

# **The Passion to Understand People: Living Philosophy in Philosophy Practice**

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**A Review of Shlomit Schuster, *Philosophy Practice: An Alternative to Counseling and Psychotherapy*, Westport CT: Praeger, 1999. Pp. 224. \$59.95 (cloth).**

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For the last twenty years philosophy has been moving out of the ivory tower in order to come back to itself. It is becoming what it is: yearning to come home to oneself (Novalis). Philosophy's home and origin is human experience, suffering especially. Human experience is the beginning and end of philosophy. Philosophical scholarship then must be work for that end, and not for its own sake.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries professional philosophers came to be institutionalized not to say imprisoned in the academy. Then they worked only for other professional philosophers, their students and their academic institutions. In that time to be a philosopher was to be a professor of philosophy. Philosophy became detached from lived life, at times as dispassionate as the natural sciences were supposed to be. Even 'applied' philosophy was an academic pursuit to construct methods and ideas to be applied to society's issues (notably abortion, euthanasia, biogenetics), to be administered as it were. Applied philosophy is not philosophy's homecoming. For at home philosophy develops methods and ideas within lived experience in freedom from suspended

preconceptions ready to be modified. Thus previously established methods are not applied but re-created, and new methods are created directly on the ground of experience.

“Philosophy practice offers, at least potentially, what philosophy itself is supposed to offer: freedom from the preconceived, the ill-conceived, the prejudiced, and the hubris of knowing it all” (Schuster 64). With the new development of philosophy practice in the last 20 years, philosophy is becoming again what it is: enquiry within the thick of experience, passionate attention to lived reality. Accordingly we no longer have to be reminded that the origin of philosophy is wonder. And we readily discover wonder’s shadowed side: anxiety, the emotion directed at the unknown.

Ivory tower philosophy concealed, and philosophy practice discloses, that suffering in anxiety is as inspiring for philosophical enquiry as wonder. It is here where philosophy’s non-clinical approach to wellbeing begins. This beginning marks the difference between psychotherapies on the one hand and philosophy practice on the other. The former need to categorize and ‘diagnose’ troubling experiences; for the latter beholds it is a given that questions are to be asked afresh, again and again. Clinical approaches to wellbeing are mediated by previously established theories. The philosophical approach is immediate; it begins in wonder and thus hermeneutically. Philosophy practice is thus a most vivid footnote to Plato.

Lived experience never fully fits into pre-established edifices of knowledge and ways of understanding. Rather it contains impulses and energy toward knowing and understanding - ‘libido sciendi’. Schuster locates this notion in the Renaissance. Referred to by different words, it has accompanied us since Plato at the latest and culminates with Spinoza’s “amor intellectualis Dei (=realitatis)” and Wittgenstein’s “the life of

knowledge”. The life of knowledge accordingly is the moral life. Philosophy practice is life practice; life practice is philosophy practice. Unlike many philosophical practitioners, especially in the U.S., Schuster does not describe philosophy practice as an innovative ‘movement’, but locates it naturally in its natural place in human nature and the history of philosophy. This is one of the many gladdening features of her book.

Philosophy as life practice unites diverse people, regardless of their educational backgrounds, into a philosophical community. Thus philosophy is democracy without depending on an equality calculus. Individual persons cannot be fully objectified: they are also always “ends in themselves”. As such every individual has a right to be attended to without preconceived ideas and values and to be understood without prejudice. As she clearly shows: philosophy practice must be eclectic. The practitioner therefore must not work as an adherent and proponent of any one school or method of philosophy. Lived experience is the basis and container of philosophy practice. The primary connection between people in philosophy practice is not emotional but ethical - a connection all too easily negated. Many of our greatest sufferings stem from negation of this (ontological) ethical connection. Philosophy practice entails its affirmation. People are philosophical creatures and “[professional] philosophers have a concrete task of serving people and the community.” In the still small body of contemporary literature on practice of philosophy, authored by practitioners/philosophical counsellors, Schuster’s book is rare in its authenticity and lack of explicit or tacit self-serving purposes. She rejects and in her work prevents any resemblance to healers and gurus: philosophy clearly is not the stuff that healers and gurus are made from. If philosophy is therapy it is so in the oldest and best sense of the word: ‘therapein’ means ‘to attend, to serve’. Such serving as Schuster

ascribes to philosophy and philosophers as their most basic and central task precludes hierarchy. The philosopher servant has no master. The philosopher servant is held in the I-Thou, in mutual recognition and respect of each other as selves. With all due confidence in herself and her work Schuster is effortlessly humble.

