

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

PHILOSOPHY IS FREE AND OPEN THINKING

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In Emil Višňovský's new book, *We Should be Living in the Garden*, we find that there is much to contemplate and that he answers many of the questions on culture, life and philosophy that are raised by the current era. The thread that runs through his essays brings together these themes to show us, as the author puts it, that philosophy is not only an immanent part of culture but it is also its "spice" (Višňovský 2010, 5).

Višňovský named his book after one of his essays (*ibid.*, 134-140), in which he states that the garden is a combination of the elements of the natural world that requires that a person bring a "golden mean" of reason, emotion, and limb to the natural environment, which in turn cultivates the cultivator. The garden is a "cultural landscape" and nature, in the shape of the garden, may also be the medicine required to treat many of the diseases of modern society. In ancient times, the phenomenon of the garden was brought to prominence by the school of Epicurus for whom it gave perspective to the world. It became a symbol of this philosophy, in which emphasis is placed on the good life and human happiness. To Epicurus and his pupils, the garden, where he lived and taught his philosophy, was primarily an oasis of peace of mind as a precondition for wisdom and blessedness; peace of mind in the sense of a value and dimension of our life, which, in the hustle and bustle of the modern city, is highly valued. In the garden, not only do the treasured fruits of philosophy bloom, but so too do all kinds of culture, including those that are valued the most: human qualities and human relations. The garden has an essential and holistic human dimension. It is the living environment or area where the differences between the natural and the cultural are both preserved and destroyed. The garden may be the peak of our civilisation and civilisability. The meaning of civilisation should be found in the development of human potential. This essay is in fact a challenge, since it ends by asking "Why don't we seek harmony between nature and culture? Why don't we construct our world like a garden?" (*ibid.*, 140).

Višňovský's philosophical views are based on pragmatism, and Dewey and the neopragmatist Rorty are often referred to. Višňovský sees pragmatism as a legitimate strand of the history of Western philosophy (2010, 80-98) and stresses that this philosophy has nothing in common with the vulgarisation of culture which is attributed to it. According to classical definitions, the principle of pragmatism lies in the fact that we will always pay attention to the kinds of consequences our ideas, concepts and theories may have (Peirce). It is a philosophy that focuses on what our ideas mean in terms of our lives and actions. In this philosophy, it is the criterion of truth that helps us live (James). It is a conception which holds that the criterion for judging the value of everything, including philosophy, is: how does it help us resolve our human problems and make our life more intelligent (Dewey)? For the pragmatist, then, there is nothing more important than human happiness (Rorty). Višňovský underlines that there is no question that pragmatic philosophy is focused on life. He emphasises that for pragmatism, people are not beings whose primary aim in life is to acquire knowledge; they are practical, not theoretical, and their main concern is life as such. Knowledge (theory) is simply one, albeit very important (instrumental even), part of that which constitutes human life. Pragmatism is a philosophy which openly recognises that every philosophy is principally a matter for culture. Culture is culture because it cannot serve its purpose using the same means as those that are used in nature to maintain the balance between the species. Our goals in nature and in culture are only superficially similar: while in nature the chief aim is to survive, this is not the case in culture (where this is the case, culture "descends" to the level of nature). Culture is concerned with cultivating life: creating, improving, and embellishing it, etc. Barbarism of any kind is a zone of transition, where culture "goes back" to the level of using simple natural means. In the cultural sphere, liquidation of the "biological substrate" does not usually occur, but, as we know, the mechanisms of cultural selection not only produce extraordinary stress, but have not yet eliminated the principle of cruelty. This means that culture itself is not yet sufficiently "cultural" or cultivated. Human history began in the bosom of nature, but its cultivation launched a transformation, which meant creating a cultural world overlapping the natural world. Višňovský reminds us that, according to Dewey, if philosophy in modern society does not change direction and simply clings to its past, it will become a non-living component of culture, a museum piece. Dewey encourages philosophers to address the present situation directly and to enter into open dialogue. Dewey sees this as the prime mission of philosophy, since for him philosophy is about solving the problems people have today. If philosophy does not deal with these problems, then it becomes non-living, a display item in a museum. Philosophy has to be continually created anew and regenerated for the requirements of its era.

