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THE

PAPHOS

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Published originally 2012 in GoodWork® Project Report Series, Number 80.

<http://www.thegoodproject.org>.

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# THE PAPHOS SEMINAR

ELEVATED REFLECTIONS ON LIFE AS GOOD WORK

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Reflecting on the Good Work project, in the context of Howard Gardner's visit to Finland in 2010, my student Peter Kenttä came up with a promising idea: the three pillars of Ethics, Engagement and Excellence called for a fourth "E" – Elevation.

This idea intrigued me. It related to my excitement over the phenomena of "uplift", "spirit", "inspiration" and more generally to those almost "magical" aspects of human endowment that are hard to pinpoint in objective terms and yet seem to characterize much of what makes humans special. Could it be that elevation, in some yet to-be-defined sense, is a fundamental notion?

This question bears on a real-life project with which I have been engaged since 1995 – a bi-annual one-week seminar in Paphos, Cyprus on the philosophy and psychology of the good life.

The Paphos seminar started out as a training seminar. Specifically, it grew from my shorter presentations delivered in organizations on themes such as collaboration, teamwork, customer service, meaningful personal life, peak performance, respect, humanly centered leadership and entrepreneurial vitality, as well as from my academic teaching efforts in the various assets of philosophy. The audience has grown from the initial 53 to 100-120, with professionals of different backgrounds attending: business managers and employees, as well as non-professionals, students, retirees, whole families, teams, celebrities, artists, relatives and loved ones of previous participants, etc., a highly heterogeneous group of individuals from different walks of life. Early on, I grew captivated by the seminar, intrigued by the fact that it seemed to work in some sense better than it should have. Something remarkable emerged during the course of the seminar.

When reflecting on the Paphos seminar in the context of the Good Work project, it seems that the three E's of Engagement, Excellence and Ethics fit quite well to some of the pivotal aspects of the processes that I had seen kindled at the Paphos seminar. In any given seminar, and irrespective of the differences in age, professional background, education or socio-economic situation, people seemed to become more engaged with their lives, committed to creating more excellence in the various facets of their lives, and with an increased sense of ethics.

To what extent has the Paphos seminar promoted Engagement, Excellence and Ethics in the conduct of the lives of its thousands of participants in the course of its 17 years of history, is of course an empirical question that should eventually be subjected to systematic research. But I am a philosopher. I am interested in promoting the cause of a better life through think-

ing and reasoning, by using lecturing as the chief instrument of impetus, rather than a crystal-lizer of universal truths or a researcher interested in investigating the science of particular in-terventions.

My passion has been in the cultivation of *uplift* and *life-improving processes of individual flourishing*, rather than in the understanding of the scientific aspects of such processes or their facilitation.

The Good Work project of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, William Damon and Howard Gardner struck a chord in me because I felt among its chief impulses is the desire to make a difference to actual life. The point, it seemed to me, was to enhance excellence, ethics and engagement in work life, rather than to pinpoint theoretically how "good work" is constituted. Indeed, even after years of study, the key notions of "engagement", "excellence" and "ethics" remained fairly intuitive as part of the Good Work project and were not operationalized in the way that (say) the concept of "flow" has long been. For me as a philosopher of the everyday, interested in promoting human flourishing, the Good Work project is an endeavor of the Good Life, as applied to the context of work.

### ***Elevated Reflection***

As Socrates taught us long ago, self-reflection is the key to better life. But consider the possibility of *elevated reflection* of one's life's possibilities, beauties and realities. Consider thinking of one's life from the point of view of an "upscale", the highest categories one can adopt, while also *feel-ing* hopeful, appreciated, optimistic, uplifted, generous, respected and respectful, grateful, com- passionate and curious. A guiding assumption behind my efforts is that it is useful to engage with one's life-philosophy with elevated reflection.

Here I have in mind an intuitive, dictionary understanding of "elevation" (as opposed to the somewhat more narrow term of Jonathan Haidt). Thus understood, elevation is *the action or fact of elevating or being elevated, the augmentation of or increase in the amount or level of some-thing; the height above a given level*. Elevation is understood with connotations that the diction-ary acknowledges, including the *raising of the consecrated elements for adoration* (as in a Chris- tian Mass), *the ability of a dancer to attain height in jumps* (as in ballet). The connotation of the spiritual dimension is there, as is a touch of the artistic realm. Given that the theme of the Paphos seminar is the betterment of life, and given that thinking is the chief instrument through which a seminar participant is expected to operate, the Paphos seminar aims to provide a platform for *elevated* thinking for the benefit of *better life*.

### ***Vitalized Insight***

I recognize that the value of life-philosophical reflection can be questioned. People in our society do not consider involvement in life-philosophical reflection a high priority to which they would devote time and energy. Institutional support for non-ideological, non-religious, non-committed life-philosophical reflection is also largely lacking.

Yet the implicit demand is there. My life-philosophical lectures at Aalto University (former-

ly at Helsinki University of Technology) are not compulsory, but 500-600 students attend them annually. There has been a considerable demand for shorter 1-3 hour lectures and for workshops run along similar lines in organizations and companies for the past 20 years or so. While the impact of my life-philosophical interventions has not been seriously studied, for me personally the tens of thousands of people that have participated in them provide ample proof, indeed, an 'existence proof'; that elevation is real, and that an elevated reflection on life-philosophical themes does good for people in their studies, work, relationships, and life at large.

