

PHILOSOPHICAL  
PRACTICE  
5 QUESTIONS

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## 7

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Philosopher and philosophical practitioner

Netherlands and Germany

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### Introduction

Answering the five questions of this anthology, I tell about my history with the practical aspect of philosophy since the 1960's. Within in the context of the Marxist and neo-Marxist revival in those years, the 'practical' was, first of all, 'social' and 'political'. For me, philosophical practice was the philosopher's emancipatory participation in the community (the 'polis') that he was part of. In the 1980's, the political intentions of the philosophical practice got lost; the practice resembled more the therapeutic care for mentally confused or puzzling individuals. By doing so, philosophical practice lost its connection to the promises of Modern philosophy. Now, again, the question is how we can develop philosophical practice as an emancipatory power in 'the polis'.

### 1. 'Praxis' in 20th century philosophy; "the sixties" 1. Why were you initially drawn to Philosophical Practice?

In 1969, I started studying at the University of Amsterdam. In the preceding years, the streets of Amsterdam were, like elsewhere in European and American cities, the public stage of new impulses of 'personally engaged' and 'autonomous', non-institutional politics. A typical Amsterdam phenomenon was "the Provo's", who joined immediate concrete experiments of 'freedom' (like communes, alternatives to psychiatry, free public bikes, biological food shops) and political actions (like humorous anti-cigarettes-industry ceremonies in the streets, and 'playful' participation in the Amsterdam city government). In that year, 1969, students and critical scientific personnel occupied the management center of the

University of Amsterdam. The university was carried away in a process of politicization. Professors lost their ‘natural’ authority, like science and philosophy lost their intrinsic values of truth. Scientific and philosophical truth became a result of ‘democratic’ discussion; social relevance became a major criterion for initiating and valuing academic research and education.

In Amsterdam, a group of students in philosophy and social sciences had founded the ‘Critical University’.<sup>1</sup> The participants in the Critical University rediscovered what, in those years, was rediscovered in the critical ‘freedom’ movements all over the world, i.e., Marx and the neo-Marxist philosophies. The Frankfurt School of Critical Theory (like Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, Marcuse) inspired to read Freud and the neo-Freudians (e.g., Reich and Fromm) as well.

The philosophical faculty at the University of Amsterdam was the stage of conflicting schools. There were several demarcation lines. There was the demarcation between the students of the ‘apolitical’ analytical philosophy and the students of ‘social and political engaged’ continental philosophies. And there was the demarcation line between the ‘political’ philosophers (the students of Marxism and Critical Theory) and ‘personalism’ (followers of Asian gurus, and students of Jasper’s existentialism, Jung’s psychoanalysis, humanistic psychology, etc.).

I did not exclude any of those schools, but, being a ‘boy of the streets of Amsterdam’, the fire of ‘praxis’ had lighted me. To me, it was not possible to do philosophy without being aware of Marx’ 11th thesis on Feuerbach: “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it”.

But how could a philosopher possibly change the world as a philosopher? Together with four fellow students, I formed ‘The Philosophers Collective’. We were looking for ways to practice philosophy in society. Three of us left the university to participate as political filmmakers in ‘Het Amsterdams Stadsjournaal’, a political film collective. I missed the philosophical aspect of their decision, and wondered how I could participate in social activities as a philosopher. I found a solution by blending *social action research* in a community development project, and a *critical study of the epistemological and social-cultural aspects* of both the com-

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<sup>1</sup> Among them was Pim Fortuijn, who was, some decennia later, to become the notorious populist politician. He became the victim of a political murder in 2002.

munity development and the action research. So, as a member of the action research team, I had two roles, as a participating social researcher, and as a critical philosophical thinker. And I hoped that the unity of the two roles would be fruitful for both the social research and philosophy. What can I say about it now, in 2011? That my intentions were nice and sympathetic, but that my experience as a philosopher was young and immature.

