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THE ART OF PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE: PHILOSOPHICAL ATTITUDES¹

Brenifier Oscar,

Paris IV – Sorbonne (France),

philosophical counselor, writer,

founder of the Institute of Practical Philosophy in France,

PhD in Philosophy

1 rue Victor Cousin 75005 Paris (France)

E-mail: institut.pra.philo@gmail.com

Abstract

The article is a translation of the second chapter of O. Brenifier's book 'The Art of Philosophical Practice', in which the author considers the meanings of philosophizing from the point of view of his "practical" dimension. The author has been working on the concept of "practical philosophy" for many years. He is one of the main promoters of philosophical practice in the world, conducting philosophical cafes, philosophical seminars with children and adults. He wrote and published many books in this field, several of them from the series 'Philozenfants' were translated into 30 languages of the world. Brenifier actively develops his own method of individual and group philosophical consultations, conducts master classes in the evaluation and development of intellectual competencies in various organizations. The theoretical positions of this work are reflected in this article.

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1. Thinking in Hollow

The philosophical attitude is the way of being that one can consider as the condition of the philosophizing, the state of mind which enables its exercise. There are some attitudes that are more or less generally accepted, but we won't go so far as to pretend that they are universal. The history of philosophy is populated by

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individuals who take satisfaction in questioning the slightest point of agreement that might have hitherto been conceded, in order to mark for ever this harmony or consensus of the seal of their distinctive individuality. These general qualities would be, for example, the desire to know, which presupposes the consciousness of a certain ignorance, hence the desire to see this knowledge progress. Doubt is also such an attitude, though it is sometimes strangely articulated within a sustained dogmatism, when it forbids itself any risk-taking in regards to the slightest statement, however provisional. Zen philosophy calls it 'poison', due to its paralyzing effect on action and decision making. Another example is the suspension of judgement, which allows a problem to be examined with a relatively opened mind, which too often confines itself to considering adverse assumptions in order to understand them, while in the background being convinced of one's own. In this way, problematization, that is, the capacity to envisage the problems given by particular and divergent ideas, would be a more appropriate term, which by no means excludes bias. But we will see that further while discussing competencies, even if it is also an attitude. Astonishment appears to be another attitude almost universally accepted, which allows one to see with a renewed or amazed outlook what appears to others as routine banality, and has thus become invisible. For, if observation and analysis seem to be essential for philosophizing, they are skills to be acquired out of an attitude, which we could identify as availability, or attention, a source of astonishment. Indeed, the fact of distinguishing presupposes an increased attention where ordinary facts become astonishing because they are no longer taken for granted. The same applies for questioning which, before being a conceptual or analytical competence presupposes a 'mise en abyme' of the world of knowledge and of the thinking subject, where nothing is taken for granted any longer. A kind of reoccurring childhood where nothing is given anymore, where the requirement of a why and how almost systematically applies to everything: the mind now operates in hollow, and not in full. As Socrates recommends, it must unlearn in order to think.

2. Contrary attitudes

In a second time, after the generally recognized philosophical attitudes, let's mention some particular attitudes, more subject to controversy, but sufficiently common or striking to be noticed. If only because they present an interesting and promising problem. The first one is the agonistic dimension of philosophizing, which feeds upon contradiction and incites confrontation. If it is present early on in Greece, in Heraclitus or Socrates, it is somewhat bracketed among the Stoics as well as in a tradition that could be called scientific, which is found, for example, in American pragmatism. For, it is not so much the confrontation between men and principles which is factoring the progression of thoughts anymore. Among the Stoics, it is rather the capacity to accept the world. In a way, it becomes a capacity to act on oneself by the very fact of this apprehension or understanding of reality. It is about 'taking unto oneself' rather than 'fighting' against. Within American pragmatism, as in the scientific method, it is collaboration and collective work that

are put forward, something which we could call a 'complementarist' vision of diversity based on a certain sympathy. A thinker like Marx, inspired by Hegel, will nevertheless combine the ability to understand the world, consciousness, with a confrontation of this world against itself, the agonistic dimension finding its articulation and its meaning in the dialectical accomplishment of this world, through the mediation of man, himself historically kneaded by these conflicts. Acceptance of the world and conflict will be two crucial and often opposite primary philosophical attitudes, as Descartes will specify.

