

## BOOK REVIEW

### THE ART OF PHILOSOPHY

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Sloterdijk, Peter, *The Art of Philosophy. Wisdom as Practice*. Translated by Karen Margolis, New York, Columbia University Press, 2012. 107 pp., ISBN 978-0-231-15871-8  
Columbia University Press <http://cup.columbia.edu>

Since the publication of his *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* in 1983, Peter Sloterdijk (1947–) is a well-known and rather controversial figure inside, as well as (to a certain extent) outside, academia. *The Art of Philosophy*, originally published under the title *Scheintod im Denken, Von Philosophie und Wissenschaft als Übung* (Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2010) is the sequel of his *You Must Change Your Life* (translated by Wieland Hoban, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013), originally published as *Du mußt dein Leben ändern. Über Anthropotechnik* (Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2009). Both books basically seek to “restore the high status of [philosophical] practice” (p. 6), which means that philosophy should be practiced in everyday life, not remain the privilege of the happy few who happen to enjoy only theoretical speculations. Philosophy is the answer to the question “what is a good life?”—it is not first and foremost an exploration of the meaning and significance of that question. Given the lexicon used by early Greek philosopher, one could add that philosophy should be a secular venture, not a mysticism of sorts, i.e., an *ars moriendi*, a purification ritual. Sloterdijk thus argues, from the perspective of the radical ethics that emerged with the axial age (Jaspers, 1954), for the “training cultures of antiquity [that] were primarily systems of ethical self-transformation” (p. 8). The book is made of four chapters, of unequal import for the main argument, followed by a Name index.

Chapter 1 (“Theory and asceticism, modern and ancient”) defines the territory to be paced. Science as practice—and thus academic science—is defined as an

anthropotechnical act, as “using practice to develop oneself” (p. 11). Sloterdijk seeks to minimize the difference between science and philosophy (p. 12 *et passim*): the method (the “*modus cogitandi*”) is essentially the same. Speaking of philosophy *qua askesis* (i.e., of some mental asceticism with or without physical asceticism) seems appropriate. If you consider that life must be purified because our everyday experience is but an accidental information source, philosophy has to be a withdrawal exercise. Two archetypal examples are provided: Husserl and Socrates.

Husserl’s “natural attitude” basically means “taking a position,” being involved in life and hence being unable to attain the sphere of theoretical purity (p. 17). Life has to become so to speak a “still life” to allow science to unfold. “Epoché,” the term he borrowed in 1913 from the Sceptics to name the suspension of all evidences, the abstaining from judgment, basically means dissociation. Sloterdijk insists, after Marcus Aurelius, on that need “to completely withdraw to the inner citadel,” which is almost *verbatim* how Laing sees schizophrenia.<sup>1</sup> A draft letter of Husserl to Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1907), written in the hope to involve him in theoretical phenomenology, exemplifies this. Phenomenology allows philosophy to become a strict science and, from that vantage point, it discovers that the poet “pure aesthetic intuition” is precious. The late Husserl, however, understood the vanity of his own blend of transcendentalism and, thanks to Heidegger, turned to the *Lebenswelt*, the life-world.

Socrates, for his part, acquired philosophical fame through his mysterious capability to become completely immersed in thought. In other words, thinking apparently creates an “artificial autism” (p. 29). Now, Sloterdijk argues that Plato’s Academy was the “architectural equivalent of what Husserl apostrophized as epoché—a building for shutting out the world and bracketing in concern, an asylum for the mysterious guests that we call ideas and theorems. In today’s parlance, we would call it a retreat or a hideaway.” (p. 33) The topological and ideological pattern for higher education were settled.