In the 1980's, the impetus of the personal and social emancipation movement extinguished. The practice of personal and social emancipation lost its spontaneous and self-organizational drives and space. It got encased by 'repressive tolerance' (Herbert Marcuse) of dominant institutional and economic powers, and by the restoration of 'old politics'. Politics, which had been the enthusiasm of emancipation and liberation of everyday life for a decade, withdrew from the houses and streets, and became the toy of institutionalized politicians again. Likewise, emancipatory change of personal and public life became more than ever the specialism of psychological and sociological change-professionals.

This loss of politics in everyday life - i.e., this loss of self-organized civil governance in the public sphere of the 'polis' - stroked the university, the neighborhoods, the companies, the health institutions, etc. And philosophy lost its sense of 'praxis'. We recognize this loss in Gerd Achenbach's initiative, in 1981, to start a philosophical practice. Even though he was critical about the psychological models of psychotherapy, he modeled his philosophical practice to the non-political, therapeutic relation between counselor and client.

It was only in 2008, at the 9th International Conference on Philosophical Practice, that the German philosopher and philosophical practitioner Thomas Polednitscheck reminded us of the ancient political roots of philosophical practice. (Polednitscheck 2009)

In the meantime, since 1980, I experimented with various forms of philosophical practice. I, too, lost the political aspect, but gained more and more experience in both finding and knowing the edges of Modern philosophy, and developing ways of philosophical interventions in social situations. In the eighties, I worked as an organization consultant and as a meditation teacher. As a freelance researcher at the Erasmus University Rotterdam, I found my 'end of (academic) philosophy'. My studies of the works of Georges Bataille, Joseph Beuys and John Cage led me to the edge of philosophy as reasoning and text (De Haas 1988; De Haas 2011d), and

forced me to leave ‘desk philosophy’ behind. ‘Praxis’ still was the magic word ... but what is *philosophical* praxis?

In the 90ties, I worked as an organization and management consultant, trying to ‘embed’ my philosopher’s perspective and skills in my consultancy job. In the years 2000, through some personal crises, I re-discovered the value of philosophy, thanks to the ongoing study of Wittgenstein’s work (De Haas 2008). I knew three things better than ever: philosophy is an *encounter* in ‘real life’ situations, it is a *dialogue*, and it has *no language of its own*. Besides, the *participating* philosopher acts from and in his engagement in the community that he is part of.

## 2. Dialogical encounters in the ‘polis’

### 2. What does your work reveal about Philosophical Practice that other related academic fields typically fail to appreciate?

As an academic philosopher - i.e., I studied philosophy at an European university and I philosophize in the tradition of the ancient Greek schools of philosophy<sup>2</sup> - I know from experience both the challenges and the limitations of this tradition. The perspective spot of this knowledge is given by the above-mentioned social-political context, by the philosophical struggle that is part of my personal life, and by my philosophical business.

Western philosophical practice in the academic field lacks the practice of real life encounter and dialogue. Nietzsche bet his own life and discussed the loss (and the denial) of ‘real life’ in philosophical reasoning, but he himself got stuck in his satirical attacks on Western philosophy and Christian culture, and in his literary dreaming about the *Übermensch* (man who has overcome himself). Marx declared the end of theoretical, interpreting philosophy and the beginning of political philosophy that would change the world, but his declaration stuck in the study rooms of the British Museum, in the totalitarian character of his philosophy<sup>3</sup>, and in the practice of fundamentalist politics. Husserl was aware of the otherness of reality in relation to reasoning and developed the attitude and method of *epochè*, but only to be better capable of understanding the conceptually grabbed ‘essence’ of reality. So, for

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<sup>2</sup>Besides, I am influenced by Eastern philosophy as well, as I learned it in the practice of sitting Zen meditation and moving T’ai chi meditation. As a part of these studies, I’ve read Buddhist and Taoist texts.

