

**THE 10TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON  
PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE. PERSPECTIVES OF  
PROFESSIONALIZATION  
X CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL DE FILOSOFÍA APLICADA.  
PERSPECTIVAS DE PROFESIONALIZACIÓN**

**LEON DE HAAS - PETER HARTELOH**

leon@platopraktijk.nl - info@filosofischepraktijk.com  
Berufsverband für Philosophische Praxis, Alemania  
Vereniging voor Filosofische Praktijk, Holanda

RECIBIDO: 16 DE NOVIEMBRE DE 2010

ACEPTADO: 30 DE NOVIEMBRE DE 2010

## **Prologue**

In the summer of 2010, the 10th International Conference on Philosophical Practice (10th ICPP) took place at Leusden, the Netherlands. 120 Practicing philosophers from all over the world participated in world cafés, master classes, and workshops. In this evaluating impression of the conference, the authors will point out and discuss trends and tendencies concerning the professionalization of philosophical practice.

Peter Harteloh, PhD, will cover the initiatives at the 10th ICPP to develop the international community of philosophical practitioners (part B). Leon de Haas, MA, will discuss the variety and comparability of philosophical practices as seen at the conference.

Each part of this article holds a discussion of professionalism in philosophical practice. The authors do not necessarily represent the same view of professionalization. So, this article must be considered a subtle and multi-perspective view of the state of art in the process of professionalization of philosophical practice, as gained at the 10th ICPP.

## **Introduction**

At the 9th ICPP, at Carloforte, Italy, the VFP nominated for organizing the 10th conference. The reason was the 20th birthday of the dutch association in 2009.

Keywords in the nomination were ‘experience’ and ‘practice’. The idea was, that philosophical practice in the Netherlands has distinguished oneself internationally for the significance of experience, both the client’s and the practitioner’s. Theory must be ‘light’ and of low profile. In consequence, the participants of the 10th ICPP shouldn’t talk about philosophical practice, but actually show their practice, and experience their colleagues’ practices. The general meeting of the 9th ICPP accepted this plan.

The 10th ICPP took place from August 11 - 14, 2010, at the International School of Philosophy. Its title was ‘Experience in philosophical practice’.

The conference committee asked oneself questions about the State of the Art of philosophical practice. The movement started sometime in the roaring sixties and seventies, and got its name in 1982 when Gerd Achenbach started his practice and attracted international publicity. But was it still alive? Or where those critics right, who gossiped about the end of this idealistic but stillborn movement?

Ruud Meij, the president of the conference, introduced another view. Whereas the pioneers of philosophical practice cherished an anti-academic sentiment, Meij pointed out an obvious trend in academic philosophy, i.e., the practical philosophy of applied ethics, moral consultation, and reflection on integrity. Positive or negative demarcation from the academic philosophy is not at stake, nor from psychology or psychotherapy. The conference committee intended to give the conference participants a broad perspective on ‘practical philosophy in society’, regardless its relation to the academy, and regardless its organization and economic form.

The *Call for Papers* brought in 50 papers from 20 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and North America. All papers were approved, and realized as a workshop at the conference.

Besides the workshops, the participants could attend a masterclass. There were 15 masterclasses, given by 17 experienced professionals in philosophical practice; Oscar Brenifier (France), Roxana Kreimer (Argentina), Petra von Morstein en Gerd Achenbach (both Germany), Neri Pollastri (Italy), Gerald Rochelle (UK), Kristof van Rossem (Belgium), Carmen Zavala (Peru), Lydia Amir (Israel), Vaughana Feary en Lou Marinoff (both USA), Anders Lindseth (Norway), and Dries Boele, Erik Boers, Hans Bolten, Dick Kleinlugtenbelt en Eite Veening (all from Holland).

120 Persons participated in the conference; 61 of them took care of a masterclass and / or a workshop.

### **Professional quality of philosophical practice. Impressions of styles and trends at the 10th ICPP**

In this part of the article, Leon de Haas (2) will sketch an impression of the masterclasses and workshop at the 10th ICPP from a professional perspective.

#### *Double bind*

There is some paradox in the title of this part. In its historical roots, philosophical practice has an anti-academical attitude, which includes an allergy for professionalism. The allergy is rather complex. As a rule, philosophical practitioners have an academic degree. And they refer to their activities as philosophical practice, the quality of which is proved by referring to the 'great philosophers', as these are recognized as such by the academic traditions of philosophy. But at the same time, as an occupation, philosophical practice is distinguished strictly from the academic practice. 'Real' philosophy - as philosophy was meant to be - takes place outside the academy, in society; that is the idea. As a consequence, many a philosophical practitioner has an ambivalent relation towards professionalization, since this word connotes prescription, regulation, standardization, generalization, lack of improvisation, and the like.

