

Philosophy and Practice

Abstract

Ancient Western philosophy was often accompanied by practice and involved with the Mysteries, to which Plato and others testify. Later, philosophy was linked with religious practices as the Church became the prime locus of intellectual life. The eventual separation of intellectual endeavor from the Church proliferated modern philosophy into the vast developments of natural and social science. However, without practice supporting intellectual activity, isolation and alienation have become significant problems. Philosophy now inclines to let psychology repair the deficit. The technique of Holotropic Breathwork offers a practice supportive of philosophy in the manner of ancient practices. It has developed in the American tradition of Transpersonal Psychology that traces to James and has notable connections to Whitehead's Process Philosophy, which also enjoys James's inspiration. This paper discusses Holotropic Breathwork against the background of ancient practice and in terms of Whitehead.

Philosophy and Practice

The Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology values communication between philosophy and psychology, which suits this paper because it starts with philosophy and relates it to psychology. The development of these two separate disciplines involves both diverse and common themes. An interesting one is theory and practice. Socrates considered philosophy an eminently practical endeavor. Though Plato felt the full force of Socrates's practical life example, his writings served powerfully to stimulate philosophy as the theoretical and conceptual endeavor it has mostly become. Modern Western philosophy has progressed from ancient in the intellectual development of the world, but has let practice fall by the way. Modern philosophy is pursued almost exclusively as an intellectual activity, and consequently the gap has widened between philosophy and "practical" endeavors, far beyond the caricaturing of Thales.

But "practical" is not the full meaning of "practice" here: In this paper "practice" loosely means a program or path of behavior that intends or moves a person towards transcendent experience. It does not mean a program that reinforces a particular religious or secular belief. Practice is an activity that seeks knowledge as opposed to belief, but not knowledge about this or that; rather knowledge that transcends any set of particulars. What is more, the knowledge depends on an experience in which, and only in which, the knowledge comes of realization. Some argue that no such knowledge is possible. But such argument cannot preclude the sort of experience practice intends, because the experience is not the sort whose possibility can be excluded by logic or reason. In fact, it is a central characteristic of the experience that it lies beyond the capacity of reason adequately to characterize. Of course, that there is such experience cannot be proved either—or it could be disproved. The experience that practice attends can only be attested to, which moves the whole issue towards psychology.

Psychology has significant beginnings in the practical matters of medicine and experimentalism. In its comparatively short history as a discipline psychology has developed extensive theoretical and conceptual concerns, while still pointedly concerned with practical issues of experiment and therapy. Practice develops as an experiment in experience, and it is the origin of therapy. It began with pulling on the goat skin of Dionysius, developed into the great cathartic Greek tragedies, and found a modern home in some of the precincts of psychology.

Philosophy has suffered a loss by moving away from practice. Can this loss be repaired? To address this question, I will first recall some of the ancient history of philosophy and practice. Then I will quickly transition to modern and contemporary times to discuss the transpersonal psychological development of Holotropic Breathwork, framing it in terms of Process Philosophy to suggest its usefulness as a philosophical practice.

Ancient Philosophy and Practice

Socrates, and later Diogenes and Epicurus among the ancients, exemplify philosophy so linked with practice that life and practice coincide. We see Socrates the most vividly because Plato's genius dramatized Socrates's search for self-understanding in contrast to the Sophists' concern merely for winning arguments and building reputation.

Despite his dedication to Socrates, Plato appreciated the intellectual power of Sophistry sufficiently to co-opt and deploy it in his own attempt to extend the Socratic mission. That very deployment ironically supports an intellectual orientation of modern philosophy that obscures the importance of practice for Plato himself, as well as for other ancients. Plato testifies directly to the importance of practice in his *Seventh Letter*:

One statement at any rate I can make in regard to all who have written or who may write with a claim to knowledge of the subjects to which I devote myself—no matter how they pretend to have acquired it, whether from my instruction or from others or by their own discovery. Such writers can in my opinion have no real acquaintance with the subject. I certainly have composed no work in regard to it, nor shall I ever do so in future, for there is no way of putting it in words like other studies. Acquaintance with it must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship, when, suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining. (341c-d)

