

Philosophical Practice as Mind-opening Dialog Towards Freedom and Vivification

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Abstract: The author argues that philosophical practice is neither therapy nor application of philosophy. Instead he refers on the Aristotelian distinction between *praxis* and *poiesis* and sees philosophical practice as a mind-opening dialog unable to intend particular results. Nevertheless philosophical practice owns a force near to therapeutic potentials: the effects which reflections, questions and ideas have on people and on everyday life on the one hand and its vivifying potential on the other. He illustrates this by the example of a successful long-term course on the history of philosophical ideas. The author shows the differences between a school lesson or a usual university course of today and a seminar which is held in the attitude of philosophical practice. Philosophical practice for him is an inspiring adventurous exercise which leads to vivification and inner freedom.

Key words: philosophical practice, therapy, history of philosophical ideas, freedom, adventure, reflection

1. An Old-fashioned Analogy

Can philosophical practice pragmatically be understood as a way of therapy? Although I like the old Greek phrase of the philosopher being the physician of the soul, for me the “soul” is not an appropriate term of philosophy any more. But this is not the only reason why I think that philosophical practitioners are not therapists, even if philosophizing might have curative aspects and can

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afford relief.

Another curious idea I often hear from philosophical practitioners is the one that in philosophical practice philosophy is *applied*. Like in a cure one takes a certain remedy – here philosophy – and applies this to the patient, who is the client coming to us. One easily sees that also the idea of philosophical practice being applied philosophy is just another form of the conviction, that it is therapy or at least a useful tool to effect something.

But things are not as easy as that. From early times on philosophy had to justify itself, and the metaphor of the philosopher as the physician of the soul fitted very well to this. Physicians had a high social status and what they did was helpful. They also had a high degree of knowledge about human beings and the world they live in; thus they were regarded to be wise persons. Even today it is tempting to not just use this analogy but take it as a serious description of philosophical practice.

Nevertheless philosophical practice cannot satisfy the expectations the metaphor of therapy puts on our work. A clearer understanding of philosophical practice sees it as *praxis* in the Aristotelian sense – in distinct difference to *poiesis*, the form of acting which has its aim outside from itself.¹ *Praxis* on the other hand has, what it aims for, within its own action, it fulfills itself without the need of reaching a certain result. If one understands philosophical practice as therapy, one necessarily wants to reach a certain result outside of the action itself, generally spoken health. So one doesn't understand practice as *praxis* in the Aristotelian sense but as *poiesis* (“fabrication” of results). For Aristotle the best example for *praxis* is philosophizing – at least this should be reason enough to question whether a comprehension of philosophical practice as therapy is appropriate.

I admit that many therapists don't want to see their activity as a production (*poiesis*) of health. They try to see therapy as a form of *praxis* as well. But philosophical practice is in its full potential if it does understand itself as *praxis* – acting without an aim outside itself, whereas therapy is in its full force if it is successful, i.e. if it

¹ Aristoteles, *Nikomach. Ethics* VI, 4-5; cf. *Politics* I, 4.

reaches a defined aim, the better state of health of a patient.

But to describe philosophical practice as therapy seems to have a clear advantage, it brings some sort of coherence into all the different ways how we practice and how we understand what we do. If one does not chose such a well-known connecting term, it becomes hard to describe what all the different ways of philosophical practice have in common. And it becomes even more difficult to decide that something is *not* philosophical practice. This leaves us with some uneasiness. The lowest common denominator seems to be that it should base on philosophy, somehow. This at least makes it possible to say that a philosophical practitioner should be well trained in philosophy and experienced in philosophizing. This is a necessary condition to be a philosophical practitioner, but it is not sufficient one.

If we try to use the metaphor of the philosopher being the physician of the soul and take it as more as just a metaphor we necessarily come to the conclusion that we use philosophy as a sort of remedy. But if we insist to understand philosophical practice in this way we also have to decide which sort of remedy is appropriate in which cure. If we remember the history of occidental philosophy we are in a difficulty, because there are numerous different philosophies. But why should Plato fit better to a certain “illness of mind” than Wittgenstein or Nietzsche or Foucault or Ortega y Gasset? – Is there something like a *Morbus Nietzscheanus* or a *Morbus Platonicus*? – It has been much easier in antiquity: Those philosophers who then used the metaphor of the philosopher being the physician of the soul – as the Epicureans or the Stoics – were convinced that their own philosophy was the panacea for all “illnesses of mind”. Having just one forceful remedy for everything it was easy to understand philosophizing as therapeutic cure. Today we cannot seriously understand philosophizing this way without becoming ideological.

