

Urban philosophy as a way of life

"I'm a lover of learning, and trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in the town do."
(Socrates)¹

There is now a growing interest in philosophy conceived as a way of life. The very concept of *philosophy as a way of life* is offered as an alternative to taking philosophy as a kind of scientific research. Many still understand philosophy as careful analyses of written works of dead or living philosophers, as well as the timeless (perennial) philosophical questions, with some scientific scrutiny. It is not always clear who should be regarded as a philosopher and exactly what kind of topics and methods should be regarded as philosophical. Yet, this approach seems to be fairly appropriate to delineate what counts as philosophical activity and who, therefore, should be treated as a philosopher. Philosophical work, the tradition of philosophy, and current topics are usually defined as *research*, conducted mainly within the academic environment, at universities and research institutes. Thus philosophy is the study of the writings of Aristotle, Descartes, Leibniz, Husserl, Heidegger, Carnap, Putnam, Rawls, Derrida, Deleuze and others, or topics like causation, free will, personal identity, responsibility, justice or the moral acceptability of certain actions.

However, philosophy has always had an alternative tradition too. Within this framework the philosopher does not primarily do research, but applies philosophical approaches and insights as an organic part of his/her life. It is not the same studying the works of say Spinoza or Sartre in the current academic setting (usually as a professor), and to hold classes on them at the university or speak about them at professional conferences, as it is to living your whole life according to the ideas developed by these philosophers (especially when we well know that both philosophers mentioned above strongly resisted becoming part of the academia). Actually, at the beginning of philosophy, we find an understanding of philosophy which suggests it is a practice of using certain life-managing principles instead of scientific analyses of other philosophers. So conceived, the ultimate task of a philosopher is the committed experimentation of the right conduct of life, trying out new principles and practices, which eventually will turn out to be the litmus test of how valuable the life of the philosopher as such, would be.

¹ Plato: *Phaidros*, 230d

In the rediscovery of this view of philosophy as a way of life, the late French historian of philosophy, Pierre Hadot has played a crucial role. What Hadot recognized was that the works of many ancient or modern philosophers could be understood in a more appropriate way if we would see them not as instances of scientific discourses, but parts of the life practice and self-realization of the philosopher. In so doing, Hadot sets talk about philosophy against philosophy *itself*, its actual application to life. In principle, anyone can be a respected expert today in Plato or Heidegger, and yet not even making a single effort to use Platonic or Heideggerian ideas in their life. Should this happen, it would not influence the overall reputation of the philosopher in question.

But what exactly does philosophy as a way of life, or philosophy as applied to life mean? Even though Hadot himself draws on a wide historical spectrum of philosophy, the Stoic philosophers serve as his main reference points. Stoicism is a philosophical idea which has become popular again, and which still attracts new followers today. The essence of Stoicism is that we have to control our negative emotions, feelings, motivations, temptations etc. by the power of reason, in order to achieve a better, more virtuous and happy life. Stoic philosophy, like other practical „schools” in philosophy after Socrates, fits pretty well into what Martha Nussbaum called (in the title of her famous book) „The Therapy of Desire”². At the center of these philosophical movements, we find the importance of individual virtues, primarily in the form of self-mastery and personal integrity.

This approach suggests that a genuine philosopher is a wise sage who lives his life according to clear guidelines, which we can immediately recognize in his conduct. It should be obvious for everyone that he is an experienced champion of philosophy, as he would simply shrug off all the miseries of life which would ruin other people; so he is almost an otherworldly creature. If we were to listen to him, we could gain the highest wisdom from his words. In this form, however, this is nothing but a caricature. In Hadot’s view, philosophical wisdom cannot be achieved in its entirety, instead we should understand it as an idealized goal for those choosing a philosophical way of life.