Plato refers to ineffable, transcendent, noetic, mystical experience. Presumably he was stimulated both by the example of Socrates and by a Pythagorean and Orphic heritage that supported his experience of Socrates. Pythagoras seems to have exhibited a charisma comparable to Socrates's, and Plato espoused Pythagoras's conjunction of mathematics and mysticism. The importance of practice for Pythagoras can be seen in the sacred concerns of the cult associated with him and its accompanying rules of behavior.

Pythagoras's mysticism and his insight into the nature of the octave suggest that music may have been part of Pythagorean practice. That would be a consistent derivation from Orphic rites. Peter Kingsley in *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1997) supports this suggestion by tracing a line from Empedocles and the early Pythagoreans down to southern Egypt, and from there into the world of Islam and the Sufi practice of music and dance for achieving mystical ecstasy.

Plato's initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries provides additional testimony to the importance of practice for him, as well as ancients from Sophocles to Pindar. In *Phaedrus* (244-249) he points to the connection between the divine madness associated with the mysteries and the philosophical life. Not only Plato's approbation, but also the almost two-thousand-year run of the Eleusinian mysteries, during which the initiates almost without exception held them in close confidence, attest to the importance of practice for the ancients.

Cicero's testimony centuries later evidences the enduring power and importance of these practices:

...beloved Athens has brought to birth, and contributed to human life, many outstanding and divine creations, and nothing better than those mysteries. Thanks to them we have become mild and cultivated, moving from a rough and savage life to a state of civilization; we have learned from so-called 'initiations' things which are in fact the first principles of life, and we have been taught a way of living happily and also of dying with brighter hopes. (*Laws*, Book Two, 36)

Plato not only emphasizes that understanding what he teaches requires a singular kind of experience, in the *Symposium* he also describes clearly and in detail a method of meditation for attaining that experience. The method has seven steps:

1. Love one body.
2. Consider how related one body's beauty is to another's.
3. Love every lovely body but no particular one.
4. Grasp that bodily beauty is nothing compared to soul's.
5. Contemplate the beauty of laws and institutions.

6. Contemplate science—the beauty of every kind of knowledge.
7. Achieve the final revelation.

The experience of the *Seventh Letter* echoes in “the final revelation:”

There bursts upon [the candidate for initiation] that wondrous vision which is the very soul of the beauty he has toiled so long for. It is an everlasting loveliness which neither comes nor goes, which neither flowers nor fades, for such beauty is the same on every hand, the same then as now, here as there, this way as that way, the same to every worshiper as it is to every other.

Nor will his vision of the beautiful take the form of a face, or of hands, or of anything that is of the flesh. It will be neither words, nor knowledge, nor a something that exists in something else, such as a living creature, or the earth, or the heavens, or anything that is—but subsisting of itself and by itself in an eternal oneness. (210e-211b)

Although the method of the *Symposium* has usually been approached intellectually by modern commentators, the ancients viewed it as a meditation practice. Porphyry testified that Plotinus used it for the effect Plato suggested: “by meditation and by the method that Plato teaches in the *Banquet [Symposium]*” Plotinus “lifted himself...to the first and all-transcendent divinity.” (O’Brian, *The Essential Plotinus*. Hackett, 1975, p. 16)

In Plotinus’s words:

Roused into myself from my body—outside everything else and inside myself—my gaze has met a beauty wondrous and great. At such moments I have been certain that mine was the better part, mine the best of lives lived to the fullest, mine identity with the divine. Fixed there firmly, poised above everything in the intellectual that is less than the highest, utter actuality was mine. (IV, 8)

Transition to Modern Times

The final separation of practice from philosophy in the West transpired as the harbor for philosophy the Church provided became less used. Philosophy ranked second to theology in that harbor, but it was in some way supported by the experiential, diurnal context of prayer and devotion. Tying philosophy to religious practices, however, ultimately attenuated the link between philosophy and practice.

