

The Method and Process of the Philosophical Café: Workshop Analysis

Adriana Vlaicu¹

Abstract: The philosophical café method sparked my interest due to its design purpose of bringing back philosophy in contact with the everyday person and by the fact that it is a group practice, entailing the need for people to interact with one another and exchange philosophical ideas in the process. The 17th International Conference of Philosophical Practice held in Timisoara, Romania in 2023 granted me the opportunity to work with this method having as attendants a group of international participants. The workshop I conducted, titled “Experiencing the Café-philosophy”, revolved around the topic of the possibility of using philosophical counselling as a helping tool in alleviating the consequences technological alienation has on the human being. The first part of the article takes on the task of getting a better understanding of what does the philosophical café method actually mean, by taking a look at the method and practice it implies, as well as trying to determine whether it really implies philosophizing or not. Having had a deeper knowledge of the method we have worked with during the workshop, the second part of the article is meant to be an analysis of the philosophical café process that was undertaken during this workshop.

Key-words: philosophical café; public philosophy; philosophical counselling; philosophical practice; social dialogue;

¹PhD. West University of Timisoara, E-mail: adriana.vlaicu81@e-uvt.ro

Introduction

The 17th International Conference of Philosophical Practice held in Timisoara, Romania in 2023 offered me the opportunity to practice the method of the philosophical café with a group of international participants. My experience in working with this method was quite brief, as I had only held meetings once every two weeks at the Students Cultural House in Timisoara for half a year previously to this event. The workshop I conducted was entitled “Experiencing the Café-philos” and revolved around the theme of philosophical counselling being used as a helping tool in alleviating the consequences technological alienation has on the human being. My interest in the philosophical café method was sparked during my studies at the master of Philosophical Counselling and Consultancy, when this method was presented to us during a seminar by ways of implementing it into during the class. As I have read more on the history of this method and the purpose it was developed for, my interest grew even bigger, as I found during my studies that philosophy is no longer present in the daily lives of the general public, being considered by a good amount of people as “gibberish, useless talk” and so on. So, I was actually searching for a method that could be applied in dealing with this situation. As a plus, the method also proved helpful for my own research supporting my PhD thesis. Thus, I was eager to have this workshop, as it offered me a double opportunity: one of practicing with an international group, the second of being able to test my hypotheses regarding the philosophical café method with a number of practicing philosophical counsellors.

An analysis of the process the workshop went through will be presented in this article, but first we will start by trying to get a better understanding of what exactly the philosophical café method represents, by having a look at what are its method and practice, as well as discussing whether it really implies philosophizing or not.

What is the Philosophical Café?

Philosophical café, café philosophique or short café-philos is a group method within philosophical practice. The foundations of this method were laid in Paris, France in 1992 by the philosopher Marc Sautet.

Philosophical cafés were conceived as a space for philosophical debates about the big questions in life, to which absolutely anyone can participate, regardless of having a philosophical education or not. The idea behind the philosophy café concept is to bring philosophy back to its roots, by taking it out of its academic “ivory tower” and making it accessible to the general public. Historically speaking, the philosophical café can be considered to have a long list of predecessors, stretching back all the way to ancient times, when Socrates was roaming the streets of Athens questioning various people on problems related to virtue, beauty, justice, knowledge and so on. Throughout the centuries, we have numerous examples of philosophers interacting and discussing philosophy in the public space offered by coffeehouses. In the modern philosophy era, we can mention Thomas Hobbes’s interest in philosophical discussion that took place in cafés in Oxford. During the Enlightenment period, the salon appeared, as “a descendant of the renaissance and baroque patronization of artists by aristocrats” (Marinoff, 2002, p. 123). Philosophers such as Rousseau, Voltaire or Diderot were regular presences at gatherings held in this type of environment, as the “salon provided an excellent sphere to meet people, to exchange and challenge ideas” (Nemes, 2011, p. 836).

