

Experience in Philosophical Practice
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Dear Colleagues,

Please allow me, as an exception, to refrain from initial statements of politeness, due to time constraints. The theme of our conference, “experience in philosophical practice”, admits of many interpretations and invites a wide array of considerations.

What does this theme involve? The experience that leads people into philosophical practice? Is it experience (or better: “experienced-ness”) that we expect from philosophical practitioners; experience which is part of the skill of a good practitioner? Does it refer to experience gained by our clients in philosophical practice? Or rather experiences that we can gain ourselves from counseling, or, more interestingly, even *should seek to have*? Finally, do we objectively perhaps consider those “experiences of thinking” (that we commonly refer to as “philosophy”) that only bear fruit in practice, provided all goes well and the practitioner is successful? Incomplete as this catalogue of questions may be, it demonstrates that the “experience” in our conference theme could either **lead into** philosophical practice, or be **gained within it, through or from** philosophical practice – and finally even be experience **required for** philosophical practice.

Well, this number of perspectives largely exceeds the possibilities of one single presentation. I will have to restrict myself to 4 key ideas. Before presenting these, I am going briefly to list 4 issues that, however relevant and challenging, are beyond my scope.

(1) Firstly, I will not participate in efforts to develop a dedicated concept of “experience”, by exploring what experience truly is, what its accomplishments are and what its status is among other pathways to knowledge. Consequently, I will disregard the relation between experience and knowledge – and not dive into epistemology. I will completely skip an area well-covered in philosophical literature, including Kant’s criticisms of Hume and Heidegger’s essay on Hegel’s view of experience. I regret being unable to delineate the concept “experience” since, within philosophical practice, it may be useful to distinguish between experiences that are essential or not, pleasant or not, coherent or not, predictable or not, and helpful or not.

(2) Secondly, I may disappoint some of you in passing over the question whether a philosophical practitioner requires Aristotle-type experience to achieve the job’s expectations. If that were so, “experienced-ness” would be an essential professional skill. One could wonder who, according to Aristotle, the “experienced” person is. Well, the one who has “savoir-faire”, who is familiar with the general requirements of everyday life and simply knows how to act in this respect. “Experience of life”, one could say, accompanied by practical wisdom.

What is crucial here? For instance, to be familiar with the results of action and to know the conditions that need to be met in order to achieve objectives. In particular, this includes a good familiarity with an array of options much wider than those visible, or even *thinkable*, to a client. This valuable “experience of life” is closely connected with “insight into human nature”, a skill which is indispensable to philosophical counselors. They should be in a position to make a fair judgment of which desired objectives are truly within the clients’ span of control, and at what cost. This brings us very close to Hegel’s axiom that wisdom is the sum of experience and thought. Keep in mind, at the end of the day, *wisdom* is the yardstick for a philosophical practitioner’s performance, and rightfully so.

(3) In addition I regret that I am also not able to deal with what it actually means for philosophy that philosophical practice first of all opened up the possibility to generate experiences. In other words, that theoretical assumptions had to be discarded - or at least corrected - after a test completed in practice leaving aside the enjoyable fact that such a test could conversely also confirm favorite expectations.

Let us not overlook what this means. It is just this possibility of being able to suspend assumptions from the severe test of practice that constitutes the seriousness of serious sciences – and philosophy has hitherto been closed off to this reputation-creating possibility. It must be left to time whether the philosophy that dominates in universities and is foreign to practice grasps and makes use of the opportunities created by philosophical practice. I often think of Carl Jung, who once stated that one can succeed very well for a long time with a false theory provided only one does not put it into practice.

(4) What indeed I most regret having to leave undiscussed is an understanding of experience that may even be *constitutive* for philosophical practice. I mean experience as the acquired power to recognize the limits and dangers of pure theory and to keep oneself free of any dogma of theory. For brevity's sake let me quote the reformer Luther to make crystal clear what might escape us: “The German proverb says that a young doctor should have a new cemetery, that a young lawyer should introduce confrontation into everything and that a young theologian fills hell with souls. For they want to reduce everything neatly under their laws and rules without the experience required to produce prudence; hence they err and harm both mankind and things.

You can certainly guess that much is to be gained by carrying this thought further, preventing many young colleagues embarking on practical work with recently acquired theoretical knowledge from an otherwise doomed “registration in the album” (as the German expression has it).

Now, dear colleagues, so much for what I must, mostly regretfully, pass over even though it might deserve detailed appreciation for the purpose of practical philosophy. And thus to what I would wish to discuss instead. There are essentially four thoughts that, to get a better overview, I first present by way of thesis.