Višňovský mentions that, in his day, Dewey had wanted to establish a newspaper *Thought News*. In the end, the project came to nothing but Dewey's intention had been to attempt to launch a new kind of publication, which was to shed light on everyday events through philosophical reflection and to help ordinary people orientate themselves better in life. Thus, he sought to establish whether philosophy has any practical benefit and meaning in life. Pragmatism wishes to transform and redirect philosophy in order to lead philosophy out of the labyrinth of its abstract, conceptual schemes and dualisms, away from the timeless Platonic realm of flawless and unchanging ideas and bring it back to life, so that it may solve the important issues of human existence, to make it a dynamic presence in culture and anchor

it in experience, while keeping its finger on the pulse of the era, if not the day. Deweyan pragmatists are thus cultural critics and social actors. They have a critical-reconstructionist relationship with their own culture and with the culture of their own community. Even Rorty does not believe that contemporary philosophers should concern themselves with creating universal theories of absolute being and knowledge, because these goals are, if not misplaced, then unattainable; even if they were attainable, it would help almost no-one, other than give philosophers something to celebrate with their colleagues. Of course, philosophers can do this—in terms of the variety of philosophies and the various forms in which they come and the goals they have. However, for Rorty it is now about channelling the creative energy of philosophy to those areas where it can solve human problems i.e. sociocultural, ethical, axiological, aesthetic, and political economical problems. Višňovský also formulates his own conviction that neopragmatism is no longer simply a matter for American culture or philosophy. It is philosophy that shows us how we can live without absoluteness, with irreducible contingency and ambiguity, and, despite this, how not to give up in our attempts to achieve meaningfulness and take responsibility for our decisions.

Višňovský underlines that although neopragmatism shares some common features with postmodernity and with criticisms of the contemporary era and culture, it certainly is not nihilism. What both postmodernists and neopragmatists have in common is that they “insist that human subjects, languages, ideas and experiences are socially, contextually, temporally and spatially irreducible in character”; however, they differ in that neopragmatism incorporates Jamesian meliorism, Deweyan creative intelligence in problem-solving and Rortyan social hope. On no account is neopragmatism resigned to the peripeteias and complexities of the contemporary era. We are creatures who continually look for and create our own self-images and lexicons as vehicles so that we can survive in this world. The values that lie behind our search and creation are not eternal and have no everlasting philosophical justification. Pragmatism is in fact the conviction that we are able to understand this world using our own resources with no need of a transcendental crutch; there is the hope that we are able to shape our own lives so as to achieve the good and happiness which is to be found in the art of human co-existence. Pragmatism seeks to find ways and means to achieve this at the philosophical level. Višňovský ends his essays with an analysis of philosophy as a “conversation”, as perceived by Rorty (*ibid.*, 227-234).

Amongst the noteworthy essays in Višňovský's book, we find those that develop the idea of philosophical practice (*ibid.*, 200-214), which receives minimal attention from philosophers in our sphere. We should have some kind of standpoint, since the area of applied philosophy usually known as “philosophical practice” or “philosophical counselling” has been taking shape since as early as the mid-1980s. G. B. Achenbach (1997), who founded the first philosophical practice in Cologne in 1981, stated that philosophical practice is founded on the fact that people create their own life philosophy, which they use as a means of coping with the world and for solving their life problems. Philosophical counselling provides guidance on the issues in their life philosophy. The philosophical practitioner and the client philosophise together about the problems and questions that life brings. In this case, the philosopher tries to impart philosophical knowledge and experience to the client—non-philosopher—in order that s/he might use it in constructing his/her own philosophy and life-style. Philosophical counselling accentuates philosophy as life wisdom, as a particular

conception of life. It is based on philosophical tradition. The ancient philosophical schools of stoicism, Epicureanism, and skepticism similarly formulated the meaning of philosophy. In addition to these Hellenistic schools, Lahav (1995) mentions the schools of cynicism, cyrenaicism, and Pythagoreanism. He believes that the impetus for philosophical counselling can also be found in religious philosophy, in the renaissance, in romanticism, existentialism and in social philosophy, e.g. in liberalism and Marxism (Šulavík 2001).

