

*The Socratic Handbook. Dialogue Methods for Philosophical Practice*, Michael Noah Weiss (Ed.), LIT Verlag, Vienna, 2015. 431 pp. ISBN 978-3-643-90659-5.

Anyone who is used to explain to a layman what Philosophical Practice is about, happens to be familiar to face with the question: "Yes, but: how do philosophy practitioners work *concretely*?". The volume edited by Michael Noah Weiss is a real treasure chest for answering to this, and shows at the same time how misleading it would be to think that there is just one general answer.

First, the volume's structure shows very clearly that philosophical practitioners nowadays are practising Philosophy in many different forms: the contributions to the volume are distributed over six sections dedicated respectively to Philosophical Counselling (6 papers), Philosophy for Children (6 papers), Philosophical Walks (2 papers), Socratic Dialogue Methods (10 papers), Philo Cafés (3 papers<sup>1</sup>), and Contemplative Philosophical Practices (5 papers). Furthermore, one will find different approaches within one section to the same kind of Philosophical Practice, which are (i) described in detail, (ii) exemplified and (iii) put in a theoretical and philosophical context.

Even if the balance among (i), (ii), and (iii) may vary, the volume not only provides a very rich tool-box to anyone who wants to practice philosophy, but also reveals most of the authors' practical experiences embed in a particular theoretical background and/or in the philosophical tradition. This counters the prejudice philosophical practitioners would lack in theoretical profoundness or philosophical knowledge, which is unfortunately still widespread in the academic world. Actually, most of the authors included in the volume are active also in academic contexts. Reading their *curricula* gives a pleasant impression of the extent in which Philosophical Practice has developed and spread: being active as practitioners in 20 countries (almost all European), internationally networked as well as organised in national associations, the authors of the volume work at any level of the educational system, in their own *Praxis*, in public contexts, in business management and so on. Given this development, Michael Noah Weiss' contribution in the last paper of the volume, aimed to further a discussion about a professional ethics for Philosophical Practice, should be welcomed and taken very seriously.

The first section of the volume is dedicated, as already mentioned, to the original and probably most controversial form of Philosophical Practice: Philosophical Counselling. Since a main aim of the volume is to offer "dialogical methods", one issue being typically contentious is immediately given: should there be a method at all for Philosophical Counselling? This review is certainly not an appropriate context for daring even a brief sketch of the debate. It will suffice to say that the selection of contributions entailed in this section has a great merit: on the one hand, it illustrates a range of concrete methods or approaches, individual examples and specific topics.

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<sup>1</sup> Among them there is a paper by Lisz Hirn which actually deals with a method for dialogue in general (in light of her solid experience in working with teenagers and in schools, it would probably have better fit to Section 2), and not specifically in Philosophical Cafés. In the Section dedicated to Socratic Dialogue Methods, though, there is a paper by Camilla Angeltun describing a method which probably could be also used for a Philosophical Café.

On the other hand, it also gives very valuable philosophical inputs for deepening the reflection on philosophical issues related to Philosophical Counselling, e.g. on its aim and scope, on the relationship between rationality and emotions, on the (ambivalent) nature of questioning, and - also - on the very idea of method. Moreover, the philosophical practitioner is provided with valuable insights how to deal not only with the Other (the counselee), but also with himself/herself and the personal attitude (particularly relevant in this respect are the contributions by Niehaus and Amir). This is most valuable, since - as Anders Lindseth in his contribution rightly states - "It is not only important what the philosopher does but even more what attitude he takes" (48).

Anyone wanting to practice philosophical exercises in educational contexts or to facilitate dialogues in groups will be extremely grateful for finding an amazingly rich variety of methods and examples in Sections II (Philosophy for Children), IV (Socratic Dialogue Methods) and V (Philo Cafés). It is quite evident that all of them are strongly rooted and have been tested in the context of a solid experience of the authors as practitioners.

The style of the papers ranges between a kind of "instructions for use" - short, dry, abstract, very useful, but less pleasant to read - and a more narrative, reflective form, which embeds the method in a theoretical or experiential context. The illustration of methods and approaches is often supplemented by the description of their instantiation and realisation in a particular setting. The attention to the concrete context, the individual case, and the particular detail is indeed a precious character of Philosophical Practice, distinguishing it from the scientific discourse.

Let me now briefly mention section III (Philosophical Walks) and section VI (Contemplative Philosophical Practices) together, since philosophical walks have, to my mind, a contemplative dimension as well. Two aspects of Philosophy which unfortunately got lost in the development of Philosophy as an academic or even scientific discipline are its affinity with a *vita contemplativa* (life in academia is normally quite hectic and subjected to the dictate of productivity and efficiency) and the attentiveness to perceptual experiences<sup>2</sup>. The papers entailed in sections III and VI show that intellectual or spiritual contemplation may be strongly intertwined with physical experiences (perception, motion).

The section on Contemplative Philosophical Practices (CPP), however, is worth particular attention, since this seems to be a new, very promising direction within Philosophical Practice. CPP is said (365) to have been introduced by Ran Lahav, who provides the Handbook with the very illuminating paper which opens the section. CPP invites us to broaden our conception of Philosophy beyond the usual rational and conceptual dimension: it aims to a kind of holistic view of the human being practising philosophy, which comprehends intuitions, feelings, imagination, dreams, sense perception, existential experience, as well as forms of meditation or breathing exercises.

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<sup>2</sup> Even if Phenomenology, for instance, has recently recalled the attention on these issues theoretically, putting them into practice does not seem to be relevant in academic contexts.

One may ask whether philosophers do not incur a kind of *hybris* in wanting Philosophy to cope with almost every aspect of the human being and experience. Still, the papers included in the section make clear that (i) conceptions of Philosophy in the sense of going beyond the mere exercise of rationality can be well traced back to relevant part of the philosophical tradition, and (ii) that CPP - while taking intuitions, perceptions, imagination etc. as sources of insights - always includes a "second element, that of reflection, [which] is crucial for making the discourse philosophical (Lahav, 373).

To conclude, let me say a few words about the very concept of "Dialogue Methods for Philosophical Practice". In the volume, the pivotal role of dialogue is taken to explain why the Handbook is called "Socratic". One may wonder whether Plato's dialogues are "really" dialogues - but this question would go much beyond the scope of this review. Indeed, it is the way of practising and theorizing dialogue which distinguishes Philosophical Practice both from the academic way of practising Philosophy, and from most therapeutic forms of counselling. In this respect, dialogue is a topic very much worth to be investigated thoroughly as a main characteristic trait of Philosophical Practice: a kind of common denominator giving identity to this very heterogeneous field (the famous *Socratic* question "What is...?" can bring one trouble when referred to Philosophical Practice).

As to the controversial idea of practising philosophy with a "method", let me conclude this review diplomatically by pointing out one valuable aspect and one possible drawback. The desire of putting experience and ideas into a systematic and general form, for instance such as a methods, can be seen as very representative of a philosophical spirit, and does not necessarily correspond to a rigid commitment to a close form (recall Condillac's distinction between *esprit systématique* and *esprit de système*).

However, providing methods for Philosophical Practice as "instructions for use" may give rise to the illusion that anyone who applies them can be considered a philosophical practitioner, even without having solid philosophical knowledge. A quite liberal view about who could be endowed with the competence for practising philosophy seems to emerge in some contributions to the volume, and is, to my mind, virtually the only problematic aspect of this Handbook, which I consider in all other respects as a fundamental contribution to the development of Philosophical Practice, as well as an invaluable support for philosophical practitioners.

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