- 1. Philosophical practice, with the help of experiences, offers to clarify experiences that our clients may prefer not to be conscious of.**

2. **Philosophical practice is summoned, for the sake of our clients, to make use of the potential power that experience has *for change*. As it is a well-known fact that we learn from experience, or at least that we have the possibility to do so.**
3. **Philosophical practice makes us discover that it is precisely experiences that allow people to make themselves *resistent to learning* and cut them off from the potential for change.**
4. **An approach for dealing with this difficulty in counselling, based on an example from literature.**

On point 1

A remark of Walter Benjamin's may serve as introduction. He once significantly noted: "Most people do not want to have experiences; their convictions stand in the way." Sessions of practical philosophy often surprisingly confirm this skeptical point of view. We have to ask ourselves under what conditions people are in a position to ignore the most evident experiences. [The case of Mrs. K. who claimed women are oppressed by men but found out that her entire family was matriarchal in practice.]

Whether now, as before, we call the things that immunize people against learning through experience 'ideologies', or 'intuitions' (those people act on), or 'models' (which psychologists love to speak of), or 'custom' or 'character' ... they are in any case full-fledged powers of influencing behaviour that experiences can not counter. Here is where philosophical practice can clarify by bringing to the surface these experiences which are overlooked or only reluctantly noticed. Our client's life-experiences are interpreted in such a way that the lessons to be drawn from them can no longer escape notice. This means that philosophical practice acts as the advocate of experience against the powers of denial which, often unconsciously, stand in the service of a precarious *status quo*.

It will often thereby be a matter of highlighting the advantages and gains to be drawn from paying attention to experiences. More or less in the sense of the basic principle of cleverness: "experiences show you what you must pay attention to in order to attain your objectives." What we may possibly arrive at on this pathway is that our client gains entry into the registers which his experiences hold in readiness for him.

As background for this remark, we can – to orientate ourselves – quote the sentence of the ironic George Bernhard Shaw, who wrote in his "Aphorisms for Revolutionaries": "People are not wise in relation to their experience, but to their ability to learn from their experiences" (Foreword, Volume 1, page 246). Instead of speaking of possibilities, about learning from experiences, we can speak of being prepared to learn from experiences. Then the next question would be how we can promote such a preparation. But that is an other issue...

On point 2

The thesis I put forward was: *Philosophical practice is summoned, for the sake of our clients, to make use of the potential power that experience has for change. As it is a well-known fact that we learn from experience, or at least that we have the possibility to do so.* We arrive at this thesis, when we ask ourselves, what it means that we *could* learn from

experience but many times *don't want* to. Formulated in another way, "why is it, that we...", or "how can we understand...". Thus the question is: what is the reason that people often do not want to be fully conscious of their experiences?

I think, the reason is the potential power of experience to cause change, or in other words, its compelling character of learning. People in general do not want to learn when learning means to *change oneself*. However, exactly this possibility of changing oneself through learning is important in philosophical practice. It's about "learning" not in a harmless, merely "cumulative" way, but in the strict sense of learning that results in correction of our expectations. That is why I do not speak now about experiences that people "collect" but about experiences that people "make". The point of learning is to correct expectation. By the way, this coincides with the original Stoic-thesis, that it is not things that make us suffer, but the way we think about things that make us suffer.

Let us think about all the catastrophic love stories that we hear about during counseling sessions. The experiences, that our client – entangled in such stories – could have made often contain the need to fulfill the expectations connected to such stories. But some people could take that as encouragement to keep cool, whereas other people chose the remedy of drunkenness.

I do not want to leave these few remarks on this second point before having indicated that we have to do here with the strict understanding of experience we have known since Hegel. Do you remember that he originally wanted to call his "Phenomenology of Spirit" "The Science of the Experiences of Consciousness"?

And what is that about – taken in the most general way? It is about the fact that the thinking process and the experiences of thinking change both the object of thinking and the thinking itself. Eventually this thinking on a higher level will try to do justice to the changed objects. *This* movement, that Hegel brought forward as an example, can be seen as an ideal for the counselling process: at the moment when we are completely conscious of our consciousness we cross its borders and then we have a changed and broader view of our world and our conditions of living. So much, then, on this marginal issue.

On point 3

The third part of my remarks I have announced with the thesis: *Philosophical practice makes us discover that it is precisely experiences that allow people to make themselves resistant to learning and cut them off from the potential for change*. As far as I can see, this aspect, which is woven into knowledge of life, has only been marginally considered in the relevant literature up to now, or has even been overlooked completely. And yet it is this aspect that should intrigue us with respect to work in philosophical practice.

Here I would like to present this aspect in a new way, that is through a short quote from Count Giacomo Leopardi's "Book of Thoughts", a compilation I highly recommend of melancholic-skeptical preludes to a world-view resistant to disillusion. And let me say at once: the spirit which here becomes manifest is precisely the spirit of quite a few of those special and intelligent clients who have come to me as a practitioner.