In addition to these practical aspects of the conception of philosophy as a way of life, it is worth considering the suggested environment, the particular *place* of such a philosophical practice. In the works of Hadot and his followers, there is a recurrent reference to the monastic way of living. For many people, life-style philosophies are represented as something similar to the lives of monks, be them Christians, Buddhists or anything else, even the Indian Yogis. The

² Nussbaum, Martha: *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*. Princeton-Oxford, Princeton University Press, 1994.

very term spiritual exercise, widely used by Hadot, itself is a reference to the founder of the Jesuit order, St. Ignatius of Loyola. As Hadot writes:

Among the Cynics, champions of *askesis*, this engagement amounted to a total break with the profane world, analogous to the monastic calling in Christianity. The rupture took the form of a way of living, and even of dress, completely foreign to that of the rest of mankind. [...] The practice of spiritual exercises implied a complete reversal of received ideas: one was to renounce the false values of wealth, honors, and pleasures, and turn towards the true values of virtue, contemplation, a simple life-style, and the simple happiness of existing. (Hadot 1995, 103-104.)³

Or in another place:

The philosopher was less a professor than a spiritual guide: he exhorted his charges to conversion, and then directed his new converts – often adults as well as young people – to the paths of wisdom. He was a spiritual adviser. (Hadot 1998, 75-6)⁴

The monastic life suggests a kind of *retreat* from the conventional life of the society. Thoreau, for example, one of Hadot's favorite reference points, notoriously went to the forest, to rethink, in a voluntary solitude, the philosophical meaning of his life. In the writings of the Stoic philosophers, like Epictetus, Seneca, or Marcus Aurelius, it is an often recurring topic to avoid the masses, which would otherwise disturb the right thinking. Thus, the philosopher is better off not contacting ordinary people rather insensitive to philosophical values. Actually, finding or creating the appropriate social environment is a fundamental part of the philosophical practice.

As we see, the original conception of philosophy as a way of life, is often defined *in contrast* to the urban life and its characteristically social nature. The aim of my paper is to rethink this widely held view. The urban life itself is a permanent philosophical experience, not just in the sense that there are more libraries, theatres, universities or public lectures in the city, but in a deeper way; rather everyday life in the city has an effect on urban people, as spiritual exercises in the Hadotian sense.

³ Pierre Hadot: *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Wiley-Blackwell, 1995.

⁴ Pierre Hadot: *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision*. University of Chicago Press, 1998.

For sure, we can philosophize in many different places and environments. It is possible in the Himalaya, in the forest, even at a monastery, as well as at the modern, secular versions of the monastery, the scientific research centers or university campuses. What these places promise is the possibility of retreat and contemplation, and thus the company of people with similar interests and motivations, who do not misdirect our attention from the desired goals. With this in mind, it is striking that the main location of European philosophy, the ancient and the modern or for that matter the cultural activity in general, has been the *big city*. European philosophy is a typically *urban* phenomenon.

The current criticisms against the state of philosophy today, including those referring to the conception of philosophy as a way of life, often focus on this point. Many think that in order to be able to find a way back to the original meaning and mission of philosophy, we have to somehow retreat to our own personal solitude, for which it would be a great help to get rid of the usual bustle of urban life. The urban environment may have a negative effect on deep self-reflection. If you wish for philosophical contemplation, it is said that the best thing you can do is to take a retreat to some meditation center, outside the city, to an intimate place near nature, or perhaps – provided that you can afford – take a spiritual pilgrimage to India, Thailand, or Bali.

European philosophy, as we mainly know and love it, was born in the city. No doubt, I have in mind Socrates, who was an urban man, and whose philosophical practice could make sense only in the urban environment. The difference between Western and Eastern philosophy may occur just in relation to their typical places: European philosophy is essentially an urban activity, while its Eastern counterpart is not. This aspect says a lot about the nature and basic ambitions of philosophy. Hadot, of course, didn't leave out Socrates from his analyses. He wrote about him: „Throughout, his philosophy was a spiritual exercise, an invitation to a new way of life, active reflection, and living consciousness.” (Hadot 1995, 157.)⁵ However, the part the urban environment played in Socrates' philosophical practice apparently avoided his attention.

