

Understanding the Other and Oneself

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Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH ON PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

Philosophical practice has become a huge movement all over the world in the last decades. Philosophical practitioners are convinced that philosophy is not only a worthwhile academic task but should be accessible for everyone as it is an activity useful for a good life as well. Many philosophical practitioners, however, are deeply involved in their practical work, in earning money and in all the other challenges of life and do not find time or leisure for deeper reflection on their own occupation. To do so is the basis for research on philosophical practice, and research on the methods, experiences, ideas and reflections is needed to develop the profession further.

We are very lucky that still many philosophical practitioners find time enough not only to do so, but also to share their findings at conferences, in books and in journals. There one can find a lot of good foundations, interesting ideas and new inspiration for everything philosophical practice is about. Whoever is a philosophical practitioner or wants to become one should regularly study those publications—as would be normal if philosophical practice were just an academic field. Philosophical practice, however, is not an academic discipline alone but an activity outside the academy with ordinary people occupied with questions about everyday life. Nevertheless, it is a serious undertaking based on philosophy and therefore it needs philosophical reflection itself. That is what this book is trying to offer you.

One of the oldest institutions of the movement of philosophical practice have been the more or less regularly held conferences in different countries of the world. In 2016 the 14th International Conference on Philosophical Practice took place in Bern, Switzerland. It was organised by philopraxis.ch, the Swiss network of practical philosophising with 28 members. The main topic of this conference was “Understanding the Other and Oneself”. The best conference papers on this topic you will find in this book.

In order to allow you a better overview, you will find these papers selected according to three main chapters. Articles in the first one are mainly concerned with philosophical practice, papers in the second part deal with understanding as the main issue of the conference, and the third part is about philosophical ways of self-understanding as a practice of the self.

I.

**PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE:
ITS THEMES AND WAYS**

PHRONESIS: THE BACKBONE OF PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE?

MICHAEL NOAH WEISS

Abstract

By means of a conceptual analysis, this article critically examines the relevance of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) for the discipline of philosophical practice. Paradoxically, two of its heavily debated issues—its eventual goals and methods—seem to offer valuable insights in this investigation. As a result, philosophical practice is outlined as an educational *praxis* of a rather different kind, namely as a formative way of life, in the sense of a (lifelong) learning and maturation process, which is centrally about deepening one's understanding of life, of the other(s) and oneself—which comes to expression not only in the way we think, but how we live.

Introduction: The guiding question

Throughout the history of philosophy, *phronesis* (practical wisdom) has been central to several of its approaches (like those of Plato and Aristotle). Against this background, the guiding question of this article hence reads: Is *phronesis* also of relevance to the rather new approach of philosophy called *philosophical practice*—and if so, in what way?

Since its beginning in the 1980s, two major issues have been hotly debated within the international community of philosophical practice: the *goals* and *methods* of this new discipline. Several practitioners have advocated that one can neither speak of goals nor methods in philosophical practice. Paradoxically, it seems to be precisely these two issues, which offer valuable resources in order to investigate the relevance of *phronesis* for philosophical practice, as is shown in the following.

Cooking pumpkin soup—a metaphor for methods

By *methods* we usually understand certain standardized procedures, which lead to a predictable outcome. In a metaphorical sense a method would be like cooking pumpkin soup according to a specific recipe. The recipe would be the method, so to say, since it describes certain procedures (i.e. how to slice the pumpkin, how long to boil it, etc.), it also lists the necessary ingredients (i.e. the different spices) and in what order the different procedures have to be performed. Of course, it also depends on the quality of the ingredients, but if you always cook pumpkin soup according to the same recipe, chances are high that it will taste the same time and again. In other words, using a certain method makes the outcome quite predictable and it is precisely because of this “predictability” of outcomes why we make use of methods. Thus, when cooking pumpkin soup according to a specific recipe, we mainly do it because we expect a certain taste. Of course, sometimes we try out new recipes and cooking methods because we are curious about the result. However, the next time we use the same recipe or method, we already have a certain expectation of the outcome—and, furthermore: cooking a meal several times according to a specific recipe helps us to improve and refine, i.e. the taste of the soup, our cooking skills etc., because we may start to add a little bit of this and a little bit of that. However, we can only do that because we already have a certain idea or expectation of the final result, as well as a kind of know-how about “how to get there”.

Methods as *techne* or technical knowledge

This knowhow resembles what Aristotle called *techne* or *technical knowledge* (see NE, VI: 1139b). *Techne* is often translated as craftsmanship and in the Aristotelian sense *technical knowledge* is the type of knowledge we use and acquire in order to make certain things, artefacts or products like a house, a boat, or even soup, but also music and art. However, according to Aristotle technical knowledge is not only concerned with knowing certain principles of production, it also involves certain skills (that means not only knowing how to play an instrument i.e., but in fact *being able* to do that). As the term already indicates, *techne* is about techniques and methods—which are intentionally applied in order to achieve a certain outcome.

