

# Philosophical Community

## Building of the 21st century

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**Abstract:** In the time of the 21st century there is a fundamental change in human communities that profoundly effects human communication, relations and, in general, human experience. How does philosophy of this time appear and how can philosophy become the guide in our life as it used to serve in the antic times? In the book market we see an elated rise of philosophical books, where philosophy is considered to be appropriate for counselling contemporary challenges of everyday life. The term „Philosophy, a way of life” is becoming more and more popular. The aim of my paper is to share the experiences of my „philosophical practice” experiment that I created in the winter of 2024/2025 around the creation of my PhD dissertation. The topic of my dissertation belongs to the field of Human-Animal Studies, which field is an interdisciplinary ground that is aiming to exceed the anthropocentric worldview. Besides, as member of the Philo Café movement of Hungary, the idea of how to make the academic research into a public philosophical act, has fascinated me since I decided to pursue a PhD. The interdisciplinary nature of the thesis and the experience in the Philo Café movement resulted in the philosophical experiment that positioned „philosophy” as a community building method, where unexpected findings resulted in human communication, relations and human experience in general.

**Key-words:** philosophy of inquiry; philosophy as a way of life; community; human-animal studies; anthrozoology;

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## **Introduction**

I dedicated my research on the 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon that appears in human-animal relations, especially in human-dog relationship. The aim of the dissertation is to explore the philosophical possibilities of transcending classical, anthropocentric thinking through the practice of living with dogs.

The concept of *cynophilosophy*, which I have introduced, refers to a new way of life and thinking in which dogs are philosophical, ethical, and epistemic companions. The thesis examines historical changes in human-animal relations within a philosophical-historical and interdisciplinary framework, paying particular attention to ancient cynicism, 20th-century shifts in animal ethics, and post-humanist theories. The argumentation explains how dogs are carriers of nonverbal, embodied forms of knowledge that transform humans' self-understanding, moral sensibilities, and community connections. *Cynophilosophy* is thus not only a theoretical construct, but also a practice-based philosophical praxis that offers the opportunity to develop a more sensitive, multi-species worldview.

This topic had been of my interest before starting my PhD. In the previous ten years I had worked as a founder and leader of an NGO for responsible dog ownership in Hungary, called EB OVO Association. In the legislative field I had numerous opportunities to connect with dog owners, non-dog owners, governmental authorities and other members of local communities. Dog owning seemed to be a common ground, a new problem in the field of urban communities.

Already at the beginning of the legislative work I realized that the background of the people involved in the question on an everyday scale is diverse. I soon realized, when urban dog-keeping is in question, a daily routine, an offline community life is being questioned that is precious to people from all different backgrounds. This realization led to further develop the work for both the civilians and the city-leaders, based on educative principles. Since the lifestyle was new for all members of society, we needed to develop our own norms of living together. The legislative work lasted ten years and has proven to be successful. Nowadays, there are many places in Hungary which are dog friendly and we live now in a country where dogs are more than allowed as accompaniment of one's private and public life, as well.

Articulating such a problem of the society and translating it to a community level rouse many other questions. These questions led to a deep interest in the thinking of Western society where more and more people chose to live with dogs as companions. *Cynophilosophy* is the study that presents some interesting ideas on how our current society shapes our lifestyle, where living with dogs is understood as a philosophical answer of the members of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Western society.

## **21st century Communities**

In this paper I am going to focus on one of the topics of *Cynophilosophy*, which is the critique on the changes that are happening in Western communities. The concept of locality is a fundamental component of the definition of modern community and society, which is being altered in the process of digitalization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

"While physically definable groups based on interpersonal relationships were organized along social and physical/spatial boundaries unanimously accepted by community members, virtual groups are based on social practices and common interests generally accepted by community members. Virtual communities therefore meet the expectations associated with communities just as much as physical communities, but due to their virtual nature, they become real communities without the physical presence of their members" (Szécsi, 2022, p. 121).

During digitalization, a completely different form of community has emerged, one that is independent of localization and refers rather to a unity based on the value system and interests of individuals. Starting from the mutually dependent relationship between community and locality, we arrive at the conclusion that, beyond modernity, the view that locality and physical proximity are not necessary elements in defining community has become increasingly accepted. Physical proximity has been replaced by common interests.

"The concept of community (Gemeinschaft), considered to be fundamental, represents real, organic, intimate, and private life, folk

beliefs, and friendships, as opposed to the public world, society (Gesellschaft), which presupposes indirect human relationships and functions as a large instrumentalized structure" (Szécsi, 2022, p. 118.).

Consequently, Szécsi proposes a redefinition of community: a social network of individuals, a kind of abstract system of relationships that does not require physical connection. This phenomenon gives rise to a self-image in which physical presence is not decisive, i.e., the physicality of the individual and the associated experience of existence disappear.

"Through the interconnectedness associated with the use of information technologies, the boundaries of these communities are becoming less and less perceptible to individuals. The ultimate frame of reference for the self-interpretation and community roles of people who connect with each other through various technologies of mediated communication is the network society that emerges through the daily exchange of information" (Szécsi, 2022, p. 123).

