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Formerly "Picture of the Month"

March-April 2008

*Reflections on Reflective Practice (1/7)*



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**Part 1: The mainstream concept of reflective practice and its blind spot**

Readers who are a bit familiar with my writings know that one of my main interests is in the philosophy of applied science and expertise, and that I use the phrase "applied science and expertise" to refer to a kind of professional practice that is not only science based but also includes the idea of *reflective practice*. But what (the hell) is "reflective practice"?

Basically, I would call professional practice "reflective" to the extent those involved make themselves and everyone else concerned aware of the assumptions of fact and value on which they rely, and of the consequences that may be imposed on all those affected. However, this is not how reflective practice is usually understood in the reflective practice literature. More often, it is understood to refer to the practitioner's personal (especially, emotional) experience in applying knowledge to practice. I fear this prevalent tendency to psychologize the concept of reflective practice is not up to the main challenges that professional practice is facing today.

For this reason, I propose that we take a fresh look at the notion of "reflective practice" and try to refocus it on these challenges. In this first part of a series of reflections on reflective practice, I would like to make some introductory observations. How is the nature and role of professional intervention changing, and why is the idea of reflective practice gaining in importance? In the second part, I will propose to examine the role that applied science plays in our contemporary notion of reflective professional practice. Thus equipped, we will in Part 3 return to the reflective practice mainstream and try to understand why it has turned "soft" and what is missing in its approach to reflective practice. The concluding parts will try to respond to the previous analysis of the present situation and examine the potential of practical philosophy to become a complementary, third pillar of reflective professional practice. Part 4 will set out with a general introduction to practical philosophy and, subsequently, a review of its origin in the work of the Greek

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philosopher Aristotle and its conception of virtue ethics. Parts 5 and 6 will continue this introduction to practical philosophy with a review of the contributions by Kant and Habermas. In Part 7, finally, I will try to combine and pragmatize these different conceptions of practical philosophy in the form of a number of basic considerations and principles that should allow ordinary professionals to *practice* practical philosophy, so that it can become the envisaged third pillar of reflective professional practice.

**The changing nature of professional practice** Professional skills are highly valued today. Given the complex issues that face decision makers both in the private and in the public sector, this is to be expected. So much so that calling in professional advice has become almost mandatory for decision makers. It not only gives credibility to their problem solutions and action proposals and thus helps them to secure acceptance; it also eases their burden of responsibility if things should go wrong. Yet at the very same time at which professional advice has become an indispensable ingredient of rational problem solving, it is itself becoming problematic.

In an increasingly pluralistic and globalized world, the meaning and validity of the professional's claims to special competence and rationality are no longer a matter of course. To be sure, these claims are generally understood to be based on the use of "sound science" (i.e., general principles of scientific method and criticism) and proven domain-specific methodologies (i.e., procedures that only those trained in a specific domain of expertise can fully understand); even so, to many people it is no longer obvious wherein exactly consists the (supposedly superior) rationality of the professional's problem definitions and solutions proposals. It should not surprise us, therefore, that professional findings and conclusions are becoming ever more scrutinized and contested by people who, although concerned in the subject at hand, are not themselves professionals or, if they are, have an expertise different from that required.

This increasingly contested nature of professional intervention need not be seen as a negative development, it can just as well be seen as a positive sign that the processes of problem solving in our modern societies are sufficiently open and accessible to allow those concerned to voice their concerns. My years of professional experience as a researcher in the public sector do indeed suggest to me that we should all – citizens, decision makers and

professionals alike – welcome this development. Although it may not make the job of professionals and decision makers easier, it ultimately increases chances for achieving problem solutions that are acceptable to all the concerned parties and are likely to bring true, sustainable, improvement. At the same time, it releases professionals and decision makers from the impossible (and elitist) claim of being able, by virtue of their advantage of information and expertise, to secure the "right" solutions and accordingly, to guarantee satisfactory outcomes to those concerned.

However, we need not decide (nor agree) at this point whether we should see this development mainly positively or negatively. My point of departure is merely that the nature of professional problem solving is itself becoming increasingly problematic. It is against this general background that the idea and methods of "reflective practice" are gaining increasing relevance.

