

Deux témoignages-réflexions (en anglais) suite au séminaire international organisé par l'Institut de Pratiques Philosophiques

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<http://www.pratiques-philosophiques.com>

Sur ce site, vous trouverez, entre autres, des vidéos de ce séminaire.

How to live a philosophical life?

A commented report of my experience at the Summer Seminar of Philosophical Practice in Burgundy 2010

Can it be taught how to live a philosophical life? I would have said that theoretically yes, but it was hard to imagine for me how this could be actually done in practice with philosophers -teachers and trainees - as they are known to me today.

This year I got an answer to this question at the International Summer Seminar of Philosophical Practice organized by Oscar Brenifier and Isabelle Millon. I went to the seminar with great enthusiasm and curiosity. I was happy to meet Oscar and Isabelle again and I supposed that I would deepen my knowledge of the "Art of Questioning", and meet a lot of interesting philosophers of all around the world dealing with philosophical practice. This expectation was in fact fulfilled. But there was more.

The evening before the seminar started, we were invited to get up early next morning to go jogging along the countryside with Oscar. The idea that the exercise of the mind has to go together with exercise of the body had been clear to me since very long ago. Nevertheless, it astonished me that we would actually be systematically doing this during the seminar. So, since I could not follow them running because of my asthma, I thought that I could not miss to share this Plato inspired experience somehow, so I borrowed a bicycle and I followed the two or three others who also got up early to this physical exercise, which became part of a routine during the following week and was accompanied by philosophical questioning exercises.

This daily early interaction exercise between mind and body symbolized the essence of this philosophical seminar: It was about how to live a philosophical life, i.e. about the permanent awareness of the relation between our thoughts and our every day actions and about the implication of our concrete praxis for our theoretical statements.

The seminar formally began with Oscar's presentation of the experience of the art of questioning, with which most of us participants were already acquainted with. Nevertheless such an experience

always opens us to new insights, precisely because of its nature: It is not a lecture about some theory, which we might already know, but a new experience, which we are dragged into in order to participate at it, each time at a more mature level of comprehension and openness.

Having opened up our minds through this introduction we were led into the next step, a more challenging one: That afternoon and the following days we were invited to show our works, i.e. to put our own philosophical theories about philosophical practice into practice. This worked as a large chain of Master Classes. We would show our way of working and get feedback from many different philosophical practitioners of all around the world and learn from their comments something about them, about our work and about us.

Now, the idea of a philosophical seminar organized like this is not new in itself. What is new for me is to see that it actually was being realized.

The key word for these seminars I think is trust. Trust in philosophy and in philosophical practice.

So everybody was asked participate since there was no danger that somebody could do something wrong and mess up the seminar.

This conviction is based on the trust that thinking, analyzing, synthesizing, trying to explain, criticizing and open up our minds to broader horizons really can only lead to improvement for everybody involved, in the sense of reaching a higher level of understanding philosophy and oneself in the world.

On my way back to Lima I was reading a copy of the last publication of the International Society of Philosophical practice (IGPP)¹.

There Thomas Gutknecht² raises the question about whether it is possible and if so, how could the practice of philosophical practice be learned and taught.

"How do we find a reliable teacher, or even a master (Meister), when it comes to learn to "live"? How do we find a personal teacher whom one can trust? What is it that a "real" teacher does and how do we recognize him as such? (And how do we recognize those teachers from whom we should rather take care of, as well as from their teachings?) From whom or from what does the teacher get taught? Why is it so difficult - especially in relation to the capacity to know how to live - to have a teacher and to be able to be a student? How does one become a teacher oneself one day? "

These questions were already answered for me through this summer seminar, and I will try to give some account of it here.

The first two master-class-workshops³ of philosophical practitioners were led by the French practitioners Jerome Lecoq and Audrey Gers. They had been practising the Socratic art of questioning following Oscar's approach for quite a while in public libraries and other group and individual

sessions. Still they were trying to get an expertise in their teacher's approach before initiating their own way, they showed and explained afterwards. While reading Thomas Gutknecht's⁴ article I remembered this:

"One is only emancipated, when one has furthermore also emancipated oneself from emancipation. After all criticism only gets it's meaning as a negation of something in particular; but this assumes (..) the existence of facts and contents. (...) The teacher must be permitted though to teach something and be able to teach something - this should by no means be denied."

So we should not fear to learn to imitate the teachings of the more experienced. This is a natural step in apprenticeship. The fear to do this is eventually based on a (irrational) lack of trust on our own autonomy or on the fear to be discredited by other philosopher-colleagues (actually present or present only in our minds) for appearing as mere learners.