Further on, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the critics of the Enlightenment period, were nonetheless deliberating over their findings at a coffeehouse, Café de la Régence. In the 20th century, the Vienna Circle had weekly sessions in various cafés in Austria, such as Café Reichsrat or Café Central, whilst Café de Flore and Les Deux Magots became landmarks in Paris for having been the place of meeting of the existentialist philosophers, such as Sartre and de Beauvoir (“Coffee and the development of philosophy”, 2013). Still at the beginning of the 20th century, but this time not related to coffeehouses, Leonard Nelson developed what he termed “the Socratic method”. First presented publicly in a lecture in 1922, the method was described by Nelson in an essay he published in 1929 as “the art of teaching not philosophy but philosophizing, the art not of teaching about philosophers but of making philosophers of the students” (Nelson, 1929). With so many philosophers meeting and conversing in coffeehouse, it is no wonder that this sort of establishment is considered to be at the basis of the development of public philosophy. As László Nemes (2023) points out, what is characteristic of modern European philosophy is its urbanism, as “the most important philosophers live in cities [and] the

typical places of philosophizing are the urban café and the university” (p. 60). The coffeehouse offers a space where the most various people can meet, drink coffee, tea, cappuccino or whatever their drink of choice, whilst having a conversation, this environment referring to “something fundamental about philosophy in general” (Nemes, 2019, p. 7).

Thus, it comes as no surprise that Marc Sautet developed his group method having the space of a coffeehouse in mind. The first official philosophical café was held in 1992 in Paris at Cafe des Phares. From there on, every Sunday morning, he debated with diverse people on various subjects, such as love, good, God, freedom and so on. The popularity of the event increased over time, France now hosting around 100 such philosophical cafés. Even more than that, the concept of the philosophical café was exported to other countries in Europe, while also reaching overseas to the United States, Canada, South America, Japan and Australia (Simons, 1998). This wide spreading of the philosophical café is explained by philosophical counsellor Lou Marinoff (2002) in the context of globalization and of a scarcity of places where people can meet and have intellectual conversation on topics pertaining to the philosophical domain (pp. 112-114). The ample dissemination of the philosophical café has also led to an increase in the variety of places the method is being practiced. Of course, in France the coffeehouse is still the preferred place of meeting, but in places like Great Britain the pub is favored, while in the United States the bookstore is the place of choice for philosophers setting up philosophical cafés (Marinoff, 2002; Nemes, 2011, p. 839).

Is It Really Doing Philosophy?

As it was expected, there have also been critics of the public dialogue that is implied by the philosophical café, with some calling it ““coffeehouse philosophy,” which is definitely pejorative in professional contexts” (Marinoff, 2002, pp. 124) and implies a degree of amateurism to the practice. Therefore, the problem whether conversations that take place during these types of meetings can be actually considered to be philosophical, has been raised. Michel Picard has tried to give an answer to this question in his essay pertaining to this very topic, linking his response to Anthony S. Laden’s work. Based on Laden’s theories on reasoning, Picard (2015) discusses about a social type of reasoning, that implies the

speaker to talk not only for himself “but for others as well”, this type of reasoning being “a form of reciprocal answerability” (p. 174). Of course, it is the role of the facilitator “to lead the conversation in the direction of attunement, and to guide participants to ground the authority of what they say in the connection amongst those present” (Picard, 2015, p. 177).

Sautet (1995) himself described the method of the philosophical café as being “neither a circle for initiates nor a wild therapy group”. Having this in mind, he goes on to explain that philosophy doesn't presuppose that something must be taught to the audience, but it is rather “a state of mind, a way of using one's intellect” (Sautet, 1995). Thus, he describes the method of the philo-café in terms similar to those employed by Picard when talking about the social type of reasoning, mentioning that during his meetings the participants “do not speak to silence others but to think with them; we don't talk about ourselves to tell our stories but to defend an opinion and submit it for everyone to examine” (Sautet, 1995).

A similar line of thought is present also in Marina Katinić and Luka Janeš's article on the philosophical café, where they debate whether this method is more about a philosophical dialogue or refers more to a form of group therapy. The two authors argue along the lines of Sautet's reasoning, mentioning that, in their experience, teaching or creating an impression of philosophical superiority from the facilitator is not recommended, keeping sources and author quotations and references only sporadic being more appropriate, as “participants are most content when they manage to come to a certain understanding using their own cognitive capacities, instead of being taught” (Katinić & Janeš, 2021, p. 58). Moreover, what is of most importance is for the facilitator to keep the discussions philosophical, by guiding them “from empirical to conceptual level” (Katinić & Janeš, 2021). Its character of being available to everyone and of working with what is available in the space of a coffeehouse: “opinions, prejudices and experiences”, is what doesn't make the philosophical café “an alternative to the university”, argues also Esther Charabati (2020, p. 75). According to her, the appearance and wide spread of this method are a repercussion of the way today's consumerist society is organized and its' not offering of “spaces to reflect in company” (Charabati, 2020, p. 75). This is where the philosophical café steps in, by allowing participants to have a space where they “can deal with topics that they have probably been putting off” (Charabati, 2020, p. 75).

