

The Netherlands/Pays-Bas : Just philosophies: philosophize for philosophies or philosophize to philosophize?

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Philosophies or philosophize?

Philosophies or philosophize: an important distinction. What do you do, when you philosophize? Do you study philosophies or are you working on one? This distinction is often used to defend and support philosophical practice. It can even be made more strong by emphasizing that in the second category one should 'walk his talk'. With that 'to philosophize' is more close to the Ancient Greek ideal of philo-sophia, 'living philosophy' as Pierre Hadot describes it in his book 'Philosophy as a way of living' or Ran Lahav emphasizes in his writings on Grant philo-sophia.

Why philosophize?

But here I would like to make another distinction. The question is - why do you philosophize? Is it to develop your philosophy? Even if one believes every statement can be questioned over and over again, the goal can still be to develop some system of ideas, possibly called a philosophy. Or is it to philosophize, as a sport, an interest in itself. Here the only goal is to see how one thinks and how one does not think, to think about the thinking. It is not to solve problems, or to develop the thinking, if there is any interest it is to reconcile with one's own speech.

So both deal with awareness, but in a different way. The question is, what are you becoming aware of? Are you becoming aware of your implicit ideas? Of your intuitions about the world, people, truth, morals etc? The practice might be set up to help, challenge or invite somebody to develop these intuitions into precise thoughts, or to try make them correspond to reality. Whatever tone you chose, the purpose is to make one aware of his or her philosophy. In the second case one does not become aware of his implicit ideas, but of the way his mind functions implicitly, which is also different from the shape one shows these ideas in. The way a mind functions implicitly refers to a kind of process producing certain ideas. These ideas might be shown in different ways, different shapes, but the second category refers to the process, not the product, nor the shape of the product. (Although these products might influence the process of it's daily functioning, when it comes to think about the thinking the ideas are the product, not the process.)

Distinct from the Socratic dialogue

This to me, seems to be the most important difference between two types of practices: the Oscar Brenifier's method and Socratic dialogues. In Socratic dialogues, the main concern is to develop group wise a philosophy everybody agrees with. To get there, an open sphere is needed wherewith open questions are strongly recommended in order to understand the other and to value one's own ideas upon. The word dialogue is mostly understood in an open way, where sense and poetic arguments can come about.

In the Oscar Brenifier's method, one does not philosophize to develop a philosophy, but rather to philosophize. It's like an addictive sport. But in this method there is a strong Socratic element as well. In fact, Socrates hardly asked any open questions, and even less tries to develop one philosophy all participants could agree upon. And as Socrates, in the Oscar-method hardly any open questions are asked.

In this paper I want to examine the Oscar Brenifier's method, a philosophical practise, mainly to philosophize, just for the sake of it. And in order to see a bit more of this practice, and how it functions we might start to rethink the value of open and closed questions for a beginning.

Could there be something good to closed questions?

In general, nowadays closed questions are regarded as bad. They are kind of rude; they don't make people feel at home or at ease; they stop a conversation instead of stimulating it and therefore most of all, do not invite to, nor let any room for, the respondent to express his or her thoughts or feelings. But in the Oscar Brenifier's method closed questions are liked and strongly recommended for the very same reasons they are disliked for in nowadays discourse. Sometimes closed questions are even regarded as non-questions. But in fact, looking at this sentence rather precise, as we will do in the Oscar-practise ever more, easily a problem shows. A closed X can never be called a non-X. Therefore these kind of statements rather express the judgment: 'One should not ask closed questions!' The first response in Oscar Brenifier's practice would be: 'Let's consider the interest of closed questions'. So, here we go.

