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Socrates in the 21st century

– A Justification of Skeptical Interventions in Narrative Encounters –

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| Abstract |

In this essay, which is a summary of the main ideas in the author's Ph.D. research (still work in progress), the author proposes a method to justify philosophical practice philosophically. Such a justification is necessary for the sake of the connection with academic philosophy and to avoid philosophical bungling. The author connects to Socrates' skeptical and maieutic legacy, as well as to Husserl's perceptive/experiential and Wittgenstein's descriptive and ordinary language legacies. He explains his hypothesis that a philosopher might be aware of his epistemic premises and able to test these premises in the practice of philosophizing. He discusses his methodic and epistemic hypotheses, the latter being experiential and semantic questioning.

| Key word |

Philosophy; philosophical justification; philosophical practice; Socrates; Husserl; Wittgenstein; dialogue; skepticism; counseling; narrative.

1. Philosophical justification of philosophical practice

Philosophical practice, as we understand it since the 1960s¹⁾, is an *encounter* (somewhere sometime) between a philosopher and one or more interlocutors who talk about *a personal existential issue* of at least one of the interlocutors.

What does it mean to a philosopher and philosophy, when the philosopher brings philosophy into action to think about someone's existential issue?

On the one hand, this question is about the philosopher's attitude and method. On the other hand, it is about the justification of that action as philosophical practice. If philosophy is being brought into action to think about someone's issue, does it keep its philosophical nature?

Both the distance to academic philosophy and the multiplicity of approaches in philosophical practice ask for more clearness about the philosophical nature of philosophical practice.

1) Usually, the "birth" of contemporary philosophical practice is situated in 1982, when Gerd B. Achenbach started his practice in Germany. The 15th International Conference on Philosophical Practice (ICPP) in Mexico City in the summer of 2018, honoured both Achenbach and Pierre Grimes for initiating philosophical practice. Grimes did so in the 60s in the USA. In the 70s, philosophical counseling on the basis of existential and phenomenological philosophy have been grounded in the UK and the USA. The author of this essay started his political kind of philosophical practice in 1976, inspired by Louis Althusser's interventionist approach of philosophical criticism.

Usually, philosophers, including philosophical practitioners, do what they have to do without reflecting on their premises. They read a paper or write an article on what is supposed to be a philosophical theme, or they coach one or more persons in philosophizing on their life issues. Mostly, the philosopher practices a specific kind of philosophizing without realizing it is just a specific kind. The way he philosophizes looks to him the only right way. He cannot imagine that other ways of philosophy are properly possible; if there are other ways, they are not proper philosophies. Such a philosopher relates to (his) philosophy as an eye relates to itself: the subject cannot see itself. However, like the one who sees can be conscious of his eye, a philosopher can be conscious of his philosophizing. This means that he is aware of the reality of his philosophizing: what he sees, is being determined by the structure of his philosophical eye, his philosophical premises. These are either ontological, or anthropological, or ethical, or epistemological. A philosopher's justification consists in making these premises explicit. The question is, "How is the philosopher present philosophically in his philosophical activity?"

1.1. Doubts about the philosophical nature of philosophical practice

At least since the exodus of scientific disciplines from

European philosophy²⁾ in the 19th and 20th century, the word ‘philosophy’ is being used to designate a wide variety of thinking practices. In common parlance, the word means opinion, view, interpretation, basic principle, or, in a negative sense, vague talk, loose talk. In the Academy, the word stands for a diversity of theories and methods, of which some even exclude each other.

In the field of philosophical practices, this variety and incompatibility are being copied. Moreover, in this field, it is not self-evident anymore that practitioners have an academic degree in philosophy. In many a training as a philosophical practitioner, one does not need such a degree. Just the training program satisfies to be permitted to do this practice and to call oneself a philosophical practitioner/counselor/moderator. In these cases, the Academy is not the traditional ground for philosophical education and identification anymore; the commercial course seller determines whether one is a philosopher. Even worse, one can make that decision by oneself and call one’s own services “philosophy”.