<sup>3</sup>Levinas’ warnings against totalitarian thinking (Levinas 1951) also apply to Marxian thinking; Marx was an ontologist.

philosophy becoming a personal and social practice, these innovators in Modern philosophy didn't offer a way out of its rational and theoretical blind alleys.

Hadot's and Foucault's rediscovery of philosophy as an 'art of living' (Hadot 1995; Foucault 1983) helped to revalue ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, but not to develop philosophy as a dialogical encounter.

More hopeful perspectives came from Wittgenstein, Buber and Levinas. Wittgenstein divided his 'real life' off his philosophical investigations; by unraveling the philosophers' thinking knots and pitfalls, he opened (moral) thinking in and from situations of real life (De Haas 2008). Buber did not speak *about* reality and human existence, but his philosophy was a speaking *with* concrete fellow human beings (Buber 1995). Levinas carried on this encountering philosophy (Levinas 1980).

I began to understand philosophical practice primarily as the always concrete, open and unique encounter of the philosophizing person with his situations, with his fellow human beings, and with himself. Then, from here, the '*supporting interventional*' relation with '*support asking*' people is nothing more and nothing less than a specific occurring of a human encounter with 'philosophical ambition'.

This is crucial in the comparison of philosophical practice with so-called 'related' disciplines like psychotherapy, counseling and consultancy. In general, these practices work on account of psychological and anthropological generalizations and reductions. The guest is a *client*, and the client is a *case* of generalized, pre-conceived clinical pictures and personality schemes. There, the clinical conversation is the gathering of information in order to apply the general knowledge. In those practices no encounter happens (they are meetings) and no dialogue is going on (they are conversations). Philosophical practice, as I see and do it, is a unique encounter between two unique, in-reducible persons.

Counseling, as understood and practiced in the spirit of humanistic psychology (like Carl Roger's), is an exception to the generalizing and reductive therapies. The humanistic counselor's attitude is open towards the client; his efforts are aimed at helping the client telling his or her own unique story and understanding himself not through pre-conceived models. As to the art of non-reductive questioning, philosophical practitioners can learn a lot from humanistic counselors. But then, philosophical practice steps across the boundaries of counseling. We, philosophical practitioners, are

not 'solving problems', and we are not just affirming and supporting the client's own processes of story telling and understanding; we challenge our guest to investigate his thinking thoroughly and critically, and to take his responsibility for the situations he is part of in his life. This responsibility is to be seen both moral and political.

Stephen Toulmin characterized the so-called 'clinical' sciences as situational and non-reductive (Toulmin 2003). However, the bureaucratic and economical pressure to 'prove' the 'truth' of clinical interventions through statistical generalization undermines the open clinical attitude. In the Netherlands, the application of diagnosis-treatment-combinations subverts the openness of the interventional encounters.

Here we also meet second-hand psychologies and philosophies. I mean all those self-declared counselors, coaches and consultants, who know the truth about their clients and use all kinds of means and rituals to heal them. I call them 'second-hand', because they borrow understandings and strategies from philosophy and psychology, to reshape them to indisputable truths in their ideologies of The Self and The Spiritual. They 'forget' to adopt the self-critical and skeptical attitude of serious psychologists and philosophers.

Unfortunately, there are such spiritual moonlighters who call themselves 'philosophical practitioner'. Seen from the self-criticism of Modern philosophy, many a philosophical practice fall back on pre-critical metaphysics. The poverty of those practices comes to light, when practitioners take refuge in cognitive therapy or spiritual counseling. Philosophy practiced as cognitive therapy reduces philosophy and the human mind to cognition and rational reasoning, and the spiritual counselor leaves any philosophical criticism and skepticism for a cosmological ontology of The Self.

Philosophical practice, seen as an open, dialogical encounter, keeps free from such generalizations and reductions. For most of the guests in my practice this is exactly the reason to visit a philosopher.