I submit this is how things ought to be intuitively. Here's my claim: If people are given a chance to reflect on their life in an inspiring and accepting, out-of-the-ordinary setting and in an intellectually stimulating, broad-minded, courteous, serious yet entertaining and respectful environment, in the company of good-willed, benevolent, encouraging others, with no need to prove anything, with no obligation to comply to custom or live out a pre-fixed role, with no need to demonstrate one's intelligence, or highlight achievements, with no sanctions for the lack of analytical skills, with no tests or challenges in sight with a possibility of failure, without interruption for several days and in a context that is secure and not threatening, and with a facilitator and group of people the participant finds interesting, exciting, trustworthy and honest, I submit it would be *absolutely amazing* if an average thinking person would not become revitalized in his or her reflections on life.

### *The Legacy of Better Life*

I do not think the Paphos seminar, or my "pedagogy", represents anything particularly striking.

First of all, the idea that philosophy should contribute to the cause of the good life of free citizens, lived out personally by those citizens, goes back to ancient thinkers, most notably to Socrates. The idea that philosophy is a detached and mainly theoretical undertaking of primarily intellectual, conceptual and analytical nature, with very little connection to the actual conduct of people's lives is a more recent invention - and not one that justifies itself by the simple fact that it happens to be prevalent in current Western academic culture.

Secondly, the thesis that elevation, or its sister phenomena like spirited uplift and inspiration, should be acknowledged as fundamental to the conduct of a life at its best, is hardly controversial. The fact that elevation is difficult to institutionalize, control, measure or predict, or to reduce to objective categories such as knowledge, information, competencies or skills, is no demonstration that its possibility does not exist as part of our shared human endowment.

Thirdly, there is the notion that life can be better for anybody. Is this not essentially the basic idea of all the great spiritual traditions in East and West? Since the dawn of civilization, the idea that people can support one another through dialog, encouragement, acceptance, warmth, respect, the showing of interest, connectivity, attunement, humor and good will seems more or less part of the human condition. That positive aspects of life *are* positive, and that mutual interrelatedness and subtle interdependencies are part of the fabric of what constitutes the good and rewarding life, is common sense and reinforced by experience. I am listing these obvious facts only in order to acknowledge some preliminary reasons why the Paphos experience might work *in*

*theory*, not only in practice. In that context the features just listed are awoken from within along with an effort to think about one's life and its grand themes.

### ***Opening the Treasure Chest***

If there is "a pedagogy" to the Paphos seminar, it amounts to launching the humanity of the participants as a platform for their personal growth, through vitalized insight, in the service of better life.

Somewhat strangely, in most academic or work-related seminar contexts with which I am familiar, one's humanity is *not* approached as a treasure chest of assets, more miraculous than measurable. Operating from a deficit model, most educative and coaching-directed seminars assume that the participant is lacking something fairly easily identifiable that he or she should acquire. It might be a skill, it might be some informative content, but in any case it is something that the participant does not possess, and the aim of the seminar is to form a channel to that something that is lacking. The contribution of a seminar is in its ability to diminish the deficit. Because the most valuable assets are assumed to be content-related and intellectual, the lecture context is constituted as a delivery platform for the knowledge he or she is lacking.

In the Paphos seminar, in contrast, the starting point is one of abundance. The participants are welcomed in their humanity, understood as plenitude, with the assumption that they already know the essentials for a more engaged, ethical and excellently implemented life, but may have become somewhat and somehow distanced from their own vital insights. The participant is approached with respect for his or her uniqueness as a miraculous specimen of life. (I realize the romanticism of this way of speaking, but that's the way I think.) Whether a clown or a king, the participant is assumed to possess potential that nobody can quite name.

### ***Resonating Thoughts***

In the Paphos seminar emotions are approached as a quintessential part of the human condition, a constructive force that should be embraced. The idea is that the lectures stimulate thinking and emotions *together*.

The point is not to try to make the participants become emotional or lure them into a blindly accepting, non-critical stance. The point is to facilitate the situation in a way that allows for the emergence of emotions that support a given theme and adds life to it. For instance, most people feel emotionally different in a quiet cathedral than in a rock concert. Thinking about one's grandparents' sacrifices in World War II, or one's mother's struggles when laboring at one's birth, might furnish welcome depth if contemplated in the cathedral tone. One might end up making a call to him or her during a break, as the emotionally tuned thinking process finds its way to that small but potentially significant micro action. The idea of a *fit* or *resonance* between the thinking of a theme and the feeling of emotions is fundamental to the effort in my life-philosophical lecturing and in my striving to facilitate life-philosophical reflection processes that bear on excellence, ethics and engagement in one's life activities.

When, as lecturer, I became emotional in Paphos it felt a bit awkward at first, fighting tears in



front of an audience and in the midst of a lecture. Maybe the case I discussed was overwhelming to me that particular morning, maybe I was tired, maybe the participants were particularly supportive, accepting and gentle. Anyway, I got involved in a case with my emotional self. I suppose I just thought, with some kind of artistic intuition, that whatever felt this right, *was* right for the purpose of a majestic moment of shared experience. I let the emotions be aroused, and I believe the decision was right.

