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The Wandering Idiot to be Named “Philosopher” —A Reflection on How Philosophy Interacts with Reality

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who has taken me through this intellectual journey
and made this work possible.*

In an interview Jonathan Wolff stressed the importance as a philosopher to listen openly, in view of the limitation of personal talents and philosophical methods when applied to policy areas¹. Wolff suggested an “engaged” way of doing philosophy based on a distinction-and-interaction model between philosophy and other fields. His experience shakes my perception of what philosophy is like—Since practical areas can inspire philosophy, can philosophy also be utilized in dealing with practical problems? Are philosophy and practical fields mutually penetrative, or just communicable as separate bodies of knowledge?

¹ Derived from the questions attempted.

Sparked to explore the place of philosophy in the contemporary world and philosophers in their surroundings, I invite Socrates² in *Symposium* and Zhuangzi in his free-wandering scripts to enrich this inquiry. The qualities of the thinkers do not necessarily tell the full picture of philosophy, but may facilitate my proposal of what could actualize the name “philosopher”.

Introduction: The Unsettled Nature of Philosophy

Philosophy, literally in Greek, means “love for wisdom”. For few can deny that wisdom is a good thing, we can borrow the definition from Diotima and Socrates that to love is to desire for not-owned goodness, which implicates in context that philosophy, is the desire for wisdom which the pursuer, i.e. the philosopher lacks, or at least with no guarantee of long-term possession (Plato 200d–201a).

Zhuangzi tries to wander free from provisional notions in concert with the true rule of nature. “Whether I succeed in discovering his identity or not,” he sings, “it neither adds to nor detracts from his Truth.” ([Office of University General Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong] 82) But he cherishes this unsettlement, which prevents one from blindly receiving any “bodily form” to which one holds on and consequently doomed to the solidification of mind, the end of livelihood (82).

Yet not everyone in lack of something can feel that lack and develop desire for complement, as figured out by Diotima in distinguishing “the foolish” from “lovers of wisdom” (204a). Here we can see philosophy as

2 The image and vision of Socrates in this essay is to some extent subjected to Plato’s narrative in *Symposium*.

a practice of the remaining leaps: to become aware of one's lack of wisdom, and further to grow a desire for it.. What is distinct in "philosophers" then is not necessarily the wisdom they possess, but their awareness of their own ignorance, their capacity to be intellectually "resourceful" out of such thirst that one never sees an end of pursuit³.

Being Destructive to Create New: Philosophers Ask Fundamental Questions

Philosophers develop such constant recognition of their own ignorance from a mind habit of questioning and examination. They do not fear, and even thrill at reexamining what people take for granted or believe within their horizons. Philosophers embrace destructive efforts on widely accepted explanations of how things work, only to make space for exploring the true reason behind. Zhuangzi suggests reconsideration of the right of power establishment, by questioning how this difference has come into place: "One who steals a hook is put to death; another who steals a state becomes its prince." ([Columbia UP]) Through this conduct of questioning one may draw the necessity to examine the fundamental legitimacy of society against human's natural freedom, rather than take the existing as the right. And it is this preserved uncertainty that has launched human exploration of better ways of coexistence in our near history⁴. In fact, one becomes as much destructive against established beliefs as productive of the embedded

3 Borrowing the personified portrait of love in *Symposium* 204d.

4 Here I am not indicating that Zhuangzi's questioning has inspired the later social thoughts, but it's the destructive philosophical thinking embedded in Zhuangzi's inquiry that inspires and communicates with the constructive human practices to reflect on forms of society and improve the members' wellbeing.

uncertainties, which powers life in constant exploration, towards “human excellence” in Socrates’s vision (Phillips)⁵.

I have once exercised this mind of questioning, which brought me an interesting reflection on how I produce and hold judgements. One day a friend asked me whether I preferred face-to-face or online teaching. “Out of question,” I commented without delay, “face-to-face lectures. Otherwise why did I have to come here on campus?” But when I recalled the talk days later, I found I did not give the reason why I loved face-to-face teaching at all, and in this way I might have lost a chance to really ponder on this change of learning format. “Sometimes one hurries to attribute value to something just because it costs rather than it deserves,” flowed my mind. In removing the barrier of assumptions to pave way for real thinking, I felt I was the moment a philosopher!