One of the marks of the philosophical practice movement is its diversity. In principle, each practitioner wants to invent his or her own way of philosophical practice (style, method, idea). Of course, there are inventors and pioneers, but usually these are not more than examples and sources of inspiration. Most practitioners intend to be an inventor themselves. So, when referring to the same example, they differ in the application - or at last, they claim to be different.

This apparent need to differentiate complicates the wish to be professional, which is apparent as well. How can we decide that a specific practice is professional, when every practice claims to be unique, i.e., incomparable? What does the 10th ICPP teach us about the professional quality of the practices showed there?

#### *Philosophical practice as a social phenomenon*

First of all, the 10th ICPP was a social phenomenon. Hundred and twenty people from all over the world met those four days at Leusden. They joined because of some common marks and common aims. They all were graduated philosophers or students, practicing philosophical practice or practical philosophy, or planning to do it some day. So, they shared this occupation.

Most of them also shared some identifying ‘pictures’ of this occupation. These pictures are the writings of colleagues like Gerd Achenbach, Lou Marinoff, Oscar Brenifier, or Schlomit Schuster (she was not at the conference), but also the ideas shared at local meetings, conferences and courses of national associations. The series of up till now 10 international conferences contributes itself to some identity of ‘philosophical practice’; they produce an idea and feeling of community. This international community has ‘a body’; through the years, about the same people participate in the conference, and this group slightly changes and grows. Characteristic of this conference was the participation of colleagues from ‘new’ countries and continents (Latin America, India, South-Korea, Japan, Africa). Striking was also the participation of a younger generation. For many years, the philosophical practice movement has been the ‘thing’ of the sixties and seventies generations. Now, we could see that more students and young philosophers are interested in this practice.

The aims of the participants were to meet colleagues, to acquaint oneself with other and new forms of philosophical practice, to learn from colleagues, and to share one’s practice with colleagues. The set-up of the conference facilitated and stimulated both the formal and informal meeting of the participants. The accommodation of the conference hotel, the International School of Philosophy, turned out to serve the formal and informal meeting purposes of the 10th ICPP very well. So did the mix of world cafés, masterclasses, workshops and non-structured program time.

In the masterclasses and workshops a variety of practices was shown. In most cases, philosophical practice is a conversation, either between two persons, or between more persons in a group. Exceptions were an archery workshop, a meditation group, and a philosophical game.

Philosophical practice, respectively practical philosophy, showed itself in all her forms: personal counseling, coaching and consultancy; working with groups; with different target groups (children, youngsters, adults); with private persons and organizations.

The classical form of philosophical practice is the conversation between the practitioner and his client. From the outside it looks like an average consulting conversation. From the inside, the conversation is ‘philosophical’ because of the questions and themes (the ‘big questions of life’; cf. Marinoff 2003), and because of the obviously philosophical interventions of the philosopher (a Socratic, or phenomenological, or linguistic, or logical, or other kind of philosophical questioning and researching). Mostly, the philosophical sources of the interventions are not explicit. That means, it is not evident which philosophical traditions are working in the intervention. There seems to be a vague mix of dialogical styles and techniques, that appears as the common method of

philosophical counseling. It is the personality of the practitioner that colours the intervention. One of the exceptions is Oscar Brenifier, whose dialogues are structured strongly, and carry the seal of both his logical method and his personality.

A distinguishing feature of philosophical counseling is the perspective of the practitioner. Is he or she aiming at a linguistic investigation? Or at a revelation of essential truths? Or at moral considerations? Those who have chosen up a position in a specific philosophical tradition or discipline (like phenomenology or ethics, respectively), can be recognized as such, and also judged according to the standards of that tradition or discipline. However, in most cases the roots are not evident.

Philosophical practice with groups is partly like counseling, partly it is more explicitly structured. In the so-called Nelson tradition of socratic group conversation (Nelson 1922), the role of the practitioner is strictly defined as a moderator, and the conversation is explicitly structured in a procedural way. It turned out at the conference, that some Socratic moderators deal more casually with Nelson's rules than others.

Not all philosophizing with groups follows Nelson's way. In these workshops the style or method is comparable to philosophical counseling, i.e., the structure and dialogical style of the conversation is vague, or mixed, mostly not explicit.

In short, the world of philosophical practices is a patchwork of partly vague, partly not reducible styles and methods. Largely, philosophical practice is a question of general (academic) education in philosophy, connected to personality and counseling competences (or talent).