This fear must be overcome. At the seminar we were induced to overcoming it, because it is on the one hand an irrational fear (nothing bad can happen through acquiring new knowledge) and on the other hand it castrates our capacity of thinking. As already Plato explains in the Republic a philosopher must be brave and his thought must be as free of external and internal boundaries as possible. His longing for knowledge should not be stopped by any fears, nor is it conceivable that he would change his mind to please others (fear to be unbeloved) or that he would fear of making a fool of himself (fear of the opinion of others)⁵.

During the first day of the seminar a participant left the seminar abruptly, apparently because she felt offended during one of the cross-questioning dynamics led by Oscar. The offence consisted in being pushed to think and answer quickly to certain questions in front of the other participants and exposing so some contradictions between her own thoughts or between her thoughts and her acts. This exposure apparently had been assumed as humiliating for her. The fact that other participants also in one way or another were exposing their shortcomings and their strengths did not seem to make any difference to her. This often happens: that people feel that they are being humiliated or that others are being humiliated, because during the exercise of the art of questioning they feel forced to answer questions which they do not know how to answer without looking incoherent in the eyes of others. I don't think that offence is a mere subjective feeling. There are offences which keep being offences even if we ignore them. But pointing out to each other, the eventual shortcomings of our thinking in the context of a learning process or in the context of a philosophical investigation is not only not an offence, but a necessity for getting more clarity in our philosophical endeavours. This issue is dealt with in great detail by Oscar in the articles "Not nice" and "Caring thinking about caring thinking"⁶. In a way, this fear of having one's shortcomings revealed in front of others has to do with the fact that in a competitive society as the one we live in, such exposure actually can be used against the philosopher and so he eventually will not anymore be in good request among publishers and universities.

But a philosopher is supposed to transcend this kind of threats to a certain point and instead make the most of the atmosphere of trust and companionship of this kind of philosophical seminars.

Philosophy has been written in different forms, with different purposes and definitively based on different principles. And so we consider to be philosophy the writings of thinkers so different as Heraklitus, Plato, Aristotle, Lao Tse, Aquinas, Descartes, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche or Wittgenstein. The same necessarily happens with philosophical practice.

And diversity was something I really enjoyed in this seminar. Richard Anthon, a Belgian practitioner proposed a workshop inspired on Isaac Asimov, where we were asked to find an eventual error in a list of three ethical rules for an imaginary robot program in the future, and afterwards we had to propose corrections. This very classical thinking exercise that can lead to a series of classical philosophical questions related to our own reality is the one I enjoyed most. Maybe this was so because there was something playful and challenging about it. In a consultation that Oscar made to me one year ago, it turned out that my interest in philosophy maybe was based on a desire to escape from real life into the world of abstractions. This maybe is so. Anyway, sometimes I miss this kind of a more classical approach in what I observe is considered today to be philosophical practice.

There was also diversity in the workshops of philosophy of children. There was the Art-of-Questioning workshop of Isabelle Millon and the Lipman-style workshop of Hreinn Palsson. Why do we have to choose? It is possible to have both approaches at different moments for the same group of children. They would profit of diversity. The Lipman approach of Hreinn Palsson was appealing because he did not assume the relativistic postmodern "caring" attitude that many Lipman-followers usually assume.

Isabelle's workshop was also very didactic.

Much of the success of any approach has apparently to do with the attitude, abilities and assumptions of the philosophical practitioner. The "method" seems to be the result of the world vision of the philosopher. A philosopher can not learn and apply some method that is in contradiction with his world vision. It is the world vision of the philosophical practitioners that have to be understood first - then if we share some of this world vision, we can merge into the working dynamic that logically corresponds to that world vision.

This fact became even clearer when we saw different approaches on philosophical counselling. Some focused more on the emotional and psychological, some more on the rational, as Oscar Brenifier, and some showed us an approach that was something in between as Peter Harteloh. Also here I believe that it is the context who will decide which approach might be the best, although philosophical questioning should always be very present and the psychological or emotional approach should just be taken as an introductory step to the really philosophical reflection.

Not everything was of my delight, but since the set up was this kind of Chain of Master Classes, it was even interesting to observe those workshops that we eventually didn't like, because we could analyze what exactly it was that we didn't like about them and agree or disagree with others about our observations.

Finally, I wanted to comment the workshop with clay held by Sandrine Thevenet, an artist who works with the Institute of Practical Philosophy. There we should do some work of art with our hands following certain instructions and after this we had to begin a conceptualization activity related to our works. I remembered Oscar doing a similar workshop at the School of Arts in Lima. In both cases, while working with the clay and having to close our eyes and concentrate in the feeling of the clay being kneaded in our hands, I thought that this exercise opened a window to the possibility to a deeper philosophical exploration of our senses and sensuality. I wondered if a step in that direction would be beneficial for philosophical practice and for philosophy in general.

I will finish here this commented report - written down during a period of several weeks and changing states of mind - with a quote of Martin Buber which summarizes the main idea I got of this seminar.

There was a time, there were times, where there was not any specific educator's or teacher's vocation and where such a thing was not necessary.