Philosophy practice entails humility. Philosophy practice compels rich and varied scholarship and precludes conceit, let alone a sense of superiority, on its account. Any piece of expert knowledge in philosophy awaits its call by lived experience. The philosopher who has herself experienced the unity of philosophy and lived life, lived suffering and who is willing to attend and serve, and thus enter into dialogue is best prepared for the boundless work of philosophy practice. Schuster appears to be such a philosopher. She moves with ease and grace through the historical and contemporary contexts of 'philosophy as care' and enables the reader to remember that care is first of all a way of knowing which precludes inflexibility and prejudice and which is nonetheless the most objective knowledge humanly possible. Unprejudiced attention brings us as close to reality in itself as we can come--and far from our ability to issue provable statements.

Thus care is, cognitively and morally, the most demanding and the most risky form of cognition. As with other ways of knowing we cannot preclude its fallibility. Schuster, in her personal presence and in her writing, displays the kind of integrity, which is indispensable for care. This essential quality can be shown and beheld, but it cannot be measured. That is a great problem for the profession of philosophical practitioner in contemporary societies. The problem shows itself in the controversies over issues of 'certification' among philosophical practitioners.

I am using Schuster's term "philosophy practice", rather than the more common "practice of philosophy". I don't see a significant difference between the two terms. However the former seems more suggestive of philosophy as an integral aspect of living. A deficiency in philosophy may have more catastrophic effects than a deficiency in nutrition (28). Philosophy is a life necessity. That this has not appeared so during much of the last two centuries has to do with philosophy's academic institutionalization rather than its longer history. According to Schuster the aim of philosophy practice is "[to make] philosophy valuable and relevant for concrete situations and questions of individuals or groups. We don't live according to a philosophy, but we live philosophically" (34).

Shlomit C. Schuster has been a philosophical practitioner since the mid-eighties when the profession had been helped home by the German philosopher Gerd. B. Achenbach. His initiative and his work are to be admired greatly, and yet we do him and philosophy a disservice, if we elevate him as the founder of the practice of philosophy. He is one of the first, perhaps the first, explicit and active representatives of a *Zeitgeist*. Schuster evidently admires him without reservation, yet with a measure of sobriety which preserves her sense for historical and contemporary context.

Friend and foe alike assign power over the 'movement' to Achenbach. This is and has shown itself a dangerous modification of the admiration due to him as a splendidly creative initiator. Some admirers tend to put him on a pedestal as if for adoration. Foes envy what they perceive as his power and strive for power of their own. Either is alien to philosophy practice, and yet the dangers have been already manifest. Schuster alludes to the cold and tepid wars among different and mutually opposing American associations of

philosophical counselors. These are not wars over the substance and development of the work but over issues of accreditation and professional certification, i.e. the institutionalization of professional philosophy practice captured in a power structure. The proponents of certification so far focussed more on goals of admission to health care systems than the quality of the substantial work of philosophy practice. Schuster is one of the most outspoken and clearheaded opponents to current requirements of certification and institutionalization which does not prevent her from requiring demanding criteria for admissibility to the profession - criteria which she herself evidently fulfills.

Clearly a philosophical counselor must bring thorough familiarity with a large diverse variety of philosophical understandings of reality to a dialogue. A philosophical counselor must be well versed and skillful in diverse methods of philosophical questioning and reasoning as well as a good scholar in the history of ideas. Schuster is evidently committed to scholarship as a (mostly tacit, but necessary) ingredient of philosophy practice. She might have emphasized this more poignantly in her book. For the scholar to be a philosophical practitioner he or she must be free of ulterior purposes (propaganda, egotistical goals, etc.) in authentic self-to-self dialogue with his or her client. As I remarked above, some basic and central qualities of a philosophy practitioner are not quantifiable.

