

*In the history of philosophy, the following applies in general:
Tell me what you think of Socrates, and I'll tell you what your philosophy is.*
Odo Marquard

What matters? ? What is important in truth? What is crucial in the end?
Leading principles in philosophical practice.

(Lecture at the opening of the 15th International Colloquium on Philosophical Practice in Mexico on June 25, 2018.)

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues – and, if I see so many familiar faces here in the audience, so many dear fellow travellers of many years I think I can say: Welcome, dear friends!

I wonder: What is it that we should think about at this 15th International Conference on Philosophical Practice? What should we call this meeting that takes place 2.000 meters above sea level? Don't you think our conference merits the title "summit conference"?

I must admit, I am impressed by this – by European standards – oversized city also because *everyone* here lives in dizzying heights as if it were the most ordinary thing. Thus, here not only old-fashioned philosophers like to look at things "from the top" – who often end up "looking down upon others"; no, *everyone* here seems to take an "elevated stance." But this elevated stance is, thankfully, put into perspective by the two volcanoes that are 5.000 meters high and that "look down" at Mexico – and so they also look down at us. This hopefully saves us from height vertigo, or to put it more simply: from hubris and arrogance, the worst of all philosophers' sicknesses.

But let us move on from the valleys and mountains, which were only meant to serve as metaphors.

More important to me is that we are meeting for the fifteenth time as part of an international conference, to hear and learn from each other, but most importantly to talk to each other. This, I think, we should acknowledge with gratitude and pride. It means that we have established philosophical practice as an ongoing conversation that unifies us and brings us together on an international level. And this, in turn, means that there are no simple, preconceived answers to the questions what philosophical practice is and what it may yet become; what philosophical practice is made of; what opportunities lie dormant in it yet to be awoken; what its purpose is; what its profile will be; what form it may take; what its tasks are; and what – in the highest and purest sense – its calling and its mission are. We can only find answers to these questions in conversation, a conversation that continues to take place amongst those, who are joined together in their common passion for philosophical practice. This is why I am grateful for this conference.

And, my dear friends and valued colleagues, I think this is the right moment to remember all those who took part in this conversation and who have significantly contributed to our conversation. They would be here in Mexico today, I am sure, but we can now only remember them and we should honour them by preserving our memory of them. Allow me a metaphor here, a metaphor that might get lost in translation. Regardless, I think we should acknowledge the dead by considering them the bricks that built our house. And those who came first in this our movement are even more: they are our foundation. I would like to name two individuals – two of many. I think, for example, of Jess Fleming who had an unforgettably grandiose appearance during the fourth colloquium in 1998. Then there was my friend Slomith Schuster who gave her heart and soul to philosophical practice until her last breath. I would like to take this opportunity and thank them and many others, whom we dearly miss, *coram publico* here today.

My hope is, I should mention, that they would approve of the thoughts I am about to share with you here today. If I were in *their* place, I would not worry about *your* criticism ...I am serious about this because the principle at work here tells us that the dead do not have to stand before us, but we must stand before them and stand their test. For the longest time this was an unchanged, valid principle to live by. It was the cornerstone of all robust tradition. And do not take this lightly –I am pointing this out because even when one day I can no longer speak to you ... you may remember these words...

I shall call this the Principle of Interwoven Tradition and Foundation. This principle determines what really matters. What really matters, is to do justice to thought and its origin. Such is the meaning of “origin,” of what the Greeks called *arché*.

After this short introduction, allow me to transition into my subject for today, which consists of three correlated questions and the guarantee, that leading principles of the philosophical practice can be deduced from these questions. Since the wording of these three questions are so extraordinarily important, allow me to present them in the original German - for those among you, who are familiar with the German language.

These three questions are:

Worauf kommt es an? Was ist wahrhaft wichtig? Was ist letztlich entscheidend?

If we try to translate them into English, aware that a direct translation might prove difficult, but I think, we can read:

What matters? What is important in truth? What is crucial in the end?

A translator who took a look at my text suggested a lighter - but perhaps not quite as accurate - version instead: What matters? What is really important? What is essential in the end?

