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Is there life for a philosopher outside Academia ?

Last November, 500 persons from over forty different countries gathered at the Unesco around the theme of “New philosophical practices”. The next Unesco report on philosophy, that will circulate worldwide, will include an important part on non-academic philosophy. Those events are a couple of examples of a major change happening in the “traditional” conception of philosophy. The word traditional has here to be put in brackets, since this tradition is in fact quite recent: only a couple of hundred years, those two centuries where philosophy has become almost the exclusive property of academics, scholars working in universities and generally functionaries paid by the state. But if we go back further, we easily see that this was not the case: philosophers were found in many strata of society, dealing with all matters of life, counseling slaves and crowned heads, teaching wisdom and not only knowledge. In this sense, the “new” development of philosophical practice is merely a return to the origin.

But the most striking feature of this phenomenon has been the strong and rather “unfriendly” reaction of the philosophical community, particularly in countries with strong philosophical institutions, like France and Germany. Why would this be the case? One can imagine many reasons, but let us simply propose for now that the term philosophy has over the years become the possession and symbol of an elite, which like all elites have the impression of holding some kind of status and power, no matter how ephemeral, vain and illusory is this power.

On the other side, let us examine why we observe that upsurge today, if we accept the principle of sufficient reason of Leibniz, which invites us to think that nothing happens without any substantiating reason. In a summarized way, let us claim two fundamental reasons.

First, the established ideological schemes have somewhat been shaken in their foundations, be they political, religious or cultural. Second, the major social, environmental and economic transformations of the planet have destabilized many ways of life. Those two features have left many of our citizens with a certain uncertainty about the meaning of their existence, doubting about the values guiding their personal and collective existence, which resulted in a profound interrogation about the meaning and purposes of life. A revealing moment of this process, which surprised many specialists, was the world wide success of a book, “The world of Sophie”, written by the Norwegian Jostein Gaarder, in 1991 : twelve millions copies sold throughout the world. Of course a book that was heavily criticized by many professional philosophers, since it was a philosophy book written for a large audience, a relatively new concept. Since the success of this book, many publishers and authors have in different countries realized the potential and demand of this kind of work, and have thus followed this lead, with different results but globally a major success, be it books for adults or children. But let us examine other aspects of this philosophical upheaval. In 1969, an American philosopher, Matthew Lipman, somewhat disappointed by his university work, decided to embark on a project of philosophy with children, wrote some novels and designed a rather precise and complete curriculum for different age groups. Almost forty years later, many projects are underway throughout the world, of different inspirations, and in certain countries, philosophy with children, starting in kindergarten or elementary school has now become official or semi-official educational policy. A concept which of course has implied to revise profoundly what is the teaching of philosophy. To synthesize this didactic transformation, let us say that it went from teaching of the history of ideas to learning constructing thought and critical thinking, which again provoked an important debate and many polemics among professionals. This generalization of philosophical teaching again had an echo in its Socratic origin, where it was not so much the teaching of a knowledge, erudition that

was reserved to the sophists, but a practice summarized as a critical relationship to established knowledge and common opinions. Another important aspect of this transformation is linked to the development of philosophical consultation, initiated in a formal way by Gerd Achenbach, a German philosopher, that in 1981 had the idea of opening a philosophical cabinet where people would come and engage in a reflection upon issues that mattered to them. Following this initiative, many philosophers took up the idea, and embarked on many different forms of philosophical counseling. Philosophical practice in business, in prisons, in community centers, with populations in difficulty, more and more forms of philosophical activities are emerging. A number of countries have now official associations of specialists, which provide training sessions and give out certificate to guarantee the qualification of the philosopher. A handful of universities have as well started a master in philosophical practice.

Last aspect of this phenomenon that we would like to mention is the development of the café philosophique. In 1992, somewhat by accident, a French philosopher, Marc Sautet, gathered on a Sunday morning in a Parisian café a number of persons wishing to debate philosophically about some issue. Thus was born the first café philo, open to everyone, where all matters are discussed, with a philosophical orientation. The only problem is that there again, most specialist disdained the initiative, questioning the motivation and legitimacy of the participants. The result of this situation being that the quality of those debates is not always what it should be when no one with philosophical competencies is animating it. But the phenomenon has grown worldwide as a key feature of philosophical practice, different format have developed, and in spite of the unevenness of the quality, philosophical activity has now a number of public places for persons interested in it. To distinguish itself as a practice has emerged as well the concept of philosophy workshop, which is generally run by a trained philosopher, and implies that

some actual philosophical work will take place, instead of what too often in the café philo is a mere exchange of opinions.

Those are some aspects of what we call philosophical practice, and we invite all philosophers to consider the interest of such renewal of the philosophical activity. We cannot deny that academic philosophy plays an important function, but for those who think that philosophy can play a more active and present role in daily life and society, we invite them to investigate the work already going on, study the numerous practical and theoretical work published, in order to think how they can develop in their own context some form of innovative philosophical practice.

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