In the Academy, skepticism towards philosophical practice occurs frequently. In view of the general lack of theoretical and

2) For lack of space, I am limiting myself to Western philosophy in this essay. However, in my understanding of Western philosophy, I have been influenced by Asian philosophical practices (Taoism, and Chinese and Japanese Zen Buddhism)

methodical clarification and academic education, the skepticism is understandable. Within the world of philosophical practitioners that skeptical feeling should be stronger yet. After all, the prestige of our discipline is at stake.

Fortunately, some practitioners do make the philosophical roots and backgrounds of their practice explicit. They post video records of their conversation on the internet (Brenifier; Lahav), and they publish articles and books about their principles and method (by example, Amir [Amir, 2018], Brenifier [Brenifier], Lahav [Lahav, 2016], Lindseth [Lindseth, 2005], Raabe [Raabe, 2014], Rhee [Rhee, 2010], and the author of this essay [de Haas, 2018b]). Lately, some practitioners are working on developing more general theories of philosophical practice, which go beyond one specific approach and method (by example, Barrientos in his lecture at the ICPP in Mexico, and De Haas [de Haas, 2018a]).

1.2. Diagnostic versus skeptical philosophy

Like philosophy in general, philosophical practice is either diagnostic or skeptical. Either the philosopher knows the truth about (the essence and totality of) Being, human existence or a phenomenon, or the philosopher questions such a truth claim. The first answers the question, “What is the truth of X?”, whereas the second asks, “(Why) should this be true?”. One

cannot do both at the same time. If you ask yourself why your practice can be called “philosophical”, you take a skeptical, i.e., questioning and investigating attitude towards your practice – at least initially (you might want to find answers at the end).

As already noted before, philosophical practice is the act of philosophizing in a dialogical encounter on a life issue of at least one of those who encounter. What is the specific philosophical *added value* that the philosopher can contribute to the conversation in this meeting? It will be either diagnostic or skeptical. Either he claims to have typically philosophical answers to a person’s life issues, which he diagnoses by philosophical theories. Or his contribution to the conversation is methodological and consists in offering his client a way of thinking. Or, by contrast, he intervenes in the story of his interlocutor – not by offering a diagnosis or way of thinking, but by asking skeptical questions about the interlocutor’s truth claims. Like a Socrates (with an attitude of not knowing anything about the other’s issue, and with a method of philosophical midwifery), the skeptical philosopher challenges his interlocutor to think critically about his truth claim.

To what extent is a diagnostic philosopher able to justify his diagnoses towards his interlocutor, the Academy, and society? Why would his diagnoses – either conceptual or argumentative – be true? The Cartesian method of epistemic self-reflection ends in the understanding that every material statement can be

doubted. The Socratic method of questioning brings about that the concepts of an absolute opinion are relative; the understanding ends in an *aporia*. Anyway, a diagnostic philosopher will have to justify his diagnoses, at least when it comes to the applicability of his diagnosis on *this* person's life issue.

The same applies to the methodical philosopher. Why would *this* method of thinking be the "true" answer to *this* person's life issue?

Both diagnostic and methodical philosophers get their materials from the history of philosophy. They quote considerations and theories or a single statement of some philosopher (for example Plato about love, Aristotle about friendship, Kierkegaard about anxiety, Marx's theory of alienation and economic class relations, or Heidegger's "*Daseinsanalyse*", etc.), and brings them forward as a clinical diagnosis, applicable to this interlocutor's issue. Or they derive a method of thinking from some philosopher (for example Leonard Nelson's reconstruction of Plato's Socratic dialogues, Hegel's dialectical pattern of thinking, Husserl's eidetic reduction, Gadamer's hermeneutics, or a linguistic way of concept analysis), and applies it to the interlocutor's process of thinking. The use of existing views and ways of thinking in itself does not justify the application in *this* dialogical encounter.

