

Either/Or:

The Therapeutic Disciplines versus Philosophy and Religion

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Abstract: I trace Shlomit Schuster's main ideas about the practice of philosophy, and follow with a critical characterization of her thought which bears on philosophy's relation to psychology and psychiatry, on the one hand, and to religion, on the other, as well as on her basis of claiming philosophy's suitability for non-philosophers. I argue that Shlomit could be unnecessarily uncompromising in implementing her either/or yet not sufficiently discerning of philosophy's difference with religion. The most conspicuous tenet of Shlomit's thought – the relation between philosophy and the therapeutic disciplines – has been abundantly debated within the practical philosophy movement. As far as I know, the tacit assumption of her thought regarding the relation of religion with philosophy and its practice, in contradistinction, has not been addressed within this movement. Shlomit's life and death urges us to tackle this delicate yet significant subject.

Let me begin with a personal note. I could not join Shlomit Schuster's association for Philosophy Practice mainly¹ because of her anti-psychiatric, anti-psychologist and anti-psychoanalytic strike, which antedated her engagement with philosophy. In spite of my refusal, and maybe because of my independence, I was Shlomit's friend. She once said that one friend like me is worth a thousand members, and asked me to join the association before her death so that I could lead it when she'll be gone. Which I did.²

Reading her work for this article, and discovering some of it for the first time, I could find the basis for this friendship also in the similarity of some of our opinions, in spite of

notable differences. Although the wealth of views she engages with in her writings makes it sometimes difficult to know where her thought begins and where her quotes and paraphrases of others ends³, I will attempt to trace her main ideas about the practice of philosophy, relegating to notes the reservations I may have.⁴ I will follow with a critical characterization of her thought which bears on philosophy's relation to psychology and psychiatry, on the one hand, and to religion, on the other, as well as on her basis of claiming philosophy's suitability for non-philosophers.⁵

Shlomit had a very clear view of what Philosophy Practice was.⁶ She emphasized that Philosophical practice is rather Philosophy practice, the practice of philosophy itself, and should be named accordingly. Philosophy practice imparts wisdom, thus, it cannot be offered to others unless by someone who lives by it. The philosopher should set an example⁷ and offer to share in the practice of philosophy, in love and friendship. An almost forgotten philosophic virtue, friendship should be revived in the practice, in the philosophic hotline Shlomit had set in emulation of the Samaritans' phone line of which she had previous experience, and in everyday life.

Philosophy practice is offered to anyone who can sustain a rational conversation (Schuster 1999a; 1999).⁸ It is imparted in a Buberian form of dialogue, by an Achenbachian beyond-method-method, through the use of the history of philosophy, which, following Jaspers, she considered beneficial for deepening one's intuitions. She used to match philosophers' writings and clients or visitors, encouraging some of them to embark on a philosophic journey in which they could articulate their philosophic biographies and envision profound philosophic transformations. Sartre and others provided her with a criticism of psychoanalysis, as well as a framework for freedom and self-determination even of one's emotions. She had no use, however, of the existential psychoanalysis of original projects he developed and exemplified in the biographies he wrote.⁹ Instead, she claimed to be a

philosophical psychoanalyst, offering self-knowledge through philosophic concepts, themes and problematics. Her study of philosophical biographies, praised since as “an extensive and excellent introduction to philosophical biography” written by “an esteemed scholar of philosophy and psychoanalysis” (Wright 2006, p. 7), was intended as a qualitative study of the significance of philosophy for philosophers, by their own testimony. On the basis on a few telling philosophers’ philosophical autobiographies, Shlomit concluded that philosophy can be beneficial to others as well, disregarding the fact that philosophy may be differently appraised by philosophers and by non-philosophers.

