

# The uneasiness of being a philosophical practitioner

by Albert Hoffmann

Since several years now, I have been working as a philosophical practitioner and there always was a feeling accompanying me, most of the time hardly conscious, hiding somewhere in the background of my mind, sporadically becoming more perceptible and then disappearing again under the surface of other thoughts and emotions. When I would be asked to name this feeling, I could call it a sort of unrest, a certain constant tension, an unsatisfied desire, a confused search for something unknown, a very peculiar uneasiness.

What I would like to do here, is to share some very personal thoughts about what I am feeling, hoping, of course, that these highly subjective reflections may be considered interesting by other philosophical practitioners, or, even better, that some of my colleagues may have experienced similar confusions.

The title of this essay *the uneasiness of being a philosophical practitioner* is intended to cause a certain uneasiness itself, at least it would have this effect on me. If I would read it, I would be tempted to ask the author the following questions:

Hey Albert, are you serious?

Is there a job more satisfying than doing philosophy and bringing philosophy into to the life of other people?

Don't you see, how privileged you are, what are you complaining about?

To which I would answer:

I am not complaining at all, you can have the best job in the world and still feel uneasy, and serious I am very seldom, but sometimes it happens even to me. Maybe the uneasiness has something to do with the concept of *job* in general, but maybe it really has to do with the part that philosophy is playing in this activity, and maybe it also is caused by the quest for seriousness...

When I read the program of an ICPP (International Conference on Philosophical Practice), it doesn't matter which one, I see a diversity of perspectives, methods and topics, unparalleled by any other scientific conference, and that's great, but at the same time it also shows this specific unrest I am talking about, it is as if all of us are a bit lost and searching our way; we definitely didn't settle down, yet, maybe we never will.

I think this state of affairs is not just a phase, it's linked to the very essence of philosophy. Robert Spaemann, a German philosopher who died not so long ago, once wrote in one of his essays that whereas other sciences occasionally have a crisis of their foundations, philosophy is different: Philosophy *is* an institutionalized and permanent crisis of foundations, because its foundations are always part of its topic and therefore also subject of controversy.

And as philosophy always is in crisis, how shouldn't this affect the mind of the philosophical practitioner? Philosophy (hopefully!) is the source material of his activity, how shouldn't its shaky, controversial nature cause a big turmoil in his head? (This is, by the way, the reason, why I think that there is a huge difference between philosophical practice and psychotherapy. Philosophical practice is for the psychologically healthy, for stable people. With a bit of irony, you could imagine the following ad for philosophical practice: YOU DON'T HAVE PROBLEMS, NO PROBLEM, WE WILL FIND THE RIGHT ONE FOR YOU!)

Another source of uneasiness and unrest in philosophical practice is *metaphysics*. In the Platonic dialogue SYMPOSIUM, Eros is described as a philosopher, and his very essence is unrest. He is defined by his longing, the longing for something outside his control, even outside conceptual control, and that's what gives him joy and uneasiness, happiness and unrest at the same time. (The best example, I know, for the fact, that losing control doesn't necessarily cause anxiety, only, but also pleasure, is *sex*. In this respect, sex and metaphysics have a lot in common.)

Now, I know that there are some very important analytic philosophers, to whom *metaphysics* is almost a four-letter word. And in a way, they are right, they are the *serious* philosophers, they are the only adults in the room. You can imagine, what advice they would give to a teenager (aka metaphysical philosopher):

Don't follow this handsome, mysterious man, don't follow this beautiful, enigmatic woman, they are leading you straight into the abyss and all will end up in a catastrophe.

And for sure, sometimes it really does end badly, and sometimes you should listen to the only adults in the room, but not always. Not every promise is a deception, and sometimes you should take the risk, because it can be so sweet and satisfying to follow the temptation of metaphysical speculation. We shouldn't, as philosophers and as philosophical practitioners, avoid the metaphysical virus, we should infect our clients with it, that they have the privilege to feel the same unrest as we do.