The main idea behind the therapeutic metaphor was the insight that a great amount of human suffering is caused by imaginations. And the cure was primarily understood as a critical examination and dissolution of inappropriate imaginations. But the Stoics and

Epicureans easily knew which imaginations were inappropriate because they had an own corpus of ideas which they believed to be true. Even if one agrees to some of these convictions, a philosophical practitioner in postmodern times has to be a philosopher of his time, not one of antiquity – admitted that main existential and philosophical issues have been dealt with since then and lots of these old ideas are inspiring still today. Hegel warned that a philosopher is always just a thinker in and of his own time and can't look into the future.² But obviously he can stick to past ideas and be someone who hasn't a sound grasp of contemporary developments.

A Greek or Roman philosopher could see himself as a physician of the soul, could see philosophy as a sort of therapy without any contradiction. Even in Renaissance the idea of philosophy was broad enough to do so: Galileo Galilei saw himself as a philosopher³ as well as Paracelsus did⁴. But today the meaning of "philosophy" is much smaller – it has different sciences and professions near to it. This fact consistently causes the question of its actual relevance. And philosophical practice can't be another profession next to philosophy (like psychotherapy) but it is inherently connected to philosophy and therefore has to deal with the

² „Das *was ist* zu begreifen, ist die Aufgabe der Philosophie, denn das *was ist*, ist die Vernunft. Was das Individuum betrifft, so ist ohnehin jedes ein *Sohn seiner Zeit*, so ist auch die Philosophie *ihre Zeit in Gedanken erfaßt*.“ Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, Vorrede, 25.

³ He was employed as a Court Philosopher for the Grand Dukes of Tuscany, the Medici, and did not say – as often circulated – that “the book of Nature is written in the language of mathematics” – but “Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe ... It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures;...” (Galileo Galilei, *Il Saggiatore*. Rome, 1623; *The Assayer*, English trans. Stillman Drake and C. D. O'Malley, in *The Controversy on the Comets of 1618* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1960) pp. 237-238.)

⁴ „Weil nun der Arzt sein erstes Wissen aus der Philosophie nehmen soll, - Philosophie ist nit aus dem Menschen, sondern aus Himmel und Erden, Luft und Wasser.“ [Transl. DS: *Because the physician has to take his knowledge from philosophy, - philosophy is not from man, but from sky and earth, air and water.* (Paracelsus, *Das Buch Paragranum*. Paracelsus-Werke Bd. 1, S. 503.)

same inconvenient questions. But philosophical practice can show up a potential of philosophy which is near to therapeutic potentials and maybe mixed up with them: the effects of thoughts, of questioning and reflecting on everyday life.

2. Ways of Thinking

What do thoughts do with us, what is their effect on us? – A fitting thought at the right time may bring relief or may solve a blockade or even a problem. It may give new force for action, new courage, a new orientation in life. But how to find the fitting thought(s)? – Within a dialogical process, through philosophizing, through engagement with philosophical ideas and questions.

This dialogical process can have manifold forms, it can also be encouraged in many different ways. In philosophical practice everything began with Philosophical Consultation, but in reality consultation is just a small part of it. Nevertheless it seems to be paradigmatic for all ways of philosophical practice even today.

The language in which we think is shaped by perceptions, bodily awareness, words, terms, imaginations and emotions. Whereas terms have a more or less definite meaning, imaginations build up an associated field which allows to connect them to emotions and moods. Therefore usually we don't think analytically, but much more surf through the waves of these cognitions and associations and come to our judgement in the issues of life. Usually this way of making up one's mind is not too bad, it's not necessary to always think.⁵ But as soon as a higher complexity needs a precise understanding of the context, this short-cut can't help us any further.

⁵ The German philosopher Hermann Schmitz discerns different ways of thinking: 1) the *bodily intelligent thinking*, reacting intelligent on situations as a whole, 2) the *hermeneutic intelligent thinking*, which explicates some denotations of a situation scarcely in order to retain the significance of the situation as whole, 3) the *analytic intelligent thinking*, which explicates single denotations and reduces the situation to constellations of facts and circumstances.

Depending on the situation it even may make things worse because these means are connected with more or less immediate judgement, which might be quite inappropriate. Confusion is frustrating us. If nothing helps we go to a Philosophical Practitioner who may lead us out of our cave.

But the best thing the philosophical practitioner can do is to stimulate to think analytically and hermeneutically (according to Schmitz' differentiation), to ask questions, to define essential terms exactly, to reflect on certain subjects. What he or she can do is to stimulate other human beings to philosophize.

