# Comparative Analysis of the Mental Mechanisms “Socratic Dialogue” and “Constructive Dispute”: Similarity, Differences, and the Expediency of Separation

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## Annotation

In this article I substantiate why, in the model of the communicative-cognitive framework of the personality, Socratic dialogue and constructive argument must remain two separate mental mechanisms, and not be united into one. I honestly acknowledge the significant similarity between them: both are based on dialogue, require the ability to listen, rely on logic and argumentation, presuppose respect for the opponent and emotional regulation. However, as I show, they have fundamentally different goals - the search for truth and decision-making; different main instruments - questions and arguments; a different initial premise - "I know nothing" and "I know my position"; a different dynamics - a joint ascent to truth and a collision of positions followed by synthesis. I propose a comparative table of differences and show the pedagogical consequences of such a separation: different diagnostic criteria, different exercises, a possible sequence of development and different contexts of application. In conclusion I emphasize that these mechanisms do not duplicate, but complement each other: the first allows a deeper understanding of the problem, the second - the adoption of a decision under conditions of disagreement.

Keywords: Socratic dialogue, constructive argument, communicative-cognitive framework of the personality, mental mechanisms, developmental pedagogy, questioning, argumentation, decision-making.

## Two Rivers That Flow in One Direction

In my model of the communicative-cognitive framework of the personality there are two mental mechanisms that at first glance may seem very close or even interchangeable: Socratic dialogue and constructive argument. This is a legitimate question: should they not be united? Does this not create an artificial duplication? I am convinced that these mechanisms must remain separate, and in this article I will substantiate this decision. Although both mechanisms belong to the sphere of communication and the exchange of opinions, they have fundamentally different goals, structure, dynamics and pedagogical tasks. Their separation allows pedagogical practice and the diagnostics of the development of each of them to be built more precisely.

Here it is appropriate to recall the old Chinese parable of two rivers that flow in one direction. One river is fast and noisy; it cuts its way through stones, breaks barriers, and hastens to the sea. The other is slow and deep; it goes around obstacles, accumulates strength, and reflects the sky. Both flow to the sea. Both are needed by the earth. But they are different. And if one tries to merge them into one, the result will be not a river, but a swamp. Something in between, deprived both of the swiftness of the first and of the depth of the second. Approximately the same is true of these two mechanisms. Both lead to understanding. But their paths are different. And if we mix them, we will lose both.

Before turning to the analysis, I must explicitly designate the place of this article in the series. Articles one through eleven were devoted to individual mental mechanisms: their philosophical foundations, psychological mechanisms, pedagogical strategies of development and diagnostics. This article is different in genre. It does not describe an individual mechanism, but substantiates why two mechanisms that at first glance seem close must remain separate. It is a comparative analysis that performs the same function as article 16 in Issue 2: it rises to the level of generalization and shows how the different elements of the system relate to each other.

Socratic dialogue is MM-5, and it belongs to the core [10; 11]. Constructive argument is MM-7, and it belongs to the supporting level [10; 11]. The distinction between core and support was introduced in the article on the structure of mental mechanisms [10] and substantiated in the article on epistemological recursion [11]. The core is six

mechanisms that constitute the act of solving a difficult problem: MM-1, MM-3, MM-5, MM-6, MM-10, MM-11. Support is five mechanisms without which the core does not work, but which do not constitute the act of solution: MM-2, MM-4, MM-7, MM-8, MM-9. Socratic dialogue belongs to the core, because it realizes the requirement of maintaining tension between perspectives. Constructive argument belongs to the supporting level, because it does not create the solution, but protects the scientific community from dogmatism. It is precisely this distinction - core and support - that is the main argument in favor of these mechanisms remaining separate. If both were core, or both support, the question of unification would be better grounded. But since they perform different logical functions in the system, their unification would lead to a loss of precision.