Philosophical Café: Method and Practice

The philosophical café, as envisioned by its creator, is built upon a series of principles, first of which refers to the fact that participation is open to anyone willing to discuss about the topics at hand. Another building block that lays at the foundation of this group method consists in the provision of a public place where universal topics can be discussed by the most diverse participants. Last, but not least we have the principle that states the importance of encouraging freedom of thought among the participants in the discussion taking place during a philosophical café.

As any other method, the philosophical café also rests upon a set of basic rules, namely the following:

- Participants propose topics, the facilitator choosing one of them or submitting the proposals to a democratic vote;
- The role of the facilitator is to guide the debate, using philosophical knowledge in this endeavor;
- Civilized attitude: when one of the participants speaks, the others listen.

Regarding the first rule, some philosophers choose to have participants vote the topic for the next session beforehand, while others adopt a more relaxed stance, having the group raise questions or concerns they have at the moment, selecting one that is discussed throughout the current meeting. Lou Marinoff (2000) mentions that when he is conducting discussions based on the philosophical café method he only sticks to the last rule, that of the civilized attitude, as he believes that this also helps “group members (...) practice other virtues at the same time: patience, attentiveness, tolerance” (p. 260). He further indicates that this rule is of utmost importance, especially when dealing with delicate or scandalous topics. As already suggested the topics that can be tackled during a philosophical café session can vary from light to serious ones, like education, good, knowledge, beauty, technology and so on, to downright outrageous ones, like sex, homosexuality, pornography, abortion, drugs, extremism, gun control and the sorts. These topics engage the public as an „excuse for the rational capacities exercise, in a relaxed environment, this concept uniting people interested in open discussions in a friendly and accessible public environment” (Sandu, 2015, p. 352).

Thus, the main purpose of the philo- café is to offer a safe space where participants can “discuss things that don’t otherwise get discussed—whether because of their awkwardness or their complexity or both” (Marinoff, 2000, p. 261).

According to Esther Charabati (2020), the quality of a discussion that takes place during a philosophical café meeting, depends on a series of factors, as follows:

1. The theme of the session, which is important to be chosen by the participants through voting, according to their interests. The facilitator’s role here is to formulate the topic in such a way as to bring “it closer to the concerns of the attendees” (p. 84);

2. The questions asked by the facilitator, which are the key for a good debate, need to be open-ended questions“ that have not one answer, but many, that can be confronted” (p. 84);

3. The level of the interventions from the facilitator, where it is important for the facilitator to be prepared to put into action “a plan B in case the debate does not start” (p. 84);

4. The coherence of the discussion, which implies that the facilitator pays attention to the unfolding of the ideas during the meeting, so as not to lose “the meaning of the search” and end up with an “accumulation of scattered ideas” (p. 85);

5. The language employed by the facilitator; an everyday language being preferred to a language rich in philosophical concepts;

6. The listening skills of the facilitator, where the facilitator needs to “set an example” by “accepting different styles” ((p. 85);

7. Maintaining the dialogue, as the facilitator needs to know “when and how to stop someone who talks a lot and contributes little” (p. 85). Different examples of techniques are given: no sharing of personal experiences or anecdotes, raising a hand or any other sign if you want to speak, speak only after the others have finished;

8. Maintaining a happy atmosphere, by using humor, even provocation or irony (pp. 83-86).

The Philosophical Café at the ICPP 2023

During the first day of the 17th International Conference of Philosophical Practice held in Timisoara, Romania in 2023, I conducted a

workshop based on the philosophical café method entitled “Experiencing the Café-philo”. The theme I proposed for this workshop was built on was that of philosophical counselling and its capacity to serve as an instrument in the alienating effect technology seems to be having on the human being. I had a special interest in discussing this topic, as it represents the thesis, I am currently working on for my PhD research and I was hoping that the 17th International Conference of Philosophical Practice will bring me the opportunity to be able to tackle this theme with a group of experienced philosophical counsellors and consultants. The session began with a brief presentation of the facilitator, mentioning the name, education and current philosophical preoccupations, followed by a short description of the philosophical café method and its rules.

As I previously mentioned, the theme for the debate was chosen by myself, namely that related to philosophical counselling and its capacity to serve as an instrument in battling the alienating effect technology seems to be having on the human being. The process requires the facilitator to introduce the topic and ask the participants to read aloud the quotes written on the whiteboard. The fragments of text selected for discussion were the following two excerpts from the Theodor Adorno’s *Minima Moralia* and Jacques Ellul’s *The Technological System*:

„What has become alien to men is the human component of culture, its closest part, which upholds them against the world. They make common cause with the world against themselves, and the most alienated condition of all, the omnipresence of commodities, their own conversion into appendages of machinery, is for them a mirage of closeness. The great works of art and philosophical constructions have remained un-comprehended not through their too great distance from the heart of human experience, but the opposite.” (Adorno, 2005, p. 96).