We mark the beginning of modern philosophy with Descartes and of modern natural philosophy, i.e. science, with Galileo. Galileo fell from the context of the Church, Descartes clearly stood outside it, and philosophy became preeminently an intellectual endeavor. Very importantly, philosophy was freed from the constraints that developed when practice evolved into organized religion, and proliferated into the sciences and social sciences that inform the innovation and prosperity of modern Western culture. On the other hand, these very endeavors eschewed the name of philosophy and relegated it to a small room in the academy.

Great benefits have clearly obtained by philosophy’s separation from practice. However, despite scientific and technological advance and the attendant prosperity and material health of the culture, the accompanying development of individuality has yielded psychic discomforts like alienation and isolation. But this paper does not intend sociological analysis; rather its concern is the significance of practice in respect to philosophy.

Cultural differences mean that modern practice necessarily must differ from ancient practice. The pace of modern life, its complexity, and the nature of community all constrain the possibilities of practice. Historically, practice was facilitated by community, but today the sort of enduring community that historically facilitated practice is rare. Holotropic Breathwork, discussed below, is an example of a practice that can fit within the modern constraints. Holotropic Breathwork developed as a transpersonal psychology.

Transpersonal Psychology

The term “transpersonal psychology” was coined by Stanislav Grof and gleaned by Abraham Maslow when he and his colleagues sought to extend the humanistic psychology they had pioneered to incorporate a spiritual dimension. Humanistic psychology itself developed a strain of psychology that traces to William James, who was notable for holding philosophy and psychology in common and developing both with a uniquely American emphasis on experience. One of James’s significant influences on philosophy, besides his contributions to the corpus of pragmatism, was his inspiration of Alfred North Whitehead. James’s “drops of experience” became exemplary of Whitehead’s actual occasions. His *Varieties of Religious Experience* informed Whitehead’s doctrine of religion as “the art and theory of the internal life of man,” a doctrine Whitehead characterizes, reflecting James’s experiential orientation, as “the direct negation of the theory that religion is primarily a social fact.” (*Religion in the Making*. Meridian, 1960, p. 16)

Stanislav Grof (numerous publications), like Whitehead a European emigrant to America, developed the practice of Holotropic Breathwork in the context of the Human Potential movement, which reflected many aspects of James’s uniquely, experientially American psychology. Holotropic Breathwork therapy is both psychological and philosophical, as well as religious in the sense common to James and Whitehead. As such it harks back to the sort of practice that is essential to philosophy for Plato and the other ancients mentioned above. It is a practice that can repair what modern philosophy has lost. I will discuss it in the context of Whitehead, whom I take to be a modern Platonist.

Holotropic Breathwork

Holotropic Breathwork comprises group process, intensified breathing, evocative music, focused bodywork, and expressive drawing. The process is attended by “facilitators,” who are expressly trained to support participants, rather than be authorities—a recurrence to the ancient Greek role of therapist, etymologically a temple attendant.

A session begins with a meeting to establish rapport, discuss theoretical issues, and give practical instructions. Then participants are paired for “breathing” sessions. One person “sits” and the other “breathes.” Later roles reverse. The “sitter” watches over the “breather,” who lies on a mat with closed eyes and breathes as deeply and rapidly as possible. Non-specific, but evocative recorded music plays for the entire session.

Breathers generally experience non-specific magnification of their psychic processes. Experiences in any one session may range from simply intensified aesthetic sense, to floods of imagery, visions, and mystical transcendence. Facilitators help breathers with difficult bodily feelings to work them out in simple ways.

After their sessions breathers get materials for drawing expressively in any way they wish, and finally the group convenes to talk about their experiences and their drawings.