**The "soft spot" of today's notion of reflective practice** In recent years, a considerable body of literature has developed around Donald Schön's (1983, 1987) seminal books *The Reflective Practitioner* and *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. We will consider Schön's approach in the third part of this series; at this point I limit myself to some general observations about the literature that he pioneered, along with a number of other writers who were working independently or in cooperation with him (e.g., Polanyi, 1958 and 1966; Schein, 1972; Mintzberg, 1973; Argyris and Schön, 1974; Argyris, 1976, 1982; Kolb, 1984; Boud et al, 1985). No need to say, I cannot do justice to the rich work of these authors here; my only purpose is to highlight some of the general tendencies of the "reflective practice" mainstream as it has developed on the basis of this early work.

Given the challenges to professional practice that we have noted above, one may certainly expect that a specialized body of literature should be developing in response. And of course, you would expect that the "reflective practice" literature *is* this body of literature and hence, that it provides a timely and rich source of reflection regarding the role professionals play in contemporary problem solving. You might hope that it helps professionals meet these challenges and become skilled "reflective practitioners" in the sense defined at the outset, that is, in dealing with the increasingly problematic, value-laden, and conflict-ridden nature of their responsibility.

You would be wrong! Quite the contrary, there appears to be a tacit

consensus among mainstream reflective practice writers to avoid the philosophical, methodological, ethical and societal issues in question. Instead, a majority of contemporary authors – including those of the specialized journal *Reflective Practice* – appear to favor a mainly psychological approach that focuses on the "tacit," partly unconscious, emotional side of the professional's skills. How do I feel when I do X? What kind of thoughts and experiences do I associate with these feelings? What do they tell me about who I am and who I want to be as professional? How do others see my practice? Can I adapt in ways that make me feel good about myself? Should I write a reflective diary on my practice? This is the sort of questions that apparently, if we are to believe the literature, are most important to reflective practitioners.

The *soft spot* of the reflective practice literature – its preference for dealing with the "soft," psychological, rather than the "hard," methodological issues of professional competence – is conspicuous indeed. Do not misunderstand me: I do not mean to say asking oneself such questions is without value. Nor do I want to create a false opposition between the two kinds of issues. Cultivating the attitude of reflective thinking certainly has a deeply personal and tacit dimension. But *not only!* We need to recover the balance: reflective practice must equally be understood to involve a deeply societal, ethical and political dimension, for it needs to address the ways we deal with issues of complexity and uncertainty, pluralism and conflict, responsibility and power. In addition to and beyond psychological aspects, reflection on such issues raises deeply philosophical concerns: How can we expect professionals to justify their findings and conclusions in the face of controversial views on what are relevant facts and values? What does it mean to solve problems rationally when the concerned parties have different rationalities? What does it mean to formulate proposals for improvement if improvement means different things to different groups of people? And so on. Furthermore, even inasmuch as we look at professionalism's personal side, I think it is an error to equate the personal with the emotional; there is an equally important intellectual core that helps us attend to the logical, methodological, and argumentative dimensions of reflective practice, in one word, to its roots in attitudes and skills of systematic *inquiry*.

Some mainstream authors might decry such a research-oriented perspective as intellectualist; but as I see it, it is the mainstream itself which has lost the

balance of heart and mind in its concept of "reflection." It has thereby left the path set out by one of its most-cited heroes, the American philosopher of education John Dewey, who was equally a research philosopher and who is often associated with the beginnings of the reflective practice movement.

