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Abstract

This paper argues that Plato's Socratic Dialogues can effectively model the process through which musical activism is understood by listeners. The Socratic Dialogues, as an abstract model, are first analyzed for advantages and disadvantages when using them to understand musical activism. This analysis breaks the dialogues into two stages: "Deconstruction" and "Collaboration." The model is then applied to the song "Ebola is Real" by F. A., Soul Fresh, and DenG, a work that arose from the outbreak of Ebola virus disease in Liberia in March 2014. The song was supported by UNICEF and has a clear activist agenda. The song structure, lyrics and commentary on the song are examined with the Socratic Dialogues in mind. The paper concludes that Plato's Socratic Dialogues offer a clear model for understanding the complex processes and relationships at work in musical activism.

Keywords

Activism, Ebola, Plato, Liberia, Ontology

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Music has been a tool for the expression of social values and the critique of social institutions throughout recorded history.¹ Its longevity in the role is no doubt a result of its efficacy. It is, therefore, prudent that structures exist to facilitate the understanding of these processes of critique and provide a framework for their replication. I argue in this paper that the process through which music achieves social change can be understood by using the Socratic Dialogues as models.

The Socratic Dialogues are a set of writings by Plato that feature Socrates as the main character, exploring moral and ethical dilemmas through conversations with a number of other characters.² In these dialogues, Socrates exposes

1. Dick Bradley, "Music and Social Science: A Survey," *Media, Culture and Society* 3 (1981): 205–218, doi:10.1177/016344378100300302.

2. Plato, *Early Socratic Dialogues*, ed. Trevor J. Saunders (London: Penguin, 2005).

inconsistencies in the thinking of the second party, resulting in a recognition of ignorance by both parties. What makes the dialogues extraordinary is that they acknowledge that both individuals enter as autonomous intellectuals with a pre-existing set of values that govern their thinking; through their joint engagement, they reach a collaborative vision that can be accepted as the truth about the nature of reality. In practice, Socrates acts more as a guide to realizing an innate truth, but commentators acknowledge that his version of truth-seeking involved interaction with others.³

This collaborative process was retrospectively labelled the “Socratic Method.”⁴ For the purposes of this discussion, it will be divided into two parts.⁵ The first is “deconstruction,” in which the assumptions of an individual are exposed through a series of questions. Socrates called the pursuit of truth—via questioning—*elenchus*.⁶ Next, both individuals negotiate these

3. Frederick Ferré, *Being and Value: Toward a Constructive Postmodern Metaphysics* (Albany: State of New York University Press: 1996), 41.

4. Simon Blackburn, “Socratic Method,” *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press,) last modified 2008, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199541430.0001.0001/acref-9780199541430-e-2907?rskey=tkjbZs&result=1>.

5. Andrew Kern, “What is Socratic Dialogue,” *Circe Institute*, last modified March 24, 2011, <https://www.circeinstitute.org/2011/03/what-is-socratic-dialogue>. I have opted to change the way Kern labels his two stages, as the term “remediation” is value-laden.

6. Simon Blackburn, “Elenchus,” *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press,) last modified 2008, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095746820>.

beliefs and values, a process I designate “collaboration.”⁷ The goal is the establishment of a new set of beliefs that are closer to the “truth.” It should be noted that the result is often an incomplete solution; rather, each party leaves with a more “accurate” understanding of the morals and ethics that pertain to the issue being discussed. Furthermore, it is reasonable to infer that both parties leave with different understandings of the collaboration, just as they entered with different sets of values.

There are several premises on which the method is built that require some examination before it can be used as a framework for music in activism.⁸ The first is the idea that through dialogue, one comes closer to some “truth,” as defined by clearer logical reasoning. This implies that logical reasoning moves towards an accepted natural truth that is realizable by human consciousness. Second, the method requires the logical appraisal and dismissal of ideas that do not hold under traditional stoic principles of reasoning. Both of these assumptions are problematic when applied to music and activism. First, the assumption that there is a natural truth that can be exposed through dialogue is not constructive in the context of music and activism. Socrates believed that the world was structured on an eternal truth that is pure and unchanging.

7. There is no designated Greek term for the collaboration stage, as Socrates and his students were not as concerned with reaching a conclusion as they were with a recognition of ignorance. For them, a dialogue culminates in a point where there is nothing else to say and the only thing left to do was act. This approach does not fully explain musical activism, so I have labelled the collaboration stage to aid understanding.