The same goes for 'distanciation', established by certain philosophers as a crucial condition of philosophizing. Phenomenological reduction is an example, which demands to go beyond the factual to grasp the general and conceptual issues of which the fact is only the symptom, a principle which refers to an ancient tradition for which the act of philosophizing, in its attempt to grasp the essential and the categorical removes it from the particular and the accidental. But again, such currents as nominalism, cynicism, positivism or existentialism, reject such an attitude, which grants concepts or universals a too great or factitious reality to anchor the subject more specifically in a concrete reality, or hardware. A last opposition of attitudes which needs to be mentioned, in our eyes, is that around humanism. Again, if concern for man and empathy for the thinking being – the only one to have access to reason or to philosophizing – seem to be self-evident, to the point of glorifying the human being by clearly distinguishing it from everything else which exists, especially from the animal world, this attitude is not totally generalizable. Philosophies of suspicion, among others, have wished to show to what extent this particular power of man is the cause and principle of his defeat, to the point of making him a being most hateworthy among all, as we shall find in Schopenhauer. Although Pascal or Augustine also summon this human weakness, but to testify to its glorious specificity. On this point, the relation to the divine will often misrepresent the result, for man will be at once the only being capable of God, subject to grace, and for this same reason, he becomes fallible and pervert in his repeated rejection of the good. On another note, Arendt will show us the evil potential that humans contain in their everyday banality.

3. Radicality

From this, let us conclude as a common attitude, to a certain radical posture of the act of philosophizing. For, even when he claims to be very attached to the singular, the philosopher tends to anchor himself in a certain worldview, from which he will read and decode facts, events, things and beings, seeking a certain coherence, if not a justification of its general choices a priori. In this sense, he will always be ready to pursue and denounce the incoherence of others, even though he, like Montaigne, has attempted to develop a certain eclecticism conceived as an alternative to dogmatism and the systematizing spirit. Or, again, like Nietzsche, who developed a theory of gay Knowledge while criticizing the heaviness of philosophy, and yet was unable to refrain from advocating a heavily backed thesis, a very demanding one, full of consequences. This radical posture, however,

sometimes claims a middle ground position, conceived as an ideal of wisdom. Thus, in Aristotle, virtue is theoretically stranded between two excesses: the prudent, for example, stands at an equal distance between the rash and the fearful. In Kant, the critical position, echoing Cartesian doubt, also attempts to place the right attitude in a 'neither, nor' between dogmatism and skepticism: neither a naive, blissful and rigid acceptance, nor a systematic, suspicious and fearful refusal. Such a critical perspective emanates from a universal mistrust of a priori judgments, but it invites us to probe the basis and conditions of their possibility. We may however ask ourselves, whether in Descartes or in Kant, if the refusal of the argument of authority has not given way to a kind of unbridled power of singular reason, to new evidences, perhaps more complex, or even more legitimate, which even though they emanate from the mind of this very individual and proudly proclaim the autonomy of singular reason and of the individual, do they not fall into other more subtle or modern forms of traditional dogmatism. Until postmodernism, which tries to reduce to a sinful act any adherence to rationality and universality.

4. Acquired Ignorance

Among these specific attitudes, dear to different thinkers or currents of thought, there are some on which we would like to dwell because they seem particularly conducive. We could name the first acquired ignorance, humility, or sobriety. As we have already mentioned, the term philosophy stems from an acknowledgement of lack and from the desire to fill this gap. However, throughout the history of thought, a phenomenon has gradually been established, attributable to the success of science: the certainty and dogmatism connected with the systematizing spirit and their cortege of established truths. Since time immemorial, more than one patented philosopher had no qualms to assert a certain number of non-negotiable truths, non-problematizable in his view. Especially in the last two centuries of 'philosophy of the professors'. For, it is no longer a question of wisdom whose quest is open or infinite, but of the efficacy of a thought or of an axiology, both on the level of knowledge and on the level of morality. To be sure, every thought, however interrogative and little assertive it may be, necessarily holds some affirmations which serve as its postulate. But it is nonetheless true that at the level of the attitude, that of the relation to ideas, certain specific patterns more naturally induce a feeling of indubitable certainty, particularly when it comes to the elaboration of a system, while others rather advocate a state of systematic uncertainty whose implications shall be consequent.