### ***Pulp Fiction***

Elevation, as I see, is a fundamental human condition characterized by the upscale nature of the perspective of thinking and the spirited tone of emotion that accompanies it. Thus conceived, elevation is a performance factor reminiscent of flow, even if it is less focused on outcome than flow is. But the emotional dimension is critical. Maybe for a super-intelligent person talking to other super-intelligent persons on a theme reducible to its analytical representation in some abstract discourse language shared by the select few, it is possible to create elevation without getting emotional, but I doubt that holds for most people most of the time in a life as it is lived. Certainly not for me and not for the kind of "ordinary people" I hope will benefit from the seminar.

Surprises pay off. I might discuss a particular performance of the three tenors in their original Rome concert of 1990, or a personal case involving my family life, along with "The Philosophy of Vincent Vega", inspired by the character of Tarantino's Pulp Fiction. The point is that the coloring of a theme, or the emotional set-up of an example, dramatically affects the life-philosophical sound of a given story or line of thought.

Given that I wish to reach out to anybody that comes to the seminar, given that I want elevated thinking of subjective significance to emerge in the mind of each participant, emotions are crucial as uplift, connectivity and the basis of the spirit which is not definable in terms of contents but is felt as energy and sensed from within as forward trajectory.

The Paphos seminar thus brings emotions back to the classroom. Yet it is also essential, in line with the age-old tradition of philosophy, to stay tuned for reason, reflection, dialog, and the studying of alternatives and distinctions. The Paphos seminar seeks to vitalize the participants as thinkers with sensibilities and with potential heedfulness vis-à-vis the future and the inherent chances in their lives.

Elevation results, when the right kind of tone and the right kind of emotions, with the right kind of rhythm and respect, become integrated with the right kind of themes to form a vibrant life-philosophical line of thought.

### ***Insights as Music***

The metaphor of an orchestra is perhaps useful here.

Think about the participation in the Paphos seminar as an opportunity to play with your increasingly fine-tuned thought-instrument in the company of other experienced musicians. You might know the score and your instrument, but the acoustics in the concert hall might be un-

expectedly uplifting, the other musicians exceptionally inspiring, the conductor a true maestro, and the audience generous. Familiar pieces might unfold mesmerizingly freshly, with astonishing depth, nuance and hitherto hidden subtlety.

The idea of the Paphos seminar as a symphony orchestra assigns a highly active role to each participant. Far from being the passive recipient of someone else's intent, the musician/participant is an active subject of the music that is played. Indeed, the individual, inter-subjective and communal dimensions form together a creative system in which the whole influences the parts and the parts affect the whole. The conductor leads the situation as well as the musicians, and facilitates the creative process, yet it would be naïve to assume that the concert is chiefly the conductor's creation, or that some straightforward cause-and-effect logic applies.

The conductor/musicians/orchestra metaphor suggests categories such as *present moment*, *emergence*, *process*, *trust*, *context*, *attunement*, *co-creation* and *intention*. These are some of the fundamental conceptual elements for the phenomenon that the Paphos seminar seeks to activate. None of these are purely, or even primarily, intellectual categories. The aim is towards a fresh performance in the living presence with a keen eye to "magical" moments of exceptional quality, the hallmark of a spectacular performance in the performing arts.

In particular, the point is not to study a composition, or learn intellectually about a symphony, but to perform in an emerging now-moment with the entire performance in mind. The point of the conductor is to integrate the whole, to cultivate and facilitate the dynamism of the subtle emerging process, and to help the musicians to flow in their individual performance. Let me attempt to capture the process in one breath: The Paphos seminar turns the role of the lecturer into one of a conductor in an elevated performance of the thinking of life-philosophically relevant themes by individual participants who share an intensified and attentive process with one another, stimulating one another in an unfolding living presence. Life-philosophical lecturing, of the kind the Paphos seminar exemplifies, becomes *one of the performing arts*.

### ***Philosopher as a Conductor***

From the point of view of a "philosopher-lecturer", the conductor metaphor points to a paradigm shift which involves aspects such as:

1. The mastery of the overall situation and its dynamism, over individual parts and over particular contents, with particular attention to interpretation and arrangement;
2. The ability to fine-tune and facilitate an emergent process, over the focus on an a-temporal outcome; a sense for timing and rhythm, drama and contrast, accents and the aesthetics of nuanced subtleties;
3. The leadership of people and their subjective processes through deft management of objectively identifiable entities such as contents, course materials and the structure of presentation;
4. The ability to inspire reigns over the ability to inform;
5. The abilities to integrate, sense, connect and attune over abilities to analyze;
6. The ability to think aloud, under social pressure and in the present moment, over the ability to think alone as an individual;



7. The abilities of caring, listening and co-creating over command, control and delivery from above;
8. Reasoning with intellect as intertwined with other human sensibilities, as opposed to viewing them as independent faculties;
9. Communication as a multi-modal enterprise as opposed to one channel operation only;
10. The viewing of the communicative situation in systems terms, with bi-directional causalities and with an emphasis on the interrelated nature of the activity or activities that emerge.

The role of the philosopher/lecturer changes towards servant leadership and side-by-side camaraderie, towards a partner in a dance of flourishing. No longer is the philosopher the privileged crystallizer and informer of universal truths from above to the ill-informed.