This is not to say, that there are no common features and resemblances between the practices. Those who share philosophical roots and disciplines, understand each other, and are capable of judging each other's interventions. But when the roots are not clear, and the discipline is not shared, judgement of the quality of a practice is very difficult, if not impossible. We badly lack a common language regarding the quality of philosophical practice.

### *Towards a philosophy of philosophical practice*

In my opinion, it is not fruitful trying to establish a quality system for philosophical practice in the sense many professions have done this. After all, the way philosophers discuss and judge the quality of a phenomenon is the open dialogue, not the procedural assessment of fixed values and prescriptions. As far as I know, we still do not know how to establish such quality focussed conversations between philosophical practitioners from different disciplines and

with different roots. So far, my experience tells me that it is not a solution to present one specific method of philosophical dialogue, e.g., the Nelson Socratic moderation, as a solution. Such a claim reproduces the problem of the non-compatibility of philosophical traditions.

First of all, we need the willingness to find coordinating ‘standards’ of philosophical practice, and the willingness to find them as a community, regardless all differences of philosophical roots, disciplines and personalities. Then, we need experiments to find fruitful methods of ‘quality focussed’ dialogues, in which we judge the quality of each other’s practice in an open but not less demanding way. Let us start these experiments, at the national forums, and at the 11th ICPP in South-Korea.

### **Towards an international community of philosophical practitioners.**

In this part of the article, Peter Harteloh (1) will describe and discuss the two meetings at the 10th ICPP, that were intended to improve the international communication between the national educations and associations.

#### *An emerging paradigm*

Philosophical practice is an emerging paradigm in philosophy. It is a new movement among philosophers, an example of a quality of philosophy, originating in the 20th Century from a critique on academic philosophy or psychotherapy. With social utility in mind philosophers started counseling aimed at individuals or Socratic group meetings. To date, this movement exhibits the characteristics of a paradigm (Kuhn), such as (i) a theory (Hadot, 2002a, 2002b), (ii) recognized examples like Nelson for Socratic dialogue, Achenbach (2001) or Marinoff (1999) for consultations, (iii) professional organizations in several countries, (iv) journals, trainings and meetings such as the International Conference on Philosophical Practice (ICPP). Becoming a philosophical practitioner involves first of all two things: initiation in the paradigm by training competences exhibiting philosophical practice, and participation in a (international) network of philosophers, involved in the paradigm. Therefore, during the tenth ICPP in Leusden, The Netherlands, we organized a meeting dedicated to the education of philosophical practitioners and to the community of philosophical practitioners as such.

*On educating philosophical practitioners*

Post academic trainings for philosophical counselors, Socratic group dialogue facilitators and philosophy with kids are available to date. During the 10th ICPP philosophers involved in these training programs met. The meeting was dedicated to an exchange of experience. Questions addressed were:

- What is the definition of (your) philosophical practice?
- Which competences underlie (your kind of) philosophical practice?
- How to translate these competences in a course program?
- How to come to an international training program for philosophical practitioners?

The presentations showed us many similarities and differences. The educational programs seem to share a model of professional (master-pupil) training and a 'learning by doing' approach. As philosophical practice is based on tacit knowledge, the showing and transmission of a practice by examples is leading in classes and course programs. The supervision by experienced counselors is included in all courses. The personality of the philosophical practitioner is considered very important. Aim is to develop a personal practice style, which must be justified as philosophical. The programs differ by being embedded in universities (Spain, Denmark) or offered privately by philosophical associations (Italy, Germany, USA, and many others). Some (France) seek new forms. Their training is based on networks connecting students aimed at developing a style and a practice based on mutual recognition. Participation is not limited to persons with an academic degree in philosophy. Philosophical practice evolves from the way students develop and in a Socratic sense all participants are students in philosophy. Programs also differ by entry criteria, philosophical content or output (e.g. certification after completion of the course). The programs agree on aiming at a personal development of the philosopher (*Bildung*) by training competences suitable for individual consultation or Socratic group dialogue. General and philosophical competences are distinguished. Important are communication skills, questioning, interpreting and understanding. Philosophical competences are qualified as analytical, existential or phenomenological, referring to the corresponding philosophical currents. Most important seems to be the philosophizing, or to quote one of the founding fathers of the paradigm, Leonard Nelson (1922): "Philosophical practice is the art of teaching not philosophy, but philosophizing, the art not of teaching about philosophers, but of making philosophers of the students".

The meeting served its purpose well. It was very useful to hear all these experiences from so many countries. It seems there is plenty of experience to share and therefore it was decided to aim for an international working group on

education. This group will manage a network discussing concepts, exchanging experience, by a common webpage on the internet. Final goals might be to formulate international training programs and criteria for international certificates. The format used for this meeting to gather information seemed to work. Practical information could be added in order to inform colleagues and students about the nature, content and requirements of courses available to date.

