

## **The Power of Ideas in Philosophical Practice**

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If we look at the approaches to philosophical practice that exist today, we will see that most of them focus on *thinking tools*. What practitioners offer to their clients is not ideas – about life, about morality, relationships, etc. – but rather tools to examine ideas. Indeed, in most sessions of philosophical practice the participants do not discuss the ideas of Plato or Nietzsche or Kierkegaard, but rather analyze the clients' ideas and experiences. And the philosophical practitioner helps the clients in this analysis – in analyzing concepts, exposing hidden assumptions, testing the validity of an argument, etc. From this perspective, the philosophical practitioner is viewed as a person who is trained in analyzing ideas: exposing hidden assumptions and questioning them, detecting logical connections and logical fallacies, drawing implications, etc. His knowledge of historical ideas is largely irrelevant. His main contribution is to help counselees examine themselves using reason, or thinking tools.

It seems to me that this exclusive emphasis on thinking *tools* comes at the expense of philosophical *contents* – in other words, philosophical *ideas*. By emphasizing the methods of reasoning, philosophical practitioners neglect the many treasures of thought which have accumulated throughout the history of philosophy. Great thinkers throughout the ages have developed profound ideas about life, and the history of philosophy is replete with deep insights and intricate ideas – theories about the meaning of love, conceptions of authenticity, distinctions between types of freedom, approaches to the self, to emotions, to moral obligations, and so forth. Unfortunately, these treasures of thought seem to play a minor role in philosophical practice, and are rarely mentioned in counseling sessions or in workshops. Very little use is made of, for example, Rousseau' view of the self, Buber's vision of relations, Ortega's theory of love, Dewey's approach to freedom, or Sartre's conception of shame.

This is hardly surprising. If you are interested mainly in tools or methods, you are inevitably going to ignore contents, namely historical ideas.

I believe that this is an unfortunate situation, because it amounts to trivializing philosophy. As philosophical practitioners we should ask ourselves what we can take from the historical treasures of philosophy – from the profound visions developed by philosophers throughout the

ages, from their insightful conceptions of human reality, from their complex responses to basic life-issues. If the answer is that we can only take thinking tools, then this is a very disappointing response. It amounts to throwing away the wonderful fruits of philosophical thought, and even attempting to invent the wheel anew. I believe that the goal of philosophical practice should be elevating life to the heights of philosophical reflection, not lowering philosophy to mere thinking tools.

How, then, can we use philosophical ideas in philosophical practice? How can we utilize deep philosophical visions from the history of philosophy to deepen our self-understanding, to elevate our way of being, to enrich our lives?

This is a difficult question, and for several reasons. First, the ideas found in the history of philosophy offer specific doctrines about human life, which may not be applicable to the individual. Seneca's conception of the good life, for example, or Schopenhauer's theory of the self seems to most of us too rigid and one-sided to adopt in everyday life. What use are such philosophical theories if I cannot apply them to my life? Second, traditional philosophical theories are usually very abstract and general, and as such are far removed from our everyday experience. In everyday life we are concerned about the neighbor's noise, about the boss's warning, about the dispute with our spouse over who should wash the dishes. These concrete issues seem very remote from the abstract theories that appear in the philosophical tradition.

Thus, the use of traditional philosophical ideas and texts seems far from simple. Nevertheless, on the basis of my experience in workshops and counseling, I believe that such ideas and texts can be used very fruitfully in philosophical practice. In this paper I would like to suggest a general approach to doing so.

### **The philosophical recital**

I suggest that philosophical ideas are important for philosophical practice, but not because we should impose them on our lives and start living according to them. Life is much richer, much more multi-faceted and open-ended any than any given theory. My point is, rather, that ideas have the capacity to inspire us, awaken our self-understanding, and influence us profoundly. This is what I call *the Power of Ideas*: Deep ideas about basic life-issues have a special creative and inspirational power, regardless of whether or not we accept them as true. In fact, the question of their truth or falsity is irrelevant. They can serve as seeds of reflection, arouse in us new

understandings, and deepen our way of being. In order to illustrate the Power of Ideas, I will start by describing what I named “the philosophical recital.”