### *Negativism vs. Sense of Life*

While I do not intend to argue the matter here, from my point of view an implicit negativism dominates academic philosophy. The Paphos seminar seeks to avoid that emotional touch of death. The aim of the Paphos seminar is to celebrate life and humanity, not to diminish or reify it. The fact that some aspects of life might be hard to define objectively or model with available modes of representation does not prove them non-existent. I look to the work of Christopher Alexander on the "sense of life" for inspiration, and return with enthusiasm to the 2006 economics Nobel acceptance speech of Edmund Phelps in which he notes, "Neoclassical growth theory [in economics] was conspicuous in having no people in it". I celebrate Phelps' vitalism and his desire to get people back to economic theory. I admire Martin Seligman's stance in *Flourish*, and in my view Csikszentmihalyi's books represent philosophy – not just "psychology" - at its best.

A chief handicap in much of academic thinking in philosophy is the doing away with *context* and *temporality*. Yet there is no life without context and time. Linking philosophy with artistic performance, along the lines suggested above, is one way of re-introducing the contextual and the temporal as constitutive elements to a life-philosophical communicative setting.

As Jerome Bruner has stressed, stories constitute life. In my lecturing, I use narratives, personal reflections, and selected short video clips in interplay with conceptual lines of thought in an effort to create a sense of context and temporality and to communicate with the "mind of a five-year old" (Gardner and Laskin, 1995). Excessively articulated scholarly content is often not of much use. In the Paphos seminar explicit reference to great thinkers or authoritative figures of the past is occasional. Such allusions might remind the participant of his or her real or imagined deficiencies, split the audience and thus intervene with the flow of energy. The aim is not to deny negative facts but to release the mind through stories and narratives to the realm of the possible. The idea is to help the participants to place themselves in contexts in which they can vividly *sense* – and not only abstractly think about - some of the less obvious aspects of their life-philosophy and experience.

## *”All Men Are Created Equal”*

People come and are welcomed to the Paphos seminar as equals. The seminar fee is moderate (about 760 US dollars for the week, with the total cost at about 1000-2100 US dollars depending on the hotel). Anybody can sign in. No doubt my Finnish background, with our strong egalitarian culture, defines an axiom here. A non-academic, jargon-free, personal and generally accessible language is therefore a prerequisite for me as the lecturer.

But when reflecting upon themes that concern the whole of life, having real examples of its various facets and stages is often eye opening. Time and again the participants find from one another insights and perspectives whose significance takes them by surprise. Each seminar group feels unique and special. The fact that there are 100 participants of heterogeneous backgrounds means that the semi-guided discussions as well as informal dialogues outside the seminar room can be highly rewarding for the participants. Invariably, the participants find the shared, emotional and attunement-related aspects of the seminar collective invigorating. The following excerpt is representative of the way the participants experience one another:

”I was surprised by the positive and uplifting community spirit in the group. The atmosphere was quite special, loving and open. I felt everyone was accepting and positively interested in everyone else. I understood that we operated like mirrors for one another. From the eyes and gestures one could sense different feelings and approaches, but all the mirrors reflected back a beautiful picture of me. The glances and words of other people touched me deeply, and I do not remember experiencing something like that ever before. It was easy to stay for a while in front of such a mirror.

”In my childhood I was an invisible girl. The middle one in a big family, I adopted early on a yielding and withdrawing role. I was a girl in a family where only the boys counted. Those memories arouse fresh in my mind when people in the Paphos-seminar expressed their joy in having come to know me and in having had the chance to talk with me. Me! I realized I had managed to convey to them goodwill and respect that Esa is talking about, even some joy perhaps, at least acceptance and interest. And I got it back multiplied! My heart was overjoyed!”

Such testimonials confirm that the overall atmosphere and the quality of the human in-between is a quintessential feature of the Paphos renewal effect. It feels elevating to experience Jefferson’s phrase – perhaps the most beautiful and lastingly relevant in the Declaration of Independence – as applying to oneself and to everyone in sight.

## *The Map vs. the Territory*

A living, personally relevant philosophy of life is more than an articulation of that philosophy. The Paphos seminar might strike an academic philosopher as somewhat perverse in its conduct, because conceptualization does not get the privileged status it is unthinkingly assigned in academic settings.

Quite clearly, the use of ordinary language accrues a cost in conceptual accuracy. That casual-

ty is not fatal. In a life-philosophical setting, much of what counts deals with the participants' internal dialog with a wide range of subjective ramifications. The intuitive, the associative, the emotional, the automatic and implicit mind - what Kahneman and other others call "system 1" - is as important a dialog partner for the Paphos seminar as is the participants' analytic, effortful, verbal, explicit and conscious mind. From the point of view of the Paphos experience, the dominant mode of academic discourse focuses too much on the latter and on Kahneman's "system 2"--- the explicit, analytic, rule-governed forms of thinking. While the Paphos seminar, as a reason and language based endeavor, operates ostensibly in a "system 2" discourse, much that actually matters takes place in "system 1", as well as in the enriched dialogue between the two systems. Whatever ingenuity there is to the effort is due to the fact that the Paphos seminar sets systems 1 and 2 into motion on themes that are life-philosophically relevant for the participant.