When an unexperienced person, e.g. a young person etc., is struck by a physical affliction or some other misfortune which was none of his fault, it does not even occur to him that this might be a reason for others to make fun of him, avoid him, despise him, hate him, jeer at him. On the contrary, if he thinks at all of the others in connection with his misfortune, he does not expect anything but sympathy and attention or at least an inclination to stand by him; in brief, in his misfortune he sees only an occasion for people to comfort him and hope the best for him; in such a way that he sometimes still thinks that he will be able to benefit from this. This is how nature arranged things. And yet, reality is so different! Even very experienced people will probably fall into this mistake during the first stages after the unhappy event has occurred – fall into this hope, distant and vague as it may be. It seems completely impossible to a human being that an undeserved affliction could harm him in his relation to his own kind in terms of their estimation, their feelings etc.; he firmly believes the contrary; and if he is still unexperienced, he will not endeavour to hide his difficulties (as far as possible) from others; on the contrary, in some cases he will actually call attention to them: despite the fact that it is of course a key rule of the art of living never to admit to being struck by misfortune or being disadvantaged compared to others.

Correspondingly, if he is blessed by good fortune or finds himself at an advantage of some sort, the unexperienced person (and when overwhelmed by joy the experienced person too) believes just as firmly that everybody – especially his friends, his acquaintances – must rejoice with all their heart, and he does not even suspect that they might hate him because of it, that he may lose one or another friendship, that even his closest friends may do everything to try and deprive him of his new advantage, defame him etc., or that they may at least wish to do so, and that they will belittle the significance and worth of his good fortune in their own thinking and when talking to others. All this, when it happens, as indeed it must happen, seems to him absolutely incomprehensible. (11 September 1821). (Leopardi, Thoughts p. 306f)

This is a splendid example of someone appealing to his experience in pride of his loss of illusions. It is the gesture of the enlightened person who thinks of himself that no one can fool him. This is his refrain: „I have no illusions (any longer).” And let us face the fact that many of our clients come to our practice bringing with them a host of such „experience-based judgements”.

Just as many people are blind because of a belief-saturated narrow-mindedness – i.e., blind to experiences that might irritate their beliefs (the case of Ms. K.) – conversely, many people are blind because of an experience-saturated formation of judgements – and that is to say, blind to insights which can put their experiences into perspective.

A woman has made the acquaintance of three men – unflattering experiences, let's say –, and now she sums up: „This is what men are like”. Here we see a problem which was described accurately by Kant: „There are also limits to the rational application of experience. Admittedly, we can learn from experience that something is like this or like that, but we can never learn from experience that it could not possibly be different.” (Review of Herder's Ideas for a philosophy of the history of mankind)

On point 4

To conclude, I will now (at least briefly) examine this problem and show at least in outline how one should deal with such difficulties in counselling. Let us first face the fact that arguments – no matter how compelling (in our view) they may be – are not of much use in the face of accumulated experiences. But one thing is possible: experiences can be shaken by experiences. In other words: in the counselling situation, we can help the client gain *by means of us* other, new, corrective experiences. Something which does require us in turn to some extent – as a secondary task – to accompany these experiences with interpretations so that the client/guest may become aware of them and so that they may be able to rectify his hitherto existing world-view.

For this is the second thing we can learn from a text like the one by young Leopardi: Experiences become the fundamental material of our world view and our self-assessment only in the form of our interpretation of them. And that means: just as experiences can be beneficially irritated only by means of experiences, so also correspondingly can interpretations only be corrected by means of rival interpretations. So this means: Philosophical practice is sometimes needed as the art of interpreting in an alternative way the experiences people have made so that other life-guiding conclusions may be drawn from them.

I will demonstrate in outline what I mean by this by referring to one particular sentence in Leopardi's fine text. Leopardi thinks that „nature“ has so arranged things that the „unexperienced“ person deceives himself in the way described in his beliefs about other people. But what is the object of this deceptive judgement of the unexperienced person? It is „the nature“ of the others. What follows from this? That the „nature“ of man is subject to a misconception of itself, that nature for natural reasons is mistaken about itself.

On this basis, we could conclude, that only culture – only a cultivated judgement that has emerged from a natural context – is able to understand 'natural inclinations' – and also to break their power to control us. Such a cultivated and sober-minded judgement, then, is also open to the possibility that other, compassionate, friendly, unresentful reactions may occur – even if they may be rare. And thus, it becomes possible in the counselling situation to refer to examples taken from the riches of tradition – from religion, philosophy and literature – it becomes possible to refer to examples of „unnatural behaviour“ which admittedly do not „refute“ the melancholic pessimism of Leopardi, but which do however expose its oneness. And this opens up a space for new, alternative experiences. And that is at least *also* – and certainly not seldom – exactly what philosophical practice is all about.

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Provisional Translation

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