

Book Review: The Art of Philosophy: Wisdom as a Practice

by Blog Admin

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In The Art of Philosophy, Peter Sloterdijk traces the evolution of philosophical practice from ancient times to today, showing how scholars can remain true to the tradition of “the examined life” even when the temporal dimension no longer corresponds to the eternal. Building on the work of Husserl, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Arendt, and other practitioners of the life of theory, Sloterdijk launches a posthumanist defence of philosophical inquiry and its everyday, therapeutic value. Patrick Duggan enjoyed this insightful and informative book a great deal, although found it to be unnecessarily dense in places.



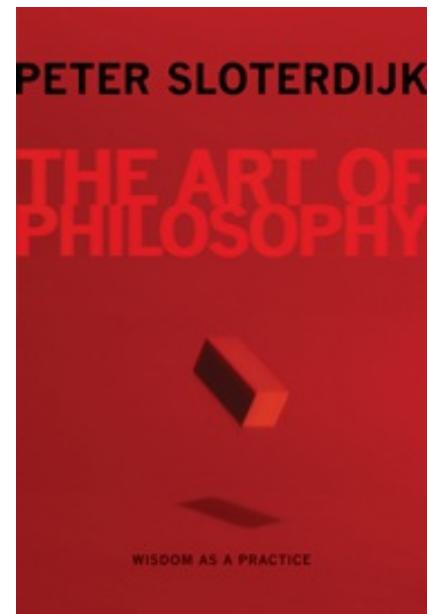
The Art of Philosophy: Wisdom as a Practice. Peter Sloterdijk. Columbia University Press. September 2012.

With *The Art of Philosophy: Wisdom as a Practice* Peter Sloterdijk is, I suspect, trying to present something of an *urtext* for his particular type of philosophical ponderings. At only 95 pages long, one could be forgiven for thinking that this might be an accessible starting point to the German philosopher's meditations on the way the world works. At the level of brevity you'd be right; the volume tackles a great deal of complex thought and a huge historical timeframe (c. 500 B.C. – present day) in an appealing short page range. Nevertheless, the writing remains quite esoteric and it takes a good 15 – 20 pages to really 'get going'.

As is a common observation when it comes to Sloterdijk, the writing tends to fall into two main categories: that which deals with the concrete and the material, and that which attends to Heidegger. Throughout the volume the most enlightening work is focused on concrete examples, such as Chapter One's consideration of the physical 'Elsewhere' of institutions of learning read alongside Socrates 'practice' of becoming absent (or 'Elsewhere') in moments of deep thought. When writing with a more Heideggerian focus the work becomes fairly impenetrable in both language and thought, and thus this work is less productive than the more materially grounded thinking found elsewhere in the volume (which, after the opening 20 pages, is fortunately in the majority).

Although the book is academically dense throughout (unnecessarily so in places) there are moments of genuine sardonic humour which help pull the reader in. Sloterdijk talks of 'quasi-homeopathic philosophers', 'loser romanticism' and the 'non-chemical' sedative quality of 'what we now call "culture"'. My personal favourite however is his rhetorically asking if 'homo theoreticus' (the theorist) is really as honourable as they would have everyone believe or 'is he actually a bastard trying to impress us with fake titles?' Thus, once you key into the writer's voice the volume opens up to make some potent and engaging arguments concerning the practice of intellectual thought and the need to consider contemplation as an embodied practice.

The central argument of the book is that the life of deep thought, the intellectual or properly philosophical life, is a life removed from life. This is to say that, as Solterdijk establishes in looking at Socrates, one can literally become lost in thought. Solterdijk takes us from Husserl back to Socrates and deploys a dynamic reading of Hannah Arendt (alongside Foucault) to elucidate a convincing argument on the 'Elsewhere' nature of 'being-in-thought' at both existential and spacio-physical levels. Thought and intellectual endeavour has always required both the physical space to facilitate philosophical 'practices' – Plato's



Academy, for example. But also, such 'academic' practices create an embodied 'space' within the thinker – Socrates' 'condition of "absences"' which were regarded as 'an inseparable attribute of the business of thinking'. So, to think might be seen as being dead to the world. Thus, for Sloterdijk the root of 'the ancient European culture of rationality' is in 'the idea that the thinking person is a kind of dead person on holiday.' (This deliberately hyperbolic tone continues throughout the book and while I found it initially off putting, once I attuned to the register it became part of the volumes charm and wit, as well as key to its (slightly polemical) argumentative strength.)

Later in the volume questions of the origins of '*homo theoreticus*' and how one might train to become 'fit for epoché' (p.37) are raised. The work here is at its most vibrant when the dense historiographical and theoretical thinking on Plato and Aristotle is turned out to face the present day. For example, Solterdijk takes us through an ancient social shift from a focus on serving the polis to concern for oneself, to arrive at a cutting observation about contemporary thought (and academia):

Where citizens once used to debate, visiting professors now work on their dissertations; the whole world is a residential home for visiting scholars. The scholars guarantee personally that they are world citizens, certain that such phrases are always worth a grant, or will at least land them a consultancy contract at a royal court.

The fairly anti-academic stance raises its head again later when he comments that 'pupils' are those who 'succumb' to an 'intellectual dependence' for the sake of a deferred independence that may never actually come to pass. And Sloterdijk goes further to comment that the 'practice [of] receptiveness' that school pupils engage in might 'immobilize' their motor functions with 'far-reaching consequences later'.

Throughout there is a sense that Sloterdijk doesn't quite trust processes of philosophical or theoretical life which for better or worse function by shutting out the rest of the world. But it isn't all doom and gloom. As the book develops it becomes apparent that the author is not reductively setting out a one-sided argument but is establishing a dialogic prose that attempts to matrix theoretical and philosophical life in all its complexity. While the ascetic nature of the *bios theoretikós* persists in the contemporary moment, Sloterdijk suggests that through the likes of Marx, Sartre and Bourdieu thinking has become more fully rooted in (or routed through) concrete materiality. Thus, we might figure a new mode of philosophical practice that is 'neither merely active nor merely contemplative'.

For all its *esotericism*, I enjoyed this little book a great deal; it is insightful and informative about the nature and history of philosophical thought. Nevertheless there are some problems (that I suspect stem from the book's starting point as a lecture) which are worth brief mention. While Sloterdijk suggests he will tell the reader 'in advance what to expect, point by point' the actual signposting to the broader argument of the work is in the main quite unclear. As such, its usefulness beyond its own pages takes some thinking through. There is also a great reliance on what we might term 'insider knowledge' (or at least quite a high level of assumed discourse) that I think limits the potential of the volume; and, to a certain degree insists that the reader go 'Elsewhere' in the reading of it. Overall though, the book raises a number of interesting political, theoretical and intellectual arguments around the practice of philosophy and its place in the world. So it's worth the effort.

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