But that is not all. It is not just the relation between philosopher and guest. It is also the relation between the guest and his or her situations of life. In the psychologically defined interventions, the client is indeed defined - to his individual feeling, thinking and behaving, and sometimes to his 'system', being the network of individual relations. As Polednitscheck demonstrated, the client is taken as a *homo psychologicus* and *economicus* and not considered

a '*homo politicus*'.

"In 2008, in Europe, we live in an age of post-bourgeois resignation. Therefore, in my opinion, a philosophical practice that wants to resist Western Europe's 'democratic melancholy' (Bruckner), must, as a political philosophy, be the critical theory of a society in which the citizen's 'political I' has been relieved by the de-politicized individual. This de-politicized individual is the homo economicus of our postmodern times, for whom the rationality of business economics is the exclusive criterion of his thinking and acting. And he is the homo psychologicus, whose reflexive individualism makes him the prisoner of his own subjectivity." (Polednitscheck 2009)

The homo psychologicus is an object of diagnosis and treatment, whereas the *citoyen* is a subject who takes responsibility for his being part of the situations he is living. Polednitscheck states, that the philosophical practitioner is not - i.e., should not want to be - a 'counselor' (in German: Berater), but a citizen who encounters a fellow citizen.

Polednitscheck refers to the political subject of the Enlightenment and the bourgeois and proletarian Revolutions. That is, to the era between the late 18th and the early 20th centuries. The framework of his political philosophy is the 'negative dialectics' of Adorno and Horkheimer (Adorno 1970; Horkheimer 1971). There is some resentment towards the so-called 'Post-Modern' times in his thinking. In my opinion, it is more realistic and fruitful, to understand our time as an era of the development of a global network society.

The political subject that Polednitscheck wants to revive was related to the political and economic institutions of the kingdoms and democracies of rising and flourishing capitalism. Those abstract institutions - both the falling and the arising - had some substantive grip on the whole of society. Nowadays, they are losing their grips more and more. In the niches and the fallow fields of the globalizing world, concrete networks of human relations are germinating, growing and developing.

In the Enlightenment, the citizen was a free person in an open society, where freedom was the participation in the institutions, and the institutions defined the openness. Nowadays, the center of his 'polis' is not the institution, but the situations, i.e., situations with open horizons. Through the horizons, situations are linked - situations, which are always concrete situations of concrete persons.

The contemporary citizen's situation is not defined; it has no closed borders, no fixed boundaries. His ordinary life is a network of situations, and by that, of changing connections and interactions. A situation is being here and now, within the horizons here and now. As time is changing, situations are changing in space - and so are the people we are meeting and encountering.

A situation is defined, while the horizons are not. The situation is limited, while the perspectives are infinite. Present-day situations are open; we are living an open society. The horizon is a vague distance from where impulses and powers are influencing us, but where we suspect new possibilities, too. When with 'the polis' we mean our non-institutional community, and with 'politics' the communication and decision-making about the quality and conditions of our living-together, then, the contemporary 'polis' is our own concrete set of situations of the global network society, and 'politics' the practice of thinking and choosing in the currents of our life, in communication with the others with whom we share our situations.

The state and market institutions are abstract processes and powers, interfering into our situations, and often dominating. It is to us, how we experience, value and treat these abstract powers. Why shouldn't we turn round our perspectives from the abstract, institutional point-of-view to our concrete situational network-positions? Is the first decade of the 21st century not particularly the playground of germinating, growing and developing practices and connections of such a global network of situated citizens? And if philosophical practice is the practice of concrete dialogical encounters - as I contend in the slipstreams of Wittgenstein, Buber and Levinas -, why shouldn't we consider this practice to be the way we have to think in this becoming 'polis-network' or 'network-polis'? And why should we - be it cynically or agreeing - comment these developments from the outside (as many 'free' philosophers do at the university and in the media), and not participate dialogically in the community that we are part of?

**3. The philosopher as a living being and as a 'citoyen'**  
**3. What, if any, practical and/or social-political obligations follow from understanding philosophy from the point of view of Philosophical Practice?**

The concept of 'practice' in philosophical practice is complicated. As I have stipulated above, some currents of Modern philosophy declared its end, and tried to find a way out of its blind alleys.

