Philosophical Café:
A philosophical dialogue and/or therapy?

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Abstract: Since cafe philosophy got started in Croatia in 2011, it has been conducted using a method developed by its founder M. Sautet: participants themselves suggest topics to discuss and select them democratically. Conducters are required to have a degree in philosophy, and to keep the discussion on track regarding philosophical rigor and structure. The first aim of the paper is to get an insight into a spiritual climate of the moment through analysis of the selected topics. Given the phenomenology of co-occurrences of the topics, it comes clear that apart from classical philosophical issues such as time, order, truth and meaning, participants predominantly choose to discuss ethical and societal issues. It comes out that they are overall preoccupied with human relationships, actual social trends and problems, as well as their own personal development. The second aim of the paper is to test whether the cafe philosophy is understood among participants as a kind of therapy, or at least a help to live a more balanced and happier life, and whether philosophy can be legitimately understood as a (group) therapy. The authors conclude that philosophical dialogue differs from a therapeutical one by a set of criteria, however it may have therapeutical side effects, as it usually does. Following the thought of E. Martens, philosophizing in public corresponds to an accurate understaning of philsophy as *elementary cultural technik* (Martens, 2009).

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Introduction

Croatia, being a middle-European and Mediterranean country, has a great tradition of discussing public topics in cafés. At the other hand, Croatian is one of rare languages in which the verb "philosophise" evokes negative connotations, such as "futile nit picking, beating about the bush". It is probably so since philosophy does not bring forth unambiguous, empirically verifiable answers and solutions, and because philosophizing demands an intellectual effort and sometimes gets into *aporias* and uncertainties. However, questioning if philosophizing makes sense is already a philosophical activity. Another reason of proverbial rejection of philosophy might be philosophising often being understood as opposed to practice, to a real life. Philosophical café is founded on exactly an opposite assumption – that philosophy is an activity rather than theory of teaching (Wittgenstein, 1922), and that it is not possible to learn philosophy, but just to philosophise (Kant, 1786). Another important presupposition is that a legitimate birth place of philosophy is an *agora* of lay citizens, and not only an academy of experts, so philosophy should be put back into the public sphere. This paper queries how philosophical café in Croatia is understood and what is its nature, purpose and meaning, as well as the meaning of philosophy in general. Nowadays, in a postmodern consumer society, there has been a tendency to identify various mental activities as kind of therapy (Sandu, 2015), for instance art therapy and bibliotherapy. Is philosophising to be understood as a form of (group) therapy? Having analysed themes at the philo café in Zagreb during four years of practice, we have found that participants have been mostly concerned with ethical and societal issues, with emphasis put onto interpersonal relationships and personal development. Our thesis suggests that philosophising can have and usually has therapeutic effect, what is worth cherishing, but it is not its fundamental aim but becoming aware and clarifying experience, questioning of concepts and approaching truth. Having put philo café in a social context, we are coming to a conclusion that philosophising is *an elementary cultural technic*, being inspired by thought of the author of this definition, namely Ekkehard Martens.

A brief history of philosophical café in Croatia

In Croatia, philo café as a specific form of philosophical practice was started by Zoran Kojčić, M.A., in 2013, in the rural surroundings of Osijek, gathering retired people. In 2013 Kojčić conducted a workshop at a symposium on the island of Cress, and he met there Nikolina Iris Filipović, M.A., who adopted the concept. Consequently, in 2014 she founded the Context Association, and began to facilitate philo cafes twice a month, until she had to quit for personal reasons in 2016. Following that, an enthusiast construction engineer Andreja Cerić founded Xantipa Association, invited a team of persons with a degree in philosophy who would cooperate as facilitators. From then on, for two years now, philo café has been taking place in a book café in the city centre every Saturday, attracting up to 50 participants so far. While Kojčić used five different methods, the philo café in Zagreb has been conducted with a single method; before every meeting gets closed, participants democratically elect a new topic that will be discussed next week. Everyone can present a topic, preferably in a question form, and vote for more than one topic. Topic presenters are required to briefly explain it, making clear why they consider it relevant. Facilitator lets participants speak by calling their name as they raise hand, respecting the sequence; a hourglass is sometimes helpful to remind participants that no one should speak for too long, but avoid extensive monologues. Facilitator may make remarks and comments, thereby taking part in the discussion. Referring back to Zoran Kojčić's words, what attracted him towards philosophical practice was "a practical implementation of philosophy into society" (Kojčić, 2014). In an article he points out that "in order to practise philosophy, one does not need a diploma or a title, neither foreknowledge of philosophical theories, it suffices to know how to think for oneself, and set theses as we believe or know and validly argue and defend, question of deny them if we come to an insight that someone gives us better arguments"(X…). Kojčić holds that aims of philo café in Croatia are raising awareness that philosophy is not a bugaboo and that it is useful to the whole of society, as all the sciences and professions use its methods, as well as almost all the people, without yet being aware of it. Becoming aware of that is the most important goal, which takes more decades to get