Now, let me make a first claim: I maintain that these questions do not only give us a guideline for our practice, but also that they are the true questions of philosophy – at least

of traditional philosophy. In fact, this is what qualifies them for philosophical practice but which also legitimizes our practice as a philosophical endeavour.

Let me elaborate.

When we are asked for our philosophical forebear – who do we name? Most of us would, without a doubt, point to Socrates and we would be right to do so. Cicero called Socrates the “father of all philosophy” and said of him that it was Socrates who “brought philosophy down from Heaven and established it in the cities.” Yes, Socrates “even introduced it into the houses” and “compelled” people to “ask about life, morality and the good and bad.”

Do you notice how Cicero, with regard to Socrates, makes an essential decision, or rather says what matters? To “explore things in heaven” is not the first concern. Instead, we are to take an interest in what matters to people down here, in the *polis*.

But the crucial point is this: Socrates, the proto-philosopher, did not get involved with the ordinary questions and worries that his dear fellow humans had in their rather scattered everyday lives.

No, he is convinced that they, for the most part, lived like somnambulists and fussed over things that are not worth the effort. In a way they lived their lives as though continuously putting on a scene from Shakespeare’s “Much Ado About Nothing.” Thus, they did *not* ask themselves what really mattered. Instead, they were preoccupied with lots of minor matters and bits and bobs, as the Brits say, and they hardly ever seemed to care for that which really mattered. That is why Cicero said that Socrates had “compelled” people to confront questions they wanted no part of. Socrates confronted his fellow Athenians with thoughts they either *did not* have or, if they had them, did everything they could to *avoid* and even *escape* them.

What is the result of this?

The result is that right from the start, philosophy has been *inconvenient*, to some even *annoying*. Others perceive philosophy as a disturbance of their much beloved routine of their everyday lives. Philosophy, in other words, engages in sabotage. And I should add: philosophy that no longer disturbs and discomforts is not worthy of our attention.

The German philosopher Robert Spaemann – a companion of philosophical practice from the beginning – stands in the Socratic tradition, when he succinctly explains that philosophy does not exist to “provide easy solutions, but to make the tasks and our questions more difficult.” Today, of course, most people rather seem to wish to have the difficulties of their lives simply lifted from them without having to lift a finger. Spaemann knows this as did Socrates, and I know it too.

In light of this fundamental trait of philosophy – let me put it this way: philosophy has a way of respectfully overwhelming people, instead of being at their service. – Now, I would

really love to name all those who have taken that stance, but time does not allow. Hence I shall only call on one more key witness of this principle and I happily point out that he was a Southern American – by the way, he has been an insider tip amongst intellectuals in Germany for quite a while now – I am referring, of course, to the late Columbian Nicolás Gómez Dávila. Entirely in the spirit of philosophical practice this grandiose maverick declared:

The sick soul does not heal by dwelling on its pathetic conflicts, but by plunging into noble conflicts.

That is what matters: to open a path for people so that they begin to ask themselves what is truly important in the end. Because if we can *tempt* them to ask themselves these questions in a profound way, then they are already beginning to free themselves from their meaningless, often irrelevant, erratic lives, from their mundane muddling through.

Again: *how* people answer the question regarding what matters is at first not the most important thing. What is important is *that they at all ask themselves that question*. By asking ourselves what matters to us adds weight to our lives – or, as Dávila put it: we plunge into “noble conflicts.” For example it is one thing to “want” this or that – it is something else entirely to ask ourselves *what we really, really want*. Then we do not simply “want,” but make our “willing” the subject of discussion. That is, our thinking is then no longer at the service of our desires, but our will and desires must submit to our thinking and contemplation. This often leads to a critique of the principle of desire, which so many of us hold dear.

Now the following is important – and here I return to our philosophical master, to Socrates. Getting *others* to interrogate themselves in the spirit of those questions is not enough. It is much more important that we ourselves recognize the meaning of these questions and that we live our own lives according to them. There is a very important reason for this and it will become clearer to us when we consider the life of Socrates.

But in order to explain this, I must go far afield... which I shall do now.