**A Shadow That Resembles a Person**

Before turning to the differences, I want to honestly acknowledge that the similarity really does exist, and it is significant. Both mechanisms are based on dialogue, and not on monologue. They require that the participants not simply perform, but interact with each other, react to the words of the opponent and correct their position. Both require the ability to listen. Without active listening, neither Socratic dialogue nor constructive argument is possible. Both rely on logic and argumentation. In both cases what is important is not emotional outbursts, but logical constructions, facts, and proofs. Both require respect for the opponent. In both cases the participant must not resort to personal attacks, insult, humiliate or ridicule the interlocutor. Both are the antipodes of conflict. Both Socratic dialogue and constructive argument are directed toward ensuring that disagreements do not grow into destructive conflict, but become a source of new understanding. Both require emotional regulation. In both cases the participant must be able to manage his emotions so that they do not hinder rational discussion.

This similarity may seem so significant that the question arises: is the difference between them merely a shadow? A shadow that resembles a person, but is not a person. For a shadow repeats the contours, but has no flesh. It follows the movement, but has no will. And if we take the shadow for the person, we will be mistaken. We will be speaking with the shadow, and not with the one who casts it. This is precisely what happens when we confuse Socratic dialogue and constructive argument. We see the similarity and think that it is one and the same. But behind the similarity hides a difference that is more important than the similarity.

**Four Differences That Are More Important Than the Similarity**

Despite the significant similarity, I distinguish four fundamental differences between these mechanisms which, in my view, make their separation necessary. Socratic dialogue is aimed at the joint search for truth. As Plato noted in the dialogue *Phaedrus*, the true orator is the one who knows the truth about the subject of which he is going to speak [1]. The participants of Socratic dialogue are united by a common striving to understand what is true, what is just, what is good. This is not a struggle, but cooperation in inquiry. In Socratic dialogue the participants do not strive to defeat each other. On the contrary, they are ready to acknowledge their error if the interlocutor has adduced more convincing arguments. Socrates, as is well known, never gave ready-made answers, but by his questions and objections tried to lead the interlocutor to correct decisions [6]. Constructive argument, by contrast, is aimed at decision-making. The participants may have different positions, and their goal is to arrive at a common agreement or at least at a mutually acceptable compromise. As the researcher E.N. Popov writes, with the appearance of Aristotle's formal logic the use of sophistic devices in arguments and the violation of the laws of logic become impossible [5]. This means that an argument always has a certain final chord - a decision, a conclusion, a result. In constructive argument the participants may not arrive at a single opinion, but they must arrive at a common decision. In Socratic dialogue the decision may not be found - what is important is the movement of thought itself, the process of search itself. It is like the difference between a journey and a business trip. In a journey what is important is the path. In a business trip - the result. And if you set off on a journey but returned with a business trip report, you have lost both.

Socratic dialogue is built around questions. As is precisely noted in the contemporary literature: we were not taught to ask, we were taught to answer [2]. Socrates used irony and maieutics - he asked questions that helped the interlocutor become aware of the contradictions in his own convictions and arrive at a new understanding [4]. Socratic dialogue is the midwifery art of thought, helping the interlocutor to give birth to the knowledge that is already present in him [4]. That is precisely why Plato defined dialectic as the ability to pose questions and give answers [8]. Constructive argument is built around arguments. The participants advance theses, support them with proofs, and refute the arguments of the opponent. As S.I. Povarnin notes, the key elements of an argument are argumentation, counter-argumentation, and the search for points of contact [7]. In constructive argument questions, of course, may

also be asked, but they perform an auxiliary function - clarifying a position, checking logic, and identifying weak points. In Socratic dialogue questions are the main instrument. It is like the difference between a lantern and a map. A lantern illuminates what is before you. A map shows where you are. Both are needed. But they are different things. And if you shine a map, you will see nothing. And if you look for a route on a lantern, you will get lost.

Socratic dialogue begins with Socratic ignorance. Socrates said: I know that I know nothing [3]. He did not enter into dialogue with a ready-made truth - he sought it together with the interlocutor. Researchers emphasize that Socrates did not place himself above the interlocutor; he was one who did not know, which allowed him to ask questions without a claim to the possession of truth [6]. Constructive argument begins with each of the parties having its own position, which they are ready to defend and argue. Each participant enters into the argument with the conviction that his point of view is well grounded, and he must defend it, but do so constructively, without aggression and humiliation of the opponent. In Socratic dialogue the participants move from ignorance to knowledge together. In constructive argument the participants move from different positions to a common decision. It is like the difference between two travelers who together seek the road, and two travelers who argue about which road is right. The first may find a third road of which they did not know. The second may arrive at agreement that the right one is one of the two. But they do not seek a third. They choose from what is available. And in this is their strength, and in this is their limit.

