Reflections

the person identify some of her emotional, behavioural and thought patterns. This can help the person understand the way she interprets her world – her “theory” of the world (what I once called “worldview”). This is the “theory” which the person lives in her everyday life, not her conscious opinions and beliefs. Conscious thoughts and beliefs are a very limited part of the person’s world, and are often disconnected from the rest of her life.

Once the person starts understanding her “lived theory,” it can be treated as an ordinary philosophical theory (or theories): about the meaning of friendship, about what is important in life, about the nature of freedom, and so on. This is the time to philosophise more or less in the traditional sense. A critical examination of the person’s lived “theory” can expose hidden assumptions, logical connections, contradictions, etc.

But the great challenge is the next step: after we have gained some understanding of the person’s perimeter, it is time to go beyond its boundaries toward a broader reality.

One way to do so is to create a rupture in the fabric of one’s perimeter, a “clearing” in the psychological forest, an opening in the prison walls. And this is a difficult matter. Contemplative philo-sophy is especially helpful here, since it uses contemplative techniques and exercises to go beyond our usual patterns of understanding.

But methods are not enough. The road now requires a committed personal journey toward cultivating a new form of awareness. This is a state of mind of openness to the greater horizons of reality, and to its many aspects, or “voices.” Of course, as human beings we cannot abolish our perimeter. We must act and feel and live within definite psychological and cultural structures. But while living our ordinary life, we also maintain an inner “clearing,” an openness to beyond ourselves. This is wisdom – Sophia: the state of mind that is attuned not just to our own ways of understanding, but to all the voices of reality, and thus to the many fountains of understanding, of plenitude, of life.

What Does it Mean to Practise Philosophy?

Peter B. Raabe

There’s an ambiguity inherent in the word “practice.” It can mean to rehearse in order to improve one’s ability in a certain activity (the verb: to practise riding a bicycle), or it can mean the activity itself (the noun: to practise law). The title of this essay, “What Does it Mean to Practise Philosophy?” is referring to the latter, the activity of philosophy and not its rehearsal. But what exactly is philosophy?

Some philosophers claim that philosophy can’t be properly defined, and that any attempt to do so can’t be clearly understood by others. This is utterly nonsense that comes from believing that philosophy is necessarily esoteric, mysterious, or somehow even mystical. A philosopher who says that he or she can’t explain what he or she is doing clearly doesn’t know what he or she is doing. I like to define it like this: Philosophy involves examining the reasons we have for the values we hold as good, and the beliefs we hold as true, so that we can free ourselves from blindly following tradition, slavishly obeying authority figures, or acting only on our fallible feelings. But what does it mean to practise philosophy?

The practise of philosophy is not merely teaching it in a classroom. A philosophy instructor scolded me once for saying this. My response was to ask, “Is teaching law the same as practising law, or is teaching medicine the same as practising medicine?” The answer, of course is, No; teaching and practising are clearly not the same. The problem is that philosophy has for so long been defined as an exclusively academic activity - one person teaching another - that it’s very difficult for some individuals to conceive of it in any other way. I compare the practice of philosophy to law and medicine not because I want to arrogantly elevate the status of philosophy in some way, but in order to demonstrate how the word “practice” is commonly used - as one person assisting another with his or her specialised knowledge. Assisting is very different from teaching.

And no one would say that to practise law or medicine means to only defend oneself, or only heal oneself. Yet I often hear and read philosophers saying or writing that philosophy is practised alone, that it’s a solitary discipline. Take, for example, the practice of philosophical counselling. If counselling is a practice between two people then philosophical counselling is clearly not a solitary endeavour. How odd it would be if philosophical counsellors only counselled themselves! This also means that I can’t consider the activity of meditation to be the practice of philosophy. In my opinion meditation - when its meaning is to sit and listen to oneself or “the universe” - is neither philosophy nor a practice between individuals. It’s a private activity more like listening to music ‘listening to one’s inner music’ than the proffered practices of law, medicine or counselling.

To practise, whether it be law, medicine, or philosophy, actually always involves two important elements: first, at least two people - the patient or client and the specialist or expert; and second: a vested interest in the outcome held by both the patient or client and the practitioner. This second point is a crucial difference between the practice of philosophy and its academic pursuit. In academia there is no vested interest in the outcome of discussions about biomedical, business, political, ethical, or metaphysical issues. Of course, students do their best to resolve philosophical issues presented by the teacher or textbook, but there are no real-life consequences produced by the discussion’s conclusion, except perhaps in the student’s grade for the course. On the other hand, in life outside the classroom both the client and the philosophical practitioner do their utmost to come up with a fair, moral, and acceptable solution to the issues under discussion, because the client will have to live with the long-term effects of that final decision into the future.

Take for example a metaphysical or epistemological discussion on the topic of reality. A student may find this to be simply a fascinating, if somewhat taxing, mental exercise.

http://www.practical-philosophy.org.uk
But for a confused and distressed individual who actually came to me for philosophical counselling, finding an answer to the question of how we know what is real was much more than merely an academic exercise. His participation in, and his sense of belonging to, the world we call ‘real’ depended on it. Philosophical counselling helped this person clarify his thinking and define reality in a way that lessened his sense of estrangement, reduced his fear of losing control, and made his life much more bearable.