I believe the actual thinking of even the leading academics is non-analytic most of the time. If the aim is to help actual living people to become more engaged, ethical and excellent with their personal life, the academic lecturing that seeks to facilitate life-philosophical reflection needs to take into account the deeper functions that humans use when subjectively evaluating what matters. Such pedagogical efforts need to reach out to human beings as creatures with internal mechanisms for heedfulness, for evaluating matters and for sensing the significant. That effort implies attuning with emotions, intuitions, and the unconscious and implicit realm as key partners in the reflective dialogue. The point is to open a broadband channel to people's subjective sense of life orientation - a philosophical lecture with a human interface.

### *Whose Ideas?*

I am a philosopher, and philosophy loves ideas. It loves to construct and spread ideas. But unlike many academic philosophers, my instinct is for helping people to construct *their own ideas* and to spread them *internally*. I am not out there to impose my own ideas, or the ideas of the scholarly-based authoritative philosophy and its sister disciplines, on the thinking of a seminar participant. Instead, I seek to help the participant become more heedful to and creative with the fundamentals of his or her own thinking. The aim is to help the participant to establish, through thinking as stimulated by lecturing, a living connection to the ethical core of his or her approach to life, to wherever excellence and engagement come from.

The participant comes to the Paphos seminar to learn about his or her own thinking, and leaves with an increased understanding already flowing, at least tentatively, into actions.

The Paphos seminar thus emerges as a lecture-based environment in which the content of the lectures is not primarily intended to inform from outside but to enlighten from within. The aim is to set a functionally effective scaffold for insight and a catalytic thinking. The Paphos seminar is a platform for the participant to engage in *the thinking of her own thinking* with insight and sustained focus, accompanied by the possibility *to experience the significance of those thoughts* from the point of view of the everyday life. Instead of being addressed as cognitive processors of objectively defined abstract contents, the participants are approached as living subjects of their own reality with an abundant internal world and with an endowment in which

the cognitive and affective powers intertwine. The participants enter the seminar as subjects capable of generating attention, metacognitive insight, thinking of their own thinking, and potentially adept observers of their own human reality with a possibility of readjusting their thinking with emergent insights.

For thousands of participants, the experience of the Paphos seminar has been enriching, enchanting and in many cases life-transforming. I doubt any observer would question the significance of what has happened to people in the Plato hall at Amathus Beach Hotel in Paphos from 9 am to 2 pm, when witnessing the glow and radiance of these people as they engage in dialog over lunch afterwards. You can sense when musicians have had a great day, even if you know nothing of the music. If 100 people manage to focus for five hours on themes that touch everybody and bear on the grand themes of life in a subjectively significant way, reaching personally relevant insights in the course of the process, any normal human being can attest to the fact that something of significance has happened even if it is not immediately obvious *what* has taken place.

### ***Solving Problems Without Mentioning Them***

The Paphos seminar is not problem oriented. Yet the situation allows for the processing of problems in away that can be highly functional:

"I arrived to Paphos expecting excitement, feeling basically happy, but tired and in my mind in a kind of a trench war. I lead an organization of 20 knowledge workers, feeling responsible for them, and with a debt burden that is pretty heavy. The Paphos process gave me a chance to think about my thinking, to listen to myself and to make sense of things in my mind and in my situation. Esa's examples of flourishing in the life of some leading people, demonstrating presence and being by the side of others as well as of astonishing uplift, were truly elevating. At the same time there were examples from the life of "ordinary people" leading to the conclusion that we are all the same on some basic level. An important element was also the feeling, entirely unprecedented, of closeness and the sharing of emotions and experiences with others, leading to the feeling of oneness, openness, acceptance, sharing, and encouragement. Philosopher Saarinen created an atmosphere in which a human being is at his best and at his most vulnerable. I have gone to psychoanalysis for 10 years four times a week. While acknowledging the merits of that experience, I reflect the week in Paphos with astonishment. It certainly helped a lot to be able to share with others. For instance, I got the idea of forgiveness for my ex-wife, who separated me from my two fabulous daughters for six years. The lost six years are like a stone in my heart but the Paphos process seems to have taken that stone away.

"Philosopher Saarinen gave an example I could relate to and I got understanding into the fact that I too have the right to flourish, to get excited and to look at life like a child. Now the world is full of possibilities and good things one can be grateful for."

Some of the benefits of the seminar experience are eudaimonic, others hedonistic. It feels good to connect with one's fundamentals, to find a way to get immersed in the significance of one's own thoughts, reflecting on them intensively with openness, encouragement and without interruption.

It feels good to be taken seriously when you engage in dialog about the fundamentals of your life, and get involved mentally with positive categories such as flourishing, renewal, hope and micro-change.

## ***Oral Philosophy***

Western academic philosophy is strongly geared towards written expression and thus skeptical of the communicative possibilities of speech. Yet Socrates never wrote anything. Wittgenstein was extremely reluctant to publish and many leading students of Heidegger insist that the true nature of his philosophy could only be experienced in his lecturing. In spite of these powerful reminders of the significance of the oral, the assumed superiority of the written expression for conducting philosophy has downplayed philosophical lecturing as an oral practice that has its own possibilities and unique features for promoting the project of a good life.

In Western philosophy, right from the beginning, there existed a call for "edifying discourses" (Rorty 1979), "philosophical modes of life" (Hadot 2002) and for "content philosophy" (Wilk 2012). Why then should the grand drive of philosophy be restricted to written expression? Even if the noble life-philosophical tradition has been marginalized in the course of the rise of overtly intellectualized academic philosophy, its legacy remains powerful. I propose it should be addressed along with the renewal of the oral forms of communication.