Chapter 2 (“The creation of persons fit for epoché”) questions the conditions of possibility of the theoretical behaviour. To become an observer means to adopt an abstinent attitude, to abandon the flow of life, to withdraw from it. Sloterdijk launches a genealogical investigation (in the Nietzschean sense) to explain “how the bracketing of concepts arising from life and their replacement by stable logical objects otherwise

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<sup>1</sup> “If the whole of the individual’s being cannot be defended, the individual retracts his lines of defence until he withdraws within a central citadel.” (*The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* [1960], Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1990, 77 cf. p. 163)

known as 'ideas' can ever be plausible in any way." (p. 35) Genealogy traditionally rests upon the opposition of noble and common, a socio-political form of the opposition of good and bad. It also presupposes the "suspicion that, despite its noble appearance, the matter in question has an inborn flaw." (p. 36) Were philosophy and science "highly born" or of a shameful low extraction? Are their claims for virtue real or made by arrogant resentful bastards? Were philosopher-scientists merely compensating for deficiencies? (p. 37) Nietzsche's answer is well known; Sloterdijk applies it to unmask autistic philosopher-scientists in four core arguments.

First, a Nietzschean psychopolitical argument is provided: Plato's Academy was founded around 387 BCE as a clear "reaction to the collapse of the Athenian *polis* model" (p. 41). Democracy had failed and the academia *qua ars moriendi* was born. The psychodrama is famous: Socrates was executed apparently over trifles and his death romantically pictured as a victory for philosophy: "The living Socrates may have been the last authentic *polis* citizen who would not have wanted to live anywhere else except in his city and under its laws, which is why he refused to flee after being declared guilty. Socrates on the threshold of death is the main witness for the postpolitical world." (p. 42) Plato concluded that one should not die for the sake of the earthly common good but for the archetypal Truth and Justice.

Second, a characterological argument introduces mood differentiation or *Stimmung*, and more precisely melancholy, according to the ancient humoral pathology, and schizoid personality, according to Bleuler's nosology. The transformation of an active citizen into a contemplative cosmopolitan was eased by the existence, in some individuals, of a strong dissociative propensity. "From the start, it was unclear whether a person leading a reclusive contemplative existence is expressing a weakness (inability to join in shared activities) or, instead, the strength of being able to stand aside." (p. 50)

Third, a sociological argument: entering the field paced by Bourdieu, Sloterdijk claims that the world of education ("paideia"), and especially its institutions, was instrumental in producing sedated persons fit for epoché. "When young people practice receptiveness as school pupils, their motor functions are immobilized in a way that will have far-reaching consequences later. This is the beginning of what can be called sedation by sitting at the teacher's feet. [...] To grasp the total peculiarity of this process, we should remember that there has hardly ever been any human type less disposed to being still and receptive than the young Attic man. The young Greek male must have been a polymorphous-athletic-erotic hyperactivity syndrome, 2,500 years before Ritalin." (p. 53)

Fourth, a mediatic argument underlines the importance of the new technologies to carve minds. The onset of scientific development has to be understood in relation to

the early culture of writing. “For Europeans, the world and the book began to be mutually analogous early on.” (p. 54) Hence a double distancing: first, the Book is preferred to Nature; second, reading requires distance from the text: “Anybody who has learned to look at written scrolls and printed pages is already practicing distance from the written word, which, in turn, keeps its distance from what is spoken and experienced.” (p. 55) The existential dressage has thus to be complemented by a grammatical one.

Chapter 3 (“Theory and suspended animation and its metamorphoses”) sketches the historical metamorphoses of the “epistemic suspended animation” of savants with four main steps: Cicero (rehashing the Pythagorean ontological aristocracy and palingenesis), Giordano Bruno (with only an *apparently* revolutionary interpretation of Ovid?), Fichte (with his groundbreaking emphasis on the “unconscious”<sup>2</sup>), and Valéry (incorporating Platonism with dandyism). In each case we see how desecularization worked to obtain a pure observer and why that bittersweet scholarly exile is paradoxical: “the thinking person has to be a kind of dead person on holiday [...] true lovers of wisdom are concerned with being as dead as possible in their lifetime” (p. 3)...