We first note the following: Socrates notoriously annoyed his fellow men with his apparent ignorance and, usually after an arduous discussion, he ultimately wrung the confession from his interlocutors that they did not know as much as they had thought at first. Socrates' irony was to appear as if it were he who needed teaching. The same Socrates, however, in the decisive moment, that is, during his plea in court, knew exactly what really mattered. And he knew it without wavering or doubting. He knew it as certainly and as adamantly as one can know something. What am I referring to here? I am referring to Socrates' request for the Athenians. He asks them to please him after his death by doing unto his sons as he had done unto the Athenians he had met at the Agora.

Do you remember what he asked of the people who sentenced him to death?

When my sons grow up, gentlemen, punish them by troubling them as I have troubled you; if they seem to you to care for money or anything else more than for

virtue, and if they think they amount to something when they do not, rebuke them as I have rebuked you because they do not care for what they ought, and think they amount to something when they are worth nothing.

But not only this! In fact, Socrates all of a sudden “knows” a lot in his apologia before the Athenians and he is unshakable in his knowledge. But most importantly: he does not *know* in his well-known *argumentative* or dialectical manner, but he simply knows his “belief” (logo), which “turned out to be the best during his deliberations”. That is how he has always kept it, he tells us.

But: what are such “beliefs”? Truly the most fundamental things – such as... well, let us consider the question he asks himself: should one fear death? And what is his answer? He does not know very much about the other world, Hades, but one thing he knows for certain:

But I do know that it is evil and disgraceful to do wrong and to disobey him who is better than I, whether he be god or man.

And if he were accused of “following such a pursuit that he is now in danger of being put to death as a result”, he would answer:

You do not speak well, Sir, if you think a man in whom there is even a little merit ought to consider danger of life or death, and not rather regard this only, when he does things, whether the things he does are right or wrong and the acts of a good or a bad man.

Ergo? Socrates *knows* what is right and what is exemplary.

He also “knows” things, by the way, which most of us today would probably see and judge in a decidedly different way: different times, different customs. Nevertheless, we should hear him out. He “knows,” for example...

“that Achilles was right in avenging the death of his friend Patroklos on Hector”, as it would be disgraceful “to live as a coward and not to avenge his friends”...

And he knows – I paraphrase:

One must persevere wherever one has been placed, for death and danger are nothing compared to "disgrace."

But I shall here refer to the one sentence of which the German philosopher Franz Vonessen said that it is *the* sentence of Socrates. What is *the* sentence of Socrates?

I quote from The Apology:

neither Meletus nor Anytus could injure me; [30d] that would be impossible, for I believe it is not God's will that a better man be injured by a worse.

Socrates says this to the Athenian judges making them aware that if they kill him they will not hurt him, but themselves.

Socrates explains his stance – and this sentence precisely concerns a stance or an attitude! – a few lines below:

Meletos might, however, perhaps kill me or banish me or disfranchise me; and perhaps he thinks he would thus inflict great injuries upon me, and others also may think so, but I do not; I think he does himself a much greater injury by doing what he is doing now S killing a man unjustly.

You will notice, dear friends, on what a profound and at the same time all-surpassing belief this is based on; - namely, on the certainty with which Socrates concludes his conversation with Gorgias:

Among the many statements we have made, ... this one alone is unshaken – that doing wrong is to be more carefully shunned than suffering it; that above all things a man should study not to seem but to be good both in private and in public;

And now, my dear colleagues, let me ask you: Shall we concede that these are truly *fundamental beliefs*, guiding principles and maxims, which explain in a most desirable clarity what was important to Socrates alone, what was ultimately true and crucial for him? These are beliefs that one does not just “have” in the same way that one has a hat, money, or some arbitrary opinion ... Remember that for Socrates it is worse to do wrong than to suffer wrong. Thus such a profoundly held belief and conviction, by which we measure and judge the world, sheds a different light on the world, on the things that concern humans and on one’s own place within the world. Something literally “clears up” in the true sense of the word and begins to shine. At the same time the ordinary maxim of getting off easily plunges [planges] the world into a diffuse twilight.

Thus, we see that it is not important what Socrates said to people, but rather who he himself was. I have made this claim in order to show that it is secondary what you tell your guests or visitors who come to you: crucial, however, is what to you has become fundamentally important. In other words, what has formed you into your best self.