8. Ferré, *Being and Value*, 41–46.

Truth was unbending and provided rules to make consistently ethical choices. This suggests that there is one universal truth without recognizing how cultural background and location—both spatial and temporal—influence conceptions of truth. I offer instead that musical activism creates an understanding of humanitarian issues; the people affected by them; and potential changes in an individual's actions to further the humanitarian cause. While not entirely consistent with Plato's philosophy, it maintains the core ideal of uncovering and examining issues with the goal of acknowledging ignorance and furthering understanding. Finally, the appraisal and dismissal of ideas based on logic works in this context, but is inadequate to explain the whole process of musical activism. Logical understanding of humanitarian issues is supplemented by—and reinforced with—the emotionally transformative power of music. In this sense, music can offer information for logical dialogue through lyrics, program notes, and context, while simultaneously engaging the listener in an emotional dialogue with the music.

Music in activism can be broadly understood through the application of the principles of Socratic dialogue. The dialogue occurs between the performer and the listener, both in live performance and through recorded media.⁹ The performer

9. It should be noted that a Socratic dialogue occurs between performers as well, although this discussion lies outside the scope of this paper. It is difficult to include composers in the framework unless they are also the performer. Plato was deeply suspicious of writing in any form and believed that truth was something that was performed. Truth was an action. Writing something down was a shadow of the truth that could be misinterpreted and could only ever serve to remind the reader of the truth,

takes the role traditionally occupied by Socrates and begins a dialogue with the listener. The dialogue is largely internal, introducing the listener to the nature of the humanitarian issue through context or through more overt means in the music itself. An important aspect of this stage of the dialogue is that the listener recognizes the work as activist. Without recognition of the nature of the music, it is difficult for a dialogue that challenges the listener's understanding to begin. The dialogue is both emotional and logical, which makes music a unique way of expressing and informing.

The subsequent "deconstruction" stage begins after the initial dialogue has been established. In this context, the cross-examination of the listener's beliefs is portrayed sonically, and the process of interpreting and negotiating the emotional and technical information that they are receiving can create cognitive dissonance.¹⁰ The artistic nature of the music provides a channel through which the emotional reality of the listener can be challenged, and the contextual background or overt lyrical message provides a reality in which the emotional response can be understood. The piece of music is contextually framed within the humanitarian reality and is, therefore, emotionally and logically received. The dialogue prompts the listener to re-evaluate their understanding of the world around them and recognise ignorance in regard to a particular humanitarian issue, provoking thoughts such as, "I didn't

something Plato discusses in *Phaedrus*. Plato, *Phaedrus*, ed. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

10. David Gere, "Can Art Save Lives?" (lecture, 2015–2016 Music, Media and Culture Lecture Series, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, NL, September 17, 2015).

realize this was happening” or “I didn’t know that it was this bad.” At the very least, the music questions a notion held by the listener in relation to the humanitarian issue presented.

The “collaboration” stage marks the construction of new understanding with guidance from the musical material. The new understanding can be complete or partial, provided that the listener’s beliefs are transformed in some way through their dialogue with the music. This process is the internalization of the logical argument presented in conjunction with the musical material and the creation of a revised understanding of reality with the activist message in mind. The collaboration stage requires that the listener collaborate with the performer and internally generate meaning that follows logically from the information presented. In this sense, the Socratic dialogue, facilitated by the music, acts as a guide toward understanding, as opposed to a firm conceptualization of reality. The music fosters independent decision-making and rejects fear mongering and stigmatization.¹¹

Naturally, not everyone will accept every message presented in this fashion. The individual may reject the

11. Another aspect of the collaboration is dance. The integration of sematic information and movement adds a physical understanding to the message, a literal internalization of the musical material that reinforces the sense of a joint engagement with the music. Corporal engagement with activist music is an additional layer of collaboration that acknowledges the music as a cultural object capable of inciting a cultural reaction and, furthermore, instils a deeper sense of interaction. In the discussion that follows, Elliot Adekoya notes that, “If you’re making a song—an Ebola song that people gonna listen to now—it has to be danceable.” Elliot Adekoya, interviewed by Jason Beaubien, *Weekend All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, October 12, 2014.

deconstruction stage, in which case there is no collaboration with the musical material. In this way, the music can be evaluated on a strictly artistic basis, and bears no transformative meaning for the individual.¹² Alternatively, deconstruction can take place, but the listener may choose to reject the collaboration with the activist material. In this instance, the rejection of the collaboration is simultaneously the creation of a revised reality, albeit one in which the listener decides that their new reality does not include the activist message. For the purposes of this article, I will limit the discussion to the application of the model, bearing in mind that responses to music—much like the people who listen to it—are varied and complex.