Though Aristotle differed between three types of knowledge, namely theoretical knowledge (*episteme*), moral knowledge (*phronesis*) and technical knowledge (*techne*), it is not only *episteme* that is of relevance for science today, but also *techne* in the sense of standardized methods

necessary for a scientific inquiry (see Parry 2014). The reason why scientific inquiries require standardized methods is simple and obvious: The results of a scientific experiment are only seen to be valid if the experiment would repeatedly lead to the same outcomes (under the same conditions, see Popper 2002)—in a metaphorical sense this is like cooking pumpkin soup according to a specific recipe again and again in order to get the same taste. And for that it needs standardized methods.

The scientific method vs. philosophical practice

This previous paragraph represents an almost over-simplified description of what can be called the *scientific method*. There would be various aspects of such a method which would deserve to be explicated more in detail. But for the purpose of this article however, such a short account about (scientific) methodologies already hints at the point of criticism offered by several philosophical practitioners, when it is about methods for philosophical practice: *Methods* can be understood as standardized procedures which, when applied repeatedly, lead to the same outcomes time and again. Due to this essential aspect of repeatability, methods as such “pave the way” for predictable, reliable and valid results, so to say. The legitimate question now is, whether in this regard one can speak of dialogue *methods* for philosophical practice at all?

Several philosophical practitioners would agree that speaking of methods in the context of philosophical dialogues is problematic (see i.e. Raabe 2001, 57 f. or Schuster 1999, 39). First, because there simply are no standardized methods to find final answers on questions like “Is there a God?” or “What is the meaning in life?” Second, if getting into a certain *mode of understanding* (i.e. gaining self-knowledge, having a moral insight, getting into a state of wonder etc.) is seen to be among the main concerns of philosophical practice, then the question is, whether there are reliable methods or techniques in order to get into such a mode. In this respect, Finn Thorbjørn Hansen, a Danish philosophical practitioner and university professor, entertains serious doubts. In the introduction of his article *The Call and Practices of Wonder* he states that,

“the most basic and most fundamental driving force in a good Socratic dialogue and in a philosophical practice as such is the momentum of being in an authentic wonder. But the phenomenology of wonder and especially the phenomenology of being in a community of wonder also show that true wonderment and wondrous dialogues are not something you can fix or produce by having the right techniques, skills or dialogue tools.” (Hansen 2015, 217)

In a later chapter of his article titled with *Can we create wonder?* he goes deeper into the subject matter and answers the question as follows:

“I don’t think it is possible to construct or steer a process to wonder and wonderment as if it was a question of didactics or knowing the right methods and techniques. But I have over the years learned that it is possible to create or better: call upon an atmosphere and ways of being which can (but never to be sure) bring us to the neighbourhood of or doorstep to wonder. This is only what we can hope for when we use deliberate practices for wonder.” (Hansen 2015, 225)

Hansen seems to have a point here by arguing that essential aspects and outcomes of what could be called the activity of philosophising cannot be created or produced like a carpenter is building a chair or a table. Whether a dialogue participant will have a deeper insight about the topic under investigation, whether she will gain self-knowledge or get into a state of wonder in the course of a dialogue is not predictable. Therefore, one should not speak of *methods* for philosophical practice but rather of *practices*, as Hansen suggests.

Practices instead of methods for philosophical practice

The term “practice” has its roots in the Greek word *praxis*, which can be translated as *deed* or *action*. Differing it from *theoria* (in the sense of *theorizing* with the goal of truth) and *poiesis* (in the sense of *doing* with the goal of production), *praxis* for Aristotle means thoughtful and reflected doing with regards to action (see i.e. Aristotle, *Met.*: 1064a). If a dialogue is seen as a type of action (i.e. as inter-action), namely one which is based on thoughtful and reflected doing (i.e. reflected speaking and thoughtful listening), then it can legitimately be interpreted as a form of *praxis*. In this respect, one can also understand Gerd Achenbach, the founder of philosophical practice, who defined what he was doing as a practitioner simply as *inter-action* (see Achenbach 1995, 63).

The advantage of assuming that philosophical practitioners are rather *performing practices* (in the sense of *praxis*) instead of *applying methods* is that practices do not “promise” any specific outcomes. Rather, practices in the context of philosophical practice would resemble reflection processes in which the goals and results are constituted *in* and *by* these processes themselves, and not on beforehand. Or, in other words, the activity of philosophising has no goal beyond itself—it *is* the goal, as the Swiss philosophical practitioner Detlef Staude points out when asking:

“How do we understand philosophy if we think of it as a practice? - Do we understand it analogous to the everyday use of the word ‘practice’ like a doctor’s practice, as a space for therapy taking place? Is philosophical practice therefore a way of philosophical therapy, therapy by means of philosophy? - Or do we understand ‘practice’ differently, for instance like Aristotle does, who perceived two kinds of activities: 1. an activity with an aim beyond the activity (e.g., build a house), what he calls *poiesis*, as opposed to this activity 2. an activity with its aim in itself (e.g., dwell, go for a walk, philosophise), what he calls *praxis*. If we orient our understanding of philosophical practice according to the Aristotelian view, philosophical practice cannot heal, cannot be therapy, because its intention—being healthy—is beyond the activity (to make healthy). In this perspective philosophising can be no means to achieve anything, so ‘applied philosophy’ cannot be philosophising, because it has its aim somewhere beyond the activity of philosophising.” (Staude 2015, 42f)