This raises the question, what it is that makes Socrates think the way he does? If he claims that he *knows* that it is so, then I must ask: how does he *know*? Does he have any reasons for saying so? What, if any, arguments have convinced him? The answer is: no, no, no! Instead: he *stands* for it. *He himself* stands up for his belief. The foundation of his philosophical remark to the judges is the philosopher himself, is Socrates himself, as he lives and breathes. It is *his* acknowledgment to have lived by this motto and to want to live by it to the last, it is how he affirms that this attitude or stance is *the only one that is worthy* to live by.

Dear colleagues and friends, let us not forget: *This* was what convinced the followers of Socrates. Not his often outlandish argumentation, his discussions that went back and forth, which would subsequently be called “dialectic,” and it was certainly not the so-called

“proofs” he composed for his conclusions – all of this we must consider Socrates’ unique “irony.” Thus, I ask you whether any of you have ever felt entirely convinced by his arguments in favour of the immortality of the soul? Do you believe in immortality thanks to Socrates? I highly doubt it...

There is something else at work in Socrates’ approach, when he unsettles his fellow Athenians and their opinions with a few dialectic tricks and when, as a result, all of a sudden everything no longer is as obvious as one thought and “hangs in the air,” for it has been called into doubt. That is what happens when he declares in court that to fear death “is nothing more than to consider yourself wise when you are not,” because it means “that you think you know what you do not really know”. Nobody knows “whether death is not the greatest blessing for humans, yet people fear it as if they knew it was the greatest of all evil.”

As you know this is what the old codger and Satyr, as Alcibiades called him, was like – but it is nothing more than rhetorical mumbo-jambo and irony – for what is really important to Socrates – and his followers were well aware of that! – what is really important to him is to not degrade himself before his accusers, whom he considers to be in the wrong, by begging for his life. It is important to me that I get this crucial distinction across and that we do not confound anything here: all dialectic discussion of death has no bearing on the fact that Socrates evidently fears other things more than he fears death. Thus, what matters is his fearlessness before the tribunal that sentences him to death, the calm and serenity with which he explains to his accusers that they hurt themselves more than they can hurt him, because it is *they* who burden themselves with injustice, and that is the worst someone can do to themselves. This is what convinced the followers of Socrates, this is what overwhelmed them and kept them on their toes and this is thus what ultimately led them to philosophy. For they were certain: someone who is capable of being so calm and serene in such a grim situation must have been given strength and a vivacious and invigorating certainty by philosophy themselves; a strength they were eager to find. This, dear colleagues, was *the practical impact* of Socrates, the earliest of all practical philosophers who worked at the Agora. This was the lesson his followers understood. – However: not all of the academically trained philosophers later understood it in the same way ...

After all, many other philosophers later saw in it the proximity of our Socrates to that person whom they had executed as the supposed "king of the Jews", whose egregious [egriesches] words: *the Lord may forgive his tormentors and mockers, for they do not know what they are doing* – these other words are in fact very close to the credo of Socrates.

And as I have just named him let me add the following: in many ways the son of Mary and the carpenter is a spiritual twin of those early philosophers whose goal and aspiration was to be truly wise and to be so especially in terms of the question what really matters and what is important in truth. Think of when Jesus tells his disciples of the famous Parable of the Rich Fool in order to explain to them that one’s life does not consist of the abundance of one’s possessions. The Parable tells us the story of a rich farmer whose land was highly productive and who therefore thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there

I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."

Has it already become clearer what I am trying to get at?

But: What about those who annoyed Socrates? That is, those who took the decidedly different view that it would be best not to suffer at all, but if suffering of others could not be avoided, then it would be preferable not to be concerned by it oneself. Every man for himself, as the English vernacular says.

Or those who say that life, "of course," is first and foremost about succeeding and having lots of money and power and prestige, and a good reputation and, if fate has so ordained, some glitz and glamour as the icing on the cake? Do you seriously believe that "irrefutable arguments" could persuade anyone who deeply holds such convictions and lives according to them?

In view of the Lord's parable I just referred to: could you, with good arguments, dissuade anyone from their conviction so that they happily forego the so-called "richness towards God", so long as they have a good life in this world and can enjoy their well-invested wealth and profits? In general – says the pocket-size Faust – he thinks nothing of lowering his sights here on earth in the vague hope for a heavenly compensation one day. With this trick, priests have long enough pulled the wool over poor souls' faces, he reckons.