Impairment as Completeness: Philosophy beyond the Disciplinary Circle

It is the unsettled nature of philosophy that constructs its special nature of “impairment”, which leads to a philosophical mind to naturally appeal to other realms of practices towards “completeness” (Zhuangzi [Office of University General Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong] 84). In this sense, philosophy can never be a separate specialty but a part of life which anyone regardless of profession can integrate into their own.

However today, we have witnessed philosophy raised as an intellectual

5 Inspired by *Socrates Café* chapter title: “Seeking Ignorance; Human Excellence.”

privilege. It seems weird to claim oneself “a philosopher” without relevant academic titles and works, while the mere conduct of questioning, which is already not trivial, falls short of, or even out of people’s expectation of philosophy. There rises a dilemma of naming, as recognized by Diotima, where one “abstract a part and call it by the name of the whole” (205c).

Upon this partial naming a “circle” of philosophy has occurred. Insiders forget there is something other than philosophy, and outsiders throw comments inward as if philosophy is totally external to them. A series of funny questions arise. The philosophers ask, “Why things that go down well in this circle do not run as smoothly outside?” The outsiders ask, “What can philosophy do except making me more confused?” But would one ever ask, why a part of something is not its whole? This only perpetuates impairment by requiring completeness from a part.

It is miserable that “philosophy” becomes only particular people’s work at a time when the term becomes unprecedentedly pervasive. The disciplinary boundaries like “philosophy and non-philosophy” are affecting how we see and contact the world. When Zhuangzi asks about the true color of the sky ([Office of University General Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong] 76), or the “True Lord” of nature and inside human body (82), we see an implicit start of scientific inquiry. But what that inquiry entails may not be the haste to solve it, but an insight of universality fuelled by free imagination. A specialist today may claim what is within “my field” and what is not, but forget the fact that it is the same world that sparks our curiosity, intellectual and beyond intellectual. Disciplinary boundary is not supposed to be a barrier before us to approach the world from various perspectives of our choice and create integrated horizons.

Releasing the Grasp of Form: The Philosophical Passion to Understand

Another reason for “non-professionals” to keep away from philosophical thinking may be people are too anxious to be sure of and in control of things, while philosophical inquiry often adds to feelings of uncertainty. Zhuangzi observes how people firmly cling to notions of right and wrong which are claimed to be, persisting that they are on the side of victory (82). In this way they trade their freedom of mind for partial knowledge and consequently a sense of informed tranquillity. But is that sense of tranquillity true happiness, or merely an illusion backed by the indifference to the eternal sorrow of mankind? Zhuang only feels sorrowful for their firmness, for it is only bounded by situation and perspective (83).

Unlike Zhuangzi, Socrates believes that there is a definite truth beyond human perspective, manifested by the morality of Gods. But Diotima corrected Socrates’s formulation of absolute opposites and suggested there may be an “intermediate state” for people in love to go through (204b–c). This also bears an implication of the motivation of philosophical practice in the form of love. Doing philosophy does not mean making judgements of right or wrong, good or bad and utilizing those labels to classify people and discriminate values. In fact, it is the recognition and acceptance for an “intermediate state” that makes space for the refinement of human life towards nobility, and opens a window to understand human needs and limitations in order to pursue excellence. We could possibly argue that the passion of both philosophers lies more in understanding than judgement. For

Zhuangzi, it was highly likely the fuelled times that so inspired him. Amid a world of war, torture and its justification he prescribes a living state of “easy wandering.” To wander, he suggests, is neither to avoid nor to engage deep, but to let the *understanding* flow as a medium of livelihood. Even one who forces virtuous conduct to their own standard on others, he believes, “plagues” people and doomed to be plagued if they “do not understand men’s spirits and minds” ([Office of University General Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong] 92).

