

Shlomit Remembered

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Abstract: In this essay I recall the first time I met Shlomit Schuster at a conference in Germany. She was under attack by another philosopher for her views on philosophical practice. I admired her fortitude and respected the fact that she remained steadfast in defending her perspective. I didn't always agree with her, but I counted Shlomit among my good friends and esteemed colleagues.

I first met Shlomit in person under the most shocking and unsettling circumstances. Of course, like most of our colleagues in the field of philosophical practice, I knew a bit about Shlomit from her writings before our initial encounter. For example, I learned how, in the 1970's, she was a student of creative therapy, which is a psychoanalytic variation of occupational therapy and psychodrama. Then in the 1980's she found answers to the many questions she had about the theory and practice of psychotherapy by studying philosophy. Eventually she discovered the practice of philosophy that was developed by the German philosopher Dr. Gerd Achenbach.

When she established her own private practice, Shlomit's work attracted professionals from the field of mental healthcare, such as psychologists and physicians, who came to her for philosophical consultations. She was one of a group of philosophical practitioners who spoke and

wrote of philosophical practice and philosophical counseling as *an alternative* to counseling and therapy. Not everyone, including me, agreed with this characterization of the new field. But I had never actually spoken with her about it until I attended the Fourth International Conference on Philosophical Practice in Germany in 1998.

I found the conference rather remarkable because the organizers had invited the general public to attend the various sessions as lay onlookers, and even to share informal meals with the philosophers. So there were many people of all ages in attendance who were not actually academics or counseling philosophers, and who had come to meet and converse with the ‘highly respected professionals’ from around the world. For me this respect for philosophers was a welcome change, given that in North America the pursuit of a career as a professional philosopher is considered as irrational as aiming at a ‘career’ in flipping burgers.

I first caught sight of Shlomit at one of the general meetings at that conference when she courageously stood up in the middle of the audience to challenge the speaker on the stage. At this time in the early history of the field of philosophical practice there was still a lot of debate about how philosophy actually ought to be practiced with ‘patients,’ ‘clients,’ or ‘visitors.’ In the emerging literature there were many heated debates regarding what ought to be the proper number of stages or steps within the various proposed methods of practice, and indeed whether there even should be any talk of ‘a method.’ But at this meeting the debate escalated out of all reasonable proportion. Shlomit became the focus of one of the most vicious verbal assaults by a philosopher I have ever witnessed. And to make matters worse, Shlomit’s attacker was, and still is, one of the most famous pioneers in the field of philosophical practice.

Perhaps I shouldn’t have been as shocked or surprised as I was. I learned later that this man was well-known for launching personal attacks, both in person and in print, at anyone who

disagreed with him. There are a number of instances in his books and essays where he twists philosophical arguments into both implicit and explicit personal insults, and where he allows a professional disagreement to cross the line of decency. For example, he writes in one of his books that the surest way to eliminate “bogus diseases” that have been invented by psychologists and psychotherapists would be “to eliminate those who reify them.” This would clearly be unacceptable inflammatory rhetoric from any professional, let alone someone calling himself a philosophical counselor.

This man’s verbal attack on Shlomit was an attempt to publicly humiliate her, and to silence her with the power of his position. At this time in my career I still had an idealized notion that a philosopher is wise, kind, gentle, rather quiet, and introspective. In my mind Shlomit fit this image perfectly. But here was this famous philosopher raging over the loudspeaker system at the top of his voice, red in the face, fist pounding on the podium, pointing an angry finger at a colleague. This attack on Shlomit came from a man determined to establish his personal dominance in that new field. And it was aimed at a woman whose only goal—that I could see—was to offer suffering individuals a better alternative to the medical approach to mental suffering found in the politically controlled and legally regulated fields of psychiatry and psychotherapy. But this went contrary to the attacker’s plans. And he was determined not to let this woman spoil his vision of how this new field was going to function.