Let us take as an example the principle of the Learned Ignorance of Nicolas of Cusa, which consists largely in asserting that ignorance is a necessary virtue, which is acquired and allows one to think, for every thought worthy of the name is but a conjecture, an approximation, which always demands to be examined with a scrutinizing and critical eye. This, moreover, coincides with Popper's more recent idea, with its principle of 'falsification', for which science is precisely characterized by the fact that every proposition can be called into question,

contrary to dogma, the act of faith, a certainty which is rather of a religious nature. For Leibniz, it will rather be a matter of worrying, of promoting this uneasiness which forbids peace, because the latter signs the death of thought.

5. Harshness

Another common attitude: rigor, or harshness. The rigorous logic of a Kant, in which each term is defined within an implacable mechanism, does not encourage such a distancing or 'mise en abyme' of thought. The attitude of the question and of problematization is not that of the answer and of the definition. However, the latter, despite a quest for certainty, knows its own legitimacy, through its demand for rigor, if only because philosophizing also means protecting a discourse from itself, so as to constitute it. This involves both commitment and questioning. The elaboration of a system implies to establish an architecture in which the concepts and the propositions fit into each other throughout the development of this thought. And as Leibniz explains, the harder the path in space and time, the more difficult it is for thought to remain coherent with itself. The quality of this architecture will define the consistency of thought, beyond the very content of this thought. It goes in the same way with the disciples of an author, who will verify their interpretation by the yardstick of the amplitude of thought that serves as a referent. And if the risk is great to fall into the trap of dogmatism engendered by the argument of authority, the typical example of which is medieval scholasticism in the quasi-pathological relation that it maintained with the thought of Aristotle, a philosopher whose propositions were for centuries considered incontestable, let us not forget that the inverse problem of an unbridled thought, which can unswervingly affirm anything and make say anything, is just as calamitous. And when Nietzsche writes that the philosopher has to proceed like a banker, 'To be dry, clear, without illusion', he tries to tell us that words and thoughts have a precise value, which one should not take lightly. Thus, the harshness that can be blamed on the philosopher is also a quality which is not self-evident, even if here again Nietzsche does not shy away from contradiction by criticizing the philosophical asceticism and the laborious dimension of the Socratic approach which requires to be held accountable for the least term or the slightest expression. This same rigor demands that we hear what we say when we say it, hear the 'truth of our opinions', as Pascal says. Thus, rigor demands an attachment to reality that must go beyond that of sincerity, of the desire for appearance, of the desire to be right or of the sense of ownership. If it does not fall into dogmatism, rigor may incarnate a real challenge for being and thought, although on the pretext of scientificity it risks obscuring and crushing any thought, intuition and creativity.

6. Authenticity

This leads us to another philosophical virtue: authenticity, which we would like to distinguish from sincerity. It relates to courage, tenacity, and will, in opposition to the inclination and complaisance of opinion, and not to some gentle