Socratic dialogue has the dynamics of a joint ascent. The participants move in one direction - toward the truth. Researchers emphasize that the maieutics of Socrates is the extraction of the knowledge hidden in a person [4]. This is not a struggle, but help, support, cooperation. Constructive argument has the dynamics of collision and synthesis. The participants move toward each other or in different directions, but with the common intention of finding a solution. As is shown in contemporary research, constructive argument is the ability to conduct a dialogue in observance of the rules, without resorting to personal attacks, with the ability to listen and hear the opponent [7]. It is like the difference between alpinists who together ascend to the summit, and chess players who sit at the board and seek the best move. The alpinists are bound by one rope. The chess players are separated by the board. Both require intelligence. But it is a different intelligence. And different skills. And different results. The alpinists are on the summit. The chess players are at the board. The winner may be one. Or there may be none at all - if the game ended in a draw. But in any case it is a game. And an ascent is not a game. It is a path. And on a path there are no winners and losers. There are only those who reached, and those who did not.

**A Table That Says More Than Words**

The comparative table of differences between Socratic dialogue and constructive argument looks like this. Criterion of goal: joint search for truth versus decision-making. Main instrument: questions versus arguments. Initial premise: I know nothing versus I know my position. Dynamics: joint ascent to truth versus collision of positions and synthesis. Role of the opponent: co-inquirer versus partner in the search for a solution. Result: deep understanding, in which the truth may remain unfound, versus a common decision, even if agreement has not been reached. Emotional tone: exploratory, surprised, open versus constructive, businesslike, but tense. Key competence: the ability to ask questions versus the ability to argue and seek compromises. This table is not simply an enumeration. It is a map of differences. And like any map, it helps one not to get lost. But a map does not replace the path. It only shows where you are and where you may go. And one will still have to walk oneself.

**Why This Is Important for Pedagogy**

If I had united these mechanisms, I would not be able to diagnose precisely in what exactly the student experiences difficulties: in the ability to ask questions or in the ability to argue his position and seek compromises. The separation allows zones of growth to be identified more precisely. For the development of each mechanism different exercises are required. Socratic dialogue requires the practice of questions: asking open questions, clarifying, reformulating, seeking hidden assumptions. Constructive argument requires the practice of argumentation: formulating theses, selecting proofs, refuting the arguments of the opponent, finding compromises. Researchers emphasize that Socratic dialogue teaches joint problem solving [6], whereas constructive argument teaches decision-making under conditions of disagreement.

Possibly these mechanisms must be developed in a certain sequence. First the student masters Socratic dialogue - learns to ask questions, to doubt, to seek truth. Then, when he has already mastered this art, he can move on to constructive argument - to learn to defend his position, to argue, to find compromises. It is like music. First you learn

to listen. Then to play. One cannot play without having learned to listen. Because playing without hearing is noise. And dialogue without the ability to hear is an argument. And an argument without the ability to hear is a quarrel. And a quarrel is not dialogue. It is war. And war is not pedagogy. It is defeat.

In different life situations different skills are required. In a scholarly discussion - rather Socratic dialogue. In business negotiations - rather constructive argument. In family relations - both, but in different proportions. Researchers of ancient dialectic show that even in antiquity there existed a distinction between dialectic as the search for truth and eristic as the art of argument [5]. Although I do not use the term eristic with its negative connotation, this historical distinction shows that people have always distinguished dialogue for the sake of truth and dialogue for the sake of a decision. This distinction is as old as philosophy itself. And it has not become obsolete. It has only become subtler. More precise. More needed.