Methodos—the meta-way

Hansen, as well as Staude, offer valuable arguments when speaking of *practices* instead of *methods* for philosophical practice. That, however, only makes sense if we understand practices in the sense of *praxis* and methods with respect to *poiesis*. Anders Lindseth, professor emeritus and a pioneer of philosophical practice in Norway (see Svare 2002) on the other hand suggests a slightly different interpretation of the term “method”:

“The word ‘method’ is ancient Greek: *methodos*. It consists of the words *hodos*, meaning ‘way’, and *meta*, what is translated with to, over, above etc. A method is a meta-way, a *meta-hodos*, a *methodos*. [...] The difficult and burdensome way of life, is a crucial topic in Plato’s philosophy. When he founds the Academy in 385 B.C., the model for all further institutions for higher education in the Western culture, his motive is to improve and to secure the way of life by means of a meta-way, a dialectical method which closer examines the way of life. For this dialectical way of reasoning, Plato used the term *methodos*—a term that until then had been completely unusual but that later in history and until today has become a crucial term in all kinds of activities.” (Lindseth 2015, 46f)

Philosophical practice—a “meta-way” to examine life?

Lindseth’s claim that Plato intended “to improve and secure the way of life by means of a meta-way, a dialectical method which closer examines the way of life” (*ibid.*) seems to be of significant relevance for philosophical practice. First, because it points at what in many philosophical practices and counselling sessions in fact is at issue (at least implicitly): the way of

life and the questions how we *actually* follow and how we *should* follow it (see i.e. Lahav 2001, 6 f.). Secondly, the interpretation of the term “method” that Lindseth suggests, is not so much concerned with the result when such a method—a *meta-hodos*—is put into practice. Rather, *method* here can be understood as a *way of reflection* as Lindseth further explicates:

“We cannot re-walk the way of life; we always have to go on. But we can in principle repeat the meta-way, the methodical trying out and arranging of the way of life, as often as we want. ‘*Methodos* means *A Way of Following*’, Hans-Georg Gadamer (Gadamer 1993, 48) writes. That holds true for all methods—for methods of practical activities as well as for scientific methods. In the meta-position of reflecting and planning, we can put on trial an action or an activity and find out how to proceed; and we can do this again and again.” (Lindseth 2015, 47)

Today one can find a great variety of formats and practices within the field of philosophical practice (see Weiss 2015). And one might not be wrong to say that all philosophical practices *represent ways of reflection* (in the sense of *meta-hodos*). And it is in that—and only that—sense that they can be understood as *methods*. That methods of philosophical practice differ from other kinds of methods seems to be obvious at this point. The question however remains, how this difference can be characterized. What is it about?

“When taking a closer look at actions, which are carried out by use of methods, that is with consideration and a plan, it becomes obvious that the methods can take very different forms. The most striking difference seems to be that some methods offer space and almost invite creation and the unexpected, whereas other methods precisely want to exclude that something new or unplanned occurs when carrying out the activity. The first kind of methods we may call ‘dialogical’ and the second kind ‘monological’. Production procedures are examples of monological methods that occur everywhere these days. The method of Philosophical Practice has to be a dialogical one.” (Lindseth 2015, 47)

Philosophising as a way of life?

Taking the reflections of Lindseth into account, one can legitimately speak of dialogical—or better—dialogue methods for philosophical practice (see Weiss 2015). However, almost more important as it seems, is the intersection between *methods* and *practices* that comes to the fore here:

Practices, as Staude suggests, are activities, which have their goal within and not beyond themselves. As a consequence, philosophical practice is done for its own sake and not in order to solve a particular, personal problem. In this respect, philosophizing can be compared to activities like painting or hiking: One is painting or going on a hike simply because one loves these activities. And if one loves to philosophise then this actually represents what philosophy literally means: *philo-sophia*—the love of wisdom. Someone, who is engaging in this activity, does not need a reason or a goal, which would go beyond this activity. Rather it is part of one’s lifestyle or way of life.

Methods, on the other hand, have been introduced by Lindseth as *meta-ways*, as ways of reflection; and “the method of Philosophical Practice has to be a dialogical one” (Lindseth 2015, 47). But there is more to it. The notion that “we cannot re-walk the way of life” (ibid.) already hints at what the dialogical method of philosophical practice is about: Though we cannot *re-walk* the way of life, the method of philosophical practice is a way to *go through* certain situations, experiences, attitudes, meanings of our lives again and again – if we want that. In this respect, it is essentially this reflective “going through” that represents the activity of philosophizing. At this point a reference to Hadot’s famous book “Philosophy as a way of life” (Hadot 2010) can be made, in which he presents different philosophies as different (and reflected) ways of living. As a consequence, philosophizing—in the sense of a dialogical meta-hodos—is not a *poietic* activity in order to find solutions to live life better, rather it *is* a way of life, a lifestyle, a life *praxis* (with reference to Achenbach’s term “*Lebenskönnerschaft*” (see Achenbach 2002)).