and momentary feeling. It belongs to the affirmation of the singular, in its conflict with otherness, with the whole, with the opacity of being, in its conflict with obstacles and adversity. It is undoubtedly one of the primary forms of truth, which we shall call singular truth, or truth of the subject. It is the whole being, but in its singular form, which is its vector and substrate, and not some mere discourse. It is the one whom one hears murmurs behind the Kantian injunction of the *Sapere aude*, 'Dare to know!', that is, 'Dare to think!' Dare to know what you think, or else you will not be able to know and learn. And for this, your thought must express itself through words, it must be objectified, become an object for itself. It is this demand which emerges behind Descartes' recommendation enjoining us to continue our journey in the event of uncertainty of the mind: the 'provisional morality'. And more squarely expressed by Kierkegaard, when he asserts to us that there is no truth but subjective truth. Authenticity is what makes us say that a person is 'true', beyond or below discourse, or through discourse. Without consideration for a kind of truth or for some a priori universality, we simply ask ourselves if this person assumes his own discourse, till the end, insofar as this 'end' has a meaning. Even through its contradictions and unconsciousness, and perhaps in spite of them, the being cuts itself a passage and forges itself. He will measure his bankruptcy or his lie in proportion to his concessions, his small internal calculations. As absurd as his being might be in the eyes of the world and in his own eyes, he pursues his destiny, he perseveres in his being, as Spinoza would say. This 'instinct of truth' allows us to assert, despite the risks of errors and conflicting judgments. It is this *parrhesia*, this frankness, this freedom of speech, the truth-telling whose practice always threatens to defeat the social bond, which Foucault calls 'the courage of truth.'

7. Availability

Faced with this authenticity, difficult to live, because often unbearable for others, let us see a third philosophical quality, the opposite, which we shall call availability, openness, or receptivity. It is about being there, being present in the world, adhering to what is other. For, if authenticity tends to be deaf to otherness, availability is completely acquired to it. It is so in two different ways: to be available like the tiger on the lookout, or like leaves in the wind. In this distinction, only the outcome of the case varies, carried by the nature of being. No more than the leaf, is the tiger 'autonomous': it does not decide in the last instance to leap on its prey, its 'tigerness' takes care of everything. Like the tiger, the leaves carried by the wind marry the slightest roughness of being, it is carried by reality, but more fortuitously. Although it can be said that the tiger, unlike the leaf, is animated by an intention, which makes it less available. Even though his intention generates his availability.

This availability can be conceived in different ways. Like the relationship between self and other: the presence of the world, the presence of others, or the presence of all that can become a tool, of all that can be instrumentalised, as Heidegger hears and criticizes it. Moreover, it is about the self-availability of self:

the opening up of oneself to the world, a self that can be reduced to the status of mere opening, an interstice through which the flow of beings and things passes, as tentatively described by the Taoist vision which, to the Western and voluntarist mind, will sometimes appear as a passive and impotent attitude. Or else it is about the availability of oneself to oneself, that is, a concern for oneself, as in Socrates, Montaigne, Foucault or even in Buddhist thought.

However, for those to whom this attitude would seem fatalistic or passive, let us ask whether reading a text or listening to a speech, or the vision of a show, does not require such availability. How many times do we say that we do not understand this or that speech, when it is not a problem of understanding, but only a refusal of acceptance? A refusal to change place or position, even if only for a moment. To think, to engage in dialogue with oneself, as Plato prescribes it, does it not presuppose a form of alienation? If I am not willing to be myself momentarily, how can I think? If I am not ready to take on the deviation of alterity, if I cling to myself like a drowned man to a buoy, how can I pretend to deliberate? If my self and the thoughts which belong to it are so obvious, how could this conversion, which is at the heart of the philosophical dynamics, take place? To be available is to be split: to be listening to the world is to accompany others in their journey, it is even to precede them in their own way to show them or to avoid them the pitfalls and other obstacles it entails, as Socrates practices it with his interlocutors. For, there is no royal way. The path that one chooses is necessarily muddy and strewn with ruts. To accept to follow another direction is to know that ours is not better off, to risk learning something and to consider new horizons.

Close to this more radical receptivity, we find contemplation, 'the other' way of being, distinct from action. For, the one who acts does not have time to contemplate, his mind is too busy to produce, to survive, to work. He is too engaged in the affairs of this world. He is perhaps even too busy thinking. Thus, in Aristotle or Plato, the contemplation of the good, the beautiful, or the true is a disposition per excellence of the intellect worthy of the name: he who has time, or who takes time. From this comes the concept of liberal arts, such as music, rhetoric or mathematics, those activities of the free man, who has time to think because he is not forced to work. He who contemplates is in the temple, a space which, etymologically, lies between heaven and earth: he looks attentively, he is absorbed in the view of the object into an almost mystical attitude; he expects nothing from the world except to be able to be seen.