He can do so in consultation, but also in philosophical cafés, in reflection groups and in seminars. If this is philosophical practice as well, the connection between general ideas and everyday life experiences should be part of it. And it should not just be an interchange of opinions or learning of interesting stuff, but a reflection on it which stimulates own thinking.

If we get people to philosophize they begin to reflect on reflections. That is quite far away from immediate involvement in everyday life, which sometimes causes confusion or frustration not to see the own situation clearly enough to be able to act in a satisfying, conscious way. Now we by reflection let the people take distance to the immediate involvement in their own life situation. From time to time we can go back to the life situation and connect the general thoughts to the concrete life-challenges. This very generally spoken is the situation of Philosophical Consultation. But a seminar must be not that different. And even a long series of seminars which goes over three years with 54 meetings of 2 hours can be quite similar, even if not the personal situation and problems of one of the participants is the main issue.

3. A Course on the History of Thought as Way of Philosophical Practice

Since more than 13 years I give long-term courses on the philosophical history of thought. I did this in different formats, the

main is a 3-years-course at the open university in Bern⁶, where I offer this course for the third time now. Between the 3-years-courses I have time enough to present other philosophic topics in several 1-year-courses.

In this course from antiquity till the 21st century I have to give a lot of information. Nevertheless each session is a vivid dialogical experience because many questions and remarks from the audience – which is much more than silently listening – lead to new insights and ideas.

Such an intensive course on the history of thought doesn't seem to be interesting for a broad public – but the opposite is true. When I started this course 13 years ago more than 50 people wanted to participate, but couldn't because the room was too small for such a big number of participants. Even today, in the third round there are still about 35 people interested to join the course. The interest in this course exceeds by far the interest in other proposals of my philosophical practice. So the question arises: Why finds a course on the philosophical history of thought such a good resonance?

I try to give some answers:

1) The course is unique. Nowhere in Switzerland a similar course can be found. Where other philosophers in other towns tried to offer courses on the history of philosophical ideas they offered much smaller courses with just some paradigmatic philosophers they dealt on.

2) The desire to get to know more about the intellectual background of our world, about the history of the leading concepts, about philosophy and philosophers from early times till today seems to be great, because nowhere this need is fulfilled – not even in university. Everywhere just small short-cuts are offered. The general view is missing.

3) The people who attend the course also detect, that they have similar interests in other fields. So the course becomes a meeting place as well. And the mutual philosophizing also stimulates friendship, as Aristotle already observed.

4) This long-term philosophizing together stimulates the hap-

⁶ Volkshochschule Bern.

piness of the participants, even if it is sometimes difficult for them to understand some of the philosophical ideas they are confronted with. I once was in a seminar-hotel with such a course, and there in a pause the participant of a different course said to a participant of my course, that we definitely must be the philosophy course. Asked why she thinks so, she said, that we were laughing so often. Obviously it can be observed that taking questions and ideas seriously does stimulate humor.

5) The course is a challenge: three years, plenty of texts to read, lots of not always easy thoughts to reflect on, many terms and concepts one does not understand at first. But the participants feel themselves enriched that they can master more than they might have thought before.

6) This long-term course establishes a dialogical space in which learning, self-discovery, appreciation, contact with others and the developments of inner freedom are met.

7) In a time in which our world and values are predominated by economic perspectives, it is interesting to get an introduction to an empire where since ages the only decisive currency are ideas, questions and arguments.

Up to now I haven't mentioned another reason for attaining the course which perhaps for many of the participants is a good one: it is an adventure. Like Odysseus who experienced the most fascinating and difficult situations on his long way home, my participants might also feel, that philosophical thought since 2500 years is not a straightforward, but manifold, mind-opening and mind-changing search, a search on which we try to understand who we are, where we belong and what is our mission. Therefore this whole enterprise reminds to the questions, peculiarities, difficulties and achievements of one's own life.

To get to know and to reflect about many of the different ideas in philosophy over the time also leads to an enhancement of personality. Philosophical ideas are often peculiar, sometimes even strange, but as soon as one gets acquainted with these, many of them show their coherence and fascination today alike – and shed new light on our own ways to see the world and ourselves. So to

get into the history of philosophical thoughts widens the capacity which interpretations of reality we find acknowledgeable.

4. Vivification and Freedom

I already explained my understanding of philosophical practice as *praxis* in the Aristotelian meaning. Aristotle also gives an explanation why philosophizing is essential and valuable for human beings. For him realizing is the main drive of living beings.⁷ The better one is able to perceive, to realize and to gain knowledge, the more one feels alive. If one would separate living and realizing it would be as if somebody else would know, and that would be as if somebody else lived my life. That's why perception and knowledge are so desirable. For a philosophical practitioner this makes clear why philosophical practice can be so valuable to people: it enhances life, it lets them feel more alive and more themselves. A high degree of activity, perception, realizing, reflecting is needed. The human being wants to realize the world because he/she wants to live and feel alive, but as human being also wants to realize himself/herself.