In February of 2010, Victoria Caro organized at the University of Alcalá de Henares, in Madrid, a public performance on the topic of love. The 3-hour event included a variety of activities, such as vocal and instrumental music and poetry recitation, but its centerpiece was a “Philosophical Recital” which I composed on the topic of philosophies of love.

This 45-minute philosophical recital was performed on stage in front of the general public. It looked like something between a theatrical play and poetry recitation. Six readers read excerpts from philosophical texts on the topic of love – as if they were poetry. Some of the readings were accompanied by piano. I selected these short pieces from philosophical discussions of love by Ortega y Gasset, Maria Zambrano, Erich Fromm, and Krishnamurti. I edited them together so that they responded to each other and echoed to one another, and in this way I combined the four philosophical “voices” into a philosophical “choir” about the meaning of love.

The audience’s reaction was very positive. I believe that people were touched by the ideas expressed. Although the words that were read were few – you cannot squeeze too many words into 45 minutes, especially when you read them slowly and solemnly – nevertheless their impact was significant, like the impact of a poem.

I should emphasize that the texts from which the excerpts were taken are by no means poetic; they are ordinary philosophical discussions. And yet, when a few selected sentences were extracted from these texts and read as poetry, the words became powerful. Because when these philosophical words were given a space for listening, when they were detained and listened to carefully – they acquired a different presence. The mind no longer ran through the words as it normally does when reading an ordinary philosophy book, but rather opened itself to them, savored them, and treated them as carriers of deep and precious meanings.

An example is the following excerpt, which I took from the book *Estudios sobre el Amor* by José Ortega y Gasset, an important 20<sup>th</sup> century Spanish philosopher. I did not change his words, only split his sentences into verses. Try reading this text slowly, as if you read a poem, and witness how the words attain a poetic presence. (The original text is in Spanish, which was the language of the recital; the following translation into English is mine.)

When we love, we abandon our inner quietude  
and emigrate towards the object.  
And this constant emigration is loving.

Love is a flow,  
a current of emotional material,  
a fluid which keeps flowing like a fountain.  
Love is not a sudden discharge, but a continuous emanation,  
a psychic radiation from the lover to the beloved.

The experience of the philosophical recital demonstrates, I believe, that philosophical words can have a tremendous power. They can move and inspire us, awaken in us new visions, develop in us new sensitivities, and bring forth dormant parts of our being.

### **In philosophical practice**

So far I have discussed the power of ideas in the context of a recital – a performance in front of an audience. But a performance is very different from philosophical practice. In philosophical practice, whether in the form of a workshop or counseling, the participants are not mere viewers, but active partakers who seek to actively deal with their personal lives. How can the power of ideas be used in this context?

To answer this question, I should first explain how I see philosophical practice. Nowadays there is a broad range of approaches to philosophical practice, aimed at different goals and using a variety of methods. Obviously, I cannot speak in the name of all of them.

As I have written elsewhere<sup>1</sup>, for me philosophical practice is a process of reflection and self-reflection that is aimed at a personal transformation. More specifically, in everyday life I am normally enclosed within a narrow attitude to life, or what I call my *perimeter*. I am stuck in rigid patterns of emotions, thoughts, attitudes and behaviors which form a constricted way of being that involves only superficial aspects of myself. Just like Plato's cave in his famous allegory of the cave, my way of being is limited to a narrow understanding of myself and my world. Philosophical practice, as I see it, is based on the vision that I can expand myself beyond

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1. See various texts on my website [www.trans-sophia.net](http://www.trans-sophia.net). A more complete text is due to appear in my upcoming book (in Italian) with Apogeo, *Philo-Sophia: philosophical practice, philo-sophical counseling, and beyond*.

my boundaries, that I am more than my normal perimeter. It is motivated by the yearning to go beyond my perimeter and take part in a greater reality.

