

Experience of wonder and meaning of philosophizing

First of all, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak in front of you here today. However, I must admit that it is not entirely easy to give a speech in front of this kind of audience, and especially about the issues which – even though only in part – pertain ancient Greek philosophy. As you know and are most probably proud of this fact, European philosophy made its important first steps right here. For this reason some foreigner (like me) might acquire a feeling that it is not *his right place* to speak about these achievements as something of importance for you. However, I find excuse, that the birth of philosophy is probably the one of the greatest achievements in our history and its greatness consists in fact, that it is not something, what we could and should characterize simply as a tradition or a cultural heritage of one nation or ethnos. Philosophy is in its nature the strife (struggle) for reaching the universal, strife for something that arises from critique of what we consider to be valid just because our society or traditions makes us believe so.

I believe that with this excuse we stumble upon the issue I want to talk about today. I have been informed that it might be interesting for you to hear about teaching of the Greek philosophy in Slovakia. I want to connect this theme with the bigger question, that is of central importance today and this question sounds: what is the meaning of doing philosophy, or of philosophizing, today? I believe that these two themes are interconnected since we have to know why we do philosophy in the first place in order to decide how to teach it or whether to teach it at all. I will talk from the perspective of my experience I gained through my study years on High School and at the University. I will tell something about, how ancient philosophy is usually being thought on our High Schools and something about the attitudes towards philosophy that are held by majority of Slovaks.

Job market and meaning of education

To say at least, the public opinion in Slovakia is quite sceptical that there is a meaning in study of philosophy at all. The reasons might vary, however, the main objection one can come across sounds, that philosophy is in its nature unpractical, that it is too abstract and speculative and therefore brings nothing substantial to fulfil our present needs. It is nothing more but plain, though smart talking. This attitude is further stimulated by a certain trends we find not only in Slovakia, but have global impact. According to quite widely held opinion, one should study what is *practical* first and foremost. What does this word “*practical*” in this context mean? It means that our education should first of all teach us *to do* something, or that the function of education consists in preparation of the youth for doing their job correctly. In other words, the meaning of study something presupposes that after study one can successfully apply for a job market, to get a job and to do it right. There is nothing wrong with this view in itself. It is reasonable to expect that people have to be prepared for their professional life. And it is also important that there is a need for these educated people in fields of their specialization.

Where do we stumble upon a problem then? I think, that we must ask whether the capacity to be successful in a profession, to get a job and to do it right is the sole aim. Or – perhaps more

correctly – whether it is definitive aim, according to which we should define the meaning of education. Not many will probably hold this opinion and many would say that the aim of education consists in forming somebody with a grown-up personality, that is, a cultured person. And this means, that the cultured person has gained from his education more than the simple capacity to get a job done.

But we often see today, that this view is under pressure before mentioned stance in the practice of teaching and educating. What we see in Slovakia is rather an effort to set aside humanities for their impracticality. In practice, one should choose study primarily in relation to the needs of a market and therefore a market in the end defines, what is worthy of study and what is not. According to this perspective the meaning of study of philosophy is defined by the capacity of being or become a professional philosopher, to do philosophy as a job. Another example might come from the field of study of art. To study art has a meaning insofar as you aspire on becoming an artist, art critic or an art historian. Why should you care about their meaning outside of limits set in this manner?

It is also worth noting that needs of a job market does not float in a vacuum and are influenced by opinions of a society. What about society, which displays great aversion against art and philosophy, which are understood as intellectual, speculative fancies without connection to lives of common people? Such attitude sets the needs of market in disfavour for philosophy and art, saying that it is less philosophy and less art what we in the end need.

This question of the aim of education is quite central. Because we have to ask about our expectations from education, ask on the meaning of education in itself, in order to structure it in accordance with this aim. What if the aim of education does not exhaust itself in forming a man able to do his job and make a living, but in forming a grown-up, full-fledged human person? Than we must assume that education nowadays finds itself in hap-hazardous, tricky situation. If doing philosophy and experiencing art to some extent constitute inherent capacities of a cultured person than they should also be part our curricula as much as possible.