1.3. Methods of philosophical justification

In Western philosophy, we know of several ways to justify a philosophical theory or method. First, *rhetoric evidence*, well-known from the sophists and Aristotle but practiced by most philosophers through the centuries. The truth and correctness of a philosophical statement and theory are supposed to follow evidently from its concept definition or logical structure or convincing rhetorical reasoning or an allegedly non-interpreting description or expression. A contemporary and favorite kind of rhetorical conviction consists in quoting so-called ‘Great Philosophers’ from whatever cultural tradition. Wittgenstein’s “showing” is another kind of justification by rhetoric evidence. He assumes that everybody in a language community knows that a non-interpretive description of a language game is correct.

Second, *conceptual grounding*, known from Kant. As all empirical knowledge is considered coincidental and restricted, it needs a firm, non-accidental, yes, absolute and universal foundation. It is the transcendental and constituting ground – i.e., the condition of possibility – of all our experience and knowledge. Kant did it by constructing allegedly universal and apriori categories that constitute human experience, Hegel by constructing a conceptual system that allegedly produces itself in a linear and “dialectical” historical process.

Third, *meditational grounding*, or *grounding by reducing*

uncertainties (Descartes [Descartes, 2011]) or *bias* (Husserl [Husserl, 1982; Husserl & Striker, 1992]). Here, the philosopher is not constructing founding concepts in the non-experiential space of his conceptual laboratory but finds them by meditating on his perception, experience, and understanding of the world. The meditation is a process of eliminating apparent uncertainties (Descartes) or obvious prescience (Husserl), resulting in exposing the underlying ‘pure’ and constituting subjectivity (Descartes) or intersubjectivity (Husserl).

As all philosophical justification is an act of making statements, it is subject to Socratic questioning. Why should this “final” concept or statement be “true”? Why is one grounding better than another? A grounding is something that happens in and with words; it is a verbal reality, even though the philosopher claims that it is an ontic, ethical or existential reality. In grounding philosophy, knowledge, and experience, the philosopher is just continuing what he is trying to ground. He builds a sand castle on sand, coincidental concepts and statements on coincidental concepts and statements. That he thinks the latter to be a-priori, absolute and universal, does not matter; they are verbal constructions, which are subject to the analysis of verbal constructions.

This inevitability of grounding verbal constructs using verbal constructs is in itself not a philosophical ailment. It is indeed

inevitable, if you want to establish an absolute and a-priori ground of the possibility of knowledge and experience using language. You remain trapped in the cave of pronouncing or writing down words. Plato's cave is a verbal prison. The grounding philosopher never gets out of his self-built web of words and statements.

1.4. A thinker's self-awareness (Cartesian meditation)

I don't consider Descartes' and Husserl's final concepts a conceptual grounding, but the observation of their *cognitive presence*. Because both versions of Cartesian meditation happen on paper and work with concepts, it looks as if the meditation results in an end, i.e., a concept or statement (“cogito ergo sum”; “transcendental [inter]subjectivity”). However, if we read the meditations as *actions*, instead of concept constructions, the result is not a concept but a state of mind. After having reduced working certainties and prescience, he who is meditating is present unbiased, open-minded, ready to perceive what appears to him as it appears.

Understood this way, the philosophical meditation is the activity of cleansing one's mind and freeing one's attention from cognitive bias. Physically seen, the meditation is a movement *from* standing inward-looking with a bent back *towards* emerging with a straight back and open senses. Cartesian

meditation in this sense, is a philosopher's self-reflection on his prescience and prejudices, as well as an act of suspending this bias on site. It is the power of this method of philosophical justification that the philosopher's focus is on his bias and his acting is on reducing the bias, whereas the other methods (re)produce bias, i.e., concepts and arguments that are considered true.

1.5. A speaker's situation (Wittgenstein)

In the field of rhetoric grounding, Wittgenstein's "showing" is an exception. His "showing" is an *act*, not a conceptual grounding. By describing the ways a specific word can be used in a specific range of situations of daily life (language game description), he is not establishing a conceptual ground. The description is a hint to the listener or reader to recollect (his experiences of) such situations, and to decide if Wittgenstein was right.