Let's start with the biggest problem: it does not let anybody express himself. And in the Oscar Brenifier's method that is exactly what we don't want. We don't want somebody to express himself. We don't want to hear his or her philosophy or rule. We don't want to know what the consultee thinks, we want to know how he thinks. And paradoxical then he must not express what he thinks, for that will probably will be so much that he, nor we, knows what we are talking about. In order to find out how one thinks we need only little information to contemplate upon. But this little information needed, is not just any information, it is a very specific piece of information. And in order to get this specific information, one better asks closed questions. The first task of the philosopher is to understand how one thinks. The second task is to show the consultee how he thinks during the consultation. For this purpose it again is more functional to ask closed questions. They, to start with, focus. So, it focuses the mind of the consultee to a certain aspect or qualification he or she came up with. And most of the time people do not want to see how they think, so in fact, even with closed questions, it can be a hard job to make somebody admit the logical consequences of what they have just said. Here I don't want to imply that one cannot focus by asking open questions, nor that one cannot give a consultee a hard time with them. The key difference and interest lies in the task of making the consultee see how he thinks and the difference with expressing oneself. We don't want him to express what he thinks; we want to show him how he thinks. With an open question a consultee can show what he thinks, with a closed question we can make him see.

In general one is against closed questions because it's more about the ideas of the questioner, then of the respondent. In a way this is true. And in fact it is a much heard complain while you are trying to make the consultee see something: 'no, yes, but it is you, you steer too much, it's because of your questions'. Also this is seen with Socrates: 'you make me say things I don't want to say'. Let's focus on this point too, in order to understand the method.

It's you, you steer too much

During a consultation consultees often feel that they cannot say what they want to say. That intuition is very correct. In the beginning of almost every discussion the 'ook, ook, okokokokok, ok, please, answer the question' or a 'hushhushshshsh, take it easy, stay with me, please do not add too much' is heard. The process is meant to be followed by answering the questions asked. From this some consultees or listeners conclude that the content of the discussion comes from the philosophical consultant. But this is incorrect. It is incorrect, because they do not see what aspect of the discussion the philosophical consultant steers upon. He steers to show a certain point, but what that point is, he does not decide. He might chose between a number of points, but content-wise all of them come from the mind of the consultee. The consultant doesn't make them up. They come from the thinking of the consultee. Even the labels to qualify this kind of thinking come from the consultee. The questioner might indeed insist on a certain question in order to make the consultee see, but every kind of resistance to seeing comes from the urge to drown the fish, not from a content failure or deceit.

When the banal can not be seen

Sometimes participants even feel betrayed in all this. It is for this reason very important to add as little as you can as a consultant. The philosophical consultant should go with the words of the consultee, and nothing but that. In the very exceptional situation where it is interesting to propose a concept, it again is from the function of showing how the consultee thinks. Or put more precise, proposing a concept after all is meant to show the consultee how he or she does not think. This is the third task of the philosopher.

Sometimes it takes a while before the consultee comes up with a rather banal word. For example the opposite of pleasure. It gives a lot of information about somebody's thinking when they cannot come up with the word pain. Of course you can ask what they would think of somebody who cannot come up with the word pain, or how they think it is possible that somebody can't come up with the word. But in order to understand the method it is important to see that these moments when the banal cannot be seen, are very rich with information about how somebody thinks, are rich with opportunities to show how one thinks.

To make them see

In spite of what might be thought from the beginning, it is not quite true that the Oscar Brenifier's method would not let any open questions be asked. In fact, the why-question is asked quite a bit. This

is mainly to clarify or to deepen, to find out what could be the key issue in the thinking of the consultee. But from a certain point you don't accept any sideway's anymore. That is when you insist to make somebody see something. The best strategy to do so, depends on the thinking pattern. For example, when somebody is very determined and has a hard time to problematize, it is worth to again and again ask for criticism of a certain statement. The consultee must at least wonder what he is doing wrong, and might get surprised himself that he has a hard time to problematize. But, there is a challenge in insisting to make them see, and not loosing the consultee or his willingness to answer the question. Therefore you must have several strategies ready to make them see a certain point. Here it also is important to find out why the question is not answered. Is it because they don't want to, possibly for the consequences of the answer they sense, or is the question not answered because they don't know. Are they avoiding or do they really don't know?