Says Dewey:

It is evident that education, *upon its intellectual side*, is vitally concerned with cultivating the attitude of reflective thinking, preserving it where it already exists, and changing looser methods of thought into stricter ones whenever possible. Of course, education is not exhausted in its intellectual aspect; there are practical attitudes of efficiency to be formed, moral dispositions to be strengthened and developed, aesthetic appreciations to be cultivated. But in all these things there is at least an element of conscious meaning and hence of thought. ... *Upon its intellectual side education consists in the formation of wide-awake, careful, thorough habits of thinking.* (Dewey, 1933, p. 78, quoted in the Dewey edition of Hickman and Alexander, 1981, p. 274; the italics are Dewey's)

With Dewey, I would argue that cultivating the attitude of reflective thinking in professionals calls as much for intellectual and methodological skills as for emotional and intuitive ones; for argumentative no less than for "tacit" competencies. Paying attention to emotional aspects is good and necessary, but it should not deflect our attention away from the fundamental intellectual and methodological challenges that confront the applied disciplines and professions today. In today's reflective practice mainstream, there clearly is too much emotional navel-gazing and "making everyone feel better" and not enough concern for these other issues.

**The "soft spot" of the reflective practice literature is increasingly becoming its blind spot** Dealing overtly and reflectingly with substantial conflicts of views, values, and rationality, rather than "making everyone feel better," is the real stuff of reflective professional practice as I see it. If we wish to promote sound professional practice, we cannot avoid considering the "hard" philosophical and practical issues of what constitutes the rationality and legitimacy of competent and responsible professional intervention. Before and beyond emotional aspects, this raises questions such as what in a concrete situation ought to count as relevant knowledge and expertise; who should be considered and involved as legitimate stakeholder; what it means to secure "rational" action (whose rationality?) and true "improvement" (based on what kind of worldview and vision?); and how we can give some systematic methodological structure to such self-critical reflection.

In real-world professional practice it is the exception, not the rule, that problem definitions, solution proposals, and concrete actions or suggestions for improvement will do equal justice to all concerns. Shouldn't we, then, expect "reflective" professionals to undertake a systematic, rigorous effort of reflecting about such crucial issues, and to be accordingly careful with respect to their claims? Shouldn't we, likewise, expect them to be able to argue their findings and conclusions accordingly, with careful attention to underlying assumptions, possible consequences, and value implications? Unfortunately, those who care to undertake such an effort and set out to face the hard argumentative issues of relevance and rightness, of rigor and validity, cannot hope to find much help in the reflective practice literature today, so long as it sticks to its prevalent psychological bent. While it is certainly helpful for professionals to "return to [personal] experience" and "attend to (or connect with) [their] feelings" before "re-evaluating [their] experience" (the three core activities by which Boud et al., 1985, pp. 26-31, sums up the mainstream approach to "reflection"), this alone does little to increase the validity and rationality of professional findings and conclusions; nor does it much to legitimize the unwelcome consequences that professional recommendations may impose on third parties.

**In conclusion,** what I find strangely absent in the mainstream literature on reflective practice is a recognition of the *need for practical philosophy*, that is, for giving careful philosophical and methodological attention to the normative dimension of practice, and thus to the fundamental *challenge to practical reason* that concepts such as professional competence, rational problem solving, and applied science pose (see, e.g., Kant, 1788; Vickers, 1965; Churchman, 1968; Habermas, 1971, 1973; Ulrich, 1983). Similarly absent is a recognition of the need for reviewing our concepts of *science education*, along with the underlying models of *applied science*. It looks, then, as if the reflective practice mainstream might be well advised to reconsider from scratch its assumptions as to wherein consist the main challenges and qualities of sound professional practice today. Only thus, I believe, can it begin (and hope) to recover the full meaning of "reflection" in professional practice.

There is much to do. Let's get down to business, then, and try to take some basic first steps towards the proposed reorientation. For example, wherein

consists the difference between applied science and rational professional practice, and what might reflective practice learn from a stronger research orientation? Conversely, how might we need to revise the current model of applied science so that it can support well-understood reflective practice? In the next *Bimonthly*, we will consider what the contemporary "applied science" mainstream has to say on this issue and in what way it, too, misses the challenge to practical reason.

(to be continued)

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**Picture data** Digital photograph of Lake Oeschinen above Kandersteg, Switzerland, composed of two vertical (portrait shaped) pictures that were taken on 22 October 2004 around 3 p.m. with identical settings: ISO 50,

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*Cultivating the attitude of reflective thinking*

„Education, upon its intellectual side, is vitally concerned with cultivating the attitude of reflective thinking.”

(John Dewey, *How We Think*, 1933)

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