reached (Kojčić, 2014). As facilitators for more than two years, we can assert that the participants' group is heterogeneous as regards age, sex and professional background; from retired university teachers, entrepreneurs and middle-aged philosophy fans, up to university students of various subjects. Still, they have some traits in common: an intellectual curiosity, thoughtfulness, and an urge to express aloud personal dilemmas, a need to communicate and to pursue personal development. Seemingly, some elderly participants with an academic carrier of a professorship back are looking for sharing their thoughts, sometimes even an audience to teach, which creates a heterogeneous symmetrically outlined group of enthusiasts with different professional and worldview orientation. We have noticed that the main problem of the café is a kind of reductionism linked to disparate *language games* (Wittgenstein, 1953): whatever the issue, a certain biologist would reduce it to bacteria, an IT expert to information, and a Buddhist to ignorance.[3] Nevertheless, a plurality of worldviews and professional discourses work together most often in a tolerant and attentive atmosphere.

Encouraging interdisciplinary dialogue and requiring participants to pay attention is to be facilitator's task, so that philosophy can be proven to be a universal language of truth that comprehends plenty of perspectives and disciplines. To conclude, one of the goals is to show that philosophy is not kept in an ivory tower of a particular science, exalted and separated from the others, but that critical thinking makes part of every valid inference, programme or enterprise, as well as that thinking philosophically enables improvement and refinement of every specific professional approach to issues.

Having reviewed 94 themes as a certain phenomenology of the Zagreb philosophical café, it is almost possible to outline a spiritual situation of the age: 28 themes belong to classical philosophical issues such as time, identity, soul, truth and cosmic order of the world, 40 themes could be classified as ethical (interpersonal relationships, role of emotions, a better world and personal spiritual development), and 36 themes as societal (the role of tradition, political correctness, critique of social and

[3] During philosophical café in Zagreb, a retired university professor, expert in a technical science, asserted more times that he "didn't understand a word of what the other participants had spoken".

criticism of social organizations). It is as important to note that there have occurred 9 "meta-themes", addressing the essence of philosophical method, for instance: *What does it mean to dare think for oneself? Is the truth outdated? Does society still need philosophers? What are the personal reasons to take part in the philosophical café? Is philosophy necessary to do politics?* However, some Croatian academic experts in philosophy are scoffing philosophical café with disapproval as they consider it a form of dilettantism and trivialization of philosophy, thereby forgetting a basic function and position of philosophy, falling into paradox of elitism, what we consider a false thinking direction, a deviation in one's philosophical development. Kojčić understands this as forgetting that "Socrates and Plato mostly conversed with people outdoors and by the very conversation, a dialogue, practiced philosophy" (Kojčić, 2014).[4] This is surely correct at least for Socrates[5], however, there arises a question where is s borderline making distinction between what philosophy have always recognized as *doxa* (Schiffler, 2004) – a sheer, unexamined opinion – and *episteme* – a knowledge of truth which is an aim of philosophy? In other words, under what conditions is a philo café truly philosophical, and when it becomes a fair of opinions with no criteria to rely on, primarily aiming at people feel as pleasant as they can, "anything goes" being its maxim? Philosophical café has thus become a philosophical issue itself, bringing us back to the ontic question on philosophy as such. Reflection on essence and purpose of philosophizing in the philo cafe will make its method emerge, as well as its transition from an academic domain into a domain of *agora* of a cafe.

Philosophical café: what *philosophy* and *philosophizing* means after all?

