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ARTICLES

HOW I SEE PHILOSOPHY OF THE 21ST CENTURY

PHILOSOPHY IN THE 21ST CENTURY: SOCRATIC PHILOSOPHY THAT MATTERS AND ENGAGES WITH PEOPLE

Esa SAARINEN

The way I see it, philosophy should serve human flourishing. To this effect, philosophy should break away from its academic and scholarly boundaries, take seriously its Socratic origins, and develop communicative strategies that work in the contemporary context.

Philosophy is the art of thinking and its chief instrument is reason. Each human being possesses the potential for thinking and for insight. Accordingly, philosophy should strengthen that capacity. Philosophy aims to contribute to the creation of a better life as a result of an individual's improved thinking.

Thus understood, philosophy is more an activity than a discipline. Indeed, in my opinion philosophy should insist on personal, context-sensitive, multi-methodological, multi-layered and polyphonic dialogue with people. Connectivity and relatedness are of the essence. Philosophy thus conceived operates across paradigms and covers existentially, pragmatically and humanly fundamental aspects of life with energy, excitement, a sense of integration and a feel for the relevant.

This is the Socratic call in philosophy, the challenge we should face head-on and take as the guiding light to the 21st century. It stresses the ideal of a life that mentally examines itself and re-directs itself from within.

The call is for improved self-leadership. It is one of critical reevaluation and reflection. Life takes place contextually and in the presence of systemic multidimensional factors. Along with the theme of self-leadership two further critical dimensions for philosophy are therefore the understanding of systemic wholes, and the ability to relate one's own activities to the on-going and emergent processes in the environment. Socratic philosophy of the kind I endorse is consequently an essential ingredient in a conscious self-reflective life. It is equally as action oriented and pragmatic as it is broad-minded.

A key word of philosophy for me is *change*. This is contrary to what one might be inclined to think in the aftermath of the Platonistic focus on eternal essences, enthusiastically grasped by much of academic philosophy (as revealed brilliantly by Richard Rorty). Philosophy should work for change, I believe - change in the service of an improved, enhanced, better life, personal excellence in life, as operated *through the realm of thinking*. Such is the call of Socratic philosophy, the way I see it.

At the same time philosophy incorporates the right, even the duty, to *investigate the bigger picture* – including the bigger picture of a small picture, a locality, that of an individual human being in the midst of her immediate context.

People are connected, and the world is connected. Environmental issues and the challenges that face us all en masse, such as climate change, the challenges of *living together* in a sustainable way, will call for the continual and

living grasp of the big picture. There is no way to dismiss the concrete, political and personal-choice related, micro- and macro-level challenges pertaining to the environmental issues, and the necessity of finding new ways to collaborate globally across once-overbearing walls of separation. This is the arena in which the fate of the human race in the 21st century will be decided, and they are themes regarding which philosophy has a contribution to make within academia and beyond it. It calls for influence-seeking media philosophy and for an attitude to communicate and engage in a dialogue that counts (Taylor and Saarinen, 1994.)

People need dreams, and people need hope. I think philosophy could and should provide both. Indeed, I believe it is uniquely well suited for the job. Philosophy serves no particular interest and therefore can serve the general interest. It is ready to fly out to the limits of reason and beyond, relying on the creative force of words, concepts and language. Unlike sciences, philosophy does not waver even when facing the seemingly impossible, the dimension of the widely and wildly speculative. Instead, philosophy plays and dances with the future and thus can create in unexpected ways. The margins, the peripheral, and the seemingly inconsequential, constitute a potential for a philosophy in search of the essential.

Philosophy helps in figuring out what cannot be decided by facts and information. Philosophy is a visionary art, a critical acumen of the human condition. Facing cynicism, the golden calf of narrow-minded interests, egoism and arrogance and chauvinism in various forms, philosophy celebrates life and stands up for the future.