Chapter 4 (“Cognitive modernism: the assassination attempts on the neutral observer”) highlights the last stage of the “ancient European adventure of mortification for the sake of pure cognition” (p. 80): the assassination attempts on the *homo theoreticus* by modern epistemologists. But can one kill “an apparently dead person”? (p. 4) There were ten apprentice assassins: young Hegelians such as Marx; perspectivists like Nietzsche; Lukacs’s infiltration of the classical apathy principle by partisan thinking; Heidegger’s phenomenology of authenticity; von Weizsäcker’s post-Hiroshima stance on “science and responsibility;” Kierkegaard’s existentialism; Scheler, Kuhn, Foucault and the sociology of knowledge; feminism and gender studies such as Butler’s; the neurological theses of Damasio; and Bruno Latour’s network theory.

Is it a murder or a reanimation? If Platonism is the political metaphysics of the monarchical age (requiring to observe the world from above and below— cf. p. 47), the secularization of the observer is a political endeavour indeed. One could hope, of course, that the Republic has, to a significant extent, disposed of Monarchy, but has human existence really become more authentic?

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<sup>2</sup> “From then on, the wise man was a pure functionary of the absolute. He saw himself as a ray emanating from the divine stored in every ego in the phenomenal world” (p. 73)

In sum, Sloterdijk's argument is as important as it is inconclusive.

On the one hand, suspended animation, mental absence, hibernation or apparent dead ("Scheintod") in thought or through thinking ("im Denken") is an important—and usually totally ignored—theme in philosophy and a crucial one in philosophy *qua* practice ("Übung"). It can be traced back to the modalities of contemplation (see the concepts of "theoria," "homo theoreticus," and "bios theoretikos") championed (e.g.) by Plato, later reframed by Husserl and Heidegger, and lately by Arendt. The contrast between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* historically amounts to the cleavage between secular life and monasticism and, as such, it does not do justice to the actual practice of philosophy. Either philosophy has some everyday use or it is not worthy of its very name. There is no doubt either that philosophy and life should not be separated. Sloterdijk aptly defines the "life of practice" as a "complex of human behaviour" that is neither merely active nor merely contemplative.

Moreover, as soon as one launches a bit of conceptual archeology—and even more a genealogical one—epistemology, metaphysics *and politics* appear inseparable. This bare historical fact is always worth an argument.

On the other hand, "authenticity", from Socrates to Arendt (and beyond), is not always a vain word and the philosophical *askesis* (i.e., practice or exercise) should be understood in the broader light of the historical emergence of philosophy out of the Greek mythological soil as it reveals the fundamental patterns of the *homo religiosus*. Mythology is not, *per se*, a derogative word, it refers to the religious practices that carved the Greek mind before—and after—the sixth century BCE. Two are of the utmost importance: shamanism *lato sensu* and the Mysteries (Isiac, Mithraic, Orphic, Dionysian, Eleusinian Mysteries...). Sloterdijk mentions only shamanism and in relation to Pythagoras's legacy (p. 33), but the themes he perused definitively belong there.<sup>3</sup> Hence four remarks.

First, in the *Charmides* (156d, 175e), Socrates evokes his meeting with a Thracian healer-priest of the king Zalmoxis, who was supposed to be able to attain and confer

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<sup>3</sup> "Only the person who has died off in advance from his "self," his body, and his surroundings, the well-camouflaged person in suspended animation, would be able to bracket his physical motions and all the "position-taking" of his physical subjectivity and, still living in his body, obtain tenable perceptions as if he were already released to disinterested contemplation "on the other side." In this context, contemplation means intuiting primary geometric figures (for example, polyhedra) and meditating on transcendent significates (for example, the idea of justice)." (p. 64) "I would like to emphasize that I have focused on Plato's metaphysics of the soul particularly for didactic or illustrative reasons. It stems from myths and mystical ideas that raise death to an imaginative pantomime, such as the legend of Empedocles's leap into the burning crater of Etna, or the legend of the death of Heraclitus, who is said to have ended his life by covering himself with cow dung and setting fire to himself." (p. 65)