[4] It could be insightful to mention Pierre Hadot's thought; the author analyzed in detail philosophical thought from ancient times until postmodern time, concluding that what is intrinsically inherent to philosophy is its practical value and participation in every aspect and segment of human life. See:Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as Way of Life. Spiritual Excercises from Socrates to Foucault*, Blackwell, Oxford 1995.

[5] It should not be forgotten that Socrates' maieutic is a very strict inquiry or "examination", as well as that Plato understands dialectics as a supreme, divine science which unambiguously leads to truth, with mathematics being its propaedeutics, and the essence of mathematics is logic.

Although a historical founder of philo café was M. Sautet, whose method is followed in Croatia, the idea of a public dialogue on philosophical themes without a requirement of thorough knowledge of history of philosophy appears in many contemporary authors: Socratic dialogue owes its articulation to Nelson (1922) and Andersen (1987), and philosophical cafe owes it to Habermas (1987), while the very concept of dialogue was elaborated by Buber (1923; 1947) and Bohm (1996). Kojčić in particular appreciates its democratic character, as everyone gets a chance to present publicly and argue his position. However, apart from fore mentioned problems in the practice, there arises a question: what is the central aim of a dialogue at the philosophical café? Philosophers who get involved as facilitators give different answers; while some assert that the only aim of the dialogue is a closer communication of the group members, as well as strengthening integrity of the group through becoming aware of various perspectives (Hirn, 2015), a public intellectual exercise that develops tolerance (Sandu, 2015) or self-knowledge of the participants (Houni, 2015), while the others emphasize that the aim is a profound, meaningful understanding of concepts and issues as a fruit of both discursive thinking and inner experience (Lahav, 2015).

Antonio Sandu goes perhaps most far claiming that philosophical cafe is an „excuse for the rational capacities excercise" (Sandu, 2015) whose aim is „critical self-reflective capacity". Just as some philosophers of the past, Sandu thereby understands philosophizing - or at least a dialogue with some elements of philosophical dialogue as a method – a mean to achieve some extraphilosophical goal.

Hereby philosophy gets instrumentalized, even when it serves noble goals such as living a better life. One of such goals is improvement of mental and general health so philosophical cafe (just as others forms of philosophical practice) gets understood as „a cultural therapy, a real alternative to medicalization of social life" (Sandu, 2015). Addressing virtual philsophical cafe Sandu says that „philosophicity" of dialogue is a hard ideal to achieve: „...it would be nice if the discussion would pass from empirical level to the conceptual one." (Sandu, 2015) Understanding philosophy as a therapeutic activity is not a novelty (Wittgenstein, 1953)[6].

[6] A worthy view of a therapeutic grasp of philosophy is present in the Andre Jean Voelke`s work *Philosophy as a Therapy of the Soul* (*La Philosophie Comme Thèrapie de l'Ame*), which

We are approaching the question posed in the title of the chapter in an integrative manner: conversations at the philsophical cafe often have a therapeutic effect indeed – participants enjoy reflecting and listening, having their shine at the end of the dialogue, conversing on by a drink afterwards, often investigating the topic more deeply in smaller groups.

The element of pleasure can be atributed to the basic element of personal phsychic balance – steping out frome oneself and affirming one's own thoughts, i.e. one's own being in a community. This recalls Aristotel's definition of man as *ζῷον πολιτικόν* (a political/ communal animal); throught the practice of the philosophical cafe we have noticed that critically thinking human beings, that is persons, have been showing to be *ζῷον λόγον ἔχων* (an animal endowed with logos/ intellect) as well, as Aritstotle defines man as well.

Hence, it is of utmost importace for the facilitator to leave a certain vacuum – a place to host thinking – not to have started a discourse, but in Nelson's terms he should wait true philosophical questions to arise, in order to ponder upon them afterwards. Given that participant are saturated with answers and offered solutions, they enjoy as attentive atmosphere of listening set up at the café. Expressing one's inner voice has a cathartic effect already, and active listening to the others opens up mental realms of an individual. Just being part of a comunity in terms of having a good company significantly improves quality of life in many people, and