So my main aim of *philosophical practice*, that it is a *mind-opening dialog directed towards freedom*, is met. The freedom-aspect is realized by the enhancement of personality which takes place over the time. The one who gets into all the different perspectives of different philosophers over the time finding out, which of their ideas, questions and difficulties do touch him, widens his mind, and therefore he gains more possibilities to un-

⁷ "It is manifest that life is perception and knowledge (...). But perception and knowledge themselves are the thing most desirable for each individually (and it is owing to this that the appetite for life is implanted by nature in all, for living must be deemed a mode of knowing). If therefore one were to abstract (...) knowledge (...), there would be no difference between (...) another person's knowing instead of oneself; but that is like another person's living instead of oneself, whereas perceiving and knowing oneself is reasonably more desirable." (Aristotle, EE 1244b 26–34.)

derstand himself, the others and the world. He is able to relativize his own point of view and nevertheless more able to judge situations and to act subsequently. Freedom is also mirrored in the structure of the course: there are many possibilities to choose. Every single of the 9 segments of the course can be subscribed anew; also every single unit consists of two consecutive parts, the first is a less dialogical seminar to introduce the philosophers, the time, their ideas, the second part is the more dialogical discussion about themes and question of the attendants. Both parts can be chosen separately. It is also up the people whether they read the 30-50 pages (per segment) of the reader with original texts from the philosophers concerned. I hope to inspire them enough that they try to do so. But I am not here to educate the participants or even to treat them therapeutically. So I neither understand myself as a teacher nor as a therapist but as a philosopher, a partner for profound dialogs. I just offer insight into the inspiring lives and thoughts of extraordinary persons who shaped our culture – and by this I introduce inspiring dialogs about certain issues connected with them.

A long-term seminar like this seems to have some similarities with school and university. But different to the term, the word “school” derives from, the Greek σχολή [sk^ho'le :] which means *leisure*, today’s schools and university seminars aren’t places for leisure activities like reflecting without having a certain goal. They often enough began to see themselves as factories to produce fitting minds for the society and economy of today. This clear goal doesn’t allow to understand learning as leisure but as efficient training. Philosophical Practice seminars differ from school hours and university seminars in as much as achievements and efficiency don’t play any role in it and they offer a space for a certain leisure activity which nevertheless is a challenge – but has no fixed goal to reach. They are a school and space of freedom.

What did I learn through the years that I practiced this course? – Naturally I learned quite a lot about philosophy, its development, the ideas and questions of philosophers, the different historic eras. I can see connections and deeper understand how the occidental

culture developed – and where the similarities and differences to other philosophical cultures are. I also again and again see, where old philosophical concepts and imaginations are still potent today, even if one normally doesn't realize that they are. I also assimilated all this knowledge in a complex way, so that in my seminars I often follow a spontaneous new track which immediately comes up to my mind and makes everything vivid. In the whole context of philosophical practice I got used to look which relevance certain ideas might have for everyday life experience or for understanding our time and world better. So I got the impression that my philosophical knowledge really helps me to understand life and to become more vivid myself.⁸ The attendants participate in this profound, complex and vivid discourse. Also their questions and inputs became more profound alive with the course of time and often connected to actual developments in a lucid way.

If it is true, what similar as Aristotle Novalis states, that to philosophize is connected with vivification, then vivification is very much needed today in order to get and to stay conscious and not just to function in our everyday life. That is the force philosophical practice has, this connection to vivification and inner liberation, to experienced freedom.

5. Recapitulation: The Endeavour of Philosophical Practice

Opening a philosophical practice and later, with some experience again, one has to ask oneself some fundamental questions, for instance:

- 1) What is my anthropological basis?
- 2) Where do I aim with my work?

⁸ The German poet Novalis (1772-1801) wrote: „Philosophieren ist dephlegmatisieren, vivifizieren.“ [*Philosophizing is de-phlegmatisation, vivification.*]. Novalis, Fragmente, Kap. 5, Die Kunst Philosophie zu machen. (*Philosophical Writings*. Margaret Mahony Stoljar (ed. and trans.), Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997.)

- 3) What are the guidelines and values of my work?
- 4) What shall the concrete outcome be?
- 5) How do I get there?
- 6) Which role does philosophy play in it?