Dialogue has to be an “open conversation” within the field of the client’s experience from which philosophical questions and transforming insights may be generated. Full attention and empathic understanding require suspension of pre-established judgments and values on the philosopher’s part.

This is necessary for the beneficence of the dialogue for the client. Thus philosophical questions and insights are newly generated in every dialogue even if those may be traced back to Plato or the Stoics or Spinoza or Nietzsche or . . . . If they are thus traced back historical philosophers become, as it were, partners in the dialogue. A philosophy practice dialogue is then a dialogue with life, which forms and develops the interlocutors as well as philosophy itself.

“The client’s situation is considered unique and for that reason not to be understood through generalization or reduction” (97). This is sufficient reason for not seeking legislation and institutionalization for philosophy practice. Teachers of philosophy practice must be mentors, not certifiers. Philosophy practitioners best relate to each other as mutual mentors, and to their clients as mentors in philosophy practice as life practice. Socrates’ maieutic approach to teaching in the market place is still unsurpassed and most alive in philosophy practice. If such incalculable equality is excluded from philosophy practice it will be alienated from itself.

There are various areas of activity in the realm of philosophy practice. Schuster addresses her book to her main activity: Philosophical counseling on a one-to-one basis. The subtitle of her book, “An Alternative to Counseling and Psychotherapy,” is somewhat misleading as she and most other philosophy practitioners refer to themselves as counselors. We don’t give counsel so much as enable a client to live productively with questions inherent in their life situations, to change perspective and live more fully with their problems rather than under their weight or against them.

Schuster describes her approach as pragmatic and eclectic. It must be pragmatic as it entails unprejudiced, therefore unselective, attention to detail. Attention does not

distinguish between ‘important’ and ‘unimportant’. In reflection through philosophical-biographical dialogue, a half-unbuttoned shirt (Dani) or white sport shoes (Yoni) may turn out to be very important in particular --though not in general. “[a]ll these exterior details – not to mention the “interior” ones of a persistent stream of thoughts and associations--are of paramount importance to the understanding of philosophical-biographical discourse”(122). It must be eclectic, as philosophy practice can not rest on any one method. I have met few philosophical practitioners whose work and writing ensues so seamlessly from human nature and philosophy’s place in it. In light of this it may be of some concern that Sartre takes center stage in Schuster’s work. Yet this concern can be dissolved. Sartre is a protagonist in some of the philosophical narratives, which constitute the last part of her book. Here she describes “[ ] part of Sartre’s influence on my practice: reflection on the possibility of making something of the person one has become through life’s events, other people, and oneself; reflection on the possibility of choosing oneself, one’s emotions and thoughts, and one’s future” (107). Schuster does not practice Sartrean existential therapy. Rather she utilizes his thought to ‘choose herself’ and her ways in philosophy practice. She is, as it were, in dialogue with Sartre (and a diverse variety of other philosophers). This becomes the most important facet of their work”(122). Philosophical practice is extremely demanding professional work which is work always also for love as connectedness.

Shlomit Schuster’s book on philosophy practice is the clearest, most comprehensive and authentic work in the--as yet very small--body of contemporary literature on the subject that I have come across so far. I read it as a portrait of philosophy practice at work, in its historical and contemporary contexts as well as a personal account

(in Part II) of Schuster's work with different clients. These were stories of a philosopher expertly and lovingly connecting with searching or desperate persons.

Her accounts, in Part I, of a variety of contemporary philosophy practices in Germany, Canada and the Netherlands give readers an impression of the diversity in approaches - so diverse indeed that one may find oneself somewhat troubled and confused. But the profession itself is still searching, and thus readers may enter into dialogue with any of the diverse philosophers at practical work these days. Schuster's book is an illuminating utterance in many possible dialogues.