In accordance with the principle of dynamic diagnostics, which I substantiate in the article on the diagnostics of mental mechanisms [12], the assessment of the development of each of these mechanisms must be not static, but procedural. The separation of the mechanisms allows this diagnostics to be built more precisely. For Socratic dialogue the diagnostics must be directed toward the assessment of the types of questions, the quality of listening, and the ability to maintain tension between perspectives. For constructive argument - toward the assessment of the logic of arguments, emotional control, and readiness for compromise. Without the separation of the mechanisms the diagnostics would be blurred: we would not be able to understand in what exactly the student experiences difficulties - in the ability to ask questions or in the ability to argue. It is as if a doctor tried to treat a disease without knowing which organ hurts. He would treat everything at once. And in the end would cure nothing. Because treatment is precision. And precision begins with distinction.

**A Duet, Not a Duplicate**

Despite the differences, I want to emphasize that in my model these mechanisms complement each other. Socratic dialogue gives us a method of inquiry - it helps to penetrate into the essence, to ask the right questions, to see hidden assumptions. Constructive argument gives us a method of decision-making - it helps to defend one's position, to persuade and to find compromises. Ideally, in real communication these two mechanisms alternate and intertwine. It begins with Socratic dialogue in order to understand what the essence of the disagreement is. Then it passes into constructive argument in order to make a decision. As is precisely noted in one of the works on contemporary pedagogy: critical thinking is not an innate ability - it is taught. Begin with the simple: ask questions in the lesson, allow arguing, give the right to doubt [9]. Here "ask questions" is Socratic dialogue, "allow arguing" is constructive argument. Both are needed. But they are not one and the same. They are two instruments. Like a hammer and a screwdriver. Both are needed. But if you drive a screw with a hammer, you will ruin both the screw and the hammer. And, possibly, your finger. So too with these mechanisms. If you use Socratic dialogue where constructive argument is needed, you will not solve the problem. You will only deepen it. Because dialogue is about understanding. And argument is about a decision. And if you seek a decision but find understanding, you will not move from the spot. And if you seek understanding but find a decision, you will not understand why this decision works. Both are a loss. Both are a mistake. Both are the price we pay for non-distinction.

**Distinction as the Path to Precision**

And so, I arrive at the conclusion that both mechanisms must remain separate in my model. They have different goals - the search for truth and decision-making. They have different instruments - questions and arguments. They have different dynamics - joint ascent and collision with synthesis. Their separation allows me to diagnose the development of each skill more precisely; to develop specific exercises for each; to build a sequence of development: first Socratic dialogue, then constructive argument; to take into account the different contexts of application in life. Together they form a powerful duet: Socratic dialogue allows us to understand each other and to seek truth, and constructive argument allows us to make decisions even when we disagree with each other. Without the first we will not be able to understand the problem deeply. Without the second we will not be able to find a solution. That is precisely why I leave them as separate but mutually complementary mental mechanisms in my pedagogical model. This is not duplication, but a subtle distinction that allows pedagogical practice and diagnostics to be built more precisely.

Here I must admit one doubt. When I speak of distinction, I risk creating yet another classification, yet another grid into which we try to fit living reality. And reality resists. It does not want to fit. It flows, changes, mixes. And in a

real conversation Socratic dialogue and constructive argument often intertwine so that they cannot be distinguished. One question can become the beginning of an argument. One argument can return the conversation to dialogue. And this is normal. This is not a mistake. This is life. But in order to see this life, one must first distinguish. One must know where dialogue is and where argument is. Not in order to separate them forever. But in order to understand what is happening. And perhaps it is precisely in this understanding that pedagogy consists. Not in laying everything out on shelves. But in seeing how one passes into the other. How a question becomes an argument. How an argument becomes a question. How dialogue becomes argument. And how argument again becomes dialogue. This is the movement of thought. And this movement cannot be stopped. But one can learn to see it. And perhaps it is precisely this that we must teach. Not what dialogue is and what argument is. But that between them there is a space. And in this space thought lives. And if we teach children to see this space, they will be able to live in it. And this, probably, is the most important thing. Not to choose between dialogue and argument. But to be able to be in both. And to know when which is needed. And not to fear passing from one to the other. Because life is not dialogue and not argument. It is a conversation. Which continues. And in which there is room both for a question and for an argument. And for silence. And for the word. And for understanding. And for a decision. And for everything else. That makes us human.

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