I envision philosophy in terms of people. I see it as an enterprise of people for people. This means focusing upon the

human potential, upon human beings that are capable of reasoning and thinking with individuality, courage and insight, and who *operate* with ideas and *create* in a space that is conceptual and often qualitative, personal, and visionary. The point is to reinforce that dimension.

More than about increased knowledge, philosophy is therefore about the on-going and personal vision- and perspective-building. As in art, so in philosophy, personal engagement is of the essence. Each individual needs to think her thoughts for herself. Philosophy wants to enrich that ongoing process of constant renewal in mental life and orientation in action. The point is to engage the individual in dialogues of enrichment, renewal and uplift, in an effort to help her internal processes of understanding (Gadamer) as driven by the ideals of an *insights-rich life*. This dialogue – the process of mental building-up, the education of the mind (Dewey, James), edification (Richard Rorty) – is the true context of philosophy with respect to which philosophy must find workable, fresh, operatively explosive methods, insights and actions to fit the demands of the situations to hand.

In Search of Style that Works

Academic philosophy might enjoy its narrowed-down practices, but philosophy with a Socratic call desires to turn to the real world.

In the real world, and in a real-world philosophy, style is an integral part of the content. This is a world in which there is no “view from nowhere” (as Thomas Nagel aptly put it), and the neutrality of methods and styles can only be declared by a

philosopher who pretends she has access to an unbiased meta-level super-truth.

Philosophy is about perspectives that engage in a dialogue and spark inspiration. This is one reason why style counts. Long live the literary and philosophical genius of a Schopenhauer, Nietzsche or Bergson, or, closer to us, the deep humanism and literary brilliance of Isaiah Berlin and George Steiner, or the flamboyant delights of the philosophers of the French brand, from Derrida to Irigaray. There is no reason to look down on “scientific”, “formal” or scholarly philosophy, or the debates of academic philosophy, but the fact is, typically they fail to generate movement of thought for people outside the narrow circle of academic philosophy.

This is not to blame a philosopher if she fails to inspire, say, a manager, a medical doctor, an architect, a young engineer, a politician, a housewife or a in-house-husband, or a musician. My point is that contributing in ways relevant for people at large, as opposed to other academic philosophers, is *one of the ways* in which philosophy should be evaluated. This is an arena that cries out for recognition and serious work. The world needs responsible, prudent, wise, courageous, fair, wide-thinking and multi-perspectivistic, mentally active managers, medical doctors, architects, engineers, politicians, housewives and in-house-husbands, musicians – *people* that want to take a philosophical, reflective and self-critical appraisal of their lives, and wish to act with more judgement and insight. Whatever the systems of our lives, we need to find more systems intelligent ways to live within them (Hämäläinen and Saarinen, 2007). The Socratic call for a self-examining life *is* there fundamentally in any future of the world that makes sustainable progress. We should recognise the

challenge this implies for us as academic philosophers and as contemporary heirs of Socrates.

I am not value-free here. Certain choices have been made. Speaking personally, I do not see how my lectures or seminars with managers and for the general public would have been productive and rewarding without those choices. (See Saarinen and Slotte, 2003, Saarinen 2008.) Philosophy serving the cause of the good life is not value-free. Certain things count more than others because not everything will enhance the prospects of the good life. This in itself is hard to quantify, although undeniable. Philosophical pedagogy, methodology and communicative choices should resonate not only with content, abstractions, and arguments. It should address tough questions of impact, usefulness and connectivity.

In addressing questions of influence, the philosopher will have to choose her colours because not all causes are just. Personally, as a professional philosopher working with business managers and people with power positions, I do not perceive myself as a performance coach. I think philosophy can contribute to a leader's level of performance but even more important is a contribution in the dimensions of human flourishing, dignity, freedom, justice and love. The point is to generate influence for the sake of the good.

First Philosophy as Philosophy of Life

For me, the core of philosophy is the philosophy of life. Accordingly, philosophy must have dynamic impact on three critically important arenas of an individual's life: self-leadership, understanding wholes, and activity in complex environments.