Holotropic Breathwork focuses on a process of self-discovery and self-creation, and, as such, is significantly analogous to the process of becoming that is central in Whitehead's thinking. Holotropic Breathwork addresses the process in several ways that compare usefully with Whitehead:

- (1) It encourages inwardness, starting on the most basic mechanical level of having breathers keep their eyes closed or covered during a session.
- (2) On a broader experiential level Holotropic Breathwork urges people to flow non-judgmentally with their feelings, deeming no feeling to be unacceptable, shameful, etc.
- (3) The Grof program for training people to conduct Holotropic Breathwork workshops aims to produce facilitators, not masters or experts. To facilitate Holotropic Breathwork successfully requires skill in some procedural matters, but not expertise in applying a method to subjects. Mostly, capable facilitation requires learning from one's own travails to be a humble companion to the travails of others. Holotropic Breathwork training, as its central requirement, insists that facilitators put themselves in the roles of breather and sitter over and over again.
- (4) At the heart of Holotropic Breathwork is the view that the psyche manifests an inner capacity to move toward wholeness. ("Holotropic" derives etymologically from the Greek *holos* and *trepein*.)

By addressing an individual's capacity for self-creation, Holotropic Breathwork displays the individual process as a macrocosm of the microcosmic process Whitehead describes for the becoming of an actual occasion. For Whitehead an actual occasion achieves its goal of maximum intensity of feeling by coordinating the events of its past into a harmony of contrasts, rather than excluding some or many of them as incompatibilities. On the larger scale personal life is richer and fuller to the extent that one integrates in a felt understanding all the events of personal history, discovering how to embrace awareness of traumatic events rather than exclude them with psychological defenses like denial, projection, etc. Breathwork theory maintains that the self is something to be explored and developed, rather than judged and categorized. As the self develops more expansively, it steps up the ladder of universality to the transcendence Plato's method cites.

The kind of practice that Plato and the other ancients understood as essential to the philosophical life yields a climactic, transcendent experience that assures a person's utter and profound connection to the entirety of the universe, revealed as self-sustaining meaning. It is not a rational experience, but it supports the very possibility of reason—the possibility for life and the universe to make sense. In so doing it provides assurance in the face of death by providing an experience of what modern psychology calls "ego death," a kind of dress rehearsal for one's final, mortal demise.

Whitehead calls the experience Peace, and his description suggests its value for philosophy is loosing the fetters and preoccupations that can constrain thinking. Peace is:

... a positive feeling which crowns the 'life and motion' of the soul. It is hard to define and difficult to speak of. It is not a hope for the future nor is it an interest in present details. It is a broadening of feeling due to the emergence of some deep metaphysical insight, un verbalized and yet momentous in its coordination of values. Its first effect is the removal of the stress of acquisitive feeling arising from the soul's preoccupation with

itself. Thus Peace carries with it a surpassing of personality.... Its emotional effect is the subsidence of turbulence which inhibits. More accurately, it preserves the springs of energy, and at the same time masters them for the avoidance of paralyzing distractions. (*Adventures of Ideas*. Macmillan, 1933, p. 367)

Conclusion

The mysteries of Eleusis focused on the process of death and rebirth reflected in the myth of Demeter and Persephone. The process of an actual occasion for Whitehead is one of becoming and perishing. On the scale of human life the process consists of birth and death. But within the macro process of human life the micro process of human birth is an analogous process of becoming and perishing. To be born into the common human world is to die to the womb. One of the fundamental spiritual events is rebirth—to be born again: The old self perishes and the new self is reborn. The idea that rebirth echoes birth on the common note of transcendence is one of the basic tenets of the model Grof understands to be operative in Holotropic Breathwork.

Holotropic Breathwork offers a method that links to ancient philosophical practices. It is accessible to modern times because it is not set within any religious framework or other dogma about particular places one must traverse on the path of self-discovery, or a particular order in which one must traverse them. Though it does not require the long study Plato thought necessary, it offers the advantage that it can be pursued at convenient intervals in today's time-constrained world. Most importantly, Holotropic Breathwork can invigorate intellectual activity by grounding it in the transcendent experience necessary to bridge the gulf that has grown since ancient times between mind and psyche.