There a Scholar/Master lived, maybe a philosopher or a smith,

his journeymen and apprentices lived with him, and learned

what the work of his hands or his mind taught them, by participating at it,

but they also learned

-without him or them dealing with it, they learned without noticing it - the mystery of the life as a person, they received the spirit.

Carmen Zavala, Philosophy Professor (Lima, Peru)

THINKING IS ALWAYS AHEAD OF ME

Some reflections about and after Oscar Brenifier and Isabelle Millon's seminar in Burgundy, July 2010

A while ago my son mowed the lawn. When I complemented him for accomplishing that job he replied: "I just wanted to present a nice image to your eyes." His remark was very poetical and it occurred to me that this way I didn't observe the garden anymore as a job well done but instead I experienced the garden as something beautiful.

Since my return of the seminar this kind of thinking keeps me busy. Observing is a matter of distance and participation. In the first statement (the job well done) I kept a distance towards the object of my

observation: a nicely trimmed grass lawn. In the second his remark permitted me to participate in an image in such a way that I can 'live' the garden and being in it.

For me attending seminars like Oscars deals with the same kind of issue. I could observe and act and keep a distance and thus not really making a part of it. I would preserve an intellectual stare at processes and eventually formulate criticisms without getting involved nor compromised. In that sense remarks about the so-called Oscars method are rather strange and foreign. I don't believe that there is such a thing as Oscars method. Yes he proceeds methodologically. Yes he moves systematically. But proceeding methodologically doesn't necessarily mean that Oscar uses a method or the method. The same way that I assume that when my son started to mow the lawn that he did this methodologically but he would deny the fact that he used a method at all.

Concerning my second view, the poetic one, I would say that I try to experience the whole seminar with all its aspects including people, place and even weather. To me practical philosophy is a matter of 'living' philosophy. It implies intensity and passion and of course thinking. This I recognize also in the person of Oscar and many of you who were there present will recognize this as well. I recognize this also in some of you. Living and experiencing philosophy is - so it seems to me - very Nietzsche like: "Das abstrakte ist für vielen ein Mühsal, für mich - an bestimmten Tagen - ein Fest und ein Rausch". (the abstract is for many people somewhat painful. To me - on certain days - a feast and a passion)

Yet there is a difference. At the end of the seminar (during the Kapittel-session) I stated that my thinking is always ahead of me. This occurred to me as a result of living the philosophy process of Oscar. It struck me that he (and also Isabelle) are very much into a converging pattern of thinking. Starting large and getting more and more focused by narrowing down statements and ideas. This requires a very ad hoc way of thinking. It presupposes also a great state of awareness, mental alertness and discipline. It tends to lose context and an overall sight. In fact: this is pretty much what philosophers are supposed to do. Philosophy in this sense means labor. No problem as such.

Though when I mean that my thinking is ahead of me that means that there is a quality in me that refuses this kind of discipline. My mind opposes and tries to seek for wonder and excitement: a divergent and poetic process.

It struck me that on a further level this is exactly the problem in Lipmans approach of philosophy for children. The workshop of Hreinn showed this clearly. The use of the story as breeding place and a questioning engine should stimulate the creative process of raising questions. Thus a discussion agenda is established. Then the concept of the community of inquiry applies, democratic procedures take over and ... at the end thinking exercises and should train reasoning skills. The problem is that the whole starts with a divergent way of thinking then followed by a convergent way. There is a rupture and it seems to me that there is a conflict.

I wonder if this is solvable. Personally I tend to switch but still find this very confusing. I wonder if both thinking patterns can coexist.

Richard Anthone, Philosophy Teacher (Antwerpen, Belgium)

(1) Philosophische Lehrjahre, Schriften der Internationalen Gesellschaft für Philosophische Praxis (IGPP), Berlin 2009 - The reason why I quote another philosophical practitioner here, is that I believe that there should be a discussion between philosophical practitioners, and since I feel that such a thing has not happened I make them discuss through my own reflections.

(2) Gutknecht, T. (President of the IGPP), Die beste Art zu lehren - immerfort Lemender bleiben, (The best way to teach - to keep always being a scholar) p. 114

(3) "Master classes" in the sense explained that all the other participants should observe and comment, contributing with suggestions and criticism to the workshop leader's approach.

(4) Gutknecht (2009) p. 136

(5) Platon describes this beautifully through the character of Parmenides who starts the dialectical exercise with Aristotle despite of knowing that most people will inevitably interpret it as him not being skilled anymore because the task he is being asked to do is very difficult, and he compares himself to the old horse of Ibykus which being a contestant was about to contend in a chariot race, and trembled at the prospect, because of experience; but for his love to knowledge and because he is among friends among whom there should be trust, Parmenides engages himself in the philosophical exercise. (Parmenides, 137a).

(6) www.brenifier.com