
Philosophy as Calling

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Abstract

Philosophy comes to us humans as an appeal to search for wisdom, understanding, insight and knowledge. All humans experience this. It is not so much a human creation like the sciences, but much rather a gift to humans to which they must respond. This calling does not come from above or beyond, but from inside ourselves.

It is in a very fundamental way a call to exercise the most distinguished quality we possess, namely thinking. It is a call to think properly, adequately, responsibly, inventively, and not only critically. Pascal stated: "Let us try our best to think well; that is the principle of morality."

The philosopher is required and called upon to encourage thinking, to identify flaws in thinking, to protest or revolt against deliberate distortions in thinking, to identify gaps in mental activity and to identify traces of philosophy and the philosophical wherever they appear or may appear. The philosophers Hegel, Deleuze and Prigogine serve as examples.

This calling is irresistible and inexhaustible. It haunts us wherever we are and in whatever we do. The philosophic mind can never stop philosophising. Gadamer stated: Not from transcendental revelation, but out of the power of deepening, and the spiritualization of the own earthly-humanly being, the road to salvation opens up.

Introduction

Four considerations motivated me to address this theme of *Philosophy as calling* as a highly necessary focus to be placed on philosophy and the philosophical in contemporary societies.

First of all, my deep concern over many years about the absence of thorough and comprehensive thinking and reflection in scientific work in general (that is, thinking beyond boundaries), but also in professional work in particular. This has been emphasised by many scientists and professionals and also the superficiality hereby created in the multiple knowledge fields.

Secondly, the disappearance of any serious thinking endeavours in our teaching and learning activities and the complementary deliberate efforts to create suspicion regarding the importance and place of the philosophical in our pursuit of knowledge and education. This is discussed by Mary Evans in her book *"Killing thinking: the death of the university"* with the fatal, to my mind, intellectual impoverishment that is hereby brought about.

In the *third* place, the point emphasised and explored by Susan Sontag (1968:8), decades ago already, in an essay *"Thinking against oneself"*: "The best of the intellectual and creative speculation carried on in the 'West' over the past hundred and fifty years seems incontestably the most energetic, dense, subtle, sheer interesting, and *true* in the entire lifetime of man. And yet the equally contestable result of all this genius is our sense of standing in the ruins of thought, and on the verge of the ruins of history and of man himself."

In the *fourth* place I also wish to emphasise my personal experience of never being able, for fifty years now, to break my ties with philosophical engagements in some form or another, either inside or outside of philosophy departments. The love of wisdom seems to be something that can never be extinguished only in the negative sense, but also in the positive sense as well: it should be cultivated continuously and not only by small professional groups.

These considerations force one to ask questions such as: Why and how does one find one's way to philosophy? Why does one become a philosopher? Why does one remain one? It seems as if the philosophical project is constantly inscribed and re-inscribed in the most intimate and secret domains of our lives. It is as if these questions demarcate various themes as belonging to the heart of philosophy, like God, Being, the human being and humanism, thinking, knowledge, truth, virtue, on the basis of which philosophy can be understood as one of the main contemporary civic urgencies. Despite all the declarations about the death of philosophy we constantly encounter new apologies for the relevance and even necessity of the philosophical – inside but especially from outside philosophical circles. It remains clear that intense and comprehensive philosophical endeavours are constantly required to orientate and re-orientate humans towards all these issues.

A calling from within

Any serious student of philosophy and the philosophical in humans soon becomes aware of one thing, and that is that we are dealing with an activity that is comprehensive in nature and that cannot be avoided or ignored, and

that must be pursued at all times and always will continue to be pursued. It would seem that Kant is correct in stating that human beings are in essence metaphysical beings (Kant 1959:36) – they either embrace it or fight it but both are equally philosophical endeavours. In other words, humans cannot do without the philosophical. As Beerling (Van Dale) puts it: “the most sublime of all passions: the philosophical”. It emerges, as it were, out of the depth of our being and therefore belongs to us in a very natural way – it becomes second nature. It comes to us as a calling, not from above or beyond us out of some kind of transcendent source, but from within ourselves.

The Greeks, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and even the pre-Socratic thinkers, articulated this natural human givenness exceptionally well and convincingly.