immortality (“athanatizein”). The shamanic dimension of Socrates’s life and works constitutes an outstanding heuristic hypothesis. The truth is that death is part of life, that all living organisms feed upon dead ones and end up themselves dead. Socrates does not claim that true lovers of wisdom ought to be as dead as possible in their lifetime, but that they should confront their inner contradictions and fears in order to die peacefully—in due time—and to live harmoniously in the meantime. In other words, the *ars moriendi* is not part of a cognitive enquiry but a gnostical tool. This is plain in Pythagoras and the Orphic Mysteries. The “*modus cogitandi*” is one thing, the orthopraxis another.

Second, although intellectual pursuits have necessarily an unworldly stage that makes them akin to an ascetic retreat from life, this stage is but one of three (to simplify): abstraction comes from life as it is experienced and has to go back to that very same embodied experience. If it does not, one can suspect that, first, the concepts at stake are pure imaginative abstractions and, second, that they have no cash value whatsoever. One could read the proximity between the Greek *ekstasis* and the Latin *existentia* from that perspective.<sup>4</sup>

Third, Sloterdijk is also unnecessarily harsh on *paideia* as a sedative. *Lato sensu*, *paideia*, *humanitas*, or *Bildung* name the socio-political conditions of possibility of a meaningful life; it provides the grand narrative that allows both individuation and solidarity. The argument should thus be about the betrayal of *paideia* and its contingent features. Of course, the collapse of the *polis* brought many problems but, fundamentally, the key—largely unaddressed—issue is dualism. Sloterdijk clearly rejects all forms of dualisms: the bifurcation of nature and culture in most civilizations, the opposition of body and soul, and lately of subject and object. So what?

The fact is that, in the same way that hysteria involves major neurological symptoms—such as dissociative amnesia, anaesthesia and paralysis—without any actual anatomical lesions, Western philosophy, has always suffered from symptomatic presuppositions akin to hysteria while philosophers themselves were of course experiencing all the everyday contingencies of embodiment: at best, the body was considered as an irrelevant dimension of our existence; usually, it was identified as the seat of all epistemological fallacies; at worst, it was seen as the cause of our existential doom. Monotheistic religion did not help with that regard. Retrospectively, towering figures who sought to obtain a more balanced view, such as Aristotle, and more

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<sup>4</sup> “Heidegger emphasized the etymological connections between the Greek *ekstasis* and the Latin *existentia*: both words highlight a restlessness that results in “obtrusion.” In this context, existing does not mean arising in unambiguous localization but being in a state of tension from here to there and from now to earlier or later. In other words, we could say that anybody who exists is called for at his “place” from elsewhere.” (p. 31)

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earthly (but not mundane) thinkers, such as the Cyrenaics, the Epicureans and other Hedonists, have either been chronically misunderstood on the issue of embodiment or never been taken seriously.

A quick overview of the history of philosophy discloses that the vast majority of thinkers have oscillated between two forms of dualism: a weak—ontic—form that carefully distinguishes body and soul, and a strong form—ontological—that opposes them, making their togetherness nothing less than absurd. According to the former, body and soul are two distinct and separable entities made of the same “stuff;” according to the latter, they are two distinct substances. Interestingly enough, as soon as psychology claimed to be scientific, leaving philosophy on its own to speculate on the ultimate, it fostered a form of monism. From the perspective of some experiences, ontic dualism makes sense; it is safe to say that ontological dualism never does.

Fourth, as far as I can tell, the translation is coherent. However, a Preface from the translator would have been welcome to clarify some choices. For instance, Sloterdijk writes about anthropotechnique (*Anthropotechnik*) or anthropotechnics as the translator of *Du mußt dein Leben ändern* proposes, not anthropotechnology...

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