deals with the ancient perspective of the therapeutic effects of philosophy on the health of the human psyche. In the foreword of the above-mentioned book, Pierre Hadot states: “A famous phrase is known to us: "It is a vain talk of a philosopher which does not cure any human feelings. Namely, as there is no use of medicine that is not taking away our body diseases, so is with philosophy, that does not takes away a feeling of the soul." Voelke in astonishing way shows that the word "empty "in this statement could not be understood in the meaning of "futile", "vain ", "redundant" or" false" In fact, this expression contains the entire Epicure's theory of language. According to this theory, empty talk is the one in which words (and thoughts) do not correspond to the actual content, and to the material things that are perceived by the material images that things emanates into us. The epicuristic treatment method will therefore consist of that "empty" speak "fills" in a way that allows an intuitive view of the image, to, let`s say, feeds the cognitive power. Unlike the skeptical therapeutics that consisted of the philosophers dogmatic clean themselves, and empty themselves of the hasty thoughts and delusions, and even the arguments through which they refuted themselves, the Epicurus therapeutics consists in the healing of the soul itself by filling the soul, feeding it, bringing it to the full state.” (author`s translation) (2017, p15). This lengthy quote is given because we observe philosophy as a kind of a feeding of the soul with the wise content, and exactly after the meetings within the philosophical cafe visitors definitely feel fed, at least for one night.

precious acquaintances and friendships are being made, too. Especially for some elderly persons philosophical cafe is a chance to get out from isolation and loneliness, as well as equal participation in social activities. However, as many authors have confirmed (Houni, 2015), the aim of philosophical dialogue is not a therapy, although it is often a side effect (Houni, 2015:320). Philsophical dialogue differs from a therapeutic one by its objective (*telos*) – which is understanding – and by method (*techne*) – which is critical thinking. Numerous critical thinking theorists point out that is relies on a set of criteria (Scriven, 1973; Beyer, 1995; Lipman, 2003) which could be most generally defined as: clarification of meaning of a notion, issue of a thesis, inquiry of reasons and arguments, inquiring implications of assertions and theories, finding out what the underlying assumptions are and reflecting upon them, giving examples and analogies, search for cons and shortcomings, grasping and arguing for different positions or perspectives, distinguishing objects of knowledge from objects of belief, finding inconsistencies, exaggerated generalizations and understatements. Critical thinking is however recognized to be complementary to other forms of thinking such as contemplative (Lahav, 2015), caring and creative (Lipman, 2003). We have come to the conclusion that it is neccessary for a facilitator to cherish critical sensiblity, and guide the discussion from empirical to conceptual level, in a friendly and safe environment, with no teaching or inducing impression of superiority, otherness and distance towards the participants.

During organization of the facilitatator's work, we have had discussions regarding extend to which facilitators should intervene with academic remarks while a philo cafe; the conclusion we've come up with is to hold onto a golden rule between academically refined explanations with sporadic refering to sources and authors, and a maieutical guidance of a participant.We have noticed that participants are most content when they manage to come to a certain understanding using their own cognitive capacities, instead of being taught. This certainly is a psychological benefit, especially as it helps to build autonomy and authenticity of a being which brings both pleasure and relief. Philosophical café must be open to everyone and work democratically, however, it is as philosophical as it is faithful to philosophizing as a specific *method*, keeping from slipping into an „easy talk". The central aim of the dialogue is surely „meaningful

understandings“ (Lahav, 2015; Houni 2015), that is knowledge which by definition is „an understanding appropriate for a subject“ (Liessmann, 2006) with both therapeutical and ethical positive implications[7].

And except for a socially-involving dimension, calling citizens to reflent on relevant issues and bringing philosophy back to the public agora, philosophical café has a contemplative dimension, too: when people hear an other's thoughts, an insight emergens in their mind as a flash of an idea, as Plato puts it in the Seventh Letter attributed to him (XX...), which then gets complemented by discursive reasoning.

Conclusion: philosophizing as an elementary cultural technic

We consider *agora* to be the underlying topos of philosophy, and today it is disguised (among the other loci) as a philosophical café, which does not depreciate philosophy as an academic discipline. Philosophising is an activity through wich man behaves authentically, in Pascal's words, as a „thinking reed“, becoming refined and offered new possibilities of interpreting reality and a new creation of reality. Likewise, Ortega y Gasset put it in a fitting explanation: „Whole philosophy is a paradox, it turns away from the common sense thinking which we use in life, for it considers most elementary beliefs that seems vitally undisputable. theoretically doubtful.“ (Ortega y Gasset, 2004). In conclusion, philosophy joins experience, contem-plation and a discursive analysis together, and can have a positive therapeutic, ethical and political effect.