In the words of Gadamer (1980:180) in his essay *Thought as salvation*: “The road to salvation that is opened up by philosophical thought, does not originate from transcendental revelation, but out of the power of deepening, and the spiritualisation of the own earthly-humanly being.” Merleau-Ponty (1963) understood the call to take up a chair in philosophy as a call “to live the philosophical life” as completely as possible, which according to him should be seen and understood as ‘a thoughtful life’. Bernard Stiegler (2003:10-13) states that if becoming a philosopher is a vocation, the following should be considered, namely that it is “assigned to those who feel themselves called” – he refers to an article in the *Encyclopedia universalis* on ‘vocation’ where it is stated that vocation, according to its originally religious sense, is a call “assigned to those who feel themselves called”. In certain vocational contexts, such as those of musicians, writers or artists a calling is not really the issue, but rather a special gift. As far as the vocation of philosophy is concerned it would seem that we have much less to do with a special gift, but rather with *a gift that precisely all of us have in common* (Stiegler 2003:11), namely that **we, all of us**, feel that we should all be **devoted** to and committed to philosophy, and the philosophical in particular. We all, and precisely as far as we all together form an ‘us’, should forcefully be devoted to philosophy, which is not the case in the other knowledge fields. Philosophical engagement is in other words not merely an individual matter but a collective one, even to the point of death. Socrates is the best example in this regard. His death was not merely an individual issue but much more: it was a societal issue.

The philosophical life “in its complete sense”, to which Merleau-Ponty called attention, is well articulated by Stiegler (2002:12) in the following description:

“For philosophy, more than for any other profane activity, one is inclined to understand the vocation in a religious sense to the extent that the philosopher in action, also can be referred to as a mission; it must be a permanent state, in its whole being, in all points of its existence, in accord

with its philosophical vocation, and this, up to the point of the intimate and secret dimensions of its existence, or even *as* this intimacy and secrecy." He proceeds by emphasising that the philosophical way of life is a life of resistance against each and every form of reduction, whether it relates to truth, knowledge, humans, virtues and constituting in this way what Blanchot called "the question of the whole, the all, that which is" (20). It is this position that links the 'I' to the 'us'.

What is encountered here, may not sound like the kind of philosophy one would find in philosophy departments or in doctrines of some great philosophers, but it remains an activity very similar to what happens in philosophy departments and done by philosophers. A careful gleaning of scientific texts, both in the human and the natural sciences, makes this same point abundantly clear – the philosophical emerges everywhere where human thinking is active. Philosophy comes to us humans as an appeal to search for wisdom, understanding, insight and knowledge. Paul Ricoeur (1967:348) made it emphatically clear: "We should remain faithful to the philosopher's oath to seek understanding." Whether it originates from a sense of wonder in the classical sense, or from traumatic experiences in the case of Levinas that force us to think, or because of disappointment of some nature in the case of Simon Critchley, philosophy's oath is to seek understanding or wisdom.

It seems as if we really encounter here a deep seated anthropological phenomenon. Let us borrow an example from Critchley's argument regarding ethics. According to Critchley (2007:11) "the ethical subject is defined by commitment or fidelity to an unfulfillable demand, a demand ... which divides subjectivity .." "Such a divided subjectivity is", he argues, "the experience of conscience. ..a concept that he places at the heart of ethics". (Ibid.) Maybe we should put this notion back at the heart of philosophy as well, especially if we consider the link established by Badiou between truth and ethics to be serious. To be truthful is as much a matter of conscience as it is to be ethical, especially when we consider Pascal's (1963:116) remark that the principle of morality is "to endeavour to think well". That means, I think, to be truthful in our thinking. Critchley (Ibid.) is proposing "an ethics of discomfort, a hyperbolic ethics, based on the internalisation of an unfulfillable ethical demand. Such a conscience is not as Luther puts it, the work of God in the heart of man, but rather *the work of ourselves upon ourselves.*" (My emphasis). Conscience regarding the truthfulness of thinking must in a similar way be seen as the work of ourselves upon ourselves.

A call to thinking

Philosophy is directly linked to human thinking. It is the manifestation of

thinking par excellence. In his thoughts on "The Philosophers" Pascal (1963:115) emphasises that "thought constitutes the greatness of human beings" and a paragraph later "All our dignity consists in thought" (Op. cit. 116). Thinking is always stripped of its true sense by the sciences of whatever nature and forced into dark inaccessible corners. Therefore we have to constantly honour Pascal's call: Let us endeavour, try our very best, commit ourselves, or work hard to think well, because that is the principle of morality. Human dignity cannot be derived from space or possessions but from the ability of humans to organise their thoughts (Ibid.).