The blind alleys were revealed where the philosophers' reasoning had drifted away from the concrete living bodies and situations, from 'real life' (as noticed by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Husserl, Bergson), and where their language had produced its own 'autistic' problems (as criticized by Marx, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Levinas). The way out of the self-imprisonment of philosophy was 'practice'. But what is 'practice' in a philosophical sense? For Marx, it was the opposite of interpreting the world, so, changing the human world - socially, economically, politically. For Nietzsche, it was the opposite of reasoning life to death, so, living a life - in a 'distinguished' and 'sovereign' way. For Achenbach, it was the opposite of theorizing in academic rooms, so, consulting clients in consulting rooms next door to the family doctor and the psychotherapist.

Achenbach's concept of philosophical practice is restricted. As indicated above, his practice has been developed in the a-political context of the 1980's and 1990's. Where his method and language is that of philosophy (particularly German philosophy), his situational and conversational model is that of the psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic conversations. Here, the philosopher is acting in the social and economic field of psychotherapists and counselors. His guest is a client with psychological problems. Calling these problems 'existential' does not change the fact that the client is considered a *homo psychologicus*, i.e., someone with interpreting and healing thoughts about his feelings, thoughts, and behavior. Putting himself and his guest into such an individual hermeneutic situation, he is treating himself as a counselor (*Berater*) and his guest as a client. Here, philosophizing is primarily and just a hermeneutic conversation and not an encounter in the full sense of this word.

What is a philosophical encounter? Is it a coincidence, that three non-conformist Jewish philosophers in the philosophical traditions of Athens were able to leave the autistic theorizing and rationalizing of Modern philosophy to find 'praxis'? Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas and Ludwig Wittgenstein. To them, the core of philosophy was the real life human encounter<sup>4</sup>. Philosophical text was just there to teach themselves and others about philosophical encounters. Philosophical practice, as we do it nowadays in the

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<sup>4</sup>Although Wittgenstein considered 'real life' to be outside of philosophy. He restricted philosophical activity to the critical investigation of the philosophers' dead alleys and thinking knots. See De Haas 2008.

economic form of small businesses, is a trial to realize this encountering philosophy in real life social situations with fellow citizens. How can we practice philosophical encounters in the defined and defining contexts of everyday life, community life and business life?

What does this mean for philosophy?

In this approach, we understand the contemporary 'citoyen' as a human being who considers himself situated in concrete 'real life' networks, and who takes the responsibility for his being part of the situations he is living. When the future of philosophy is practicing real life encounters between 'citoyens', in social and economic situations, what, then, are the challenges?

First, the philosopher is not a therapist, counselor or consultant. He or she is a real Socrates (not Nelson's conversation facilitator (see De Haas 2011a), nor the quasi-Platonic digger of hidden Ideas<sup>5</sup>). On the contrary, he is a citizen who is willing to encounter his fellow human beings and enters into dialogues.

Second, the philosopher is a public challenger. Not like Russell, Sartre, Foucault, Chomsky or Bernard-Henri Lévy, who are prophets, relating to the 'old time' political institutions. The encountering philosopher is not a prophet; on the contrary, he initiates dialogues and takes the responsibility for the situations he is part of.

In my view, philosophical practice is the consequence and promise of Modern philosophy, i.e., of those currents of Modern philosophy that are conscious of the pitfalls of theorizing philosophy and are searching for philosophical ways of human encounters. What are 'philosophical ways of human encounters'? Actually, this is a pleonasm. As Buber and Levinas showed, in an encounter - which is not a mere *meeting* - two human beings open to each other and to themselves. They accept the other human being as an *other* being, not reduced, and not reducible. In a dialogue - which is not a mere *conversation* - they share and explore the endless landscapes that they are and that they inhabit ... without the will to reduce their experiences to concepts and conceptions.