In his now classic book, Richard Sennett defined the essence of urban living in the terms of the regular meetings of people strangers:

There are probably as many different ways of conceiving what a city is as there are cities. A simple definition therefore has its attractions. The simplest is that a city is

⁵ Pierre Hadot: *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Wiley-Blackwell, 1995.

a human settlement in which strangers are likely to meet. For this definition to hold true, the settlement has to have a large, heterogeneous population; the population has to be packed together rather densely; market exchanges among the population must make this dense, diverse mass interact. In this milieu of strangers whose lives touch there is a problem of audience akin to the problem of audience an actor faces in the theater. (Sennett 1974, 39.)⁶

The urban life is like a theatre; urban people should permanently play certain characters, which means a never-ending need and opportunity of performative self-creation. In the city you can't just be anything, but virtually you *must* be anything, depending on the actual circumstances which are always changing. Instead of the rigid integration of the self or personality and its malleability, the *transformative* power of social experiences comes to the forefront. In the city everything is *relative*. One moment you seem to be one person but in the next minute you become someone else. First you see a wealthy person stepping into an expensive restaurant, minutes later you buy something from a seller at the farmers' market, still later you pass by homeless people, then you bump into groups of foreigner tourists browsing their maps, local teenagers going to party, or even a group of migrants. Rich and poor, well-educated and uneducated, old and young, local and foreigner expose to your eyes the permanently changing spectacle, in the light of which you should define yourself. The interpretation of a supposed „true” self totally loses its meaning in the city bustle; you must realize that you're not *this* or *that*, but an unlimited source of self-creation.

The days in the city mean a kind of spiritual exercise in this sense. In the city you realize that the self or the „soul” is not something out there waiting to get discovered, but something permanently changing. A trip on the metro or the tram can become a time of meditation. We rarely think about it this way; a deep meditation, being *at last* ourselves, usually suggests scenarios outside the city center. We don't even have to leave the city in order to perform a philosophical exercise! Just the opposite: what the long tradition of European philosophy teaches us is that the best environment for getting philosophical is the city. As the American philosopher, James Conlon claims:

Being urban and being philosophical are significantly intertwined and the city is the surest place for philosophy to happen. [...] The daily dynamics of city life, rather

⁶ Richard Sennett: *The Fall of Public Man*. Penguin, 2003.

than providing affirmation of one's values, provide constant challenges to them instead. [...] Philosophy has acquired the reputation of being ethereal and abstract, but if its paradigm is the Socratic dialogue, it was born amidst the bustle of the *agora*, born on the busiest corner of a great city. (Conlon 1999)⁷

Eduardo Mendieta, much as I do, argues that its obvious bias toward the urban life is a rather underestimated aspect of the philosophical tradition. He illustrates this point by Jean-Paul Sartre's example. Sartre was a city dweller through and through and his philosophy should be understood from this perspective:

Sartre was a demolisher, defiler, deconstructor of the delusion of subjectivity, of a life that is lived alone, away, concealed from the look of the other. Self-consciousness is a nothingness, it thus cannot have its own space, or place. Its place is outside itself, beyond itself. [...] Gabriel Marcel, for whom the philosopher was truest to his calling by being in solitude, wrote that 'Sartre's world is a world as seen from the terrace of a *café*.' This is a very accurate description, for Sartre's philosophy peers into the city from inside the city. His tenacious phenomenological eye and pen are constantly trained on the life of persons, moving, sitting, talking, reflecting, objectifying, deceiving and trusting others, always under the look of others. [...] Sartre wrote extensively on the city, city life, buildings, and crowds. His numerous letters are sprinkled with incisive phenomenological explorations of cities: Berlin, Paris, Rome, London, etc. (Mendieta 2001, 209.)⁸

One of the main symbols of the European city life is the *café*. The coffeehouse began arriving to European big cities from the middle of the 17th century, as a substantial public scene for philosophy, science, art, politics, and public affairs. What was the *agora*, the marketplace of Socrates' time, became the *café* for modern European intellectual.⁹ Recently, the cultural role of the *café* has been a topic of extensive research. In the dominant view, the coffeehouse has played an essential role in creating a civilian public sphere for free discussions of people with

⁷ Conlon, James: Cities and the Place of Philosophy. *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 1999, 6 (3/4), 43–49.