This approach to philosophical practice differs considerably from those approaches that are aimed at solving problems (marital tensions, problems at work, anxiety, etc.). Solving problems means normalizing the person – helping him return to normal life. In contrast, the goal of inner transformation means transcending normal life towards new and greater horizons.

From the perspective of inner transformation, thinking tools have a limited, though important role. They can help us analyze the geography of our perimeter, but they cannot take us beyond its boundaries. A critical examination of our perimeter can serve only as the first stage of the philosophical process. Once we understand the layout of our Platonic cave, our perimeter, a second stage must follow, a stage which I call *trans-sophia*: beyond philosophy. In this stage we seek to step beyond our perimeter to a broader way of being. Here thinking tools cannot help us very much. What is needed is no longer mere analysis, but a source of inspiration, wisdom and plenitude towards an inner change.

The trans-sophic task of stepping beyond our boundaries is tremendous. I believe that it requires a personal and open journey, which cannot be summarized in a few pre-defined techniques or formulas. Nevertheless, this journey can be aided by various general guidelines, or methods. This is where the power of ideas can play a crucial role.

I suggest that contemplative activities can employ the power of ideas for the purpose of inner transformation. By *contemplation* I mean an activity in which participants reflect on an idea or read a text while “listening” inwardly. They open an inner space of listening and “listen” inside themselves – but not only to the literal meaning of the words. More importantly, they listen to their own inner reactions to the words, to the inner “voice” that arises in them in response. A new space of listening is opened in the person, a space which is relatively free from ordinary perimetral thoughts and reactions. The result is like a clearing in the forest, which allows deeper aspects of the person express themselves through deeper understandings. New facets of the person are awakened, new depths come into play, and in this sense the person takes a step beyond the usual boundaries towards a broader way of being.

This is the general idea of contemplation in philosophical practice, as I see it. But how can it be done in practice, in a workshop or a counseling? Two main issues arise here, that of the *what* and that of the *why*: First, which philosophical ideas or texts should be chosen for

contemplation? Second, what methods should be employed in the process of contemplative reading?

### **The issue of texts: The writings of transformational thinkers**

Not every philosophical text is equally useful for contemplation; not every text is equally helpful in the trans-sophic process. Some texts shed light on everyday life experiences, while others are remote and abstract; some are poetic and inspiring, while others are verbose and dry; some suggest novel ways of relating to ourselves and our world, while others remain within the bounds of familiar attitudes.

I suggest that there is a kind of texts that are especially relevant to trans-sophic contemplation and to inner transformation. These are texts which describe such a transformation, and do so in a perceptive and powerful language. I have in mind here a diverse group of thinkers throughout the ages, which includes Plato, Marcus Aurelius, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, Martin Buber and others. Although these thinkers belong to very different schools of thought, use different concepts and offer very different theories about life, nevertheless a common theme is shared by all of them: they all view our normal way of being as constricted and limited, and call us to transform ourselves so as to go beyond our limiting boundaries and take part in a greater reality. I therefore call them *transformational thinkers*, and their writings – *transformational texts*.

I suggest that the writings of these transformational thinkers can serve as wonderful sources of self-understanding and inspiration for the process of inner transformation. I do not mean that we should accept any of them as an authority or a final truth. Indeed, in the context of contemplation we should not see them as doctrines that claim to be true, but rather as seeds of contemplation. These texts can inspire us to look at our perimeter in our own personal way, to seek our own way of transcending it, and open ourselves beyond ourselves.

To do so, however, we need to reflect on these texts in an appropriate way. Clearly, not every way of reading the text can contribute to these goals. The question, therefore, is how to read those texts.

### **The issue of method: How to contemplate on transformational texts?**

If I wish to reflect on a transformational text in a way that would inspire me to go beyond my perimeter, beyond my boundaries, then theoretical reading is not enough. I must learn to reflect

on the text in a way that would open me to the words and allow them to act in me and inspire me. I must learn to read the text in a way that would take me beyond my usual mechanical reading and awaken in me new layers of understanding. I must, in other words, learn to open a new kind of space inside me for ideas to speak in me.