However, philosophy should therefore not be used as mere means to an end not reduced to (mere) fun of therapy, in particular not distorted into sophistry, philodoxy, preaching an ideology or political agitation. Temptations of these constantly exist and both facilitator and participants should be aware of it.

To conclude this reflection on the essence of philosophizing in the café, an especially insightful thought is that of contemporary German

[7] „Without critical reflection on the ideas or the images, the activity is not different from many New Age workshops that blindly trust personal experiences without critically evaluating them. What makes this activity philosophical is that experiences which reach us from different parts of our self are examined, interpreted and organized.“ (Lahav, 2015: 373)

philosopher and didactics scholar Ekkehard Martensa (Martens, 2003) suggesting that philosophizing is one of elementary cultural technics such as reading, writing and calculation; still it does not mean it should be adressed in an instrumental manner. In what sense is it a basic cultural technic?

1. *Genetically*; it has emerged in the framework of Greek-European culture which makes it a constitutional part of Europe's cultural heritage.

2. *Anthropologically*; it is a general trait of man as a *symbolic* being.

3. *Descpriptively*; it is inherent to the Western modern era which is characterized by reflective and democratic decision-taking.

4. *Normatively*; it is inherent to a menaningful and truly human way of life. It is a useful tool to survival as a criticl approach to scientific-technical civilisation. In the first place, it is an end in itself: a trait of a meaningful and self-determined (*selbstbestimmten*) life.

5. *Didactically and methodically*; it is not an inborn ability, but it can and should be cherished (Martens, 2003).

Although philosophizing as a skill of building up concepts can be trained to a certain extend, it is not just about using rules and knowing the strategies of interpretation, but includes a certain way, an art of judgement in individual cases and assesment of arguments and counterarguments. Apart from that, it is not just formal but matirial dicipline, too, as history of philosophy offers a multitude of concepts and perspectives. Philosophizing is also profoundly personal – inseparable from inner self of a person and her partakers. It is not an extra skill in addition to the others, but a *foundational* one (Lipman, 1991) in sense of „giving an accounting" (*Rechnenschaftgeben*) of what we think and how we act, not in sense of professional knowledge; initial steps can be performed by anyone. Also, it is personal in sense of being irreplacable since man has symbolic, explanatory i.e. spiritual needs just as material ones. Following Plato, it comes clear that philosophizing stands between a mehanically applicable argumentation technic and a personal search for truth (Martens, 2003: 30).

That personal pursuit for truth is closely linked to „self-bearing" being, inherent to human beings compared to the non-human. By this we mean developing one's own being, meaning and orientation using one's own critical apparatus, where we cease to be wheels in machine of fate,

which is primarily simulacrum produced by mass media[8], that is virtual reality served by the electronic media which dominates the current *age of the world picture*.

And in order to come to the moment of developement, it is first essential to come to comprehension of self, of the surroundings, history and society, and philosophizing plays a springboard to get through the veil of *doxa*, this opening the gates of pure, uncovered thinking of *aletehia*, as Heidegger would put it.

We hold that this is perhaps the most important component of philosophy *per se* and philsophical café as a medium to implement philosophical thought into domains of contemporary agoras – an opportunity to get close to the ideal summarized in the slogan of *Dare to think for yourself*. Seemingly, nowadays the greates phiobias appear to be freedom and truth, as well as critical thinking, and philosophy as elementary spiritual technic presents a platform to meet these concepts, as well as a chance offer toold to build up a freely thinking, moral individual, instead of mehanically and heteronomously molded man. It is a contribution to the project of humanism. Therefore, philosophical café is an exeptionally valuable practice which enables foretold tendendies get implemented in the general public, breaking disjunction between „high" academic philosophy and lay philosophy. At one hand, it gives meaning and value to philosophy itself; at the other hand, it boosts intellectual developement of humanity and, hence, the very cosmic equilibrium.

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[8] The concept of *simulacrum* was coined by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, referring to virtually molded reality, that is illusory paralel picture of phisical reality, „a thorough dominion of image, of an information sign and media conquering the reality". We are convinced that only philosophy possesses an apparatus to overcome that virtual *doxa*. See: Baudrillard, J. 1976, Symbolic Exchange and Death.

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