The practice of philosophy in the form of philosophical counselling can have a profound effect, especially on the lives of distressed individuals who have been labelled ‘mentally ill.’ There is no precise definition of the term ‘mentally ill,’ but it is generally applied as a professional diagnosis to people whose behaviour, thinking, and emotions are deemed to be outside the realm of the acceptable social norm. There is no conclusive evidence that any of the hundreds of so-called ‘ diagnosable’ mental illnesses are due to biological causes or chemical imbalances, or that any of them can be cured with psychoactive drugs. But given that many individuals who have been professionally diagnosed as being ‘mentally ill’ have been helped to overcome their diagnoses with philosophical counselling, it is fair to say that philosophical counselling is a practice of philosophy that can cure ‘mental illness’!

It might be argued that if an individual is cured with philosophy then the original diagnosis of mental illness must in fact have been a misdiagnosis. But, due to the number of diagnosed ‘mentally ill’ individuals who have been helped to overcome their ‘mental illnesses’ with philosophy, this argument throws into doubt the very diagnostic criteria it attempts to defend. Simply put, to practise philosophy as philosophical counselling can have a profound effect, especially on the lives of distressed individuals who have been labelled ‘mentally ill.’

The ‘beyond within’

Gerald Rochelle

I often wonder what Practical Philosophy is - its nature, its purpose, its worth. How, I ask myself, can a subject which has its roots in the academic exist outside it and have value? I accept that academic philosophy is an academic pursuit, and that some academic philosophers engage in Practical Philosophy as an academic pursuit, and this can easily weaken the ‘practical’ side of the project. Practical Philosophy draws upon its academic heritage and history. Yet it engages in Philosophical Counselling, work with children, or business, or with those that are not professional philosophers, and its philosophical method and perspective clearly lend value to these things. Between these two poles philosophers can be found on ethics or standards committees, or in roles where critical and moral analysis is deemed important.

However, when I wonder about the value of Practical Philosophy to the individual, the matter is not so clear. Some philosophers take a philosophical view developed by others, they are, for example, Stoic or Epicurean, and use appropriate and established philosophical tenets to support their own attitude to life. And I am left wondering if this is a Practical Philosophy. In some respects it is - it seems eminently practical and singularly philosophical - but, as far as individuals discovering something practical which is philosophical or by philosophical means for themselves, it is not. It may be that this is just ‘practising philosophy’.

Philosophy has an inherent drawback - it provides a rational method for asking questions but it is not so clearly equipped for providing answers. Philosophy can draw valid conclusions and find flaws in argument, but it cannot tell us that something is, or is not, the case beyond that the conclusion is validly drawn, or that there are no flaws in the argument that led to it. This is one reason why philosophy is an excellent therapeutic tool. Faith, on the other hand, provides answers because it supports belief. Whether such belief is justified, that is whether it warrants being held, although of interest to the philosopher, is irrelevant to the faith-based believer. But I am unsatisfied by this polarisation. It is a mistake to assume there are only two alternatives: that either it is philosophical and held back by the constraints of critical questioning, or it is faith-based belief that leaves no room for scepticism? The world is not so black and white, not a mixture of the two, more a zone of freedom which comes from being neither. For me, there is a road to an alternate way of thinking for the individual that can be navigated by philosophy but not entraped or overpowered by it, and which does not suffer the problems associated with accepting on the grounds of faith.

It may be that the only true worth of philosophy in a practical sense is that it is something we can ‘go through’, that is ‘go beyond’. Unless we can go through philosophy, we will always be stalked and dogged by philosophical questions - ‘what is the meaning of this?’, ‘what is the meaning of that?’, and so on. Having disposed of philosophy by going through it, we can see that which is ‘beyond philosophy’, and which is ‘within myself’. ‘Beyond’ in this sense is not related to ‘beyond’ which is some sort of absolute aim ‘beyond’ the everyday or commonly accepted, but, more simply, ‘beyond’ the trap of philosophical thinking.

Practical Philosophy, therefore, should be best engaged in the matter of working through philosophy in order to leave it behind. If we seek individual enlightenment or wisdom, our aim as Practical Philosophers should be to live ‘beyond’ philosophy and find ‘within’ what philosophy can so easily disguise, discredit or be so keen to do. The magic ingredient which is both ‘beyond and within’, and remains as yet undiscovered, is contained within the sense of realisation in the same way as it is contained in a revelation or an intuition. Realisation, revelation, and intuition are all had when what is the case is understood. For example, we live in a world which we believe to be unavoidably temporal. The realisation that time is unreal, and that it is nothing like what we think it is, in particular that it is not temporal, allows us the freedom to understand something which is ‘beyond (time) and within (a new non-temporal framework)’. It is ‘beyond’ the misperceived belief that time is real, and ‘within’ because the sense of realisation is known intuitively and via a moment of revelation. We may wonder if the sense of realisation must be attached to something as in