The possibilities of oral philosophy are approached in the Paphos seminar as an effort to create a platform that

- a) Unfolds in the *present moment* with gentle dynamism, warmth, trust, acceptance, hopefulness, seriousness, attunement to others, encouragement, respect, non-manipulative discretion and non-directive sense of the possible;
- b) Focuses on sharpening the insights of the *listener*;
- c) Addresses the theme of the *better life* in a way that is elevating and subjectively significant to the participant.

Of particular significance is the desire to encourage the participants to get involved with reflective lines of thought that might be idiosyncratic but relevant to him or her. Associations are encouraged. The fact that thoughts are elusive, idiosyncratic and subjectively unpredictable is considered a major asset. The associative nature of the mind, unhelpful as it might be from the point of view of the ideal of academic analytic reasoning or university lecturing, is approached as an ally. The point is to activate the mind by feeding its various resources in a way that is subjectively convincing, rewarding and forward-looking. As a result people find productive openings from unexpected internal and external sources. Serendipities emerge, because the space for them expands and their subjective desirability increases.

## ***Mindlessness of Even the Best Minds***

One need not dwell on works such as Paul Johnson's *Intellectuals* to note that no matter how learned, brilliant or hungry-for-knowledge people might be, they can be staggeringly inept when



it comes to living their lives. The creation of a context to facilitate a gentle, internally productive dialog with one's mindlessness is one of the motivations for Paphos-like philosophical lecturing.

In Ellen Langer's work on mindfulness there is a strong emphasis of the conditional, as opposed to the absolute mode of thinking, as a key antidote to mindlessness (Langer and Piper 1987). In one of the original studies, the shift from mindlessness to mindfulness was brought about linguistically with what seems like a minimal change. Indeed, research points to the fact that deceptively simple linguistic form can encourage mindlessness and similarly prevent it.

Life-philosophical lecturing is a linguistic activity and one that looks for major impetus through minimal interventions. The conditional mode of thinking is encouraged in the lecturer's style in presenting cases, as well as a frequent personification of the themes, as opposed to generic lessons based on theories. Additionally, many of the cases draw from environments familiar to everyone (family life, sports, music). Each case that is discussed is offered as an interesting example only, rather than as a paradigm of a pointedly identified ideal. Theories and research results are presented when applicable, but only in the sense in which a conductor might occasionally refer explicitly to the score when working with an experienced orchestra: mostly using it in the background as a potential source for a more exquisite performance.

The Paphos seminar is not statement-based. The seminar does not seek to provide the "right" answers. It does not even identify "fundamental themes". No particular beliefs are targeted as objects of criticism or veneration. Instead, the content is expected to shine through as if behind a veil. Generic themes such as "choice", "respect", "love", "temporality" serve like melodies in the background.

As one seminar participant put it, the seminar is about 'glow-how', rather than 'know-how'.

Yet the seminar does assume some generic conditions as to what counts as a productive, rewarding, functionally effective way to engage with one's thinking in the life-philosophical realm. In other words, there is a meta-level pragmatism regarding what works, but that philosophy is empirically grounded rather than ideology-based.

The seminar also assumes some fundamental aspects of the human condition that any life-philosophy needs to address, and seeks to provide an inspiring context to do that. Even in the absence of the explicit identification of fundamental themes, the seminar seeks to guide the participant towards an internal dialog of such themes.

### *The Key of the Score*

As a constitutive factor of the Paphos praxis, *the overall atmosphere*, both inside and outside the lecture hall, is particularly important. The philosopher's challenge is one of leadership rather than management, directed primarily at cultivating "the culture" of the seminar, the overall feel of the context, the attitude to others, and the mode of seriousness in which the thinking is taking place. This is *the key* (as in music) of the score that is played. The philosopher seeks to guide the thinking process to unfold with particular colors and emotional styling, which in my case tends to move in timbres such as *respectful, sensitive, appreciative, sincere, generous, merciful, kind, hopeful, realistic-while-appreciating-the-future, serious, humorous, joyful, curious, compassionate, excited, and non-threatening*.



Consequently the task of the philosopher is to *set the tone* for the thinking as opposed to identifying the *content* of the thinking. The philosopher seeks to indicate *the touch* with which the thinking and dialog are intended to take place, carefully trying to lead the line of thoughts with dynamism that is elevating. Paradoxically, while the life-philosophical lecture at any given time seems like one-sided talk to an audience that on the face of it only listens, what is being said is secondary in significance. The primary focus is on *the qualitative aspects* of the participant to his or her own contents as it unfolds in the course of the lecture.

Inasmuch as a philosopher is supposed to be a mid-wife, as Plato's Socrates suggested, what is being mediated is the participant's subjective processes in the dimension of what Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature". The assumption is that such a treasure is worth aspiring to for the subject, and worth facilitating for the philosopher.

### ***Positive Philosophical Practice***

The Paphos seminar seeks to exemplify a *positive philosophical practice*. The seminar emphasizes participants' strengths and already existing resources while operating with the means of philosophy as a linguistic and reason-based enterprise. Positive philosophical practice sides with positive psychology (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000, Seligman 2011; Snyder and Lopez 2002,) in focusing on "life worth living" (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 2006) rather than on deficiencies and malfunctions.

