

PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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A Model for Philosophical Groups that Supports Philosophy as a Way of Life

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Abstract

Philosophical practice is enhanced with the use of strategies that make sound philosophical thinking a way of life. This paper puts forth an ancient model that would mentor individuals within a group setting in a philosophical way of life that promotes happiness and is centered on the care of themselves and their souls. It explains how various exercises, grounded in rigorous philosophical techniques, could enable people to immerse themselves in a way of life that is philosophical.

Keywords: *philosophical communities, happiness, Know Thyself, exercises, Stoicism, teacher/master*

Introduction

Because all people everywhere desire happiness, and one important element in philosophy is the knowledge of how to achieve it, philosophy can be useful to all people. Since most people live outside of the university, then philosophy should be taught outside of its confines. This paper explores one way to do that.

If philosophy is to be transported outside of the university and offered to the people, a number of important questions need to be answered. For example, are there ways for people to become wise without necessarily having to learn all of the complex and varied principles of philosophy? Must new pedagogical methods be developed in order to serve the peoples' inherent need to achieve happiness, or might we find the means within an already established Western philosophical tradition? If so, what are the methods that were and could be used?

This paper puts forth a model born in Ancient Greece that would support and mentor individuals within a group setting in a philosophical way of life that promotes happiness, and is centered on the care of themselves and their souls. It explains how various exercises, grounded in rigorous philosophical techniques, could enable people to immerse themselves in a way of life that is philosophical. This prototype offers a philosophy for the people that is of the right, meaning one that is just, rational, and true. (Derrida, 2004)

A Brief History of Philosophy as a Way of Life

The roots of man's search for happiness can be found in first and second century Greco-Roman philosophy. Throughout those times, individuals ("the people"), by their own means or with the help of others within their philosophical community, acted on their bodies, souls, thoughts, conduct and ways of being in order to transform themselves, to attain a certain state of happiness, and to become wise. The techniques and practices they used were embraced by the term "taking care of oneself." The individual who pursued his wish to become a philosopher made a choice that obliged

him to transform his whole way of living in the world, not just to take some courses in a university. (Hadot, 2008)

For us now, “Take care of yourself,” is mostly a rather momentary admonition to tend to one aspect or another of one’s well-being. This was not the case for the Greek and Roman philosophers. For them, the term implied an entire way of life that entailed methods of training. It was a full out attempt to formalize a vision and a practice which involved the endless progression of individuals towards positive, ethical participation in the good life and in their achievement of happiness.

Epicurus wrote that it is never too early and never too late to occupy oneself with one’s soul. One should philosophize (care for one’s self and soul) when one is young and also when one is old. It was a task, a way of living, a real activity to be carried on throughout life, one that had rules for social and personal conduct and for the art of life. Philosophizing involved preparation for a certain complete achievement of life, and for a happy proximity to death. (Hadot, 1995)

The various practices to which cultivation of the self gave rise were called “spiritual exercises.” They were considered exercises because they were practical, required effort and training, and were lived; they were spiritual because they involved the entire spirit, one’s whole way of being. The systematic presentation of these exercises produced assurance in the soul, and therefore peace and serenity.

In order to cultivate oneself, one has first to know the Self one is taking care of. This is why the most important moral principle, and spiritual practice, in ancient philosophy was thought to be the one delivered to Socrates at Delphi, “Know thyself.” For the Ancients, this was not an abstract, intelligent sounding idea, but rather it was technical advice. In order to know himself, the person was to observe his thoughts, behaviors, and emotions, day in and day out, without ceasing. This enabled him ultimately to construct a world suitable for himself and allowed him to realize his ultimate humanity, reflected in a general human excellence associated with virtue, potency, and functionality. (Soccio, 2010)

Though no treatises exist which outline all of the instructions and techniques utilized by the Stoics and the Platonics, two lists of spiritual exercises have been passed down from Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 B.C.E. – 40 C.E.). These lists give us a fairly good idea of the kinds of activities considered to be philosophical as well as therapeutic. Included in those lists were: research, reading, listening, the development of attention and self-mastery, and indifference to indifferent things. Also included were therapies of the passions, remembrance of good things, self-mastery, and the accomplishment of one’s duties.