In terms of the early history of philosophical counselling I should also mention that as early as 1967 a Dutch philosopher, J. van Veen, presented his own personal philosophy as an early version. In 1973 van Veen established The Philosophical Centre for Self-Education and Parenthood. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that Achenbach remains the founder of philosophical counselling as a philosophical movement. The Society for Philosophical Practice (Gesellschaft für philosophische Praxis) was established in Germany in 1982 and a journal (currently published as *Zeitschrift für Philosophische Praxis*) was founded in 1987. The philosophical counselling movement quickly spread to other countries: the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Canada, Italy, Israel, South Africa, and later France, and the USA (*ibid.*). For instance, in Vienna, Austria, a philosophical counselling practice was opened by Eugen M. Schulak as early as in 1998.

It is the opinion of this reviewer that the new philosophical counselling movement has emerged due to a lack of clarity concerning values, the flourishing of a variety of life styles and the decline in popularity of grand narratives towards the end of the 20th century. In this situation, philosophy increasingly began to feel the need to engage with the problems people face in their everyday lives, to help these people solve their difficulties, shape their life philosophies, and define or resolve their personal identities. Harriet S. Chamberlain describes the circumstances under which philosophical counseling emerged as follows:

Our Postmodern milieu has given us access to a bewildering variety of life styles and worldviews. And our culture is one of minimal traditional structure, change, risk, relativism both cognitive and moral. We have more freedom than ever to choose any number of life styles, spiritual paths, geographical locations, careers, and personalities... (Chamberlain 1999, 35-36).

Emil Višňovský stresses that the mission of philosophy is not only to create new and original ideas and systems of ideas or even great conceptual systems, but also to look after people's souls, to identify historical and contemporary trends, to mediate the intellectual wealth already accrued by philosophers and culture, in an attempt to implement these ideals and this wisdom (2010, 206). His approach is based upon the pragmatist platform, particularly on the works of Dewey. He is convinced that Dewey's philosophy throws light on the problems of our times: issues concerning democracy, technology and culture, education, ways of life, morals, the private and public spheres, the links between science and practice, between life and art, and between secularity and sacredness. We are forever philosophising in certain situations and, according to pragmatism, the value of philosophy does not lie in epistemology but in social ethics in the broadest sense of the term: one of the tasks of philosophy is to teach people how to live (the art of living), although sometimes the problem may be reduced to how to survive. The value of philosophy consists in its ability to become an intellectual (and intelligent) device for a good (and better) life (*ibid.*, 100).

The aim of philosophical counselling then is a quest for the good life through philosophy, and this appears to be the best characteristic of philosophical counselling. At the fifth congress on philosophical counselling held in Oxford, A. Adam put it this way: "Central to the agenda of philosophical practice is the question: What is the good life?" (1999, 1). From that we can deduce that just as the replies to this question are varied, so too are the methods used in the pursuit of them. No answer can be definitive; they can be more general but also entirely specific. Philosophical techniques such as Socratic dialogue and dilemma training may be used to improve communication skills, Socratic virtues, teamwork skills or to acquire decision-making skills (*ibid.*, 8). D. Boele explains that:

Philosophical practice or philosophical counseling does not focus exclusively on ways of solving problems. (For instance, how can I improve my communication skills? Or, what should I do in order to be a good friend?) It takes experience as its starting point and focuses on assumptions, values and ideas. (So the question should be: What is professional co-operation? What is friendship? etc.)... Most of the time, we live these values and ideas unconsciously. Philosophising is a way to make them conscious and to put them at the top of the agenda of my attention (for example, by looking for definitions of 'freedom', 'responsibility', 'friendship', etc). Only consciously these values and ideas can turn into 'life directing concepts', in the service of the effort to lead my life (and to develop an art of living, I would say). Philosophising is value and idea oriented, because this approach is useful for the quality of one's life (Boele 1999, 9).

