Chapter 5
Practicing Philosophy, From Plato to Gadamer

ABSTRACT

This section explains what kind of philosophy we are referring to when we talk about the role of philosophy in the cross-disciplinary type of debates that interest us here. Namely, it is a practical – rather than theoretical – philosophy; indeed, a practice in itself, rather than an analytical pursuit, which is aimed at achieving practical wisdom, rather than theoretical insights. This entails different kinds of practices – from what we would nowadays call moral and political philosophy, in Plato and Aristotle, through a certain kind of interpretive practice, in Heidegger and Gadamer, to a series of neo-pragmatist ways of living, in Rorty and Shusterman. What these have in common is a philosophical focus on what we can do, in our personal, social, and professional lives, rather than what type of theoretical knowledge we can achieve – and how. The former is a kind of philosophy that is more likely to have an impact on the way we live, than on a particular theory or line of arguments.

INTRODUCTION

Before we discuss how exactly each of the practical philosophies mentioned above might help us with our cross-disciplinary studies, let us try to unpack what we did in the previous section. We looked at the issue of consciousness and the self from different angles, reading the works of neuroscientists,
psychologists, psychiatrists, artists and philosophers. It was a modern-day Socratic walk through the Agora where my interlocutors would speak to me through their books, articles and conferences, rather than colloquial dialogue, as Socrates’ might have done.

But something is lost, in this kind of desk-based investigation. Not only the spontaneity of the debate, but also the sense of a holistic event – something that takes place live and is therefore unique, not only authentic. How can we rekindle this sense of live event, in philosophy – and furthermore, in higher education? I happen to believe that bringing people together from across disciplines and have them debate – at conferences or through website forums – is key to the cross-disciplinary kind of debate that I advocate in this book. And the role of philosophy is precisely this – to provide a common method and language, that of unbiased rational conversation in a non-technical vocabulary.

In Ancient times, the theoretical and the practical were strongly intertwined in philosophy. Most Greek philosophers – certainly Plato and Aristotle – engaged in both; but what is most important, they engaged in something that is both, at the same time. Plato’s dialogue *The Republic*, for instance, discusses both the ideal leader, and practical aspects of his/her behaviour in action. It tackles the topics of knowledge and reality, whilst at the same time debating discrete aspects of it – from mere illusion and opinion (their role in people’s lives), to pure Ideas and how they are connected with life in agora. Aristotle, in turn, was similarly preoccupied with both theoretical matters – of a metaphysical nature – and practical ones, from ethics to politics. They both saw practical wisdom as a much worthier ideal in both our social and private life, than the purely intellectual type of knowledge and skills we currently associate with philosophical pursuits.

Two 20th century German philosophers – Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer (mentor and disciple) were particularly interested in the ancient wisdom of Plato and Aristotle. Heidegger used the Greek notion of *aletheia* (truth) to conceive of a kind of understanding that one needs to arrive at by uncovering what is already there, a ‘sense of being’ that is active in and around us, whether we choose to seek it or not. In his *Being and Time* (1927/2005a), he spoke at length about this so-called ‘hermeneutical circle’, which helps us make sense of things, in a dialectical way.

Another practical aspect of Heidegger’s hermeneutics is the role he assigns to journeys, for purposes of understanding another culture from within. In the conclusion, we briefly discuss this in relation to what international students say about the massively educational role that journeys have had in their lives.
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