The Greek term 'epoche', taken up among other things by phenomenology, somewhat captures this availability. It describes this mental action, this moment of thought or contemplation, in which are suspended all our judgments, our knowledge, our convictions, our a priori, whatever form they may be. This theoretical 'mise en abyme' may involve in the same way a suspension of action, mental or physical. A distancing from the very existence of the world and its nature. Our own consciousness is thus subjected to criticism, to a questioning, to the scrutiny of doubt. Not to condemn it to the limbo of an eternal absence of judgment, but to recast its paradigms, its foundations, its modalities. The idea of judgment is not abandoned as an inherent source of error, but momentarily

suspended in order to examine its legitimacy. We are far from the radicality of some Pyrrhonism, determining that we cannot trust either the senses or the reason enjoining us to remain impassive and without opinion, thus condemning us to *aphasia*, this mutism of thought. Although such wisdom is undoubtedly one of the paths leading to *ataraxia*, this absence of trouble and suffering. It is this momentary suspension summoned by Descartes as the epistemic principle of 'methodical doubt'. In Husserl, this will be articulated through the 'phenomenological reduction', a principle which avoids the pitfalls of our various beliefs – naive or constructed – concerning the existence of the world, in order to examine phenomena as they originally and purely appear to consciousness.

8. Prudence

The last, relatively collective, philosophical virtue that we would like to address is prudence. It is this prudence which is supposed to make us perceive the dangers which are waiting us, and which might, therefore, induce us to inaction, out of fear, from the principle of precaution. Prudence does not like unnecessary risks, and from there one can easily slip into the rut and conclude that any risk is superfluous. This is true of our 'good students', big or little, who will hardly assert anything that is not perfect: that would not be complete, that would not be irreproachable, which would not be the faithful reflection of the extent of their thought. In trying to foresee the unfortunate consequences of our actions, we will want to avoid them, and in order to simplify our lives, for more security, we will abstain. As every word involves some risk taking, better to remain silent, especially if others listen to us.

But, besides that prudence which resembles a chilly and bourgeois morality, that unworthy lukewarmness which St. Paul condemns with impetuosity, what more vigorous meaning can we give to this term? It is, however, one of the cardinal virtues: it merely invites us to think before we speak and act, to decide conscientiously, to do what is right, rather than to react impulsively or inconsiderately. Kant is interested in this practical and ancient wisdom: for him, it is a skill, one that makes us choose the means leading to the greatest welfare. Prudence presupposes clarity of judgment and of mind, it forms the citizen, it sometimes belongs to politics even more than to morality. But if philosophy is a practice, as we understand it, then philosophical art must also confine itself to this prudence, which waits patiently and seizes the opportune moment, which seizes the best means, for the sake of efficiency, this other form of truth. Like nature, which proceeds with a principle of minimal action.

Indeed, Plato distinguishes the politics from the philosopher by the 'kairos', the seizure of the opportune moment, a crucial modality of efficiency, unlike the philosopher who 'aristocratically' ignores temporality. But after all, if he invites the king to become a philosopher, he also invites the philosopher to become king, to be political: that is, to grasp the limits of his being in space and time. All truth is not good to say, at anytime and to anyone, says Jankelevitch; but to know what to say, what can be said, how to say it, to whom to say it, when to say it, is it not also

part of the truth? Truth is collective, it is neither singular nor transcendental, say the pragmatists, and no doubt in this they better assume the practical dimension of philosophizing, which is not a simple knowledge but a know-how, a knowing how to be, how to act, of which prudence is a constitutive virtue.