However, J. Delnoij reminds us that:

Although Socratic dialogue derives its name from Socrates, it is not an imitation of the dialogues as written by Plato. What is essentially "Socratic" is the rigorous inquiry into thoughts, concepts and values we hold true. A Socratic dialogue is a joint investigation into pure assumptions when we make a certain statement (1999, 52).

R. Fischer (2005) says that Socratic questions help us focus on ideas or concepts as the basic components of thinking. All ideas and questions must be regarded as potential sources of truth. These questions invite us to take part in our everyday experiences, to look deeper into things and to investigate the miracles and secrets we find there. These questions force us to reach deep and think about concepts which express the structure of our thinking about the world. T. Curnow (1999) describes a modern Socratic dialogue that was undertaken by a group. This begins with general questions, often of an ethical nature, then gradually questions are asked using individual examples, and then one of these is selected for further discussion. The discussion encourages not only a reflection of individual experiences but also the consensual change of ideas. Consensus is very important; it is a compulsory step. Since consensus is mandatory, progress is slow, differences in opinions cannot be ignored or regarded as insignificant (*ibid.*, 47). L. Marinoff (2002) also underscores the necessity of consensus. He believes that Socratic dialogue presupposes a practical, open mind and that it is possible for understanding to take place. It presumes that there exists the ability to listen to others, but also to hear what they are saying; not simply to filter their attitudes through preconceived views but also to be able to imagine the attitudes of others. The point of this dialogue is to make explicit that which is implicit. A. Adam (1999) underlines an important moment, namely that philosophical counselling, like philosophy, seeks answers to questions

which may not have a definitive solution. Through this process we learn to eliminate some of them. H. S. Chamberlain sees philosophical counselling as a dialogue in critical thinking:

Critical thinking is a way of thinking and evaluating the quality of one's own thinking, and the thinking of others in light of particular criteria. Critical thinking can be called a kind of "metathinking". It requires learning and perseverance. It is the opposite of day-dreaming or free association... By means of the structures, tools and methods inherent in these processes of critical inquiry, a dialogue takes place between philosophical counsellor and counsellee (where it is an individual session; if it is a group session then it involves all the members). There is also, however, an internal dialogue between 'self' and 'self', reaching unto the deepest levels of conscious and pre-conscious activity to uncover the motivations for feelings, thoughts, and actions (1999, 38).

In his analysis, Slovak author Ján Šulavík attempts, amongst other things, to clarify the relationship between two basic assumptions which enable philosophy to act in a practical dimension. He is concerned with the relation between explicit and implicit philosophy that forms the basis of the dialogue between consultant and client, but also with the relation between professional and lay philosophy that creates the basic level of this communication (Šulavík 2001, 151-174). The author understands implicit philosophy to be philosophy that has been fixed in the earlier life of that particular person. The philosophical consultant helps his/her clients to realise, formulate and rationally process this philosophy. The consultant's task is to bring it to the centre of attention, to discuss it, expose it to conscious control and rationally reflect on it (*ibid.*, 151). Implicit philosophy is not current philosophy. "Implicit" refers more to accentuating the transformation of "non-philosophical" insight into a philosophically thought-out standpoint. Implicit philosophy is philosophy only from the point of view of it being possible for it "to become philosophy". In order to realise this change, non-philosophical insight has to be rationally workable and capable of adopting a philosophical form. The rejection of explicit philosophy is actually realised against the background of implicit philosophy; the act of rejection creating a space for its explication. The term "implicit philosophy" is in harmony with a hermeneutical conception of pre-understanding, where each theory supposes a non-theoretical background. The transfer of philosophy from the implicit to the explicit form through critical reflection (philosophising, philosophical dialogue) is linked with the methodological demand that it be a "consciously thought-out attitude". This demand should not be construed on the basis of the Hegelian ideal of a continuously expanding consciousness and decreasing sphere of human ignorance and unconsciousness, which applies more to culture and society rather than to the consciousness of an individual. The sphere of normal individual consciousness is limited and in order to be able to think through new problems, we have to stop thinking about the old ones; we should bring them to a close so we do not have to think about them, for some time at least. With regard to the limits of the capacity of the human mind we have to take into account not only the process of explication but also the reverse: re-implication. An explicit philosophical position, which the bearer identifies with to the extent that it becomes their inner life principle that affects everyday thinking, snowballs the axiological and emotional processes associated with it, controls the process of noticing, the memory structures and becomes a natural part of the mental structure of the subject. It can gradually become fixed in the shape of practically oriented and effectively functioning "automatic ideas", which the

subject ceases to realise and is able to reflect on consciously again when confronted with contradictory attitudes (*ibid.*, 154-155).