Many other practices fell under the realm of spiritual exercises to be cultivated throughout one’s life. Meditation, examination of one’s conscience, and philosophical discourse, with oneself and others, were also considered exercises of prime importance. Regardless of the exercise, each was designed to form souls more than to inform minds. (Hadot, 1995)

Since, as we have seen, philosophy was intended first of all as a way of life and discourse was a major part of it, it was considered that there could never be a philosophy or philosophers outside a group or community. The people who were engaged with a particular philosophical community considered it to be a kind of school that corresponded to a conversion of one’s entire being, as well

as to a desire to live and to be in a certain way. The Stoics and the Platonists understood that philosophizing was not just about pedagogy, it was also a training and guiding of the soul which led to a conversion which raised the individual from an inauthentic, worried life to one that was authentic and serene. Its practitioners learned how to live and to become. (Chase M., et.al., 2013)

In itself, the art of living demanded by philosophy was a lived exercise exhibited in every aspect of one's existence. It enabled the philosopher to orient himself in the world and to bring together and focus the fundamental rules of life so that he could keep them ready and at hand at each instant. Philosophy was a lived physics, a true spiritual exercise that involved a way of seeing and being in the world, one which procured pleasure and joy for the soul.

By the 5th century A.D., philosophy as a way of life was usurped by the Christians who had the distinct advantage of their claim to the word of God. Yet, they borrowed many of their ideas from the Greeks and Romans. These included demanding a conversion and encouraging a way of life within a like-minded community. Christian ascetic communities, like ancient philosophical ones, showed a central preoccupation of concern for and knowledge of oneself, and they demanded a way of life that went with it. Throughout the spectrum of exercises offered by these two seeming extremes – Socrates, who died in Athens in 390 B.C.E, and Gregory of Nyssa, an Orthodox Christian who died in Cappadocia in 395 C.E., taking care of oneself constituted both a principle and a constant daily practice. Both traditions made life a training for death, and considered the process of that training to be what philosophy is. (Hadot, 1995)

By the Middle Ages, the practice of philosophy became confined to the universities, and the practice of Christianized Ancient Greek philosophical exercises occurred only in a few Orthodox monasteries. Still, there have been philosophers who have remained faithful to the vital existential dimensions of ancient philosophy. Through them, certain essential aspects of ancient philosophy have been rediscovered and revitalized. These philosophers include Kant, whose interest in reason and the primacy of the practical stems directly from the Greeks, Goethe, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Thoreau. Important philosophers from our own time, notably Pierre Hadot, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, draw from Ancient Wisdom and practice when they talk about philosophy as a way of life, technologies of the self, (Martin, 1998) and the need for deconstruction, and also when they entreat us to radically change our way of living and of seeing the world. (Derrida, 2004)

Does Philosophy as a Way of Life Exist Within Communities Today? Should it? Could it?

I am unaware of a group that exists currently in order to support philosophy as a way of life, as was done in Ancient Greek and Roman times. Is it purposeful and possible to return to the ancient ideal of philosophy? To philosophy before 'philosophy' as we know it today? To philosophy as the interest one takes in wisdom? To philosophy as a way of life? If so, how and where would this return take place? What would be its practices, and who would be qualified to teach them? (Derrida, 2002)

In "The Antinomies of the Philosophical Discipline" Derrida (2004) wrote of the possibility of philosophy being a mobile non-place from which a person might continue or begin again, throughout life, always in a different way, always asking oneself what is at stake, driven not by an ends orientation, but rather by the value and meaning of the basic. He wanted all individuals to be provided

with a place where they could touch upon that within themselves which is natural and real, and which is concerned with values and meaning, justice and compassion – the things philosophy has been concerned with since the beginning.

In order to realize this possibility, Derrida suggested that rather than constructing more philosophical structures upon existing toms, we prepare individuals to undertake their own, new analyses. This means that learning environments must be created in order to help all people, including those who reside outside of the university, to understand what it means to have philosophy be a way of life - a way of thinking and being that involves not only reason, but care of themselves and of their souls. These spaces, these environments for philosophical gatherings could make for “a new beginning onto the futures of thinking, with no programmable end in sight.” (Derrida, 2002)

Now, the breakthrough of what is to come must always arise out of the resources of a past thinking that cannot be effectively renounced. We must set the Greek and Roman philosophical way of life at the forefront of our consideration for what these learning environments might look like, how they might function, and what they might teach.