Philosophy, as described above, is in other words primarily a human activity; it takes place at the first level of thinking; the sciences are secondary level activities. Philosophy as discipline is, however, different. It is parasitic to the sciences. In its true nature, on the other hand, philosophy guides and orientates the disciplines; and the disciplines or sciences are parasitic to the philosophical. The disciplines show a lack, a gap, something missing. And this missing part, empty space, is the philosophical. For this very reason only the pursuit of the philosophical can make significant inroads here.

When we refer to this activity as unavoidable, what does this really mean? It means that one cannot run away from it, that it demands commitment, that it imposes itself on one's intellectual endeavours and that one is confronted with the responsibility in the sense that one is obliged to respond to statements, situations, arguments, insights and understandings, wherever they may appear. Since it involves an attitudinal and emotional involvement, as well as an intellectual challenge to one's thinking capacity that calls for constant commitment, I prefer to use the term 'calling'. We have to respond to the call, align ourselves to it, grow into harmony with what this call implies.

This calling can quite easily be illustrated in terms of the work of some philosophers: Merleau-Ponty (In praise of philosophy), Adorno (The task of philosophy), Gadamer (Thought a salvation), Derrida (The right to philosophy), Ryle (On thinking). There are many more examples. They could never reject this calling, and stop devoting their lives to it, or resign from it. And even in cases where philosophers were obliged to resign for institutional reasons they could never successfully resign from philosophy and the philosophical as such. The same is true of us. As it comes to them, it comes to us, through all human intellectual activities and engagements as part of it: sciences and knowledges, technics and technologies, everyday human rhetoric and activities, educational strategies, political ambitions, economic drives, societal demands and challenges, ethical and moral requirements, anthropological challenges (Who are we? Post-human? Or, still the subject in the humanistic sense of this term?), and matters of method and approach.

On a personal note: literally and exactly 50 years of philosophising,

inside and outside philosophy departments, convinced me of the fact that the philosophical cannot and should never be avoided or ignored, only neglected to our own detriment I need to add. Simply because it is always there; it is encountered everywhere in all situations, and not only, and perhaps fortunately so, in philosophy departments, but everywhere, even in the churches and their dogmas, and even in major companies and not the least in their board rooms, in the market place and in all manifestations of economisms and ideologies. And never to be ignored, also amongst lay people and young people wherever people ask questions of an ethical nature and that certainly not only in exceptional cases.

The tasks implied in the call

The philosopher is required to encourage thinking, to identify flaws in thinking, to protest or revolt against deliberate distortions in thinking and to identify and isolate gaps in mental activity. But he or she should also identify traces of philosophy, and the philosophical, wherever they appear or may appear. While Hegel (1977:18) emphasises how problematic and self-deceptive it can be to accept and take for granted what is familiar to us, Deleuze and Guattari (1994:12) emphasise how “absolutely disastrous for thought commercial professional training can be”. Prigogine and Stengers (1989:8-81) identified the problematic impact of determinism on the sciences as a manifestation of cultural conviction and prejudice. For these reasons philosophy is always and will always be and should always be inventively interfering in scientific and intellectual activities.

Moreover, real rivals and enemies should be identified and unmasked in terms of their diabolic intentions with regard to human thinking. Philosophy encounters many new rivals, for example in the field of sociology, psychology and economy. These animosities generate organisations (economism, populism, consumerism, and technicism) that systematically produce, without any opposition, “the degree zero of thought” (Stiegler 2006b:52), the erasure of thought. (Cf Evans’ *Killing thinking*). Deleuze and Guattari (1993:10) has stated explicitly: “Philosophy has not remained unaffected by the general movement, [the spirit of the age], that replaced Critique with sales promotion. The simulacrum, the simulation of a packet of noodles, has become the true concept; and the one who packages the product, commodity, or work of art has become the philosopher, conceptual persona, or artist.” And then they continue and ask: “How could philosophy, an old person, compete against young executives in a race for the universals of communication for determining the marketable form of the concept...? (Op. cit.:10-11). Again, we should take heed of the argument by Deleuze and Guattari: “Certainly, it is painful to learn that the *Concept*

