

“Philosophical Practice and the Vigilance of Thinking”

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Philosophy’s pretense as pure thought is betrayed by the body. Practical philosophy’s pursuit of philosophy as an embodied activity subject to the physical constraints compounded by any interpersonal activity holds this pretense to account. Gadamer and his commentator, Jean Grondin, for example, refer to thought’s “vigilance”. An approach to thinking that acknowledges its embodiment, however, reveals that the notion of the vigilance of thought is largely an illusion, one of which the Stoics, for example, were well aware. The sense in which vigilance can be applied to the activity of thinking is limited. The embodiment of the thinker constitutes a perpetual possibility for thoughtlessness and regret. Given even a limited possibility that thoughtlessness can be ameliorated, there is a moral demand that the subject of thought also be recognized as the subject of thoughtlessness. In this light, the practical philosopher both is an emblem of the ideal of vigilant thought, and institutionalizes a limited number of aspects of the traditional role of moral friend.

The paper begins with an examination of the mistaken ideal of vigilant thinking and its substitutes. Upon concluding that vigilant thinking is not sustainable, I argue for the cultivation of openness as a moral obligation. As a good, cultivation is neither an end nor a means, but the standing possibility of self-understanding despite the non-susceptibility of self-understanding to instrumentalization. Self-induced vigilance is possible only as a response to reversals of expectation, and as such is understood to be severely episodic and unpredictable. While such reversals are inevitable, they are opportunities for understanding. The practical philosopher appears on the scene of this drama in two roles: first as the standing possibility of understanding in the activity of dialogue, and second as the contemporary institutionalized analogue of the moral friend. While it is hopeless to expect to avoid thoughtlessness itself, the cultivation available in the dialogue of philosophical practice—the conversation of moral friendship—is the hope of susceptibility to the correction of others, and the readiness to offer such correction oneself. The paradox involved—the so-called “Paradox of Bildung”—is that the good of cultivation cannot be more than a hope. Being essentially a response to the failure of the general project of instrumental rationality, cultivation cannot be instrumentalized itself. The implication for practical philosophy is that while philosophy is not itself instrumental, practical philosophy as cultivation can be parasitic upon instrumental practices. The paper concludes with the consideration of continuing professional education in ethics as but one such possibility.

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