Hybrid communities are characterized by their members becoming insensitive to the differences between virtual and physical communities, and the basis of these communities is the abstract world of information exchange. The physical presence of humans is becoming less and less present in the definition of human community, and the lack of group identity transcending the individual is becoming more and more characteristic of the community. Cultural evolution has reached a point that is completely independent of biology. Western thought has become a field of demystification and dehumanization, forming abstract communities devoid of human presence. Human community relations are realized in an abstract space that transcends the physical presence of the individual. I believe that in our fast-paced society, people compensate for the lack of natural groups by forming new ones. One of the most original ways of doing this is the lifestyle practiced by 21st-century dog owners. I call this phenomenon a philosophical way of life.

According to *Cynophilosophy*, dogs are capable of removing humans from the abstract, single-person community (Csányi, 2002, p. 3.) into

which technology has confined them during cultural evolution. Thus, in the 21st century, dogs become leaders of humans, providing an appropriate, animalistic answer to the questions of the dehumanized Western society.

### **Philosophical community building of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The experiment**

As a committed member of the Hungarian philosophical café movement, I regularly organise events outside the academic framework, following the mission of the international movement that is to bring philosophy back to its roots, taking it out of the ivory tower of academia and making it accessible to the general public. Therefore, finding new ways where philosophy and philosophers become more visible and accessible to a wider audience, seems to be the right way of philosophical practice.

In the autumn of 2024, I have arrived to the point of my PhD research where the bases of the dissertation had been written. Further discussion of the topic was the aim that met with the opportunity to create a programme that creates space for offline and online philosophy at the same time. Besides that, promoting the new discipline of my research field, anthrozoology in Hungary, creating its institutional framework and bringing its topics into the public discourse seemed to be an excellent way to create *Alive Philosophy*. *Alive Philosophy* is an event series of philosophical inquire held in an offline venue and broadcasted on the internet, as well. The first season was called “*Animal Humanism*”, where six different episodes were created based on the chapters of my dissertation in the field of philosophy and three extra-shows were developed in line with the topic of the programme.

The framework of this programme provided an opportunity to put this triple aim into practice, on the one hand by creating a space of public cultivation of academic thought and dialogue, on the other hand by raising awareness of the philosophical potential of anthrozoology, and at last promoting public philosophy in an offline and online.

The offline venue of *Alive Philosophy* was in a recently opened cultural café, downtown Budapest, Hungary, called *Inga Culture Café*. *Inga Culture Café* has a vision statement that is very close to the aim of the experiment: “*The Inga Culture Café is a community space that aims to rehabilitate café culture in the twenty-first century*”. *Inga*, however is not

only giving home to a culture café but to the editorship of *Szélsőközép Productions*, an organization aiming to provide 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural content for both online and offline audience. Fostering philosophy to such a space and angle attention to philosophical practice was an irrecusable idea.

### **Online is the new Agora?**

“Why would you go, when we can meet online?” is a crucial question when it comes to the question of 21<sup>st</sup> century communities. In this experiment I decided to approach the question from the aspect of offline community building and understood every online act as a door to the offline community. Visibility of the online world gave opportunity to philosophy to be visible. Every episode of *Alive Philosophy* was promoted on line with multiple forms of social media advertisements.

Parallel to *Alive Philosophy*, a monthly philocafé was held in *Inga*. Due to the genre of the philocafé recordings are not possible which makes the events less visible. However, every *Alive Philosophy* program mentioned the philocafé movement, which made the offline events of philocafé more and more popular, as well.

The diverse practice of the different genres became my personal philosophical practice in the field of attention for that time. Drawing attention to philosophy and philosophers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century online world and channelling attention into the offline sphere while creating a hybrid community is a complex practice where the visibility of the philosopher becomes crucial.

“Attention (prosochê) is the fundamental Stoic spiritual attitude. It is a continuous vigilance and presence of mind, self-consciousness which never sleeps, and a constant tension of the spirit. Thanks to this attitude, the philosopher is fully aware of what he does at each instant, and he wills his actions fully” (Hadot, 1995, p. 84).

Every episode of *Alive Philosophy* was preceded by a 1 minute “short” video that served as an advertisement of the episode, where each topic had been explained in summary, in a simplified language where raising public attention was the aim.

These shorts were seen by a few thousands of people; therefore, the online visibility of philosophy and philosophers rose and turned the practice into public philosophy.

## **Conclusion**

Among the many advantages of creating *Alive Philosophy* is that it gave opportunity to rephrase the most important ideas of the dissertation and create a dialogue out of the written text. By making the dialogue public, the audience also gained opportunity to think about ideas of the interdisciplinary field of Anthrozoology and meet some of the most prominent Hungarian philosophers of our time. The guests of the program were from the academic world, experts of the field and most of them were quoted in the dissertation.

After each event an informal meeting was facilitated in the café for the audience, guests and the editors of the program. Some of the scholars were returning guests, as members of the audience and in the line of the 9 events a community started to form. The parallel philocafé events also gave place for the philo-community to meet.

All in all, four different communities merged in the process of *Alive Philosophy*; first, the online and offline audience of *Inga Culture Café*, second, the community of the philocafé in *Inga*, third, the academic community, fourth the editorial of *Szélsőközép Production*. The half year process was closed down with an event where all the part-takers were invited for an informal offline event.

The community experience needs long term commitment. *Alive Philosophy* is going to start a new season with new guests in the autumn of 2025. What are new ways of philosophizing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is an exciting topic of philosophical practice. The task is to keep raising the question and never stop answering it, again and again. Philosophical communities can be alternatives to the digitalized communities or dog-walks. Here the members understand the importance of human presence and appreciate locality as one of the crucial elements of human life.

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