Why philosophical practice?

At this point however, one might get the impression that there are no obvious and immediate “benefits” from performing philosophical practice—reflecting about life and making it a lifestyle is nice and fine, but why? In fact, one can find an extensive discussion within the international community of philosophical practitioners on whether or not philosophical practice and counselling should, can, and could offer concrete benefits and even help in terms of problem-solution-approaches. Those who have advocated philosophical practice as a counselling profession were soon confronted with the dilemma that their (often goal-oriented) approaches to philosophical practice were hard to distinguish from certain psychotherapy approaches, which have existed for much longer. In 2001 Peter Raabe, in a distinguished analysis, pointed out that in

fact all approaches of philosophical counselling at that time closely resembled already established approaches of psychotherapy (see Raabe 2001, 79 f.). The fact that most philosophical counsellors were not trained in therapeutic methods, only contributed to its disadvantage. On the other side of the discussion were philosophical practitioners who did not intend any helping or therapeutic activity at. For them, philosophical practice and counselling was more of an activity to *philosophically* reflect upon key-issues the counselee brought to the counselling session—but without the intention to solve a particular existential problem (see Lahav 2001, 7 f.). There are good arguments why the latter approach to philosophical practice seems to be more authentic and in line with certain key concepts in the history of philosophy (i.e. Aristotle's *praxis* as discussed previously). However, who would want to visit a philosophical practitioner and pay for it, if there are no concrete benefits to expect from it? In other words, why philosophical practice? In order to go further into this question I suggest a closer examination of the term “philosophising”.

Philosophising as searching for wisdom

Philosophy in its literal translation means *love of wisdom* (*philo-sophia*). Philosophising—in the sense of “practicing” this kind of “love”—would then resemble a *striving, seeking and searching for wisdom* (see Lahav 2001). However: What is *wisdom*? In order to approach this question, I would like to introduce Aristotle's differentiation between two kinds of wisdom: theoretical wisdom (*sophia*—in a general sense, knowing universal truths) and practical wisdom (*phronesis*—in a general sense, knowing how to live a good and virtuous life) (see *NE*, Book 6).

The search for truth (that is, *sophia* or theoretical wisdom) in the sense of universal principles (i.e. laws of nature) today would fall into the area of science—mainly the natural sciences. *Phronesis* (practical wisdom) on the other hand plays a minor role in academia today. Nevertheless, it was Hans-Georg Gadamer who saw great potential in it and regarded it as “the only methodological model for self-understanding of human sciences if they are to be liberated from spurious narrowing imposed by the model of the natural sciences” (Gadamer 1997, 107). With Gadamer's words in mind, it appears to be worthwhile to take a closer look at the term *phronesis*.

***Phronesis* as “conscience set into motion” (Heidegger)**

It is known that Gadamer, when developing his hermeneutics, was influenced by Heidegger’s reading of Aristotle (see Coltman 1998, 11). Heidegger, when going into the subject of Aristotelian ethics in his famous series of lectures called “Plato’s Sophist” (1997) stated at a point that “phronesis is nothing other than conscience set into motion...” (Heidegger 1997, 39). That Heidegger here would bring in the term *conscience* is interesting, since with it he also—implicitly—on the one hand states that the ethical life stance of the individual is essential to *phronesis*. On the other hand, by using the expression “set into motion”, he indicates that *phronesis* is oriented towards practice—it does not simply represent conscience, but conscience put into action. At this point one has to admit, that today one can find a wide range of interpretations of the term *conscience*, which does not necessarily make it easier to understand Heidegger’s definition of *phronesis*. However, what all these interpretations of conscience have in common is that they—in one way or another—claim conscience as involving a certain moral *context sensitivity*, that is, a kind of mindfulness towards the given situation (that is, to feel morally “called” in this situation). And this moral context sensitivity is indeed central to Aristotle’s conception of *phronesis*, as is shown in the following.

If one assumes that ethics in general is about *the good*, then for Aristotle this *good* first and foremost depends on the development of certain character traits, which he called virtues (like honesty, justice, courage etc.). In contrast to other approaches of normative ethics, which relate *the good* primarily with living *up* to certain moral norms and principles (i.e. principlism), the virtue ethics of Aristotle rather identify it with acting and living *out* the respective virtues. However, developing and practicing virtues without being context sensitive can have the opposite effect of being virtuous—one can do the right thing wrongly. For example, if I intend to be honest towards my friends, without being sensitive towards the respective situations where I want to be honest, then a consequence could be that I hurt or humiliate someone (without even intending that). It would then be fair to say that I was honest, but not particularly virtuous. For this reason, Aristotle demands a kind of situative knowledge or awareness, which he calls practical wisdom (*phronesis*). However, in order to know what is good in a concrete situation, it needs a kind of overall framework—a “reference system”, as it were. In the Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle this overall framework can be identified with what he called *the good life*. And Aristotle seems to have a point when asserting that the highest goal for all human beings is to live a good