I say to you: just go ahead and argue ...! In the end, once you realise that you have achieved nothing, you will have to accept that there are other things that really matter. That is, how *you yourselves* understand these questions. And it will not help to quote cunning or wise sentences from the works of philosophy to make an impression – Schopenhauer summed this up in a great metaphor:

"You don't nurture others with undigested passings but only with the milk which is secreted from your own blood."

Let me give you an example. Imagine someone comes to you seeking for help, eaten up by an addiction for "success." This is someone who has always tried to please everybody and to gain their approval, who, like a camel, has threaded through the eye of every single needle – but not in order to earn his way into heaven, but in order to get the position or job that he had aimed for. Thus, imagine a person who has never found the courage to show backbone, who has never learned to stand upright, who would not even know what it means to stand by his word. This is someone who considers dependability obsolete and a cliché and to whom integrity is but an antiquated ideology. This is someone who has always tried to get by, to belong by any means necessary, not to be ousted, not to be outpaced. Imagine that someone like that – and you know how likely it is to meet a human being of that type – comes to us, to our practice; exhausted, burned out, disappointed, but still admiring those who have "made it", who have "arrived" at the top, the successful people, the few in the spotlight, the much sought after, the envied, the happy – as your guest calls them.

Well? What would you do, what would you tell your visitor?

I think this much is certain: none of you who leer at success and continuous and instant gratification, none of you who fear that your guest could leave you or could bear a grudge against you would be able to help this person. Quite the opposite. Ideally this person would find someone who knows the temptations our imagined guest has fallen prey to, but who has been able to avoid those temptations by thinking them through specifically, thus you should be someone who has freed themselves from these temptations and left them behind like a childhood illness. Because such an illness we have to have suffer through in order to be immune to it for the rest of our lives.

So what would I do? – Well, maybe I would attack my patient, just a little bit; only to test him, just to see whether he has a sense of humor – whether he can be seduced into laughing about himself, or at least smile a little; which would be a start... I would, for this purpose, recite to him a poem, a philosophically highly educational poem, *nota bene*. The title of this poem, which, by the way, Robert Gernhardt wrote, is “Always” (*Immer*). Since it is quite an entertaining poem, I shall read it for you...:

Always someone swifter than you

You crawl
He walks
You walk
He runs
You run
He flies:

There's always someone still swifter than you.

Always someone more gifted than you

You read
He learns
You learn
He seeks
You seek
He finds out:

There's always someone still more gifted than you.

Always someone more famous than you

You're in the papers
He's in the encyclopedia
You're in the encyclopedia
He's in Who's Who
You're in Who's Who
He's a monument:

There's always someone still more famous than you.

Always someone richer than you

Your book is reviewed
His is being read
Your book is being read
His is devoured
Yours is treasured
His is being bought:

There's always someone still richer than you.

Always someone more popular than you

You are praised
He is loved
You are honoured
He is adored
They lie at your feet
They carry him on their shoulders

There's always someone still more popular than you.

Always someone better than you

You are ailing
He languishes
You die
He passes
You are judged
He is redeemed

There's always someone still better than you

Always
Always
Always.

That is the poem. And now realise the following: it all depends on me having truly learned and grasped [*grasped*] what this poem teaches us and that our imaginary guest notices and can experience this, my knowledge, thanks to my demeanour.

Thus, I would like to summarize what I have said so far:

Those who come to us philosophical practitioners are not looking for philosophical instruction. Instead, they are looking for someone who is philosophically wise and thoughtful. And, to borrow Kierkegaard's expression, we could say: a philosophically up-built person.

I know, dear colleagues, I have not said much so far, but, and of this I am convinced, I think I have said something that really matters to us in practice. Let me put it this way:

As you know, research on therapy has found time and time again that, in terms of the effectiveness of therapy, what matters is not the type of therapeutic theory that is being applied, but the therapist, which is to say: the kind of person the therapist is. Yet, the problem I see here is that the more detailed explanation that follows these findings entirely and consequently fits into the milieu of psychotherapies: there is, then, talk of “empathy” and sensitivity, of a friendly commitment to understanding etc. We already know this often recited litany which is of little to no substance...