Zhuang attributes the failure of understanding to the favor of solid form. Form is the agent of identity, but can also obscure identity as it potentially substantiates discrimination and partiality. People communicate by words. Do words really say something or nothing? How do we catch them and attribute value to them? (83) That all depends on listening. The art of listening is as important to train as the art of expression. Students and new employees in speech-enhancing workshops are often told “how you say something is far more important than what you say.” But this is only half of the story. If we as audience really follow an easy mind in favor of familiar or persuasive forms, it is unfair for those who are less good at expression but have equally inspiring ideas to share. And if a philosopher believes that complex views always thrive in sophisticated styles of expression, s/he is likely to be tricked by this favor of form that costs him/her a fruitful moment of understanding.

“The piping of Heaven” is able to “bring out of ten thousand things their own nature in all different ways” (81); In the great expression is great listening, which is to listen without right-or-wrong judgement but only in search of understanding. It has no form but manifests in infinite forms,

bearing an admirable potential to understand and thus live in concert with whatever it encounters. Understanding is therefore in the same way, the core of philosophical passion as well as the wisdom of life.

Conclusion: How Doing Philosophy Is Relevant in Our Contemporary World

As soon as we switch our perspective on philosophers, from a profession to anyone who could come to be, we have seen that philosophy is nothing more and nothing less than a resourceful moment of feeling ignorant. Everyone has the right and capacity to practise a moment of philosophy in the flow of their life, not in solution-seeking haste or tranquillity-seeking anxiety. It is not necessarily a moment easy and joyful; it may well be heavy and lost⁶ ([Office of University General Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong] 81), but the right is in us to go through the feeling as it is. Philosophy does not provide direct solutions to real-life struggles and could even induce more confusions and uncertainties. But we open up and examine them so that we do not need to be forced in joy or pain by the appearance of our encounters or any authorities, but only forced to be free, in our own, real feelings. An examined life becomes our own.

Being honest to one's own ignorance also brings chance to recognize and receive others' limitations. Doing philosophy is not only about self-liberation, but also facilitates ways of living with each other in reciprocal fulfilment. Socrates uses logical inquiry to lead people to reexamine their subconscious or misled assumptions in the formation of the views they hold.

6 From Zhuangzi, *Discussion on Making All Things Equal*, mentioning the feeling of loss by the character "Tzu-Chi of South Wall" overwhelmed by the Piping of Heaven.

In “In Dialogue with Humanity” tutorials I also had a taste of philosophical conversation. It does not have any presupposed purposes, or necessarily leads to agreement, but during the conversation ideas and thoughts from multiple perspectives are opened up, examined, and developed. At a time when people strive to claim borders between each other, I believe one way to enhance mutual understanding is to facilitate such kind of conversations within communities of diverse backgrounds. Christopher Phillips⁷, a philosopher, made such attempt by inviting people to his discussion session series as an experiment of Socrates dialogue, and an inheritance of Socrates wisdom to spark new imagination of public life.

Jonathan Wolff, in the interview, insightfully pointed out that philosophers engaged in policy areas have a “long-term” role. “Anyone can do committee work, but few can change the terms of the debate.” (Popescu) We debate on what we see, while that wandering idiot, passing with a scrutinous gaze, in asking questions unanswerable, renews what we could see. In fact, we all have the chance to be in the idiot’s place, who is later named “philosopher.”

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⁷ The author of *Socrates Café: A Fresh Taste of Philosophy*.

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Teacher's comment:

LI Xinting's work is exemplary of the independent inquiry that arises out of rigorous lines of questioning. Her thinking is disciplined

and generous. Her interpretations and analyses of the textual ideas in relation to the context of her inquiry are evidence-based and perceptive. They penetrate multiple layers of meaning, preserving ambiguities and complexities. In a clear and distinct voice, she prosecutes her argument with sound reasoning, and accomplishes what she aspires to—in her own words, “to produce and hold judgment”. Her critical reflection on what it means to philosophize implicitly deposits a long-term challenge to the idea of the research university today and the role of General Education in it. (YUENG Yang)

