

The Nine Steps of a Philosophical Walk

Peter Harteloh

Erasmus Institute for Philosophical Practice, Budel, The Netherlands, 6021MA

Abstract:

Since 2007, I conduct philosophical walks as individual consultations, teachings or Socratic group exercises. A philosophical walk is intended to make participants think, to deepen thoughts and to become conscious of oneself in relation to the surroundings by walking. It is a form of philosophical practice, facilitating dialogue so that a meaningful story can be obtained. Participants are encouraged to (i) walk in such a way that they obtain space for thoughts and thinking, (ii) conceptualize, (iii) identify a place related to a concept, (iv) question concepts, place and space, and (v) connect concepts with their experience. In this paper, I will describe the method of my philosophical walks and give an example: a philosophical walk at the campus of Nanjing University, China, in 2013. The aim is to provide readers a tool for conducting philosophical walks themselves and walk just like Lao-Tzu, Confucius, Socrates, Aristotle, Nietzsche and many other philosophers have done in order to philosophize and produce concepts related to life, person and place.

About the author

Peter Harteloh is a philosopher. Since 2007, he works as a philosophical practitioner in the Netherlands with a focus on individual consultations, Socratic group dialogue and philosophical walks. He conducted philosophical walks in the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Cambodia, Japan, China, Sweden and Greece (Athens). An appointment for a philosophical consultation can be made by email. First consultation is for free in order to see if a philosophical approach suits the client's theme. For more information, please see: www.filosofischepraktijk.com. Correspondence: info@filosofischepraktijk.com.

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"When walking in the company of other men, there must be someone I can learn something from. I shall pick out his merits to follow and his shortcomings for reference to overcome my own." (Confucius)

1 Introduction

Walking is an aspect of the life and work of many philosophers. Lao Tzu walked and hold at a symbolic border in order to have his thoughts written down as an early example of philosophizing in a rhythm of holding and walking. Confucius walked with his pupils in order to philosophize. So why should we restrict philosophy to sitting down and writing books or papers and not follow the example of Lao Tzu and Confucius? Philosophizing means looking for the right rhythm of thinking and thoughts, a rhythm that suits the person, place and the situation.

Many examples of such a walking can be found in philosophy, such as Nietzsche (walking as a metaphor for his struggle with life), Rousseau (walking as a way to find himself), Kant (walking as a discipline of thought), Heidegger (walking as a retreat and source of inspiration by nature), Gandhi (walking as a mystical experience), Nishida Kitaro (walking as a meditation or contemplation), Lao Tzu (walking as a wandering of thoughts), Confucius (travelling to encounter different ways of thinking), Aristotle (walking while teaching) and Socrates (taking a walk with Phaedrus in search for the right place to philosophize). The walking is usually considered part of the biography of a philosopher, not of his work as such. However, I think the walk should be considered part of the works. It is the way the work is produced. Works are not produced by deep thinking while sitting behind a desk, but by walking and incorporating the rhythm of thinking in thoughts.

An explicit focus on the philosophical dimension of walking is the basis of my philosophical walks (Harteloh, 2009; 2015). A philosophical walk is no tourist tour along places where famous philosophers lived or worked. It is not a way to please or wander along places of interest in city or nature. A philosophical walk is a form of philosophizing. It is a philosophical practice (Harteloh, 2013b). The walk is structured as a philosophical consultation, i. e. like a one to one conversation with a reflexive sequence of questioning, interpreting and understanding (Harteloh, 2013b). The reflexive structure enables participants to learn, develop a good character and eliminate bad habits as Confucius pointed out.

Since 2007, I use philosophical walks for individual consultations, teachings or Socratic group exercises. In this paper I will describe the development of its form. I will illustrate the description with an example: a philosophical walk at the university campus of Nanjing University. By describing my method, I hope to inspire other philosophers to do philosophical walks, share the results and develop it further as a method in philosophical practice.