Attitudes are skills. The origin is the same, the meaning almost identical. With the exception that the first refers to being, to knowing how to be, while the second refers to action, to knowing how to do. It remains to be seen whether the action must determine the being, or whether the being must determine the action. Again, as a matter of attitude or as an act of faith, this positioning will determine both the content of the philosophy taught and the way of teaching it, the need to teach it, the relationship to the other, the relationship to oneself and to the world. To fully assume this problem, we must not deny that philosophizing has a subject: ourselves, or the other. This is an observation which prevents us from speaking for philosophy and authorizes us to talk only in the reduced perspective of a singular being, a singular word. But here again, this amounts to advocating a specific attitude which cannot escape the criticism of those who wish to escape from it.

9. Synthesis of philosophical attitudes

In guise of a synthesis, let us add this little summary that we had written for our pedagogical work. It captures all the attitudes essential to philosophical practice in a teaching setting. The attitudes in question are cognitive and existential ones, which must be distinguished from moral attitudes, although they can reach them. The idea is to make oneself suitable so that reflexive activity can be exercised.

Resting

To calm the body and the mind, to calm down, to silence the hubbub of the spirit, to emerge from the precipitation of thought and the urgency of speech. To do this, the teacher must monitor and moderate the pace he gives to the task, whether it be a lesson, a written work or a discussion, so that students become aware of their own functioning and act more deliberately.

The acquired ignorance

Introduce a part of uncertainty into class work, moving from a pattern of knowledge transmission, the actual knowledge, to the implementation of hypotheses, the process of thought. It is a question of being able to abandon our own opinions, to suspend our judgment, even if only for a rigorous and critical examination. To do this, the teacher must no longer confine himself to the scheme of the 'right answer', unique, absolute and omnipotent, to work on the process of reflection, on common reflection and problematization.

Authenticity

Daring to think and say what one thinks, to venture on hypotheses without worrying about anxieties or seeking the approval of the class or of the teacher; without being undermined by doubt. It is also about being responsible for what we say, what we think, what we do, in a rigorous and coherent way. To value this singular thought, the teacher should encourage more timid students, either orally or in writing, invite everyone to complete their idea in spite of the consequences, clearly, to ensure that they are understood, and prevent any collective manifestation of disapproval or mockery that would interfere with the process.

Empathy / Sympathy

To develop the capacity to put oneself in the place of others in order to understand them (empathy), to feel attraction towards others (sympathy), to decenter oneself; a state of mind which makes pupils available to others, comrades or teacher, willing to hear a foreign speech without prejudice or animosity, but with interest. It is a question of introducing cognitive rather than emotional relationships, based on reason, which does not imply to identify with the other, to feel what he feels or to necessarily be in agreement with him, nor to reject his person, but to understand his emotions and ideas. For this, the teacher will have to invite the class to become aware of the problematic relations between students and to work on that which generates parasitic frictions.

Confrontation

To develop the capacity to confront the thoughts of others and one's own, to engage in criticism and debate, without trying to seek agreement or consensus at all costs, without minimizing or glorifying one's own thoughts or that of others. It is not a matter of respecting ideas or opinions in themselves, but of respecting reflexive activity, which implies replacing soft tolerance with a certain vigor. To do this, the teacher should invite students not to fear each other, to reconcile students with the concept of criticism, so that they take this activity as a game or exercise and not as a threat.

Astonishment

Learning to accept and acknowledge surprise, one's own surprise and that of others, in the face of the unexpected, in the face of difference or opposition, in order to perceive what is problematic and to grasp its stakes. Without this astonishment, everything becomes routine, thought is blunted, everyone is turned unto himself and his own platitude, everything is only opinion and subjectivity or certainty and objectivity. To do this, the teacher must put forward the diversity of perspectives and tighten the relationships between ideas in order to generate a dynamic tension, producing new hypotheses.

Trust

Having confidence in others and in oneself, without thinking that it is a matter of defending anything: one's image, ideas, person. Without this trust, everyone will distrust others, will try not to answer them, will refuse to admit obvious errors or aberrations, because they will suspect a hidden agenda, because they will be afraid of being caught in wrongdoing or humiliated. This trust is a factor of autonomy both for oneself and for others. For this, the teacher must create a climate of trust where error is dedramatized, where one can laugh about absurdities, where a beautiful idea can collectively be appreciated, whoever the author might be.