This is a methodological criticism, whose significance would be highlighted once general characteristics of Shlomit’s thought, leading to potential further criticism, are formulated:

1. Being deeply religious herself, at least since her doctorate thesis onwards (as testified in the moving and noticeable thanksgiving), Shlomit did not clearly differentiate between philosophy and religion nor between philosophic transformations and spiritual conversions, in her writings¹⁰, in the association she created¹¹, in some of the sessions she described¹², and maybe in her own life. In her last years and during the course of her terminal illness, she converted to Christianity. She published articles about early Christians mainly in religious journals, yet proposed Johann Climacus as an ideal for philosophical practitioners (Schuster 2010)¹³ and referred to another patriarch as a philosophical practitioner and cognitive psychologist (Schuster 2012).

2. To the contrary, maybe exaggeratedly so, at any event in a way that became the mark of her philosophy, she strongly demarcated philosophy from psychology, psychoanalysis, and psychiatry. She offered philosophy practice as a non-complimentary alternative to all forms of psychological, psychoanalytical, and psychiatric therapies, even

insisting that counseling, now called philosophical psychoanalysis, should begin with a criticism of these therapies (Schuster 1999, chap. 1).

3. Thus, there seemed to be a Kierkegaardian either/or¹⁴ in Shlomit's thought, between one block comprising all psychological therapies, psychoanalysis, and psychiatry, on the one hand, and philosophy, undifferentiated from spirituality and religion, on the other. But not any spirituality would do: Shlomit was averse to any association of philosophy with the new age movement and some of its practices, such as the occult (see e.g., Schuster 2005). This was one of the reasons of her dispute with Lou Marinoff.¹⁵ I make mention of this here in order to exemplify how Shlomit could be unnecessarily uncompromising in implementing her either/or yet not sufficiently discerning of philosophy's difference with religion. This may have blurred the issue of the suitability of philosophy to non-philosophers, a positive answer to which she should not have inferred from philosophers' philosophical autobiographies. This is so because, as I see it, Philosophy is an arduous discipline, which gives its best to persons whose passion is rationality, truth, consistency. Religion has a wider appeal and answers better emotional needs. In Shlomit's personal life as well, it was not philosophy which proved helpful in her terminal illness, but religion, to which she unequivocally turned. This may be understandable, but worth noticing for someone who championed the practice of philosophy.

Shlomit did not demarcate philosophy from religion. She did not address the issue of their relations, an issue, to take some examples, on which Kierkegaard agonized and to which Spinoza devoted his best efforts. She relied on various religious existentialists' views, such as Bubber and Jaspers, and may have taken for granted that philosophy can be religious; or she may have adhered herself to an interpretation seeing St. Augustine's conversion to Christianity as a philosophical transformation. Ignoring the inherent tension between

philosophy and religion in her writings and along her life, she championed as a personal example of Philosophy Practice a life framed by religious knowledge and practice.

The most conspicuous tenet of Shlomit's thought – the relation between philosophy and the therapeutic disciplines – has been copiously debated within the practical philosophy movement.¹⁶ To the best of my knowledge, however, the tacit assumption of her thought regarding the relation of religion with philosophy and its practice has not been yet addressed within this movement. This is a delicate subject that Shlomit's life and death nevertheless urges us to tackle.

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Endnotes

¹ Another reason was her initial bitter dispute with Ran Lahav, which did not enable both of them to be in the same association. I thought that two associations for four Israeli philosophical practitioners were too much, and as I refused him, I had to refuse her as well.

² A fuller portrait of Shlomit and my relationship with her, can be found in my "In memorium" (Amir, 2016).

³ See, for example, Schuster 1999, p. 117.

⁴ For my own view of the practice of philosophy, see my forthcoming monograph, *Taking Philosophy Seriously: Rethinking Philosophers' Responsibility* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press), which contains the main articles I have published on the field for the last 25 years.

⁵ My opinions were known to Shlomit.

⁶ Like other Dutch philosophical practitioners, Shlomit studied with Achenbach, and brought philosophical practice early on from Holland to Israel.