life and to pursue happiness—even if we all have different ideas of what the good life is. For Aristotle however, the pursuit of happiness had little to do with getting into a hedonistic state of pleasure. What he was rather advocating with *the good life* was *eudaimonia*. Today often simply translated with happiness (and therefore easily misleading), *eudaimonia* is well-being as a result of being virtuous and doing good. The idea that well-being can be attained by “doing good”, however, might appear quite moralistic. And in fact it is, if one blindly tries to act virtuously and hoping to become happy, without trying to get a deeper understanding of *life*, *the good* and *the good life* as such. For this is what *eudaimonia* actually is about—a deeper understanding of human nature to nurture *human flourishing* (the latter a translation of *eudaimonia*, which is also occasionally used), which can be called *phronesis*. It goes without saying that this deeper understanding is not obtained “overnight”, but it comes with experience (see Aristotle, *NE* 1142a 6-7). However, as soon as I begin to understand how to foster *human flourishing* (that is, *eudaimonia*)—both with myself and with others—the chances are high that I also *want* to act according to this understanding in each and every situation, since doing the opposite when having attained such an understanding would be “human decay”, so to say, and why would I want that? With this in mind, we can come to a tentative definition of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), namely: as some kind of moral knowledge (see Gallagher 1992, 197) or conscience (see Heidegger 1997, 39) or even mindfulness (see McEvelley 2002, 609), which allows us to do and act good in a given situation, based on our understanding of how to live well overall.

***Phronesis* is learnable, but not teachable**

The practice-oriented character of *phronesis* cannot only be found with Aristotle, but already with Plato. The same applies to the idea that the highest goal in human life is to live a good and virtuous life (see i.e. Plato, *Meno*: 87d-89a). *Phronesis* then, as mentioned previously, would be the practical wisdom—or the moral knowledge (see Gallagher 1992, 197)—about how to do that. However, the impression that *phronesis* would be a form of knowledge in the sense of knowhow would be misleading. “Know-how”-knowledge, to call it like that, can be attributed to *techné* (technical knowledge), in the sense that someone can teach someone else how to do, make, or produce something. But this is not the case with *phronesis*, as it is pointed out in Plato’s dialogue “Meno”. In this dialogue Socrates and Meno investigate the nature of virtue (and virtue here can be

understood in the sense of *phronesis*) and whether it is teachable or not. They arrive at the conclusion that it is not teachable, but learnable. This makes Meno wonder how a form of knowledge like virtue could be learned if it cannot be taught. In this respect Shaun Gallagher points out that,

“Socrates obliquely hints at the answer: ‘We are probably poor specimen, you and I, Meno. Gorgias has not adequately educated you, nor Prodicus me. We must then at all costs [language which is reminiscent of 86b-c] turn our attention to ourselves and find someone who will in some way make us better’ (96d). Obviously, if I turn my attention to myself I will find only one person, me. Socrates suggests that one must look to oneself in order to become virtuous. In effect, the knowledge that one can learn but not be taught is self-knowledge. If virtue is knowledge, it is in some sense self-knowledge. There is no teacher who can tell me who I am in a way that is superior to my own possibility of finding out for myself.” (Gallagher 1992, 198)

After this passage in his book *Hermeneutics and Education*, Gallagher points out that moral knowledge (*phronesis*) presupposes self-knowledge. And furthermore, that only through self-knowledge can be attributed what makes moral knowledge genuinely different from other forms of knowledge, and that is moral concern and involvement:

“Self-knowledge, which is intimately linked with *phronesis* and thinking for oneself, is clearly contrasted, not only to Meno’s reliance on memorized definitions, but to the type of knowledge offered by the Sophists. Even those Sophists, like Gorgias, who, through clever technique, could compose fine-sounding and memorable definitions do not represent for Plato the ideal of education. Education is more than rhetorical technique, as characterized by Plato. Rhetoric, as practiced by Sophists such as Gorgias, is a collection of purely formal techniques used to impress those who listen. As formal technique it does not manifest moral involvement and concern for student, subject matter, or truth. If we define *art* (a term that in English once signified ‘learning’) as a practice that manifests such moral concern, then for Plato education has more to do with art than with formal, unconcerned *techne*. The notion that art or learning involves moral concern would not be irrelevant to the concept of virtue (*arete*) or *phronesis* under discussion in the *Meno*. Education cannot be reduced to an exercise of techniques which simply allow us to manage information.” (Gallagher 1992, 198 f.)

Philosophical practice as an educational practice?