The starting point of Wittgenstein's "showing" is the assumption that a word is just an instrument, which has a limited range of uses ("rules") and gets a meaning when it is being used properly in the situation of its use. As I see it, Wittgenstein tested this epistemic presupposition in every new language game description (even though he has not said so explicitly).

2. Testing epistemic hypotheses

So, if we consider this interpretation of Wittgenstein's motive in describing language games a method of justifying philosophical investigations, *investigation and justification are the same*. Doing an investigation – which is, with Wittgenstein, the description of a language game, or, with Socrates, dialogically questioning the interlocutor's truth claim – is testing one or more epistemic hypotheses.

The hypotheses are assumptions about the philosopher's knowledge, interventional aims and interventional techniques. They answer questions about how the philosopher is present in the interaction with his interlocutor. What is his aim in this interaction? What does he know? How does he know? How does he relate to the interlocutor? His answers to these questions are formulated as hypotheses. The first hypothesis is about his epistemic assumptions; the second is about his aim in having a conversation with someone; the third is about the technique of his interventions in the interlocutor's narrative.

2.1. Semantic projections and augmented reality

Most philosophy is ideology, in the sense of designing and distributing ideas about the world, human existence, knowledge and truth. Ideological philosophers *add* meanings, values, connections and explanations to our world of our organs, senses

and limbs. Plato's allegory of the cave is the philosophical archetype of the idea that we perceive the world through filtered glasses. Plato thought that it was possible to take off the glasses and see the true reality of the world. However, this too was an idea made of words, i.e., another filtered view. This is what people do; we project ideas into the world of our sensory perception. In any case, our ideas always consist of words. They are not intrinsic properties of what we perceive but are our verbal additions to what we perceive. What we experience as this reality, is a mix of perception and added values – at the same time perception and conception.

These semantic projections are the work area of philosophers. Since the first philosophers in East and West (about 600 BC) they have been designing ideas about the nature of the world and human existence by conceptual constructions and arguments. But soon there were also philosophers who realized that what was considered truth, i.e., reality as it really is, is a matter of semantic projection, or illusion.

2.2. Washing your perception

If our understanding of reality is a matter of semantic projection, i.e., if it happens in our definition of concepts and our argumentation with words, how is it possible to see through this and to free ourselves from those “semantic glasses”?

Socrates thought it possible in a real conversation about a particular subject to put aside his ideas on this subject (the skill of “*epochè*”, of knowing nothing about the subject of the conversation). This makes it possible to investigate the subject in an unbiased way and to have the interviewee do this research himself (the so-called “maieutic” approach). Socrates did not reflect on the possibility of this skill; he just did it. Maybe, Plato’s thoughts about “ideas” concerning the meanings of words was an attempt to understand the possibility condition of “not-knowing”.

Descartes practiced the art of “*epochè*” in a less radical, more process-based way (what he called “meditation”). He systematically doubted his certainties. At the end of this process, he thought that there was just one certainty left: in this process, he is the one who doubts something, thinks about something, perceives and experiences something. Although this understanding was expressed in words, concepts and arguments, we might see it as the expression of an act – *the act of being present on one’s own, without any cognitive grip on the world*. The meditation does not just bring about an understanding, it mainly produces a specific manner of unconditionally attentive presence. Husserl tried to find words for that. In the jargon of German idealism, he called it “transcendental subjectivity”, which, with him, is both a matter of “pure”, i.e., unbiased experience and intersubjectivity. Husserl’s form of “*epochè*”, the

phenomenological reduction, is a matter of perception, the act of perceiving this reality in front of you without understanding it in advance through the knowledge and experience that you have already built up. It is the act of being present open-mindedly with this reality in front of you. Only then the process of “learning” can begin. So, both Descartes’ and Husserl’s philosophical meditation is a matter of being present unbiased, with open senses. This kind of justification of the philosopher’s knowledge and experience is not the construction of a conceptual and argumentative “ground”, but the act of being present in the situation that you want to understand.