The historical roots of philosophy are essential for inscribing and building the ‘horizon of a new community.’ These learning environments will not be attempts to start over without history, to efface the contextual and institutional specificity of philosophical practice through a haphazard rejection of its grounding. Rather, they will facilitate other beginnings and other directions for the infinite progress of beings in the world. Faring forward, philosophy can move on, reaching out towards a path for the people that is both vigorous and right. (Derrida, 2002)

The Horizons of the New Philosophical Community

If there are to be new learning environments in the 21st century which support happiness, wisdom and philosophy as a way of life, what would they look like? What would be their purpose? What techniques would be used? The means to achieve the ends of these philosophical learning environments must be spelled out. This will enable people who wish to participate in these environments to know what they are committing to and what they can hope to actualize. Here are my suggestions.

1. *The learning environment must be constituted within communities*

An essential feature of a new philosophical learning environment is that it be constituted within a community. The Ancient Greek and Roman philosophical schools knew the importance of this, yet those of us who have been indoctrinated into the sovereignty of the individual might wonder why it was they thought a community was vital to their aims.

First, when one decides to become a member of a community, he must adhere to certain fundamental agreements in order to be and to remain a part of its culture. The illusion of unity established by the fundamental agreements made within the group helps to mask the differences of the other members, enabling them to live and work in close proximity while learning to tolerate and learn from the inevitable discord of difference. In this way, the individual’s experience of himself is opened up, intensified and widened. As a result, he can learn responsible responses to his own discomfort and a coming to peace with the Self and with the avowable laws of a community and its effacing of difference. (Derrida, 2002)

A number of people gathered together, especially around a teacher, can form a center of gravity that works for their mutual benefit, one that a person working independently, however dedicated, cannot have. A group allows for introspection by the individual as well as for a level of engagement with others. In short, a community can provide conditions favorable for self-transformation while at the same time providing important mutual support for its members.

2. The purpose of these communities

The express purpose of these learning environments, now established as communities, will be to enable philosophy to be practiced as a way of life by its members, who would include teachers as well as students. These communities would manifest possibilities that foster the art of living well and that would support the “care of self and soul.” The communities would provide for the philosophical training of human beings, accomplished through the slow and difficult education of their character. They will promote the harmonious development of the entire person.

There are currently precedents for communities centered on dialogue, learning and belief. For example, there are Buddhist monasteries and communities around the world in which dialogue and debate about Buddhist philosophy plays a central role. One has only to go to Google to find 6,440,00 sites that deal with them in one way or another. A tiny sampling is the Nairopa Institute in Berkeley, CA, the Manjushri Dharma Centers scattered throughout Europe, and the Triatna Buddhist Community in India, each of which provides centers for teaching and learning the Buddhist path.

There are also Hindu communities—10,300,00 Google sites pertaining to those, as well as Islamic (50,300,000 sites), and Christian communities (which pulled up 30, 200,000 results) in which the study of central beliefs and the attempt to live them, both individually and together, are the animating forces. So, I am proposing nothing radical other than a philosophically centered community that would speak to the people’s search for happiness and wisdom.

3. Methods to be used

The primary methods to be used by these communities would be the spiritual exercises borrowed from the Ancients, with other relevant philosophical exercises from more recent eras added into the mix. Examples, for instance, of philosophical exercises that could be used in connection with individuals being prepared for death would include encouraging them to think and to write about their experiences with death, to think of death as immanent each day, to imagine their own death, or to imagine that everyone upon whom their eyes rest is going to die. They could also be encouraged to read various philosophical and literary texts which pertain to death or to watch films which consider the topic.

The Socratic maxim “Know Thyself,” would constitute the basis for all spiritual exercises. This practice requires a particular kind of caring relationship to oneself that would lead individuals through their own unique self-actualization process and would guide the total learning environment. Other exercises would include the development of attention, various meditations, the recollections of good things, the accomplishment of one’s duties, and becoming indifferent to indifferent things. Reading, writing, dialogue (Grimes, 1998), listening, research, and investigation into topics of interest would also be included. All exercises would be tailored by the community leader to fit the individuals in the community and their unique situations.