Nevertheless, in a significant way we can say something similar about philosophical practice. It does not matter what kind of philosophy the philosophical practitioner reads, but rather what kind of philosopher the practitioner is and thus what kind of person our guest meets. That means the guiding question of philosophical practice is no longer, “What is philosophy?”. Instead, the question is now “Who is a philosopher?” As philosopher in practice I am not a “representative” of any specific way of doing philosophy, not a “spokesperson” of any philosophical trend, fashion or school. Instead, the familiarity with philosophy and philosophers, who have become our role models and our motivation, must, so to speak, be incarnated by us. *The philosopher, whom the guest of the philosophical practice hopes to meet, is philosophy as institution in a specific case: it is philosophy “incarnated” and instantiated with a terminology that is influenced by and belongs to theology.*

Dear colleagues, dear friends. To conclude, I would like to do something – in a way as a sign of my respect for this “summit meeting” in the Mexican mountains and valleys – that I have hitherto strictly avoided. Many of you know that I scrupulously avoid the term “method” just like Paul Feyerabend did, you know.

But for once I shall compromise my principles and say a few words as to “how” precisely we can tempt our guest to, perhaps even seduce them into exposing themselves to questions that, as our guest might say, are “strange” to them.

For this purpose, I consider a thought that I recently found in a lecture from 1971 by Georg Picht, an important German philosopher and student of Heidegger. It is a rather simple thought:

A person is educated [german: „gebildet“] if they understand what they themselves say.

Well, do we understand what this sentence is trying to tell us ...? It expresses the profound insight that everything we say or think, that everything we are “aware” of, is based on an infinite depth and abundance of what is unconscious and what is un-thought, what is not or not yet understood. One could speak of the unconscious, of misunderstood Logos, or even

of uncomprehended apprehension. Do you know what I mean? Every single word that we speak, every term has its own history, its own implications and carries with it an abundance of thoughts thanks to which the word has gained its meaning and form. Every single one of our judgements is made possible by a long history that could perhaps be traced all the way back to prehistoric times – and even everyday chatter that concerns itself with what is *en vogue* or *à la mode*, even such chitchat we are only able to *understand* if we *comprehend* how a phrase has come to be, what has made it possible or popular.

I am not afraid to cite a very trivial example: who could understand how they have come to call something “cool;” amongst German youths this phrase is extremely popular. And? Do we trust ourselves to explain this habit in such a way that our counterpart understands the “world view” to which this saying belongs and it represents? And that this particular world view also shapes the judgements that decide what matters, what is truly important and what is essential in the end? But this *is* the contribution of philosophical practice, this is enlightenment in an emphatic sense. I hope to have made clear with these intimations what Picht meant with his extraordinarily clever sentence when he said that only the person who understands what they themselves say is educated („gebildet”). For it is true: in every sentence we utter there is contained an infinite wealth of many more sentences, thoughts, judgements, assessments, views etc., which for the most part are concealed like unclaimed treasures. The task of the philosophical practitioner is to dis-cover and retrieve them.

A sublime, highly ambitious goal is thus set for philosophical practice; one in which the Socratic heritage is both accepted and modified. Let me summarize my thoughts as follows:

Philosophical practice is all about getting people to understand what they themselves *say*. This takes place when they themselves begin to understand which spirit reveals itself “behind (or: in) their sentences” and which is initially hidden in them. If we succeed in bringing that spirit to light so that our guest be able to judge their spirit, they will see what made them decide what matters, what is truly important and what is crucial in the end. Only then can the revision begin.

And us?

We shall accompany and support our guest on their path and we shall do so according to what has become our measure by which we live. Often what we require the most here is courage, the courage to trust our own convictions. And believe me, the discouraged do not achieve anything and they certainly cannot reach out to their guest who turns to them for help during a most substantial, existential crisis.

Lastly, I should say that, if you have the impression that you might not have understood me, or even worse, that you might have misunderstood me, I sincerely hope that this is only because of my very bad English.

In this case, I would like to say: Excuse me!

In the other case, which I hope it is "the case", I say: Thank you for your attention.