2 Nine steps

I distinguish nine steps for setting up a philosophical walk (*table1*). First, there is the preparation. I choose a theme for the walk and gather some appropriate quotations of philosophers. Every participant will get one of the quotations at the beginning of the walk. When I started doing philosophical walks, I did not use philosopher's quotes. This was not satisfying. Often the walk became a kind of self exposure of participants in relation to places without much philosophical content. The walk looked more like a coaching session or a therapy. That was not my intention. The use of quotations improves the philosophical character of a walk and marks it as a true *philosophical* walk.

For a philosophical walk with a relative unknown group of people, I use a variety of quotations from Eastern and Western philosophy. For a philosophical walk as an individual consultation with one or (maximum) two people, I do not use quotations, but I design a route according to the theme of the client (Harteloh & Mozichuki, 2009). For example, if the client is trying to understand events

from his past life, I conduct a walk from the historical city center to modern parts of the city; if the client is struggling with his present life, we walk through the modern parts of the city with lots of building activities; we can walk the parks and secluded places when the client is seeking rest and peace of mind in a modern world or we can go from the backstreets to the privileged areas when moral problems seem to be a theme. During such a walk we reflect on the surrounding architecture, choose places of interest and reflect on the reasons for choosing such a place. In this way, we travel from form to content, and in the end clients discover they did reflect on their theme and developed it in an indirect way by reflection on the surroundings. By taking a walk, clients forget their theme in order to find it anew.

Table 1. The nine steps of a philosophical walk

Step No.	Activities in this step
1	Preparation; selecting quotations and/or designing a route
2	Instruction of the participants. Ground rule: “we walk or we talk”
3	Walking along the route
4	Stop at place of conceptualization-choosing a spot
5	Questioning of the participant who called for a stop-just questions, no answers
6	Choose a question (“the best question”)
7	Taking a picture on the spot of conceptualization for analysis and/or group discussion
8	Continue the walk
9	Group discussion-reflection & narrative abstraction

2.1 Instruction

Just like a Socratic dialogue, there are rules for a philosophical walk in order to promote philosophizing. Ground rule is: *we walk or we talk*, i.e. we do not speak and walk at the same time. Speaking while walking distracts the attention too much. It makes the walk too cozy and the group look like a bunch of chatting tourists. That is not the purpose of a philosophical walk. A philosophical walk is a dialogue.

First of all, an inner dialogue of the participant with herself, second a dialogue among the participants (the others) and third a dialogue of participants with their surroundings (nature or city as otherness). An ordinary style of conversation has to be avoided. Rules structure the conversation as a dialogue and improve philosophical content. While walking the participants keep silent. They are involved in an inner dialogue (contemplation) and they process sense impressions from the surrounding environment with the quotation of a

philosopher in mind. In this way, a philosophical walk is an alternation of walking and standing still, of silence and speech, of inner and outer dialogue.

The philosopher's quote is the focus of attention. Participants are invited to conceptualize in a personal way. We do not look for "correct" historical or traditional philosophical interpretations, but for a connection between the philosophical content of the words and the life of the participant. Participants are allowed to call for a stop and exchange thoughts with other participants when standing still. Every participant is instructed to conceptualize, i. e. to find the most important concept in or behind the quotation they drawn at the beginning of the walk. Participants are also instructed to find the right spot for conceptualization (find *your* spot). It is on this spot we stop, stand still and exchange thoughts.

During the walk, every participant has to choose one (*the*) spot matching the philosopher's quote according to his or her interpretation. The facilitator notes the time of finding this spot for group analysis. For example, early and late conceptualizers can be distinguished. Early conceptualizers are quick in determining their spot. They are not afraid to choose and eager to steer the group in thinking. Leaders of the group, either formal or informal, are often early conceptualizers. However, the early conceptualizer seems to be afraid of the uncertainty. How long will the walk last? Will they meet other spots equally or even better fit for conceptualizing the quotation? During the evaluation of a walk my standard question to early conceptualizers is if they did regret their choice or met other places later on during the walk that were a better fit for their concept or quotation. For late conceptualizers the question is if they have waited too long and actually already passed a place better suiting the philosopher's quote. In this way, we reflect on the handling of uncertainty and the consequences of a choice.