A certain sense of precision is needed here. Another example: Somebody tells you that she is very determined. And a bit later she tells you that she shuts herself off from other people and calls that kind of functioning 'stupid'. But, the question 'why are you stupid?' is answered with: 'because I'm very determined'. This answer affirms the original expression 'I am stupid', that's true, but there is something more important to see. This answer makes a circle which stops the thinking. Just like the idea of being stupid. For the consultant it is important to see this, so he can make the consultee see. And it is quite a black spot the consultee has here, so it is very insightful for the consultee to become aware of it, to see how easily he throws away his own insight. And here this fits the profile of thinking 'I am stupid'. It fits the profile of not wanting to see your own ideas, to throw them away before they were even born, to shut yourself off from your own ideas.

What happens?

Here it is time show even more precise what really happens during a consultation. Suppose you start a consultation by inviting the consultee to ask a question. And he starts to tell you a story. The first rule of the method we meet here: go with what you get. Every little piece of it. So, here already it is good to stop the consultee and ask what could be going on when you invite somebody to ask a question and that person starts telling a story. Suppose the consultee replies: 'Maybe this person likes to talk very much'. Here the principle of sufficient reason is relevant. From all the things the consultee could have said, he choose this one for some reason which gives us information about his thinking. He probably likes to talk very much himself. And seen the fact that he himself started telling a story when he was invited to ask a question, we can deduce that this is really the case. Or when somebody calls some kind of functioning 'slippery', he thinks slippery. Otherwise his mind, the same mind that was the producer of the kind of functioning qualified, would not have come up with this word.

But when you would just ask him 'how do you think?' he would not think of 'slippery'. In order to say this, to qualify this kind of functioning that actually is his, a certain distance is needed. That's why we ask a consultee to think in general. This also is an important feature of the Oscar-method.

Thinking the general is another feature opposite to the Socratic method. In Socratic dialogues a group of people are invited to consider a 'big question' via a concrete example. This is mainly meant to commit people to the conversation. This way they won't hide (which participants do not do on purpose, but is more of a usual human safe-functioning). To think via an example and to ask 'what do you think?', provides the dialogue with different kinds of answers. Participants then have to talk about their own ideas, without having the possibility to escape via some abstract, intellectual story they are not really concerned with. In the Oscar-method on the other hand, we don't want to examine the ideas of the participants; we don't want to know what they think, but rather how they think. And here the general, or the absolute, is allowed, also to commit the participants, but obviously in a different way.

The function of the absolute

- Nothing is absolute. This idea is at the very basis of the exercise. Every proposition can be problematized. And in fact the consultee is invited to problematize his own thoughts. Could there be a problem to A? What could it be? And at the same time, the absolute is used in the exercise. Consultees are asked to think the absolute. They are forced to chose and make general statements about what they prefer or would rather want. Here the absolute is not used in order to preach, nor to convince people of something. The absolute is a means to think. And therefore it clarifies. It doesn't clarify what they think, but how they think. To make a choice in the absolute between good and bad, it doesn't mean that consultees are not allowed to do A anymore, but it helps to see how one thinks and even more to show them how they don't think.

To think the absolute we sometimes use the third person. When a consultee gets a little irritated or resisting, it is very useful to ask the same question indirect. For example: 'When we would ask the people in the supermarket, would they believe somebody who says 'if you say so' agrees with me, or no?' They of course would say that that person does not agree. With this move there again is some space to think. And of course the consultee feels that the question is coming to him. And it comes, but now he has to admit, and in this way learn something about himself, or gives the consultant another opportunity to deepen.

A question to conclude

So we can conclude that all this is in order to think about the way of thinking. This does not give us any new insights on a certain philosophy of somebody's believes. But what is more interesting to know how our mind functions or what it produces?