2.3. The act of being present

In his *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 2009), Wittgenstein did not engage himself in constructing concepts and arguments to give a “ground” for his method of describing language games. He just performed the descriptions. He was aware that any attempt to conceptualize a “ground” of his method would bring about a theoretical construction with arbitrary and invented word meanings, that he had to investigate with his method of describing language games. So, he decided that *showing* (by description) how a word is normally used in situations of everyday life should be convincing by itself. After all, within a specific language community we all

have learned how to use a specific word in a specific situation. That is evident.

Yet, in spite of Wittgenstein's fear of conceptualizing and theorizing, we can try to imagine how it is to describe a language game as it "evidently" is. He said that the description "just puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything" (PI §126). But what do I have to do when I describe the usage of a word "without explaining or deducing"? When I try, I will have to create something like an "epochè" or a "phenomenological reduction". In other words, the description of a language game implies that the descriptor, first, calls to mind how the specific word is and might be used in situations of our lives, and, second, tries to describe these usages unbiased. This kind of philosopher projects himself in situations of life and brings himself to being present unconditionally and unbiased.

Actually, in his philosophical investigations Wittgenstein puts both his descriptive practice and his epistemic ideas on the line. Every description again is proof of the correctness of that attitude and those ideas – and the proof can prove invalid every time. There is no absolute and definitive proof (after all, that would be a theory with word usage that should again be the subject of a language game description).

2.4. Skeptical intervention as a practice of proving epistemic hypotheses

In philosophical practice, the proper philosophy is in the conversation, which happens in an encounter somewhere sometime. If we want to justify philosophical practice, the proper place is *this* conversation in the *current* encounter with *this* person. As philosophical practice is a situated conversation, again and again, its justification can only be the continuation of the present conversation, now with the focus on justification.

Next to such philosophical justifications on site, it is possible and desirable to justify philosophical practice on a *meta-philosophical* level. Here, the philosopher is not reflecting on a specific conversation, but justifying *his ethos and actions* in those conversations.

In the end, the self-reflection meets with assumptions that cannot be justified, because they are arbitrary (like Wittgenstein's epistemic ideas) though inevitable to the one who meditates. How can we escape from this epistemic cave?

One possibility is, that we admit the hypothetical nature of our epistemic points of departure and test our epistemic hypotheses in the practice of philosophical conversations. So understood, a philosopher's acting in a dialogical encounter is itself (partly) testing the epistemic hypothesis. This can be considered a version of Wittgenstein's "showing", now in

conversations.

2.5. Epistemic and methodical hypotheses

The way I do philosophical practice might be called *skeptical, narrative and maieutic*. It is *skeptical*, because it tries to be ignorant – i.e., unbiased – towards the interlocutor's issue and experiences. It is *narrative*, because it focuses on the interlocutor's experiences concerning his issue. And it is *maieutic*, because it doesn't think *for* the interlocutor, but challenges her to think for herself. In brief, I call my philosophical actions *skeptical interventions*.

In skeptical interventions a philosopher does not ask his interlocutor to adopt a diagnosis or method of thinking. He does not give an interpretation of his interlocutor's life experiences and questions. Nor does he expect his interlocutor to think about his issue following a specific method. He listens unbiased and open-minded to his interlocutor and asks *experiential questions* (to encourage the other to tell about his or her experiences concerning the life issue at stake in concrete terms), as well as *semantic questions* (to investigate abstract and generalizing expressions in the other's narrative).

Why does a skeptically interventionist philosopher ask experiential questions? He does so, because Husserl made him conscious of the bias every time, he wants to know something

in the world, especially when it has to do with semantic projections. There is no way back.

Why does a skeptically interventionist philosopher ask semantic questions? He does so, because Socrates and Wittgenstein made him conscious of the verbal nature of his knowledge, especially when it has to do with generalizations and absolute truths.

Is there no method in skeptical interventions? Of course it is. Here, too, the bias becomes a hypothesis that is tested on the spot – the methodical hypothesis, which proves or disapproves itself in the act of asking experiential and semantic questions in a skeptical and maieutic way.