In my experience, there are a variety of exercises and methods that can facilitate such an inner opening. It is outside the scope of this paper to discuss them all. Instead, I will focus on one particular example – I call this method *Poetic Writing* – as an illustration of contemplative reading.

As in most contemplative methods, the method of Poetic Writing seeks to take participants out of their usual way of thinking; in other words, to create a temporary rupture in the person's normal attitude, a "clearing" in the perimetral forest. Participants then attend through this inner clearing to a brief text, as well as to the inner voices that arise in response. To the extent that the reader is able to open such an inner space – a clearing – which is relatively free from usual perimetral forces, she can give voice to deeper understandings. And if the selected text is effective and inspiring, it can arouse in the reader deeper aspects of herself.

Some contemplative methods use meditation, focusing techniques, slow readings, imagery exercises, and so forth as ways of pushing aside one's usual perimeter and of creating a space of inner listening. In contrast, Poetic Writing focuses on a more active activity: writing. The idea is that when we try to write poetically, when we try to put our thoughts in verses, we are engaged in a special kind of listening to the words. Unlike writing a letter or a philosophical text in which we look "through" the words to the idea, in poetic writing we attend to the words themselves, to their rhythm, their sound, their precise meaning and reverberation of meanings. Thus we assume a way of listening that is distinct from our everyday attitude, and is much more intense.

Here is one way of doing Poetic Writing. First, as a preparatory stage, participants read and discuss the selected text in order to understand its literal, straightforward meaning. This can be done in a brief academic discussion of the main ideas, just as we analyze a text at the university. There is no need to analyze the text in great detail, but we must make sure that we have a general idea of what it says.

Once the basic idea is understood, the workshop leader (or a participant, or the counselor) selects a sentence that is well-formulated and that contains an interesting and rich idea. She reads the sentence slowly, several times. The other participants listen to the sentence and to the way the sentence reverberates inside them. They each write a poetic verse (or a couple of poetic

verses) that expresses their inner response to that sentence, in other words the understanding (personal or universal) that arose inside themselves. This will be the first verse (or the first two verses) in their poem.

After a few minutes, a second sentence is read, and the participants write a second line in their poem. A third and a fourth sentence follow, so that at this point each participant has a poem made of at least four lines. The participants then take a few minutes to polish their poem, sharpen and clarify it, and develop it if needed. When everybody is finished, they read their respective poems aloud. A conversation can conclude the activity.

In a different version of this exercise, participants write their poems not individually but in small groups. Although a group may make it more difficult to engage in inner listening, it facilitates communication and enables participants to exchange ideas.

In my experience, such exercises, whether in the form of individuals writing or group writing, yield astonishingly beautiful poems that express deep understandings and self-understandings. I have used brief texts by Marcus Aurelius, Martin Buber, Henri Bergson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Krishnamurti, Erich Fromm, and others. The results were always deep understandings that reverberated with the original text on the one hand, but on the other hand were personal and creative.

### **The power of words**

The exercise of Poetic Writing is, as I said, only an example. It is an example of a method that can help us use traditional philosophical texts to open ourselves to new fountains of understanding. I suggest that one important lesson from this example is that as philosophical practitioners we should not ignore the treasures of philosophy, as many of us have unfortunately been doing. After all, a traditional philosophical text need not be seen only as a rigid doctrine. It can also serve as a seed for free contemplation, which can help us reach our own depths in a personal way.

A more general lesson is that deep philosophical texts have an immense power to open us to new understandings and in this way to awaken new depths in us. This is the power of words, which philosophical practitioners have often neglected. For many years philosophical practitioners have emphasized thinking tools. It is time now, I believe, to make use of the treasures of ideas from the philosophical tradition and of their immense power to inspire us and transform us.