One might not be wrong to say that today's educational systems (if not Western society as a whole) are rather based on the educational approach of the Sophists than on Plato's, since many of the subjects taught in schools and universities are essentially concerned with the teaching of "techniques which [...] allow us to manage information" (ibid.). In this respect, the Platonic concept of education is different: According to Gallagher, it implies a unique feature, which is lacking in the type of education offered by the Sophists, namely moral concern and involvement. And it is only due to self-knowledge that moral concern and involvement, which is here assumed to be essential to *phronesis*, can be evoked. For example, the teaching of moral principles—i.e. in the form of a school subject called *ethics*—would not be of any value with respect to the development of *phronesis*, if it does not "go hand in hand" with a process of personal self-reflection with the students where they can gain or obtain self-knowledge. If self-knowledge would be "left out" however, then teaching moral norms and principles would be nothing more than teaching "a collection of purely formal techniques" (ibid.). Therefore, if one tends to follow the educational ideal of Plato (and there seems to be good reasons why), then certain practices are required which facilitate self-knowledge and, with that, *phronesis*. The question now is, whether philosophical practice could be such an educational or better: *formative* (in the sense of formation; in German "Bildung" or in Norwegian "danning") practice—not only as a school subject, but also as an offer to society in general? And if so, could this lead us to an answer of the question "Why philosophical practice?"

Concluding remarks: Philosophical practice as a (trans)formative activity

If one takes a look at the history of philosophy, then philosophizing as a formative practice has a long tradition, as for example pointed out in Hadot's *Philosophy as a way of life* (2010). If one takes a closer look at this tradition, then one will find that what is meant with formation in this context can actually be identified with self-transformation, as i.e. Ran Lahav confirms: "Throughout history, many important philosophers believed that philosophy can help us to transform ourselves towards a fuller and deeper life" (Lahav 2016, 20). As a consequence, formation in the sense of self-transformation can also be called a (lifelong) learning or maturation process, which is centrally about *deepening one's understanding*

of life—of the other(s) and oneself—however, not only in a theoretical way (formation is not a thought experiment, so to say), but in a practiced and lived way. Therefore, if philosophizing is about transforming ourselves towards a fuller and deeper life, then this self-transformation is fundamentally connected with self-knowledge, (how else could we transform ourselves towards a fuller and deeper life?) Furthermore, if philosophical practice is understood to be a way on how to reflect about life (see Lindseth 2015, 47)—a life *praxis* (see Achenbach 2002), a way of life (see Hadot 2010), or a sense of a quest for wisdom (see Lahav 2001)—then it seems to fall into line with this tradition of self-transformation. As a consequence, if philosophical practice is understood to be such a transformative way of living towards a fuller and deeper life—towards *the good life* in the Aristotelian sense of *eudaimonia*—then the *development of phronesis* plays a decisive role on this way. In fact, it is the way. In other words, *phronesis* seems to be the backbone of philosophical practice. If it is taken out (not only as a concept, but as a fundamental way of life), then philosophical practice seems to lose its *raison d'être*—its “right to exist”, so to say. Then it would be either mere theoretical reflection, which—in the best case—would make us *thinking* differently, but not *living* differently (and academic philosophy is already doing that quite successfully). Or it would be a counselling approach like psychotherapy, where it is about solving particular problems and issues—but then it would be a *poietic* activity and it would not deserve the name philosophical *practice* in the sense of *praxis* (see Staude 2015, 42 f.).

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A NEW TOPIC ON PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTITIONERS' AGENDA: PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE AND SEXUALITY

LYDIA AMIR, ANDERS LINDSETH,
WILLI FILLINGER, GERALD ROCHELLE,
VANDER LEMES¹

The essay presents five contributions to the innovative subject of philosophical practice and sexuality, put on the philosophical practitioners' agenda in the last international conference by Lydia Amir.² These contributions are introductory remarks to this vast and significant theme. Together, they form a basis for further dialogue. We hope to get the discussion started, first, by reading your comments, and second, by inviting further contributions to the subject.

The five abstracts are gathered at the beginning, followed by the essays. Most of the contributions preserve the oral character of the lectures on which they are based. Though there are advantages as well as weaknesses in this type of publication, in this case we believe that it was significant to retain the tentative character of the talks by amending them only as required for publication.

¹ The list of authors follows the arbitrary order of the lecturers in the conference panel dedicated to this subject: Lydia Amir, Tufts University, Medford, MA, USA, Visiting Professor, lydamir@mail.com; Anders Lindseth, Nord university, Norway (Professor emeritus) anders.lindseth@yahoo.com; Willi Fillinger, Philosophische Praxis, Zürich, Switzerland, www.kopfvoran.ch, philopraxis@kopfvoran.ch; Gerald Rochelle, Independent philosopher and Philosophical Practitioner, England, Great Britain, gerald.rochelle@btinternet.com; Vander Lemes, Neo-Socratic dialogue facilitator, Switzerland, vander.lemes@gmail.com.

² The essay, edited by Lydia Amir, is based on the lectures delivered in a panel on "Philosophical Practice and Sexuality" (Friday, August 5, 2016, 20:00-21:30), chaired by Amir, as part of the 14th International Conference of Philosophical Practice in Bern, Switzerland, earlier this year. The panel included five short lectures followed by a discussion with the public.

Abstracts

Lydia Amir: Philosophical practice and sexuality?