So, the practice of a skeptically interventionist philosopher consists in testing his epistemic and methodical hypotheses. His *perceptive, in particular listening attitude* posits and tests the assumption that only the person who raises his life question is capable of examining and answering this question. His *experiential questions* posit and test the assumption that the source of knowledge consists of concrete, ‘lived through’ experience. His *semantic questions* posit and test the assumption that abstract and generalizing language expressions push away the living experience (the attention is diverted from the concrete experience, to be focused on a word that becomes a dead concept through abstract definition).

Philosophically, the listening attitude comes from Socrates,

the perceiving attitude from Husserl. With Socrates a philosopher is not developing and applying his concepts and theories but challenging his interlocutor to investigate his own concepts and opinions. The Socratic philosopher has to listen to the other to be able to put himself in the other's subject, concepts and reasoning. He speaks the other's language and intervenes in the other's truth claims using the other's words. With Husserl's phenomenology a philosopher is aware of the cognitive bias in his experience of a situation as well as in his experience of the other's experience and narrative. Such a philosopher puts the biased voices in his mind to silence and tries to perceive the situation unconditionally and unprejudiced. With Socrates and Husserl, a philosopher is unable to pronounce upon reality, as he is aware of its verbal and conceptual arbitrariness and coincidence; he cannot but reduce his bias and investigate his concepts and propositions about the world. We can call it the *aporia* of semantic projections. What remains is the surrender to the other person's narrative and the attempt to entice this person to face his bias himself.

With Husserl, once the bias is taken away, only perception and experience of what you want to get to know remains. Now, all the time the philosopher is present *in the field of tension between open perception and closed conception*. It is the art of perceiving and experiencing the situation you are in, without "taking back" this situation in your concepts and arguments (cf.

Levinas's criticism of "totalizing" philosophy – (Levinas, 1961). As James has put it, we humans are present in the world in an experiencing way; to us, the world exists as experience. (James, 2007) A skeptically interventionist philosopher asks experiential questions, because he wants to experience the experience the interlocutor is narrating. First, the Socratic together with the phenomenological skepticism asks for experiential narratives. Second, the philosopher has to enter into the other's landscape of experiences so that he can experience the other's experiences and go with the interlocutor. Only if he experiences the narrative, he can investigate the other's word usage. And only if he asks for experiences, the other will be challenged to explore his own landscape of experiences. The practice of asking experiential questions and checking the philosopher's experience works as a test of the hypothesis. The subject of the narrated experiences, the interlocutor, returns to what extent the philosopher's questions and remarks fit the narrated experience.

Once he has landed in the other's landscape of experience, the philosopher will be able to notice semantic projections and question them. Here he mobilizes Wittgenstein's view of how words get their meaning. The semantic hypothesis states that to understand words you have to know the rules of their application and the local situation of usage. The narration of the interlocutor's experiences follows the "normal", generally regular usage of words. If the philosopher notices words and

expressions that deviate from ordinary usage, he asks what the other means and he challenges him or her to describe what he means in experiential and situational words. He does not keep off the other's expression but challenges him or her to leave the abstract and generalizing concept and proposition and to go back to experiencing the subject of his narration. Here, too, the practice of questioning works as a test of the hypothesis. If the hypothesis, i.e., the semantic question is valid in this case, depends on the interlocutor's reaction. He or she decides whether the question is relevant and brings about a semantic reflection *in this case*. The hypothesis is always put forward *on site*, in *this* conversation with *this* person, and can only be tested in *this* dialogical encounter.

3. Conclusion

Again, a skeptically interventionist philosopher justifies his attitude and method “hypothetically” in and through the conversation itself. It is obvious to discuss the hypotheses explicitly in a follow-up conversation with the interlocutor, which is itself a philosophical dialogue.

In the practice of a skeptically interventionist philosopher, a text like this essay is not philosophy; it is meta-philosophy, i.e., the philosopher's self-reflection on his attitude and

method “in general”, seen from his experiences with this kind of dialogical encounters. It makes his “ethos” explicit.

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