Also, the early conceptualizer has to put up with a question during the rest of the walk for quite a while. This is a challenge because early conceptualizers usually cannot stand up with questions for long. They reveal themselves rather as actors than thinkers in the ordinary sense of the words. Late conceptualizers usually are apt to put up with a concept for a relative long time. They can stand the uncertainty of a suiting place coming up rather well. Their conceptualization is usually deep and they take any question for granted. They reveal themselves as thinkers not so much as actors in the ordinary sense of the words. Because the participants do not know the route, this challenge gives the walk the excitement

of the unknown. Participants have to choose under circumstances of uncertainty, they have to decide and justify their decision, just like in real life. In this way a philosophical walk is a metaphor for life as such.

2.2 Walking

At the beginning of the walk each and every participant draws ad random a quotation from a bag with philosophical quotations. The participant encounters a challenge in a random way, resembling life. We start to walk and think. When a participant encounters a spot for conceptualization, he calls out and the group stops. The participant calling for a stop, reads the quotation, mentions the concept formed and explains the relationship between concept, place and quotation (*see Figure 1 as an example*).



Figure 1. The Philosophical Walk led by Peter Harteloh at the campus of Nanjing University, China, in 2013. (Used with consent)

Next, the group is allowed to ask questions; just like in Socratic exercises, comments, judgments or discussion are not allowed yet. The participant who has called for a stop does not answer the questions. He or she chooses one question ("the best question"). This way a participant walks with a concept until the stop and after that she walks with a question till we reach the end of our walk. Thus, a participant is not ready after conceptualization. A participant philosophizes all of the time during the walk. Thus, basic competences of philosophy (questioning, interpreting and conceptualization) form the building blocks of my philosophical walks.

2.3 Group discussion

At the end of our walk we arrange a group discussion along the principles

of the Socratic dialogue (Nelson, 1922). This discussion can take place in open air or in a classroom. I use the time (= order) of conceptualization to structure the discussion (see *Table 2*). Possible connections between conceptualizations (associations, elaborations, reactions) now become visible. During group discussion we investigate those connections.

Participants will also have the opportunity to explain their conceptualization and tell about their experiences during the walk. Focus is on the conceptualization and dealing with the question chosen. There is room for discussion. Pictures of places where conceptualizations take place can be used in this discussion (Harteloh, 2015). They serve as examples so that the discussion is a Socratic dialogue about examples, questions, principles and concepts.

3 Example: A philosophical walk in Nanjing

In 2013, I conducted a philosophical walk at the campus of Nanjing University as a demonstration of a philosophical exercise in Socratic style. There were 11 participants: all students. We walked for about one hour. Every participant managed to find a spot for conceptualization. The group formed rather abstract concepts, showing themselves as students. More concrete concepts like colors or objects did not come up. Questions were focused on the how and why of the concepts formed. Interpretations of the walk are partly mine (the facilitator) for purpose of describing the possibilities of a philosophical walk. During the walk, the facilitator aims at deepening interpretations by questioning, not at a "correct" philosophical interpretation (if any). During the evaluation, the facilitator aims at narrative abstraction by pointing out possible connections between concepts in order to stimulate a constructive way of philosophizing and let the group create a story as an outcome of the walk.

Since the campus where we walked is a place for living, many conceptualizations were related to personal experiences of the participants. The conceptualizations followed each other in a regular order with intervals of 5 minutes (see *Table 2*). The first participant stopped after 5 minutes of walking along a footpath in between the buildings. He came up with the concept of "*realization*". Note how the concept stems from the experience of walking, not from a theoretical reflection. It suits both the quotation ("The obstacle is the

path") and the experience of carrying out a walk planned beforehand. A concept is realizing itself in an action, i.e. in practice.