⁷ What kind of example should it be? Shlomit lived on welfare in utter poverty, maintaining that she desires to live a creative life. She never let people into her apartment, which she shared with at least 15 cats, the exact number of which she did not want to disclose. She met friends and clients in the public spaces of her building, where she created a cactus garden and a living room. Although she talked Hebrew, the language of the place she chose to immigrate to, she never mastered it, certainly not its writing, a fact that hindered her success and lowered her chances to find work as a lecturer. More importantly, is personal example necessary for Philosophy Practice? Should we require it?

⁸ Sane and insane, clinically depressed, suffering from anxieties disorders and other psychological or psychiatric disorders or problems – Shlomit's anti-psychiatric and anti-psychoanalysis stand would even object

to these characterizations or diagnoses. I am a little more cautious (see Amir 2013a). I hope this is still a subject of major controversy among philosophical practitioners.

⁹ For Sartre's role in the thought of Shlomit, see Schuster 1997, 1999, pp. 101-108, 139-140, 2003, chap. 6. For Sartre's criticism of Freud, see Amir 2006.

¹⁰ For example, she writes, "The case histories in the second part of this book have to be understood within the tradition of the confessional and biographical method of philosophizing, which seeks philosophical knowledge through self-disclosure" (Schuster, 2003, p. 121). Although she reports Augustine's appraisal of *The Confessions* as being a religious text, she treats it as a philosophical one, indeed one of the three philosophical autobiographies on which she bases her thesis on the benefices of philosophy. Rabbis, Christian thinkers, and religious philosophers are championed in her books, notably Bubber and Jaspers. Yet, she mentions and uses many more, such as Russell's skeptical approach (Schuster 1999a) and Sartre's *Words* as a paradigm for self-description in philosophical counseling (Schuster 1997).

¹¹ We once had a discussion about a Rabbi who joined her association. I noted that a religious person of the stature of a Rabbi cannot have much use of philosophy. Between philosophy and religion, religion will always win for him. She objected to my demarcation, yet agreed with my argument about religion's overpowering philosophy.

¹² She rightly emphasizes the importance of ethics for emotions, and the role philosophic discussions on ethics can have on them. Yet she sends the non-religious client to read on good and evil in Jewish thought, on one occasion, and on the other, she reads some verses from Khalil Gibran's *The Prophet*. ("Read the book *On Good and Evil in Jewish Thought*" [Schuster, 1999, p. 137], says Shlomit, referring to Shalom Rosenberg's *Tov ve Rah be Machshevet Israel* (Tel Aviv: Misraad Habitahon, 1985). This is in the case of Simone, who "expressed the wish to make a radical secular new beginning rather than become an observant Jewess or convert to Christianity or any other religion" (Schuster 1999, p. 135). To Daniel's repeated question about his parents' behavior, "How could they have been so cruel?", Shlomit "tried to answer with verses from Khalil Gibran's *The Prophet*. In these verses evil is described as 'good tortured by its own hunger and thirst.'" [Schuster, 1999, p. 130]). For my own view of the role of ethics in philosophical practice, see Amir 2005, 2005a, 2009.

¹³ Shlomit writes about the joyful mourning Climacus engages in in preparation for his death, renouncing vice and after vice whilst climbing his ladder of perfection. Yet, such an endeavor makes sense only within a religious framework, in which repentance in preparation for an afterlife is required. Similarly, as testified in Young E. Rhee's article in this issue, she recommends the ascetic life of Byzantine patriarchs to philosophical counselors, disregarding the religious assumptions of such lives.

¹⁴ For Kierkegaard, the either/or choice is between the aesthetic attitude and the philosophic-religious one (see Amir 2014). Yet Kierkegaard pained to express the difference between philosophy and religion. Shlomit bluntly ignored the issue.

¹⁵ The other reason for this dispute, to which Peter Raabe alludes in this issue, is the certification Marinoff thought would be helpful to the movement.

¹⁶ My own view is given in Amir 2004, reprinted in 2013.