The strengthening of constructive, life-enhancing capacities of ordinary people has not been a main concern for Western philosophy since the days of William James and John Dewey. In actual practice, much of academic philosophy is elitist and assumes a pretence of knowledge (somewhat like economics, as described by Hayek in his towering Nobel speech). I find much of academic philosophy fear-based as it seeks to pinpoint mistakes and operates with conceptual criticism as the leading faculty of mind. The result is the lack of synthetic, life-enhancing contributions (a point made clear in Gardner's *Five Minds for the Future*). The human-centered tone of William James is sadly lacking in academic philosophy. But while oral life-philosophical philosophy might not advocate theories for other experts to scrutinize, maybe it can serve another useful function: to deliver contexts for constructive and life-enhancing reflection in which ordinary people can beneficially get involved with reflecting on their life in practice.

Positive oral philosophy thus conceived would serve the cause of "life worth living", not by studying its conceptual foundations, or instructing people about them, but by strengthening people in their positive capacity to guide their lives more meaningfully with the instrument of their thinking.

### ***Awakening the "We" Within***

The Paphos seminar delivers benefits to the individual, but it is not an ego trip. The seminar is not about the participant's flourishing at the expense of other people. More than individual talent, capabilities, competencies or possibilities, the seminar makes the participant more mindful of

the shared humanity that connects him or her to other participants in the seminar, and to people at large. Invariably in the seminar, people start to sense each other with an increased generosity, empathy and concern. Compassion is one of the cornerstones of the seminar, facilitated in part by the shared experience that emerges and the meta-level recognition of the emotional involvement of other participants as the seminar unfolds. The following representative excerpt from one participant illustrates the logic of the seminar:

"I am a middle-aged woman who has lived happy years and others not so happy. I have lived through a divorce due to unfaithfulness and have been an entrepreneur in the health care business for 20 years. I have two wonderful daughters whom I have guided to become adults, seeing now with joy and pride how their wings carry.

"I set out to the Paphos seminar from a life-situation of contradictory tensions. My life seemed grey and I felt like I was dragging a pile of stones in my everyday. I did not want to read anything about the seminar in advance because I did not want my expectations to get directed to some particular outcome. So I did not know what was to come.

"Right from the start the positive atmosphere that glowed from the participants surprised me. Everyone had come to develop themselves, had come to dwell on the fundamentals of humanity. Day after day I found myself pondering, how Esa's stories resonated with my own life, touching it and striking chords in me. In dialogues with other participants I strongly felt how we all are in the same boat, as small people in the storms of life. As days went by I noticed that my bad feelings started to evaporate and to its place came enormous energy and positive state of mind. I realized that one need not expect all the goodness to come from outside. One can change one's own attitude and make the sun shine, at least from among the clouds. I had over the years curled up into myself, into my own bad feelings and inadvertently pushed the negative buttons of people close to me – getting of course the negative back like from a mirror!

"The Paphos seminar was to me something I had not experienced before: deep dive into my own selfhood, a possibility to study without any pressure to achieve and with an insight into the little fundamentals in life which constitute the bedrock of the whole of humanity. I got back the vivid colors of life. I hope this upscale tone in my life will remain alive for long in the mangle of the everyday. And I wish I could give to others at least some good thoughts and actions in the circle of influence that is given to me. When looked through the spectacles of positivity the world would be so much better place to live in!"

This participant's heart-felt testimony represents to me the life-philosophical process of the Paphos seminar as I believe it has happened hundreds if not thousands of times. Details will vary, specifics will change, but the desire to get revitalized in one's relation with one's life remains the same.

### ***Replicability of the Experience***

Can the Paphos seminar be replicated? It can, because the Paphos seminar *experience* in its essentials is generic.

This is a chief thesis of this paper: there is an identifiable psychological state that can be fostered, facilitated and attended to from outside to yield *inside* a fruitful platform of elevated reflection on life-philosophically fundamental themes.

Such a state in a lecture-based setting is not reducible to the "charisma" of the facilitator. The speaker's humor, style and personality might help, along with the beauty of the surroundings and other external factors. Yet I believe what takes place is entirely generic; it could be replicated or reinvented by a number of life-philosophical speakers in a number of ways. The discussion above has indicated some of the guidelines that might prove relevant for such an undertaking. Here's my suggested blueprint:

1. Activate the storyteller in you. Activate the stand-up comedian. Activate the internal musician, the conductor and the improviser excited to jam. Activate the nurturer, the caring gardener who celebrates the miracle of growth and wants the seeds to flourish. Activate yourself as *space*, rather than a star. Activate yourself as a creature of multiple sensibilities, over and above your intellect. Activate yourself as a trust-builder. Be honestly you yourself, be authentic, be vulnerable, and be true to shared humanity. Use positive examples with the rate of at least 4-to-1.

2. Hold your horses with your brilliance, intellect and learning. Don't raise yourself above others. Don't split the audience. Don't believe you know the truth. Don't believe you are the best. Don't lecture even when you lecture, but suggest with conviction, inspiring a sense of the possible. Don't manipulate, don't push your own agenda but show integrity with your example and dynamic humbleness.