Sexuality may be a devaluated subject in the history of philosophy—arguably, the most terrifying thing for a rational being—yet most philosophers have written about sexuality, about its relation to love, its ethics, metaphysics, even its potential epistemological power. A source of great happiness, thus, sometimes of great misery as well, it certainly is a powerful and puzzling force to contend with in everyday life. It may be difficult to do sexuality full justice as well as incorporate it in a harmonious life along with other forces that shape our life. It is most definitely an important part of everyone's experience, if not in action at least in thought. As such, it deserves our attention as philosophical counsellors and practitioners. As far as I know, however, the subject has never been addressed in the philosophical practice movement conferences. I believe the movement is mature enough to address this theme by asking: What can philosophical practitioners contribute to a supposedly enlightened generation on the subject of sexuality? In what follows, I explain why philosophical practitioners cannot be silent about sexuality.

Anders Lindseth: The natural paradox of sexual life

Experience gives us an opportunity and a reason to think. But thinking is bothersome. It is easier to have opinions, and we like to believe we can have scientifically founded opinions on important life issues. Such issues are death and sexuality. Above all our experience of being sexual beings seems to be bothersome to think about. Therefore, we first and foremost have to consider this bothersome nature of thinking sexuality. What is at stake here?

Willi Fillinger: Understanding the sexuality of the other and of oneself

The specific approach of philosophical practice to sexuality is that philosophical practice attempts to understand what sexuality is and what it means for each unique person who comes to the practice. Philosophical practice presumes that sexuality is an essential part of the drama of human existence; that it is a bodily function (and has a function in the preservation of the species) but that it receives and changes its form and meaning in a personal story in relation to others. In making sense of sexuality, thus, we have to take into account the complexity of the human body with its attractions and repulsions. Maybe Sartre or Merleau-Ponty or Foucault can

help us make sense of it, but it also might be possible that we reach here the limits of our understanding.

Gerald Rochelle: Sexual activity—an opportunity to experience reality beyond within

Sexual activity takes us beyond its reproductive function and causes us to face wide-ranging human problems. Philosophical reflection on these matters can expose something of metaphysical meaning. One type of sexuality, “Tristanism”, involves abandonment to another through “falling in love” that transcends our normal experience and exposes something of reality. This experience of reality “beyond within” can have life-changing consequences.

Vander Lemes: Sexuality and philosophical practice

“How can philosophical practitioners contribute to a supposedly enlightened generation on the subject of sexuality?” By reviewing a selection of topics in the recent bibliography of the Philosophy of Sexuality, I draw attention to the diversity and complexity of sexual behaviour, as it is presently understood. I advocate a deeper understanding on these subjects as a pre-condition for any moral judgment in general. I further argue that philosophical practitioners could play an important role in the understanding of sexuality by contributing to the creation of spaces of reflection in a joint effort with other disciplines. There, their clients could achieve a better understanding of themselves, and, at the same time, find some relief in a philosophical approach to their issues.

ESSAYS

PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE AND SEXUALITY?

LYDIA AMIR

Any person who talks about sexuality suffers a kind of devaluation, especially if one is a philosopher, and most conspicuously when one is a woman. This is a subject in which one cannot have just an intellectual interest, or so it is presumed. Even non-Freudians assume that addressing the subject is nothing but a veiled sublimation of unsatisfied sexual desires. Insisting on discussing it philosophically is doubly distasteful, as it lowers philosophy as well as its faithful practitioners, those otherwise immaculate rational agents, forcing them to look at their lowest needs and account for these irrational movements, making them think about that condition in which there is no thinking.

My purpose in proposing this symposium is not to rehabilitate sexuality nor even the philosophy of sexuality, even less to devalue myself or my colleagues, but to put a question on philosophical practitioners' agenda: What can philosophical practitioners contribute to a supposedly enlightened generation on the subject of sexuality? This topic has never been discussed, as far as I know, in any international conference of philosophical practice, nor in the various publications associated with the movement.³

Yet, the significance of the question lies in the following considerations: our post-sexual-revolution age is considered to be "enlightened" about sex; because we know it all, we would go to a sexual therapist or to a psychologist to discuss sexuality only if something is really wrong with us; so what about our normal unhappiness? What about our regular sexual lives? With whom should we talk? With our "happy-in-sexuality" friend? Our "miserable-in-sexuality" friend? Is there a subject on which we least trust others, believing that whatever happens there is our sole responsibility, and that we should hide our misery and especially our happiness if it comes along? By keeping sexuality private, we have denied open discussion about it. And, when discussions are open, what is really shared? What is really learned?

³ My own contribution to the question I have posed can be found in an article (2016) and a forthcoming essay in an anthology I edit on new frontiers in philosophical practice. References can be found at the end of this part of the essay.

True, you may say, but why should *practical philosophers* bother with sexuality? First, let me answer, because there is an ethical dimension in all human sexual behavior that makes it not only amenable to philosophic inquiry, but requires it. Granted that, and this is the other reason I propose, coming to terms with the form sexuality takes and the place it occupies in our lives makes it at least an ingredient of the good life, if not the content of it, as some ethics textbooks have it. Let me elaborate on both reasons.