Ebola Intervention in Liberia

As a case study, I turn now to the recent outbreak of the Ebola virus disease in Liberia. The epidemic began in March 2014 and as of March 2016 there were an estimated 28 603 total cases and 11 301 deaths.¹³ A study from Lofa County in Liberia indicates that the trajectory of transmission cannot be understood without first taking population behaviour into account and suggests that education and social mobilization are

12. Louise Meintjes “Paul Simon’s Graceland, South Africa and the Mediation of Musical Meaning,” *Ethnomusicology* 34, no. 1 (1990): 59, doi: 10.2307/852356.

13. World Health Organization, “Situation Summary: Ebola Data and Statistics,” last modified March 2, 2016, <http://apps.who.int/gho/data/view ebola-sitrepebola-summary-20151030?lang=en>.

an integral part of controlling the outbreak.¹⁴ The importance of music in population behaviour is underlined in the investment of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in educational music throughout West Africa during the outbreak.¹⁵ There are numerous musical projects explicitly addressing Ebola in popular music alone, many of them actively attempting to educate the public and dispel the myths surrounding the disease.¹⁶

One project that caught significant media attention is a collaboration between the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and West African musicians F. A., Soul Fresh, and DenG called, "Ebola is Real."¹⁷ The song has been in rotation in more than 50 radio stations in Liberia and tackles a major obstacle to information dissemination—that is, only 42.9% of the adult population is literate.¹⁸ The song starts as a generic pop tune: auto-tuned vocals and a synthesizer outlining harmony.¹⁹ When the chorus starts, however, the message

14. Ibid.

15. "Misconceptions Fuel Ebola Outbreak in West Africa" *UNICEF Liberia*, last modified July 11, 2014, http://www.unicef.org/liberia/media_8291.html.

16. Boima Tucker, "Beats, Rhymes and Ebola," *Cultural Anthropology Online: Ebola in Perspective Series* (2015), accessed October 3, 2015, <http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/592-beats-rhymes-and-ebola>.

17. Adekoya, *Weekend All Things Considered*, October 12, 2014.

18. Adolphus Scott, interviewed by Jian Ghomeshi, *Q*, CBC Radio One, September 9, 2014.

19. F. A., Soul Fresh and DenG, *Ebola is Real*, in partnership with UNICEF and HottFM 107.9 Liberia, (2015), MP3, accessed October 3, 2015, <https://soundcloud.com/unicef-liberia/hott-fm-ebola-song>.

becomes very pragmatic: Ebola is real, not a conspiracy.²⁰ DenG sings, “It’s real/ It’s time to protect yourself/ Ebola is here/ Protect you family/ Ebola is real/ Protect your community.”²¹ Adolphus Scott, a Communication Specialist from the Liberia section of UNICEF who collaborated with the Liberian artists, notes that the lyrics were approved by the Liberian Health Ministry and provide medically accurate guidelines for the recognition of Ebola signs and symptoms.²² The artists originally recorded it in English, but have plans to translate the song into a number of indigenous languages. The success of the song can be seen in its reception: the song has become a popular ringtone and is used in a variety of other media outside of its circulation on the radio, including television.

The application of the Socratic Method as a framework for this example clarifies a number of the key mechanisms in the song. “Ebola is Real” is immediately recognizable as an activist text. The opening chorus advocates understanding and unity among the West African population in the fight against Ebola, creating a suitable environment for the deconstruction stage. The musician/UNICEF collaboration intentionally targets traditional cultural practices that increase risk of transmission, namely washing the deceased before burial and braiding their hair if the deceased is female.²³ In this instance,

20. Mel Bromberg et al., “The Ebola Epidemic in West Africa: Challenges, Opportunities and Policy Priority Areas,” *Nursing Outlook* 64, (2015): 34, doi: 10.1016/j.outlook.2014.12.013.