What is most important about these exercises is that each constitutes an experience of authentic presence of the self to itself. Each is to be undertaken with the understanding that it is necessary to make one change one's point of view, one's attitude and one's convictions, when appropriate. Each is designed to involve the individual in a continuous dialogue with himself, aimed at realizing a transformation of his vision of the world and a metamorphosis of his being. (Gould, 2005)

Unlike most work done within an academic environment, it is to be remembered that these exercises are not first and foremost intellectual. They don't involve just speaking and writing, but consist of being, acting and seeing the world in new and different ways. In choosing to undertake these exercises, the individual is making a choice for a certain way of life. He is exercising an existential option that will ultimately enlist from him a desire to be and to live in a philosophical manner. The modifications the exercises encourage him to bring about will require effort but, little by little, with their aid and his perseverance, he can and will make that which is a good inclination become a settled purpose, ultimately achieving an indispensable metamorphosis of his inner self. (Buzare, 2011)

4. *The requirements of the teacher*

Like all learning environments, these philosophical communities must have a teacher. In fact, each one would be centered on a teacher, or a master. This teacher would be a leader of a philosophical society at work. The concepts of this mastery will vary, but each teacher would need to be trained. What would be the qualifications and training required for such a person?

Imagining a few of the great teachers from Ancient times when philosophy was established as a way of life can help. The names of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle alone are enough to evoke images of what incarnations of wisdom look like. True, wise and good, and always wishing to do what was best, they can help us create a model that we can imitate and magnify.

Expanding upon this model provided by the ancients, the leader will be able to assume authority because he/she knows such things as the causes and principles, the "whys" and the larger perspective of things, and because he/she answers first of all to the principle of reason. The leader (teacher, master) would be able to teach, to direct, to steer and to organize the empirical work of the students. He /she would also have knowledge of how to counsel individuals, and how to lead groups. He/she would be skilled in discourse and dialogue and in being able to philosophize in general.

The teacher will have to introduce, initiate, and train the student (disciple) in the philosophical way of life. In order to do this, the teacher will have to have been first of all introduced, initiated, and trained in it herself. Because one cannot become wise without having personally experienced what is shameful or bad and, as a result, won a victory over oneself, every potential teacher will have had to have gone through such experiences successfully.

For the student, the teacher will represent a true and all-important encounter with the Other. As a result, in his/her role as guardian, guarantor and mediator, and as one who is a predecessor and elder, he/she must strongly represent and be a model for the speech, thought and knowledge of the Other. In order to do this, he/she must have already established him/her self as the Subject within his/her own life. Finally, the teacher must constantly bear in mind that his or her responsibility is to serve the community, the truth and the Way. If the philosophical learning community becomes about submitting blindly to a charismatic or controlling teacher, it will become no more than a cult and will ultimately fail.

Conclusion

As philosophical practitioners, we are engaged in the noble, on-going project to develop strategies that make sound philosophical thinking a way of life. Borrowing from the Ancients, one idea that would support this goal would be the presence of modern day philosophical communities. These communities will give those who are outside the university the benefit of philosophical understanding and enable them, through their own explicit efforts, to live, not in conformity with human prejudices and social conventions, but in conformity with reason and the Right.

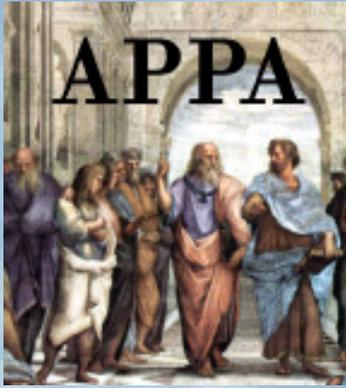
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Shanti has known since she was seven years old that her calling was that of a teacher and “Spiritual Mother.” In order to better fulfill that role, she obtained a B.S. in Food Science and Nutrition, a Master’s degree in Counseling, and a Ph.D. in Transpersonal Psychology. She has also worked extensively with spiritual teachers, attended modeling and acting schools, and studied piano, voice and dance. Shanti currently works as a self-actualization coach, has led workshops in creativity, meditation, and sand play, and taught classes on developing personal style. She is also a cabaret performer. Shanti is a teacher and trainer of bullying prevention in the Taos Public Schools as well as Taos Pueblo. She writes a monthly column on Parenting Skills for the Taos News.





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Aims and Scope

Philosophical Practice is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

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