According to Šulavík we can say that, from the perspective of practical life (psychotherapy, philosophical counselling), the aim of “philosophising” is to explicate implicit philosophy, introduce it, reconstruct it, and improve it so as to enable a reverse secondary implication. The point of the process of philosophising (critical reflection, philosophical dialogue), which can be regarded as a manifestation of conscious theoretically-oriented human activity, is to modify or improve our life styles. If the adaptation process and the nature of the life problems require it, then we should have at our disposal the characteristics and abilities that will enable us to explain and consider our implicit basic outlook and assumptions. Some of our life problems can be resolved only when we change our implicit philosophy (*ibid.*, 158). The requirement to consciously reflect acts as an ideal which determines the direction of philosophical thinking. In a given philosophical attitude, various aspects are consciously thought out and analyzed to different degrees (*ibid.*, 188).

Another Slovak author who has touched upon the issue of philosophical counseling is Eteľa Farkašová who suggests that we are witnessing a growth in the philosophical desire for practical application—whether in the form of creating different kinds of applied philosophies, by establishing a new institution of philosophical counselling or through other forms of closer contact with human lives. These all illustrate the variety of ways in which philosophy can develop as a reflection of actual (and everyday) life, how we can engage with it and influence it in terms of shaping, improving, deepening and enriching it with new dimensions (Farkašová 2004, 220). According to the author, a practical method of philosophy might in the future be applied far more in connection with the philosophical counselling discussed earlier or in terms of the therapeutic effects of philosophy on people who find themselves in complex life situations, facing problems they are not sufficiently internally prepared for. The objective of such guidance is to use philosophy to lead people to better self-knowledge and to the kind of practical wisdom we can rely on in everyday life (*ibid.*, 226). Philosophy can seek to create opportunities for (self)reflection and deeper self-knowledge, to strengthen these moments in human life, to refine their needs (*ibid.*).

Farkašová also deals with questions concerning the character and objectives of philosophical dialogue. She states that the aim of the philosophical practitioner is not to teach philosophy in terms of sharing knowledge or handing out instructions; if the practitioner’s work is to be effective then he or she must above all listen to the other person, meet him or her halfway in order to understand not only the current issues but also his or her more general attitudes, value orientations and worldview. It is important that what the partner says is taken seriously, that there is no attempt to try to persuade the person of his or her truth and/or of the correctness of “one truth” (in a given situation or problem); on the contrary, in situations where one particular subjective way of looking at and understanding things dominates, the practitioner should focus more on showing that there are other possible perspectives and ways of understanding. The uncovering of a wider spectrum of perspectives and approaches leads the individual to a process of making choices and decisions, and this is what the crucial point in a philosophical dialogue should be. During the dialogue, which reveals new ways in which people can see their lives as interesting and worth living again, there should be a mobilisation of inner strength not only so that people can see themselves

(their lives) as a value, but also to confirm and strengthen this value in the process of their lives. Etela Farkašová believes in the ability of philosophy to provide assistance in solving life problems by teaching us to assess life situations more comprehensively and to create a more appropriate image of philosophy, but also to construct our own self-image and/or the images of other people on whom we rely in our life projects (2004, 234-235).

E. Višňovský asks: Do we still believe that philosophy has anything else to offer or are we simply playing separate purposeless philosophical language games? Could there be a kind of philosophy that is not merely school philosophy or literature for experts (though interesting) but also a form of practical activity? His response is that the highest criterion for such a philosophy would probably not be the number of publications or the quality of them but the good life (and good society). This philosophy would formulate this concept of the good life and help bring it into being. It would not simply be a school subject or research discipline. It would be a philosophy that was good (or “useful”) for something in life. This philosophy would judge everything from the perspective of the “art of living” and/or it would itself be this perspective. Teaching philosophy would imply teaching the art of living and devotion to philosophy would mean devoting oneself to the practical art of living (Višňovský 2004, 200).