### ***Broaden and Build Effects in Life-Philosophy***

In the Paphos seminar, the participants might at first be amused, puzzled or amazed by some aspects of the group, surroundings of the seminar, or the speaker's personality. But that opening connection will soon give way to the participant's own "divinely conferred power" (as the original form of "charisma") and as it gains momentum in the course of the seminar week. It is a "broaden and build" process (to borrow the apt phrase from Barbara Fredrickson), an "opening of the heart" in the sense of the meditative traditions and Buddhism-inspired mindfulness practices (illuminated by Allan Wallace with particular insight). It should be stressed, however, that the Paphos seminar remains fundamentally a project of Western orientation, with a strong emphasis on reasoning and language. If (to use a deliberately stereotypical example) a no-nonsense middle-aged male engineer comes to the seminar, as often happens, I find it important that he does not find anything in the seminar suspicious even in retrospect. Nobody should be lured into doing something he or she might find embarrassing afterwards.

The impact of life-philosophical reflection in the Paphos context, unsurprisingly in my opinion, is often considerable and sometimes staggering. What becomes redirected, or fine-tuned, is the participants' orientation to the overall set-up of his or her life, often as reflected in some of the specifics of his or her life as it currently unfolds. When Mr. Timo Joensuu attended the seminar in 1999, I knew nothing of his private or professional concerns. To me and to most of the participants, he was a man in his early 40's who attended the seminar with his wife. Ten years later I

got an email that read: some thoughts he had come up with in Paphos had been brought to fruition, and he would like to show them – and in fact, he had founded the first private cancer clinic in Finland with a focus on top-of-class medical treatment and passionate people-focus.

The story of Timo Joensuu and Docrates Cancer Center is illustrative, because it demonstrates how unexpected the results of elevated life-philosophical reflection can be both from the point of view of the participant as well as the facilitator. This is how it should be. There is no way one can predict the effects that a subtle change in one's attunement to one's life can bring about. The fact that the seminar is not about "philosophy of life" as an abstract discipline means that the participant's overall *orientation in life* becomes a topic of the reflection along with *micro-behaviors* in the everyday. The person starts to investigate some aspects of his or her mental models, presuppositions, automatic responses, patterns, behaviors and habits (Kahneman's system 1) without no need to arrive at any concrete conclusions. There are no head-on crashes, and blame and shame are kept in the background. Encouraging, respectful non-directed guidance is the norm, an ideology of 'obliquity' (as John Kay might put it). The result is the seminar as a "safe base" (somewhat in the sense of Bowlby), in the warmth of which the participant engages in rich and rewarding reflective internal dialogue in the dimension of *what for*.

While people often report considerable increase in efficiency in their affairs after the seminar, the seminar is not about performance. There is hardly anything that is goal oriented in the Paphos seminar. People do not engage with any exercises, templates or instructions. There are no tests or checkpoints. This means that whatever mode or mental models the participant uses in his everyday task accomplishment as part of his or her functional routines, is brought to a minimum. Nor are there any of the peak performance "boot camp" routines—such as the participants writing up their goals, memorizing acronyms as shorthand for automatic response, or exclaiming together inspirational affirmative shouts. The participants are not led to pre-fixed conclusions through some dramatized settings in which they would reflect (say) about their own funeral and then list the three most important things in their life. The Paphos seminar goes out of its way to extend the internal comfort zone of the participant with the idea that that *non-fear is good for life-philosophical thinking*. When entering the realm of the possible, it is good to feel safe. In short, the seminar seeks to provide a platform for the personal interpretations of one's life *beyond* achievements and beyond the discourse of targets and goals.

More than efficiency in performance, the seminar cultivates mastery in life; more than brilliance, it seeks to encourage wisdom, judgment and moderation. As a result, academic intelligence keeps its relevance but loses its primacy, along with skills and mental models needed for accomplishments and tasks. New intentions have space to evolve. Fresh interpretations emerge as shorter-term concerns, worries and goals fade into the background.

## *The Crucial Three Dimensions*

In an analysis of my university lecturing, my student Tuuli Lehti and I proposed three dimensions that a life-philosophical lecture seeks to cultivate

1. Orientation to the present moment, including one's present experience of oneself;
2. Clearer reflection, including a meta-level perception of one's own thought processes and the realization of the connection of one's thinking to various outcomes in life;
3. The actual implementation of a better life.

We pointed out that even if most universities do not address the challenge (as pointed out by Kronman 2007), it is possible to envisage a university lecture series based on the idea of edifying the participants in their orientation to the present moment, in clearer reflection and in striving towards a better life (Saarinen and Lehti 2012). More specifically, it is possible to envisage a university lecture series in the service of activating and cultivating the intention of a Socratic project for a better life. But university institutions, with their strong commitment to rational discourse and disinterested objectivity, have often been sadly reluctant to explore the realm of personal meaning and the good life.

In the Paphos seminar, as an effort of finding a platform for people to meet as people, on themes that unite us all, no institutional criteria for acceptable methodologies need to be acknowledged. Looking back, I am grateful for the fact that no institutional agent was there to smuggle in conventions, or impose norms and standards. Rather as the project of a philosopher of the everyday, which is how I see myself, interested in human flourishing and in the possibilities of us as humans, the inspiration to create elevation for *all* people was the motivation— along with the idea, perhaps romantic and naïve, but in my view vital and right, that reason should serve the good of people in their individual striving for life at its meaningful best.

Such is the Paphos seminar as a "good work" project of sorts, devoted to increasing excellence, ethics and engagement in peoples' lives, and operating through the vital dimension of human endowment – the fourth "E", elevation.



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