21. F. A., Soul Fresh and DenG, *Ebola is Real*.

22. Scott, *Q*, September 9, 2014.

23. Ibid.

the Socratic dialogue targets the ignorance of the general population toward Ebola transmission, resulting in the subsequent cognitive dissonance between traditional practices and the new information. The Socratic Method also notes that dialogue does not happen in a vacuum; in “Ebola is Real,” many beliefs and misunderstandings about Ebola are brought into the dialogue. DenG noted in an interview with the World Music Network that, “When I first heard of Ebola, just like the majority of Liberians, I believed it was a made up conspiracy.”²⁴ This belief must be deconstructed before any additional meaning can be imparted, hence the fundamental message “Ebola is real,” not “five common signs and symptoms of Ebola.” Recognition that deconstruction must take place is an integral part of the song’s success.

The second stage, collaboration, is approached in a number of ways. The Liberian DJ Elliot Adekoya, also known as “The Milkman,” reported the following:

Two of the most powerful phrases [in the song] are “The thing, Ebola, now come” and “the thing now show face”. . . People go around, people be like “No shaking hands my man” in the Liberian way when they say “The thing now come,” it means the thing is here. Now we know it is here and it has shown its face. So we all understand it is in our midst now; we gotta be careful.²⁵

24. “Liberian Musicians Fight Ebola with Songs,” *World Music Network*, Oct. 9, 2014, <http://www.worldmusic.net/news/news/2014-10-09/liberian-musicians-fight-ebola-with-songs/>.

25. Adekoya, *Weekend All Things Considered*, October 12, 2014.

This suggests that the lyrics have become a mantra for preventative measures, indicating that the collaboration stage of the song has challenged the usual behaviour of the population and has, moreover, replaced that behaviour. This is only possible through the collaboration of the listener with the musical material. Furthermore, Adekoya notes that, unlike the early messages that Ebola was incurable, “Ebola is Real” focuses on prevention and wraps the message in an accessible dance beat. Underscoring Adekoya’s comment is that the fatalistic messages of the earlier outreach programs did not collaborate with the listener. Instead, they bombarded them with fearful images and information that was not a mutual exchange—as in the Socratic Method—but, rather, caused a reaction among the public that was based on emotional reactions to distressing images.²⁶ This fearful response was the result of presenting consequences, rather than collaborating with the public to change outcomes.

As an extension of the collaboration stage, the artists note that the next step for them is the translation of the song into a number of indigenous languages. This step in the collaborative process is part of the Stop Ebola Now campaign, which released a song that features lyrics in French, Malinke, Soussou, Kissi, and Lingala. These examples demonstrate the necessity for linguistic accommodation in the West African region, a further feature of the collaborative process between the listeners and the artists, who decide which language to create in.

26. Ibid.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Research

The Socratic Dialogues provide not just a framework for understanding how activist music imbues meaning in its audience, but also gives a model to understand why populations respond to specific songs. The process through which meaning is achieved is capable of being understood and, as I have argued, can be understood as dialectical. In the context of Ebola in West Africa, much can be learned by applying the model to the activist music produced during the height of the epidemic up to the present day.

The Socratic Dialogues are more than a model for understanding. Activist groups can use them as a model for the construction of activist music. With this model as a guide, activists can identify the ideas already present in the population that need deconstruction; determine how to portray the music as activist; and create strategies to facilitate the collaborative process, thereby guiding the listener towards a new understanding of reality that encompasses some aspect of the group's message. This model provides a solid foundation on which music can be built to imbue meaning in the listener, while simultaneously avoiding stigmatization and fear mongering.

Moving forward, I believe this model can be applied to the arts more generally as a way of understanding how meaning is transferred to the audience. More attention should be given to the use of music in the fight against Ebola, as there was widespread use of music throughout West Africa by a number of prolific artists that has yet to receive attention in the literature. I would encourage interdisciplinary dialogue in this

area and recommend statistical analysis of transmission trends to determine any possible correlation between the release of activist music and its respective airtime on local radio.

I have given most of my attention to the process by which listeners understand this music, but the dialogues hold benefits for performers as well. They give performers chances to be challenged about their activist message; face the challenges of changing social paradigms; and discover the nuances as to how people experience an activist message. This model provides insight into these complex relationships, allowing music to be built around a structure that facilitates the meaningful exchange of information and providing a tool that can analyze how musical activism is received and understood by its listeners.

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