Višňovský distinguishes between philosophical counselling and philosophical therapy as being two forms of practicing philosophy. If a therapist communicates with experts or with laypersons from different areas of life in society, whether individually or in groups, he or she proves him/herself to be an expert on in-depth questions concerning human practice and life and the main method used in his/her work is the “Socratic dialogue”. This means reviving the role of a Deweyan style of philosopher as a social actor involved in public life (e.g. in the form of consultations for managers), or the role of a Wittgensteinian style of philosopher as a therapist not only at the psychological but also at the worldview level—at the level of solving life’s problems and dealing with the “art of living” for ordinary people. Philosophical counselling and therapy therefore mean a sort of Socratic return, bringing contemporary philosophy “back to life”.

Višňovský defines philosophical counselling as a specific tool for solving particular situations in life and the problems individuals have on the basis of three presuppositions: 1. that every person has his/her own life situation which leads to certain problems, difficulties, dissatisfactions, desires, anxieties, etc. (personal, work, etc.); 2. that every person has his/her own lifestyle and feeling that is tied to that life; 3. that every person has his/her own life philosophy (strategy, orientation, worldview, conviction, faith, etc). We may not be clearly aware of any of these. Philosophy is capable of understanding a person in depth and is able to teach them this art of knowing themselves as a person and in the world (*ibid.*, 208).

Life philosophy, according to Višňovský, is one of the necessities in life. The pluralistic, turbulent and even chaotic world we live in today and the changes in our culture and civilisation challenge us to formulate our life philosophy anew and reshape it over and over again. The central question of life philosophy is “how should we live?” Life philosophy is thus a set of some fundamental ideas (or perhaps simply one or two such ideas) formulated in a language intelligible to us, which tell us about our life mission and guide us in shaping our own lives; it is a set of ideas, which teaches us how (or how not) to live a good life or even how to live a bad life. Thus in philosophical counselling we work with people’s life philosophies and thereby also with life’s problems since in life philosophy we encounter

these problems either at an early stage or in a more advanced form. Through decoding and analyzing life philosophy we obtain the code for resolving situations in life, for instituting changes and opening up new opportunities. What is interesting is Višňovský's view that creating life philosophy is both necessary and possible and above all we are all "responsible" to ourselves and our surroundings for our own life philosophy: "each of us creates our own life philosophy (it is both essential and possible) and is responsible to ourselves and our surroundings for this life philosophy, since we do not live in isolation and our actions are carried out on a long-term basis and are strategically controlled by this philosophy (except for the odd outburst, emotion, disruption, etc.). However, no-one can create their own life philosophy in isolation. People need to communicate with others. Building a life philosophy is a creative process and creation is not an abstract activity. It is here that much depends on whom and how we communicate. Socrates, regarded as the father of philosophical counseling, followed the maxim: "No engagement between humans without any mutual enrichment" (*ibid.*, 212).

Višňovský also talks of the ethos of the philosophical counsellor: a philosopher who maintains a sensitivity to the problems people have in this world; not only the problems of the powerful but particularly those of the weak and of ordinary people because life itself is the greatest value and that is true for every single person, not only those in privileged positions. A philosophical counsellor is a philosopher who cannot be indifferent to the problems of everyday life because he has a heart and indeed sees the mission of philosophy precisely as being involved in solving these problems. A philosophical counsellor is a philosopher who wants to help those who have not resigned themselves to life, but who want to live lives that are as good and as meaningful as possible. A philosophical counsellor responds to the needs and expectations of these people (non-philosophers) who turn to philosophy in the hope of finding within it life wisdom and the answers to any burning questions that fate has sent their way (*ibid.*, 214).

The essays by Emil Višňovský serve as proof of the authors initial statement i.e., that philosophy is primarily free and open thinking (2010, 6).

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