Teaching Philosophy in Slovakia

Fortunately, philosophy and ancient Greek philosophy is still being taught on some of our High Schools. How does this study work? Philosophy is a part of the course, which we might call Social Studies. During this course the students are supposed to get basics from economy, psychology, law and so on. Usually students meet with philosophy in the last year of their study during the High School. What they actually learn, is what we might call doxography. The study consists mostly of memorizing, which is sometimes hopefully connected with a little understanding of the teachings of selected philosophers in quite brief, concise form. For example, in a field of ancient philosophy students are concisely acknowledged with the thoughts of the Milesians, Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Parmenides, sophists and – last but not least Plato and Aristotle. These opinions of philosophers are further divided into the fields of their interest, like the opinions on knowledge, being, nature, morals and ethics and so on.

Already during these years I have met with almost unanimous aversion against philosophy which came from my schoolmates. To them the learning of the teachings of old philosophers came as a complete waste of time and energy. They complained that they learned something

untrue, just a speculative fancies far-fetched from reality, overtly unpractical. But these stances were not at all original but only mirrored the most wide-spread opinions in our society. In a certain sense, these opinions are understandable. The understanding of the problems and questions of philosophy and their solution truly is not easy to come by, it is not simply present at hand. Therefore it is not surprising if I have encountered reluctance towards the meaning of teaching and learning of philosophy.

Teaching doxography has its advantages and disadvantages. I don't believe that this way is entirely responsible for all the evils philosophy has to face today. Nor do I believe that it is flawless. On one hand, by this method students gain a certain basic overview of philosophy. On the other hand, it truly has its limits. One of these limits might consist in fact, that students often do not see philosophical problems as their own problems. It is as if the significant philosophical figures had nothing to say to us today. For this reason I also believe that it is important to open the student mind towards the problems of a philosopher as problems of his own. In fact, problems of philosophy form questions of our everyday lives.

Wonder as beginning of philosophy

Let us turn to the question why doing philosophy and philosophizing is of central importance for our lives, and mostly, why should we learn to philosophize. I believe, that a certain aversion against philosophy is partly written in the nature of philosophy itself. To explain this, I want to turn attention to short passage from Book I of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. In it, Aristotle says that the origin or beginning of philosophy consists in wonder (*θαυμάζειν*):

“For it is owing to their wonder (θαυμάζειν) that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize. ... And man who is puzzled and wonders, considers himself ignorant.”

It is worthy of noting that by beginning of philosophy Aristotle does not understand certain event in our history, the historical beginning of philosophy some 2 600 years ago. In fact even we can begin to philosophize today in quite the same manner. So, what matters is actual, specific experience we have every time we begin to truly philosophize, and this experience is wonder.

Let us look at this experience in more detail. First of all, our usual, normal relation to the world, that is, that how we understand and know the world is not that of a philosopher. Quite contrary, men began (and *begin*) to philosophize actually when they discovered their ignorance. And it is certain, that if we can *discover* our ignorance, than we usually, in our normal lives, are not aware of it. The true philosophising begins only when *we know that we do not know*.

As we can see, we are not usually aware that we are ignorant and that means that we usually think *that we know!* Our ignorance is hidden from us. Therefore, if we become aware of it in wonder, we also discover that so far we have been wrong! In the experience of wonder our normal understanding of the world, our opinions, our attitudes, is shattered at least to certain extent or wholly torn apart.

I have just mentioned that the aversion towards philosophy is somehow written in nature of philosophy itself and now we see why. Philosophy is self-critical, philosopher criticizes

himself because he is aware of his ignorance. But philosopher, just like Socrates, the philosopher of ignorance *par excellence*, knows that *others are also ignorant*. He therefore detaches himself from the others, just like the philosopher in Plato's Cave Analogy. Philosopher's opinions, which are originating in the experience of wonder, are therefore seen with reluctance, often as incomprehensible, as a fancy talk that has nothing to do with truth and reality.

At this moment I would like to end with this final thought: the experience of wonder is teaching us to accept our ignorance in the first place. But it also calls us to transcend it, to find reasons for what is true in itself and what is real. With this attitude we open ourselves to searching, and also towards the criticism of others. But it also teaches us to criticize others. In other words, philosophy is learning us to be tolerant but not in indifference to the opinions of others, but in common discourse, in searching for what is valid not only for me, but for you and all the others. We should not forget that we have to learn to be tolerant this way, that it is an open-ended quest. And there is probably not the better way than to learn with the best, among whom we count such philosophers as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.