Petra von Morstein summarized the meeting well, stating: “the mandate of philosophical practitioner is to bring back university questions to general public. Singular questions of singular people, philosophers can word them. Teaching philosophical practice is training this competence.” She also reminded us of the nature of our enterprise by saying “We need to take into account: what is philosophical about our work?” This last question seemed to introduce the meeting dedicated to the community of philosophical practitioners as such.

### *Becoming a community of philosophical practitioners*

Already at the start of the 10th ICPP the community theme was there. During the opening session, Leon de Haas asked us to meet each other in person, to look each other in the eyes and tell about our person and our work, an exercise daring and confronting, but which clearly set the atmosphere of the conference. Later on, a meeting of representatives of associations for philosophical practice was dedicated to the question “How to become a community of philosophers?”. As “the philosopher is philosophical practice” (Achenbach), this question seems to be the driving force behind the development of the associations of philosophers in philosophical practice, a development involving questions about the nature of philosophy and the image or role of the philosopher, but also determining the profile of philosophical practice by including activities such as consultations or Socratic dialogue and by excluding activities such as philosophical psychology or theology. Such a profile of philosophical practice is determined by the activities of the community members, or to quote one of the founding fathers of our discipline, Pierre Hadot (2002a), “But philosophy itself, that is to say, the mode of philosophical life, is no longer divided into parts, but a unique act that consists in living logic, physics and ethics.” The participants of the meeting entered into a passionate discussion on the community question, addressing themes such as:

- The distinction between applied philosophy and philosophical practice. Some consider philosophical practice a new kind of philosophy, others seem to consider philosophical practice as an application of academic philosophy.



- The cultural embedding (including male or female) of philosophical practice. Differences in form and content are evident. Sometimes there is no mutual understanding. How to overcome differences in context?

- Criteria for recognition as a philosophical practitioner. There is no consensus on this.

- The policy of opening up the membership of an association to people without an academic degree in philosophy. This complies with the origins of our movement, i.e. an attempt to philosophize with ordinary people outside university, but may result in an image problem, i.e. not being taken seriously by for instance universities.

- The founding father(s) of philosophical practice in modern times. Are psychologists such as Hersch or Cohen to be considered philosophical practitioners? Or is Achenbach explicitly founding a practice as a philosopher the first to ground a philosophical practice?

- The philosophical content of a policy of an association or how could a policy be grounded on philosophical principles?

Language differences in relation to the communication between associations and philosophical practitioners. What kind of language should we communicate in? German, English, Spanish, etc. Documents on the ICPP conference website should be translated in several different languages.

- The communication between practitioners and/or associations: frequency, content, carrier. We already communicate during conferences. Do we need to communicate more often? Effective communication is only possible when there is something to discuss: form follows content. Some think the ICPP meeting every other year are enough. Others propose to form a network to discuss and exchange ideas by the internet, in between conferences.

In a Socratic way, the meeting produced no clear answer to the community question. The meeting showed several themes occupying the community to date. In line with Achenbach's (2005) idea of philosophical practice addressing the question: "What am I actually doing?", the outcome of the meeting is a reflection on philosophical practice as a passionate investigation of the nature of philosophy as such. Despite the difference in opinions we share a passion and are decided to meet each other again in two years time. South-Korea will harbor the next ICCP in 2012. We can conclude that the idea of a community is viable, but that more work is needed on content and ways of communication. We decided the gathering and presentation of programs or courses on a website; that seems to be a good starting point for this community. The courses show our apprehension of philosophical practice and inform colleagues or students in a practical way. The ICPP website ([www.icpp10.org](http://www.icpp10.org)) could be used for this, with ICPP standing for International Community of Philosophical Practitioners.

**References**

- ACHENBACH, G.B.: *Lebenskönnerschaft*, Verlag Herder, Freiburg, 2001.
- ACHENBACH, G.B.: *Grundzüge eines Curriculums für die Philosophische Praxis*, IGPP, Reutlingen, 2005.
- HADOT, P.: *La philosophie comme manière de vivre*, Albin Michel, Paris, 2002a.
- HADOT, P.: *Exercices Spirituel et Philosophie Antique*, Editions Albin Michel, 2002b.
- KUHN, T.S.: *The structure of scientific revolutions*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970.
- MARINOFF, L.: *No Prozac, but Plato*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 1999.
- MARINOFF, L.: *The big questions. How philosophy can change your life*, Bloomsbury, New York, 2003.