bad. The question was not resolved even though there were new arguments presented on both sides. There was also a short discussion involving only a small number of participants, regarding whether risks have to be about things that happen, or whether there can be a risk of something not happening. The participants in question leaned toward the standpoint that risks have to be about things that happen, but that ‘happening’ should be interpreted rather widely.

Answer number (5) was only shortly discussed. The participants agreed that it could not work as a ground for a definition, but it did give rise to a discussion concerning whether only outcomes that affect the individual who acts, should be considered.

The discussion regarding answer (6) concentrated on whether a risk must be possible to influence. The discussion was both long and vigorous and the group did not agree on an answer.

After the discussion several new tentative definitions were suggested:

- 6A. The probability of a scenario with a consequence to happen.*
- 6B. Something that I cannot / do not want to avoid that change my plan.*
- 6C. The probability of a scenario with unwanted consequences.*
- 6D. My perception of the probability of an unwanted event.*
- 6E. The probability for negative consequences.*

The discussion based on answer (7) revolved around the issue of whether a risk is something you take or if it just happens.

In the discussion flowing from answer (8), some participants again took the opportunity to point out that they did not agree that a risk must involve something bad. There was also a discussion on what it would mean that a probability increases in comparison with another

state. What kind of state are we talking about? The discussion concerned in particular whether there is a normal state that means no risk.

Answer (9) where shortly discussed mainly concerning whether there can be a chain of events where the last part of the chain makes the first one a risk. A new tentative definition was suggested:

9A. My perception of the probability of an event that is unwanted by me or someone else.

Then we turned to discuss the first of the tentative definitions (1A). It was unanimously rejected but for different reasons. Some did not like the term ‘probability’. The earlier discussion regarding ‘probability’ was further aggravated by a discussion on whether it would make the definition more difficult to use when one has to explain ‘risk’ to laymen. Others disliked the term ‘accident’ and some disliked both. The definition was also considered to be uninformative.

Suggestion (1B) rendered the same destiny. In this case, the words ‘increased’, ‘probability’, and ‘unwanted’ were all controversial. ‘Unwanted’ was controversial both because it was considered too subjective, and because it implies that, a risk has to be about something negative.

The next suggestion (1C) looks very similar to (1B) and it was unanimously rejected even though it was seen by some as the best suggestion so far. Suggestion (1D) was rejected by everyone. Partly because of the term ‘probability’, but also because it was regarded by most of the participants as being too neutral.

This was unfortunately as far as we got given the limited time we had at our disposal.

Discussion

The most obvious conclusion from the results above is that it confirms that the concept of risk is far from clear. Some issues turned out to be particularly salient. These are e.g. the question of whether a risk has to involve something negative, and in that case who should decide what is negative, whether it is something objective, whether ‘probability’ is a suitable word in a definition of ‘risk’, and what kind of outcomes are relevant.

Some other things that also could be noticed were that (I) the classical definition, is at least not obviously satisfying as a definition, (II) it will not be an easy task to find consensus around the term, and (III) even though consensus was not reached after this exercise, quite a lot was gained in terms of lifting the thinking around the concept to higher levels.