An understandable, and perhaps even justified reaction, from Shlomit would have been to shout just as loudly as he did, and to hurl personal insults right back at him. Instead, she spoke slowly and confidently, choosing her words with care. She was steadfast in her stance as a true philosopher, handling his verbal abuse with poise, grace, and dignity. She didn’t allow herself to be intimidated by the man’s international celebrity, nor by his loud voice and aggressive manner.

While he continued his personal insults and name calling, Shlomit stuck to her principles and offered only logically reasoned replies. And no one came to her defence.

This disagreement was being carried out in English. And due to what I assumed must be a misunderstanding of the language, the German audience began to laugh at Shlomit's measured responses to the angry insults and name-calling aimed at her by the philosopher on the stage. At that time the laughter was puzzling to me, but in several later conversations I had with other female philosophers it was pointed out to me that in 1998 there was still a very negative sentiment in Europe against female philosophers. Both the philosophers in the audience, and the general population who had been invited to attend the conference believed that women had no place in the elite professional circles of philosophy. The laughter against Shlomit—this woman who dared to claim she was a philosopher—trying to stand her ground against a 'real' philosopher was seen as comedic entertainment. In reality the male philosopher on stage was only reflecting the contemporary anti-feminist attitude of those in attendance.

After that terrible session I decided to introduce myself to Shlomit. When I approached her in the courtyard she seemed guarded and hesitant to speak with me. I imagined she was worried that I might also harbour sexist prejudices against her. And because I had been so caught up in the emotion of that confrontation, the first thing I asked of her was to help me understand what the argument had actually been all about.

She explained that a small group of U.S. philosophy professors, led by the one on stage whom she had challenged, disagreed with the practice of philosophy as a free-market enterprise. Instead they wanted to monopolize it by bringing it under the supervision of professors and mental health-care specialists by means of government regulations and state certification. She pointed out that at this conference a variety of names for the practice of philosophy had been put

forward, such as philosophical counseling, philosophical consultation, philosophical psychoanalysis, philosophical practice, and philosophy practice. She said that all these terms are valid labels for philosophizing in particular settings, but they're not proper nouns to which to apply a trademark of ownership, or obtain legal title protection so as to make them the exclusive property of some individual or group. And she felt that the attempt to licence practitioners was also completely misguided. But her vision of an unregulated field of practice, free from the methodological constraints inherent in psychiatry and psychotherapy, was contrary to the agenda of the philosopher on the stage.

In all her presentations and published writings Shlomit championed the German philosopher Gerd Achenbach's conception of philosophical practice: that of a "beyond method method." This open-ended approach to his clients—or as he preferred to call them, his 'visitors'—resembles the so-called 'continental' style of philosophizing. It's nature is often intentionally somewhat ambiguous, where terms are only thinly defined in order to invite a variety of interpretations. Shlomit emphasised its being non-clinical philosophy which does not require diagnosing, and does not result in it being a 'therapy' under the authority of any particular 'school.' This is what had sparked the rage aimed at her from the lectern that morning.

Whenever I think of Shlomit this unfortunate incident forces itself into my mind. But I know Shlomit to have been more than a defender of Achenbach's conception of the practice. She had a sincere compassion for her counseling visitors, seeing philosophical practice first and foremost as a way to help people in distress. For her it was more than just a way to make a living or create a name for herself. She worked hard to offer her visitors, as she put it, "a face-to-face relationship with a philosopher as a philosophical guide."

A number of years later, at another conference, I had the opportunity to travel beside her on a bus. We talked about our personal ideologies, our philosophical preferences, and our clinical experiences in our separate countries. And when we occasionally disagreed with each other we simply agreed to disagree. But one thing on which we found it easy to agree was to always remain friends. I feel very fortunate to have been considered a friend by a philosopher whom I have admired from the first time I read her words on paper, and respected from the moment I first met her in person. In asking her again about her courageous stand at the conference in Germany she observed that some events in life can be both very motivating and incredibly absurd at the same time. This made us both laugh. I prefer to remember Shlomit in that moment.