There is a third source of uneasiness in the life of a philosophical practitioner, maybe the most important one, and that's the lack of money. Closely linked to this problem is the question of professionalization: Should philosophical practice become a regulated profession, regulated by law and internal rules, with a required curriculum for future practitioners, mandatory exams, an official code of conduct and its own official professional organization, where membership would be mandatory for all philosophical practitioners?

Do we want this? Of course, I can't speak for all my colleagues in the world, so I better should ask: Do *I* want this?

The short answer to this question is a clear NO.

The long answer is: No, but yes.

No, because of all the things I have said before, no, because of the wild, controversial character of philosophy, no, because of the diversity and heterogeneity of philosophical practice. No, because the regulation of philosophical practice would sooner or later exclude a lot of paths, which are taken today, no, because we may end up in a situation, where some philosophical

practitioners would be forbidden to call their activity philosophical practice, even though it may be more creative and philosophical than the rest.

So, it's a definitive *no* from me, but even a definitive no isn't always a definitely definitive no.

Without some professionalization and institutionalization many students of philosophy will continue to face the unpleasant choice between starving and working in a field which has very little to do with their passion for philosophy. As nobody wants back a situation, where philosophy is something for dukes and millionaires, only, we really are pushed into the direction of professionalization and our uneasiness is growing. But maybe there is a way out of this messy situation, a risky way for sure, but still a way:

What if we play a bit theater, the theater of professionalization? Let's set up some educational programs (with criteria so loose, that everybody passes), let's create favorable statistics for the authorities to prove the social utility of philosophical practice, let's do regular scientific conferences (but this we are doing already!) and, most important, let's design beautiful, colorful, professional looking diploma, not only for practitioners, but also for our clients. (I am sure, they will love it!)

Why I've called this way risky? Not because I am afraid someone would find out that we are cheating. Actually, we are not cheating, at least not in the sense the word "cheating" normally is used. We are not selling something worthless for an exaggerated price, pretending it is highly valuable. Rather we try to seduce people to opt for something which is much more valuable than they think.

No, the risk lies somewhere else: Sometimes clever people think that they are using something for their own purposes without realizing that it's using them. Professionalization and institutionalization seem to be just a formality, but this formality may form and deform us, and with time it may turn us into something we never wanted to be.

The uneasiness of being a philosophical practitioner won't go away, so it seems, whichever path into the future we may choose. Therefore, I would like to finish this essay on a lighter note, with a suggestive metaphor for the problem of seriousness. The topic of seriousness was always present in our reflections, even though it was not its primary focus. Is our profession a serious one, are we taken seriously by other people, are we considering ourselves as serious, scientific, reliable professionals?

Maybe the following will help to clarify my position on this topic (or maybe it will blur all the lines):

In many countries, prostitution is illegal. But also in countries, where prostitution is legal, a brothel seldom advertises openly the services it offers, at least not on the entrance of the building. Very often prostitution uses a cover up, and very often this cover up is *massage*. Brothels regularly present themselves as massage parlors. This cover up is not randomly chosen, normally you won't find brothels present themselves as, let's say, dental offices, grocery stores or coffee shops. Of course, massage and prostitution are two completely different activities, there is no doubt about it, still they are somehow connected, or let's say, they work with the same object, the living human body. Touching is an important part of both professions as well as the activation of blood circulation and the work with the sensibility of skin and muscles.

In Zürich (prostitution is completely legal in Switzerland), where I've lived for many years, there was a famous brothel, which had a big ad above the entrance of the building, saying:

#### ONLY SERIOUS MASSAGE

This inscription was amazingly ambiguous. On the surface, it was just the usual cover up, *serious* most probably indicating that there was absolutely no sexual activity. But when you consider that almost everybody knew what was going on there, the wording appears to be defiantly ironic. Of course, sometimes it's socially important to keep the appearances, even when all people know, but here it was a bit over the top. But then there is another, more disturbing layer of possible meaning: What if it's true, what the inscription says, what if this *is* the serious massage, the only serious massage?

So, in the same sense of *serious*, as in the above-mentioned ad, I would write over the gates of all philosophy departments of all universities ONLY SERIOUS SCIENCE and over all the places where philosophical practice is taking place ONLY SERIOUS THERAPY.