Table 2. A philosophical walk at Nanjing University Campus, on May 25th 2013

Time of conceptualization	Quotation	Source/Author	Concept formed by the participant
5'	The obstacle is the path.	Zen	<i>Realization</i>
10'	One cannot step twice into the same river.	Heraclitus	<i>Change</i>
15'	It takes a wise man to learn from his mistakes, but an even wiser man to learn from others.	Zen	<i>Communication</i> (with others)
20'	The way is not in the sky. The way is in the heart.	Buddha	<i>Heart</i>
25'	Do you have the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving till the right action arises by itself?	Lao Tzu	<i>Waiting</i>
30'	A flower falls even though we love it and a weed grows even though we do not love it.	Dogen Zenji	<i>Nature</i>
35'	If you understand, things are just as they are; if you do not understand, things are just as they are.	Zen	<i>Objective</i>
50'	One cannot step twice into the same river.	Heraclitus	<i>Same</i> (same quotation, different conceptualization)
60'	When the way comes to an end, then change. Having changed, you pass through.	<i>I Ching</i>	<i>Possibility</i>
65'	The wise sees knowledge and action as one. They see truly.	Bhagavad Gita	<i>Wisdom</i>
70'	What is the path? the Zen master Nan-sen was asked. Everyday life is the path, he answered.	Zen	<i>Life</i>

After 10 minutes a participant stopped in front of a building that appeared to be a swimming pool. This is the place she connected with the saying of Heraclitus ("One cannot step twice into the same river"). Every time she came there for a swim, there was *change*. The water changed and she was changed. She could not step into the same pool twice.

A participant stopped after 15 minutes of walking at the border of the pavement and the park (*see Figure 2*). The place resembles (a man made and organized) *communication* between two kinds of substances: concrete (man-made) and grass (nature). The place resembles the content of the quotation ("It takes a wise man to learn from his mistakes, but an even wiser man to learn from others"). By communication containing oppositions or borderline experiences, we can identify mistakes and learn from them.



Figure 2. Longxiang Luo (罗龙祥), now an associate professor of Yangzhou University, was a PhD student of Nanjing university in 2013. (Used with consent)

A participant stopped after 20 minutes at the spot showing the subject of the quotation (a building) in a material way. The building was a dormitory. The participant contemplated the quotation ("The way is not in the sky. The way is in the heart"), identified its concept (*heart*) and looked for a spot related to the concept. This appeared to be *her* dormitory, not *a* dormitory. Home is where the heart is. The world is adapted to the concept.

The next participant stopped after 25 minutes walking under a lamppost and waited there. Note she expressed the content of Lao Tzu's saying ("Do you have the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving till the right action arises by itself?") on a spot suitable for *waiting*. The waiting was familiar to her, the right action a mystery.

After 30 minutes, a participant held at flower boxes places along the road. They seemed fresh, well maintained and beautiful, but some weed could be detected in them too. They represented the dialectics of *nature*, the concept attached to this place and the quotation: "A flower falls even though we love it and a weed grows even though we do not love it".

Another participant stopped after 35 minutes. He focused on his perceptions

during the walk and chose a spot when the concept, "*objectivity*", was formed. The place is a witness. It was the spot where the concept came to his mind. The relationship between place and concept is historical, not symbolical. The place just recalls a moment in time when his mind grasped a concept. It is objective. The concept objectivity is mediating meaning between text ("If you understand, things are just as they are; if you do not understand, things are just as they are") and place.

A participant stopped after 50 minutes of walking. She also had the saying of Heraclitus and as we did not encounter a river she chose to stop in the middle of a pedestrian crossing (zebra), black and white stripes representing a river. The spot was different and so her conceptualization. She came up with the concept of sameness. She considered the word "*same*" a key word in the saying of Heraclitus and connected it with the zebra she crossed so many times, staying the same, escaping change. This participant focused on another side of the dialectics inherent in a philosophical saying. Note, the identification of a key word in a saying is a good way to come to a concept, although there is no one to one connection. The identification is a choice made by a person with his or her experiences and there is no right or wrong choice. The choice has to be legitimate for the person as such.

Another participant stopped after 60 minutes on a path she often took while walking the campus. It was a kind of T-spot. The spot resembles a choice. One has to go left or right, two possibilities that lie at the end of a straight road. The quotation ("When the way comes to an end, then change. Having changed, you pass through") makes *the* right and *the* left "*possibilities*".