1) Every aspect of sexuality is associated with ethical issues. To name a few of its most famous problems, in its association with marriage, the questions of adultery or fidelity and loyalty arise, as well as jealousy; on another register, the questions of pornography, prostitution, homosexuality, paedophilia, sexual harassment and rape are common issues of ethical concern.

But I am not talking about these obvious ethical issues when I say that sexuality necessarily involves ethics. Rather, I am referring to the fact that we are in an intercourse or exchange with other human beings, which always bring the subject of self-regard and other-regard, of use and misuse, of lying, cheating and abusing, of gossiping and ill-talking, of cruelty, humiliation as well as other forms of aggression, and thus of guilt, shame and disgust.

All these ethical issues cannot be transferred verbatim to the realm of sexuality, and although they are intuitively sensed, they have at least to be discussed even if initial attractions and behaviours seem not-amenable to discussion. Rights and duties are to be assessed, liberties granted and experiential knowledge validated by reflection.

2) Sexuality is certainly a powerful and puzzling force to contend with in everyday life. Because it is difficult to do sexuality full justice whilst incorporating it harmoniously with other forces that shape our life, a reflective effort on our experiences is needed, no less than an education of the will, a reconsideration of our desires, a reevaluation of our values, and more. In short, a philosophical journey or task lies ahead with the goal, as always, to reach unity or harmony, or at least to understand, and thus live more comfortably with our incongruities, conflicts and tensions.

In order to begin this task, a first confusion has to be lifted, that sexuality is similar to love. There are various traditions of love in the West, the platonic, the Christian, the romantic, the realistic, all claiming the same claim: only this tradition knows what love at its best is... But they do not agree. The platonic (Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus) maintains that we love best when we love the good, the Christian, when we love God, the romantic, when we love another human being, and the realistic (the Epicureans, Schopenhauer, Freud), when we recognize that love is nothing

but sex (Singer 1984-1987). For the last tradition, love is reduced to sexuality, for the romantic, sexuality and love are not in tension, but can harmonize, for the Christian tradition, it is a stranger in the picture, and for the platonic, it is a confusion.⁴

Thus, we cannot explain sexuality by explaining love. Nor is explaining sexuality an easy task. Here again, there is no agreement. Some see sexuality as a means of reproduction, others as involved in love, others again as a form of body-language, and some consider it as a conveyor of pleasure and no more (Primoratz 1999).

But sexuality is more than all these options, even if taken together. It is also an epistemological tool providing a unique insight into the other and ourselves, our bodies, our animal-nature, our limitations in knowing, our finitude and mortality, but also our vitality, and through this, a direct intimation of life itself, call it metaphysical or spiritual. The plenitude it affords is deeply irreligious⁵ in that it desires nothing more and thereby frees us from transcendent aspirations as well as visions of desire as necessary lacking and of wisdom as acceptance of misery. It is a practice of desiring that which is, and satisfying oneself with reality. This is no less than an initiation to a certain kind of wisdom.

I hope I have convinced you that sexuality is most definitely an important part of everyone's experience, if not in action at least in thought. As such, it deserves the attention of philosophical practitioners.

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⁴ On Plato's view of love, see Amir (2001). On various forms of love, see Amir (2002, 2004).

⁵ A similar point is made by André Comte-Sponville (2012, 318).

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THE NATURAL PARADOX OF SEXUAL LIFE

ANDERS LINDSETH

As philosophers we mostly do not like to talk about sex or sexuality. We feel better, we are on more secure ground, when we talk about *eros*, about *agape* or sometimes simply about love. The case is that most people, however, not only philosophers, dislike talking about sex. With relatively few exceptions we do not talk openly about our own sexual life. But at the same time all human beings are much occupied with sexuality. We have sexual impulses, sexual fantasies, we are sexual beings living sexual lives. That is the case and we may hardly find exceptions, although sexual drive lessens with aging. This being occupied by sex coupled with a lack of talking about it is an astonishing paradox. We may explain it with reference to tradition, social norms, upbringing and so on. However, I think the paradox is very understandable, and, so to speak, natural. It must be that way, for the good reason that we are deeply vulnerable beings longing for love.

In his book, *The Ethical Demand* (1997), the Danish philosopher K. E. Løgstrup writes: “Regardless of how varied the communication between persons may be, it always involves the risk of one person daring to lay him or herself open to the other in the hope of response. This is the essence of communication and it is the fundamental phenomenon of ethical life.”⁶ We may be independent in the sense that we manage to live our lives well, still we are dependent and vulnerable beings in the fundamental sense that we always have to take the risk of daring to lay ourselves open to others in the hope of being positively met. If we are not well received, it may be very painful. We have come out and been dismissed. We have exposed

⁶ Knud Ejler Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, (Introduction by Hans Fink and Alasdair MacIntyre). Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press 1997, 17. (Danish original: *Den etiske fordring*, Copenhagen 1956.)