

The non-social facet of philosophy

Modern philosophical practice has usually been understood as interpersonal discursive activity. But philosophy also has a non-social, or even private, aspect. Just like religion is not merely work with others but a serious, sustained effort to deepen and broaden one's own faith, and monasteries are not just scenes of social intercourse but environments for carving, crystallizing and saving one's self, we should see philosophy not only as talk but as reflection on one's own spiritual condition and as determination to be what one ought to be.

Consider the Stoics for an ancient example. For them philosophy meant long and arduous meditations on one's own nature and attempts to assume the right attitudes of indifference, harmony etc. There was a prominent social and stately aspect to Stoicism of course, but if you read Seneca or Aurelius, it is impossible to ignore the non-social facet of their philosophical lives. Originally Aurelius's writings were probably not even intended for any public but as a means of self-reflection and self-exhortation. Or think of Diogenes the Dog who constantly trained self-sufficiency. It was not only counseling, lecturing, or organizing group discussions. I believe that we have to revive this personal and autonomous side of philosophy. We should enlarge the scope of the contemporary concept of philosophical practice.

Philosophy is often a silent mission. And perhaps also solitary. When we are alone, and without news and media, we have all the time to ourselves, no time is squandered. We are not distracted by others in our perceptions of the world and ourselves, and there is a feeling of tranquility that follows from removing ourselves from the restless social world. As temporary or permanent hermits we are without social constraints and therefore free to do and think what we like, how we like. This disengagement from social preoccupations is precisely the time for philosophy as a personal, independent engagement.