An *encountering* philosopher is someone who musters up the courage to challenge all cognitive and institutional reductions that

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<sup>5</sup>Plato's philosophy resembles more the open philosophy of Levinas than the so-called 'theory of Ideas' as has been thought by Christian users of Plato's writings. Plato's notion of 'eidos' and 'idea' is closer to Buber's encounter and Levinas' countenance than to the ontological 'Proper World' ('Hinterwelt', as Nietzsche called it) of conceptual Ideas.

occupy the situations that he and his guest are focused on in their encounter.

And they do this not just in the text of their dialogue, but particularly in the practice of their lives, in their everyday situations and encounters.

This is the philosopher's challenge, in his own life. And in his *caring* encounters with those who come to visit his place, he teaches his guest to philosophize in this sense, in this perspective.

And his *place* is not just and not primarily his consulting room; it is every situation in the landscape of his life - where another human being is longing for an encounter in his or her struggle for life.

It's a philosopher's challenge to be *present* in those situations in his 'community' - and to initiate that kind of dialogues.

**4. About the justification of philosophical practice**  
**4. What do you see as the most interesting criticism against your own position in Philosophical Practice?**

In discussions about my practice, there are two issues: justification and the political.

In the business world where I try to market my practice, clients ask me if I can guarantee the quality of my interventions. They are used to asking for the results of the services they buy from consultants and coaches. I think, they are right; they have to be curious about the results of the services that they pay for. Besides, private customers ask if my services will be paid back by the health insurer. I think it a shortage of philosophical practice that we hardly are able to give more than vague hope of 'success' to our guests. So far we have neglected the issue of the justification of our practice. In the new Indian journal of philosophy, *Manabayatan*, I tried to start this discussion (De Haas 2011c).

Another criticism against my position in philosophical practice came from Thomas Polednitscheck and was related to the political aspect of it. As I discussed above, I take this criticism very seriously. Again and again I try to understand the political aspects of the encounters with my guests, and I am experimenting with practical consequences of this understanding.

**5. Re-inventing philosophical practice**  
**5. With respect to present and future inquiry, how can the most important problems concerning Philosophical Practice be identified and explored?**

In short, I can summarize the conclusions of this essay in the following questions, which are perspectives for inquiries and dialogues.

Is it - in relation to the Modern history of Western philosophy - still justifiable to practice philosophy as a primarily *rational* and *conceptual* discipline instead of a real and open encounter of human beings?

What does it practically mean for philosophical practice to be a situated *encounter* between *in-reducible* human beings?

What does it practically mean for philosophical encounters to be an encounter in *open situations*, in which the people in dialogue are *responsible* members of the social networks that they are part of?

How can we *justify* our practice without reductive objectifications and generalizations, i.e., doing justice to the open, not-reducing and in-reducible character of philosophy and philosophical practice?

Asking, researching and discussing these questions, is only possible as an aspect of the everyday practice as philosophizing human beings and practitioners. Doing this, we will be re-inventing philosophical practice in the footprints of the great philosophers of our time, and, at the same time, finding contemporary forms for the age-old philosophical traditions.

If '*polis*' stands for the 'significant' community that we are part of; and if '*significant*' means: to make choices about the quality of our everyday lives; and if we consider '*choosing*' to be our own matter in our social relations and situations - then we are talking about the philosopher's political role. I mean, it is the practice of *freedom*. We turn meetings into *encounters*, conversations into *dialogues*. And we brake reducing and reduced conditions open to situations with perspective-full horizons. In whatever social situation, commercial or not. This implies, that we leave behind totalitarian and activist political philosophy (Marx, Sartre, etc.), as well as the *shopkeeper* and *counselor* mentality of philosophical practice. On principle, there is no difference between paid and not paid philosophical encounter. It is not a shame that a philosopher wants to earn his money with philosophical encounters. On the other hand, the content of the philosophical service cannot be dependent on the payment; it is always a real and heartfelt human encounter.

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