All these – and similar – fundamental questions are tools to clearer grasp one's own understanding of philosophical practice which in the beginning often is implicit only. If one makes it explicit by this reflective procedure one gains answers which can be the starting point for new reflections years later – and hereby one gets able to judge whether one's understanding of philosophical practice fits to one's experiences or needs to change.

I do not want to go into details about the possible answers to all of these questions here, but I already mentioned my answers to question no. 2: vivification and freedom. Both are *required* for philosophical practice, but a higher degree of them is also what one can *aim* for – as philosophical practice as *praxis* has these qualities in itself. Question no. 4 on the other hand asks for pragmatic targets, for instance to earn money with philosophical practice, and often enough they might conflict with the aims.

I mentioned in this article a possibility of Philosophical Practice – the 3-years-course in the history of philosophical ideas – which sounds at first to be very dry stuff and not at all something one might think of when hearing the words vivification and freedom. But I also showed up that even such a challenge – or perhaps especially such a challenge – has a vivifying and liberating character and effect under certain conditions. The main condition is, that such a course immediately must allow experiences of freedom and vivification insofar as the attendants have to feel free to do so and the course must be a vivid experience as well. Just under this condition such a course can be an exercise for vivification and inner liberation.

If we, keeping this long-term-course in mind, reflect on the task of a philosophical practitioner, we are very far away from understanding philosophical practice as therapy or as applying philosophy – because philosophy is at the very core of it. This example shows what a philosophical practitioner does instead: he estab-

lishes vivid dialogical spaces of listening, reflecting and gaining knowledge about oneself and the world around. Those spaces enforce the people in their own capability of orientation in life and their ability to solve problems themselves. They are exercises for life and freedom and vivid and free experiences. They open up the minds of all who share this experience. Philosophical practice is a bodily, emotional and intellectual experience of human potential and of vastness. Vastness because philosophizing is not an experience of narrow limits but one of again and again new possibilities to see the world and the human being. Philosophical practice is able to trigger changes therefore. Nevertheless it is not comparable to therapy but much more τὸ ἄσκησις (*áskēsis*), to *exercise* in the meaning of repeated training. The exercise of philosophizing is very much needed because if we don't do so human beings tend to become narrow-minded in course of time. We develop habits in thinking, more and more seems to be obvious to us, we get used to our own opinions as if they were truths. This is a good basis for being manipulated as well. Philosophical practice on the other hand stimulates questions, doubts, makes things even more difficult at first. But by looking on them from a more abstract, more general point of view we gain distance to our involvement in our imaginations and judgements and opinions. This way we gain space inside ourselves which corresponds to the dialogical space in the outside.

That's how philosophical practice works and what it aims for. A philosophical practitioner or a guest/client of him experiences this on all human levels: bodily as well as emotionally and also in one's own way of thinking. So the body becomes equally free as the thoughts. It is important for me to mention this because the contraposition of body and soul has an old tradition in occidental philosophy. In the German language, however, one finds that the word for body "Leib" has originally the same meaning as "Leben" [life – which has the same root]. So vivification means also to better come into one's body, becoming more bodily flexible, active and vivid. Philosophical practice enables the whole living person to express herself more freely and vividly because new

levels of realizing and understanding are accessed. This is possible only – as in every exercise – if it is done repeatedly. So a 3-years-course is a good basis to really get into the philosophical attitude.

Philosophical practice therefore is an exercise for life in order to get all aspects of our person in a more vivid and conscious interplay. If one sees philosophical practice as applied philosophy or therapy right from the beginning, one is missing its openness and therefore the main point that it has neither a special subject nor a special method on its own. Its full potential derives from the *praxis* itself. Philosophical practice is open to all sorts of actualizations, even to very methodical ones or others looking like therapy or like education. They can continue to be philosophical practice and keep their vivifying and liberating potential only, if they are not becoming therapy or education or whatever. Because intending a useful goal outside of philosophical practice itself makes it dependent on this goal and therefore narrows its original potential as *praxis*.

My example, the course in history of philosophical ideas, for example might look like teaching, like education. But very much depends on the attitude. “Education” can be translated into German with *Bildung*, and this term also means: to work on the own personality, to become consciously mature and fully the one who one intends to be. This meaning of *Bildung* is near to the center of philosophical practice. So my course is philosophical practice as long as it gives inspirations, as it vivifies and liberates, as long as it can be a space to exercise one’s personal potential. Here this potential can be bodily experienced, can be felt and enriched through many new insights during the dialog. To build and hold a space in which such a *dynamis* can evolve is the *praxis* of philosophy in its full sense

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