indicates a society of information services and engineering. But the more philosophy comes up against shameless and inane rivals and encounters them at their very core, the more it feels driven to fulfil the task of creating concepts that are aerolites, rather than commercial products. It gets the giggles, which wipe away its tears. So, the question of philosophy is the singular point where concept and creation are related to each other." (Op. cit.:11) What can the philosopher bring onto the scene, what role can still be played? The facilitating role of Socrates remains at the heart of the challenge! Variations, reconnections, compositions bring forward novelties of insight and understanding in terms of "the art of forming, inventing and fabricating concepts" (Op. cit. 2 & 12).

For philosophy to live up to its calling it must propose a principle of interruption so that it does not become absorbed in the world as it is. (Cf. Badiou 2004:53-57). The world as it is should be described. Currently, it is the world wherein money, products and images are exchanged. Thought must be able to extract itself from these processes and take possession of itself (instead of being possessed) as something other than an object to be circulated and exchanged with other objects. This point of interruption is an unconditional requirement for the existence of philosophy. This requirement needs to be supported by both the polyvalence of meaning as well as the reconstruction of the category of truth. The problem is the one of knowing if, in the world as it is (ie people who live in it and think in it), there is the slightest chance for such an enterprise to flourish or be heard (OP. cit.:52) or is it merely a vain dream. There is no doubt, says Badiou, that philosophy is ill. The problem is knowing whether the illness is mortal or not. ... And then: "If philosophy is ill, it is less ill than it thinks it is, less ill than it says it is". He is concerned that the world, that is the people who live in it and think in it, this world is asking something of it. Yet philosophy is too morose to respond due to the morbidity of its own vision of itself". (Op. cit.:53). It is the world that calls upon philosophy to get up and walk! (See Op. cit.:56-57).

The essence of the call: irresistible and inexhaustible

This calling is irresistible, but also without end. It gives us no rest. It stays with us. It haunts us wherever we are and in whatever we do. The philosophic mind can never stop philosophising. This calling is inexhaustible. Ricoeur (1967: 347-348) emphasises: "Philosophy cannot stop along the way; it has sworn at the start to be consistent; it must keep its promise to the end." This urge to philosophise receives constant support, inspiration and encouragement from the History of Philosophy in general, from influential contemporary older philosophers (Badiou, Simondon and many others), but also from young philosophers who philosophise with great enthusiasm and

persuasive arguments on crucial issues of our time, like Stiegler (2006a) (on Philosophy of Technics, politics, sociopathology and sociotherapy), Malabou (2007) (on the new maladies of our time), Salanskis (2007) (on the 'ethos analysis' of territories of meaning), and Critchly (2007) (on an Ethics of commitment and a politics of resistance) (to mention only a few) who come forward with a kind of philosophical therapy for the severe illnesses that harass contemporary societies all over the world.

In his remarkable essay "*Philosophy and desire*" (to my mind one of the clearest statements about philosophy as a calling, already attended to earlier) the philosopher, Alain Badiou (2004:39-40), states early in the text that "there is no philosophy without the discontent of thinking in its confrontation with the world as it is." It would seem as if 'thinking' and 'the world as it is' are the two central issues in philosophical activity, according to Badiou. He closes the text with the important statement: "the world needs philosophy more than philosophy thinks. Philosophy is ill, it might be dying, but I am sure that the world (the world, neither a God, nor a prophet, but the world) is saying to philosophy: "Get up and walk" (Op. cit.:56-57). As if he wanted to say: come to life again. This sounds like a perfect articulation of the idea of "philosophy as calling", or, philosophy as being called up, despite the odds against it, to deliver and bring forward, to invent new insights into thinking, knowledge and truth in order to regain these notions from their current distortions and neglects for the sake of human beings and the world! In the Translator's Introduction to *What is philosophy?* by Deleuze and Guattari (1994:vii) the translator states: "[The book] is not a primer or a textbook. It closely resembles a manifesto produced under the slogan: Philosophers of the world, create!" It reminds of Michel Serres' (1997:92-93) firm point of view: "Invention is the only true intellectual act, the only act of intelligence. ... Only invention proves that one truly thinks what one thinks... I think therefore I invent, I invent therefore I think...."

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