⁸ Mendieta, Eduardo: The city and the philosopher: On the urbanism of phenomenology. *Philosophy & Geography*, 2001 (4) 2, 203–218. 209.

⁹ László Nemes: A filozófiai kávéház és a nyilvános filozofálás európai hagyománya. *Nagyerdei Almanach* (3) 4. 2012/1. 1–37.

different social backgrounds. In this sense, the café is the quintessence of modern city life. With the words of the Italian novelist, Claudio Magris:

Those places where just one tribe sets up camp are pseudocafes – never mind whether they are frequented by respectable people, youth most-likely-to, alternative lifestyles or *a la page* intellectuals. All endogamies are suffocating; colleges too, and university campuses, exclusive clubs, master classes, political meetings and cultural symposia, they are all a negation of life, which is a sea port. (Magris 2000, 7.)¹⁰

By representing the diversity of the urban community, the very possibility of free debate and open discussion, the coffeehouse touches something fundamental about philosophy in general. When the city dweller goes to a café or other similar public places, she makes a philosophical spiritual exercise. As she exposes herself to challenges coming from people who have different backgrounds and who think differently, she risks her views and identity.

The urban person and philosopher is a passionate *seeker*. Not someone who tells us what is there, what is right, what to do, but someone who constantly addresses questions to himself and others. This is the *Socratic* conception of the philosophical life. The Socratic philosopher does not believe in absolute certainties, thus he does not even try to find them. He feels better raising questions, than answering them once and for all. For Socratic philosophers, the question is life, the ultimate answer is death. So Socratic philosophy is not solution-oriented, the seeker does not enter into a discussion with others to find satisfying answers, to make life easier, unproblematic, or simple; on the contrary, she seeks doubts where the discussion seemed to be settled. The city dweller meets people not to learn ultimate certainties, but to challenge any view which claims to be obvious. Thus, the urban person looks for places where the people are of diverse background and think very differently, not for people similar to himself, always echoing the same opinions, and so reassuring each other as a sort of sign of tribal solidarity.

The peculiarity of city life initially stikes one as culture shock, when they first move from a village or a small town to a big city. The village often strenghtens one's illusion that other people live and think, by and large, similarly to us. Consequently, their company may further deepen our belief in our most cherished ideas. Entering the urban life causes us to

¹⁰ Claudio Magris: *Microcosms*. The Harvill Press, 2000.

question radically everything we think about the world and ourselves. The city never sleeps, constantly shaping us, at every moment urging us to redefine ourselves.

Most of the philosophers today are urban people. They live in cities, because they have their jobs there, at universities and research institutes. They go to other cities to attend conferences, because they are held in cities too. Some of them have a bad feeling about this, and secretly hope they could step out of the city, and find a quiet place, somewhere outside the city bustle. Philosophers are often unable to realize the potential of the urban environment. The city is the place of philosophy. It is not only about philosophers; even an ordinary non-philosopher city dweller is also becoming a kind of philosopher in the phenomenological and communicational environment of the city.

In this essay, I have presented the argument that the city is far from being in opposition to genuine philosophy; quite the opposite can be true in fact, that is the city and urban life embody a special possibility of philosophical practice. This insight could bring about a significant change in the thinking of philosophers or those interested in philosophy. Everyday experiences of the urban life: downtown walks, the contemplative observation of the urban crowd, travelling by bus, metro or tram, meetings at cafés, regular visits to public lectures and discussions, all these can be understood as forms of philosophical spiritual exercises. The city changes us all, let's indulge in this elementary transformative power, and contemplate upon the people in front of us, coming and communicating, and on what's happening with us during this exchange. The idea of philosophy as a way of life lives in the city, here with us, if we pay attention, we will see how.