A conceptualization after 65 minutes of walking took place at the spot where grass peeked through the concrete at regular intervals. It looked one spot, but appears to be made up of many different elements (man-made, nature, etc.) representing both order (the concrete) and chaos (the grass peeking through). *Wisdom* unites and wise men see the oneness. The group could see the oneness caught in the quotation ("The wise sees knowledge and action as one. They see truly"). So, wisdom is in us.

The last conceptualization took place after 70 minutes at a pedestrian crossing (zebra), a lively spot ("What is the path? the Zen master Nan-sen was asked. Everyday life is the path, he answered"). A lot of people pass there every day. The zebra is a path, enabling us to walk along a crossroad. The shape of the path indicates danger, but it also keeps the person crossing the road safely. It is

both part of everyday life and a symbol for life as well. "Life" is the concept here.

In this way the walk produces different ways of conceptualization as the same quotation can be linked to different concepts (compare the concepts at 10 or 50 minutes) or the same place can suit different quotations. The concepts differed in abstractness. Conceptualizations took place at regular intervals characterizing the group process as relaxed and polite. Participants seem equal to each other as they all are advanced students in philosophy. In their conceptualization some stay close to the saying using a key word mentioned in the saying, explaining the connection between concept, place and saying by the key word chosen. Others connect a word to the saying and use the place as an explanation. Here, symbolization of a personal experience takes place (e.g. see participant 2, 4 or 9) which is often a desired outcome of an individual philosophical consultation too (Harteloh, 2013b).

4 Reflection

In the group discussion, I ask the participants to tell about the way they dealt with the conceptualization and the question. Some participants contemplate the quotation, choose a spot suiting the quotation and come up with a concept suiting place and text. They think like Aristotle. The concept suits experience and the world. Other participants contemplate the sensations during the walk (quotation included) and they choose a spot related to the quotation by a concept. This think likes intuitionists/constructivists. The concept mediates meaning.

Other participants contemplate the quotation, choose a concept suiting it, and look for a spot suiting the concept. They think like Platonists. The world forms itself along the concepts. In this way, the walk shows different ways of conceptualization. We can compare them and relate them to the person conceptualizing. It enables the person to reflect on himself. Thoughts can be recognized as Platonic, constructivist or Aristotelian. This is what I call putting a philosophical diagnosis (Harteloh, 2013c; 2014). It is something an academically trained philosopher can do and makes the walk differ from walks led by psychologists or life style consultants. The philosophical diagnosis is part of the individual consultation too, a step towards philosophical interpretation and understanding of the client's theme.

5 Narrative abstraction

The evaluation of the walk is ended by making a story of the concepts formed by the group during the walk. The order of conceptualization gives a clue. In Nanjing, the group seemed to walk *from* a realization, implying change, communication (with others), heart (feelings) and waiting (rest and reflection) as part of (a) nature with its objectivity and same(ness) of being there despite its change, *to* a possibility of wisdom (by understanding) and life. The long, not necessarily grammatically correct sentence (philosophizing involves neologisms!) carries the morale of the walk for the group.

I consider a story a conceptual connection of the concepts produced by the walk. There is a connection between the concepts, because people react to each during the walk by associations, elaborations or opposition. The story is not a fairy tale. It is a metaphor containing the morale of the walk. The story is built on the concepts produced by the group during the walk. It is *their* story. The story transcends the concepts formed. It is an abstraction. It is not a regression, a going back to the underlying principles as in the original format of Nelson's Socratic dialogue (Nelson, 1922).

This going back to underlying principles is often criticized as a Platonic way of thinking. I replaced it by the construction of a story. It is a move forward. As all the concepts should be used to form the story it is the result of group work. Any concept left out should be critically questioned. Why is it left out? Concern should also be about the participant whose concept is left out. Is this person left out of the group? Why? In this way we construct a story meaningful to the group.

The story is the result of philosophizing together, a reasoning as a journey, a walk. Constructing a story is also the typical work of a philosopher shaping a text in the right format by considering details and conceptual connections in a very precise critical way. It produces some coherent context for the concepts and communicates a moral. In Nanjing the concepts formed clearly exhibited wisdom as a practice, a way of life. The participants carry it on as memory to a philosophical walk from realization to wisdom and life.

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