In order for philosophy to have communicative impact and dialogical appeal, it cannot be content with the stingy discourse of academic philosophy only. A personal way forward will involve personally inspiring discourses (as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche in particular realised). That is the personally tuned pathway of human dignity that the Socratic approach to philosophy points to.

Without wanting to sound self-centred, let me offer some perspectives based on my personal experience as a practicing philosopher. In addition to my academic work, I have worked extensively with businessmen and –women, as well as with people from all walks of life, for almost three decades. Tens of thousands of people from outside academia have attended my philosophical settings. The chief format has been that of a lecture while in specific cases a personal dialogue has also been instrumental. In my *positive philosophical practices*, as I would put it, the key is connectivity, relatedness, and relevance for whoever is present. My Socratic philosophical practice is not about lecturing to people about philosophy. It is not about proving my scholarship to an audience. It is not about arguing a particular point. Typically in my lectures, I do not mention one single philosopher, and the entire lecture is jargon-free. My project is about creating an inspiring platform for people to re-connect with themselves more deeply in the dimension of thinking, and to gain insight for their lives. Rejecting both the scholarly and the guru-paradigm, the insights that emerge are not intended to take place on my terms, but on those of the participants. The point is not that people walk away from the lecture thinking more like I do, but more as each is thinking for herself after intensive and focused reflection.

I believe the 21st century does need such platforms of thinking, such enriched contexts to live out and experience one's own thoughts, in the service of life that proceeds and celebrates its miracles.

More than anything, my style of Socratic philosophy calls out to people to take their own thinking seriously – much more so than what is required by the immediate challenges she may face. Philosophy for people is inspiration for the individual to elaborate on *the voice and subtleties of her own thinking*. It is an invitation to think beyond the obvious, beyond the immediate concerns and beyond the fashionable clichés. Philosophy for the everyday is an act of empowerment through the realm of thinking, a celebration of our tremendous human endowment of experience and insight.

One radical aspect of philosophy as I see it, from the point of view of prevailing academic philosophical practices, is the way it encourages us to encounter each other's equals.

I take particular pride in the fact in my Paphos seminar, arranged 30 times on a commercial basis and with over 2000 participants since 1995, any kind of people can sign in to attend. The Paphos seminar is sold to the general public just like a holiday on Cyprus is. Anybody can come. The actual result is that any group of about 100 participants is radically heterogeneous. People of different rank and file.

Meet one another on equal terms. Irrespective of their status or education, age or wealth, people enrich one another as each investigates privately one's philosophy of life and prevailing perspectives.

From the point of view of me as a philosopher serving as the conductor of an emerging thought concert, it is essential *not* to dismiss people on the basis that her issues are not

“deep”, “serious” or “intellectual” enough. The point is to engage in *a dialogue with people in the living present* with the intent of a personal and yet mutually co-created going-forward. The aim is to increase the understanding of oneself, of the complexities of life, and the gestalts of the wholes in which one is operating.

The way I perceive it, philosophy concerns everyone and concerns itself with everyone. Philosophy *is* a concern – *an on-going concern to engage in* rather than a subject to be looked at and learned. The fundamental core objective of philosophy is its *open-door commitment to a dialogue*.

Increasingly, however, since the Second World War and in the course of what Mark C. Taylor calls hyperspecialisation, academic philosophy has given up *the ancient promise of philosophy* for the benefit of some intellectually intriguing but alienated-from-life super-symbol management studies as the true task of philosophy. No doubt the motivation here is political and economic, an effort to appear respectable along with sciences. Yet the objective should be to maintain philosophy’s magnificent dialogic, life-enhancing undertone, to do justice to both its nobility and commitment to the everyday.

We will have to realise that reality is the true arena for us as philosophers, like it was for Socrates, for Sartre or for the American pragmatists. There cannot be any significant philosophy for people outside the realm of the real. In philosophy for life, thus conceived, even more important than new knowledge is therefore the vitalisation of thought and personal insight for the implementation of action in the service of a better life. It turns to people on *their* terms and from the point of view of a positively tuned life in the mode of becoming.

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