„... for most workers, technological growth brings harder and more exhausting work (speeds, for instance, demanded not by the capitalist but by technology and the service owed to the machine). We are intoxicated with the idea of leisure and universal automation. But for a long time, we will be stuck with work, we will be wasted and alienated. Alienation, though, is no longer capitalistic, it is now technological.” (Ellul, 1980, p.72)

In the next step of the process, the facilitator asks the group of attendants to give examples from their personal experience that are illustrative for the topic at hand and are related to the fragments of text previously introduced. Considering our theme of discussion, the question I have asked the attendants was along the lines of: "Could you describe an experience where you felt alienated as presented by the authors of the two fragments of text?" Most people had examples of times and situations that the associated with the descriptions of alienation presented by Adorno or Ellul. The process continues with the philosophical counselor asking the participants one or several questions that are connected to the theme, to which the participants reply, by giving arguments for their choice of answers. The two main questions that interested me the most in finding out the answers of the participants, were "What solution could we find to help people better cope with the negative effects of technological alienation?" and "Is philosophical counselling a good tool to use in this endeavor?". All sorts of solutions were provided as reply to the first burning question I had, including education, a change in people's perspective and mind set, another socio-economic structure and so on. But, as varied as the replies were for this question, the second one got a unanimous reply, as all people present agreed upon the usefulness of philosophical counselling in serving as an instrument in alleviating the alienating effect technology seems to be having on the human being.

The end of the process entails the opening up of the discussion, the group of attendants being free to continue their debate under the guidance of the facilitator. Thus, the session continued on the lines of the usefulness of the group methods within philosophical practice, and especially that of the philosophical café method in the process of alleviating the alienation of the human being generated by technology.

At the very end of the session, we made a short summary of the topic discussed and the conclusions we have reached, as well as a brief recounting of the steps the philosophical café as a method presupposes, at the request of the master students that wanted to have a better understanding of how this process works. On the subject of attendants, the session was populated, as I had hoped, with experienced philosophical counsellors from various countries (Hungary, Czech Republic, Brazil or the United States), along with several master students in the Philosophical

Counselling and Consultancy master program offered by West University of Timisoara.

In regard to the rules, some of the students were surprised to find out that the method of the philo-café does not include a lecture from the philosophical counsellor on the topic at hand. But what I found most interesting is that, compared to other group sessions I have held applying the philosophical café method, I can definitely say that this was the first time the attendants actually respected the civilized conversation rule. What I found during my experience of practicing with this method, is that this is the rule that most people have difficulty in complying with, as most participants are eager to express their opinion or to reply to what another person has said, without waiting for the other person to finish speaking. In most sessions there is one point when people end up talking on top of each other, which causes a bit of frustration and confusion, but this was not the case during the workshop I held at the 17th International Conference of Philosophical Practice. My supposition is that this is due to the fact that most attendants were trained philosophical counsellors with experience in practicing the philo-café, or philosophical counsellors in training, who were interested in hearing what the other participants had to say. In the usual group that I hold, there is a much wider variety of people participating, some of whom are not necessarily being interested in hearing the others, as voicing their own thoughts and ideas. My conclusion is that I still have work to do regarding my ability to bring the debate to the social type of reasoning Picard was talking about, to have the participants better attuned to each other and thus to be able for them to speak in connection to those around them.

Conclusion

As I mentioned in the Introduction to this article, my interest in the philosophical café method was a double one: first, of getting to practice in a new environment, having international participants, second for having a chance to test my hypotheses regarding this method with the help of a group of experienced philosophical counsellors. In light of all of the above, we can conclude that the workshop “Experiencing the Café-philo”, held at the 17th International Conference of Philosophical Practice held in Timisoara, Romania in 2023 has reached its purpose. Firstly, as the group

of participants was indeed an international one, with philosophical counsellors from Hungary, Czech Republic, Brazil or the United States having joined in the debate. Secondly, we have received possible answers to the questions prepared for the attendance to discuss upon during the session, questions meant to test the hypothesis regarding the usefulness of philosophical counselling in alleviating the alienating effect of technological alienation upon the human being.

The answers were all affirmative and the further inquiry into the topic lead us to question the use of the philo-café method itself with this purpose and to think of ways through which this method could be improved upon to better serve this goal.

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