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The Art Of Philosophy: Wisdom As A Practice



Synopsis

In his best-selling book *You Must Change Your Life*, Peter Sloterdijk argued exercise and practice were crucial to the human condition. In *The Art of Philosophy*, he extends this critique to academic science and scholarship, casting the training processes of academic study as key to the production of sophisticated thought. Infused with humor and provocative insight, *The Art of Philosophy* further integrates philosophy and human existence, richly detailing the foundations of this relationship and its transformative role in making the postmodern self. Sloterdijk begins with Plato's description of Socrates, whose internal monologues were so absorbing they often rooted the philosopher in place. The original academy, Sloterdijk argues, taught scholars to lose themselves in thought, and today's universities continue this tradition by offering scope for Plato's "accommodations for absences." By training scholars to practice thinking as an occupation transcending daily time and space, universities create the environment in which thought makes wisdom possible. Traversing the history of asceticism, the concept of suspended animation, and the theory of the neutral observer, 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 defense of philosophical inquiry and its everyday, therapeutic value.

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Customer Reviews

Peter Sloterdijk is a prolific and original contemporary philosopher in the best Western tradition. His

writings deserve careful reading, though some of them are quite demanding and require background knowledge. Thus, to fully benefit from this 107 pages short book one should first read his 500 pages book *You Must Change your Life!*. At the center of *The Art of Philosophy* is the seeking of a detached "angelic" view of the world with the help of a fitting way of life, as central to Plato and most of pre-modern Western philosophy, in contrast to an "embedded" view of the mind as bound by the body, emotions and one's habitus in time-space. The latter puts strict limits on human ability to arrive at absolutely true theories, and the very concept of such theories; while the first, though recognizing the limits of most human beings, regard some approximation of theories uncontaminated by human limits as achievable by persons who distance themselves from the world in one way or another. The author might have done well to include at least some discourse on relevant Asian philosophies, and take into account other treatments, such as by Thomas Nagel in his book *The View from Nowhere* (1986). Consideration of differences between social theories, which are clearly very influenced by emotions and contexts, and abstract physical theories, such as quantum theory, which also depend on propensities of the human mind but are much less biased by personality features and habitus, might have added a lot to the book. But, instead of going into substance, I would like to apply the book briefly to the context of public policy making on two levels: intelligence analysts and political leaders.

The best I could say for this book is that it kept my attention to the end. Sloterdijk is interesting if you take him to be doing a kind of intellectual history. He has managed to connect up several strands of a philosophical tradition that goes back to Socrates and extends to Husserl and that emphasizes the idea of philosophical detachment. Sloterdijk is especially taken with the idea of *epoche* as found in Husserl's writings. I first studied Husserl under Maurice Natanson at UC Santa Cruz. Natanson treated the *epoche* as a kind of mystical thing: either you got it or you didn't. I had recently rejected Christianity and was not ready to take up another set of beliefs based on faith. Now, many years later, I find that Sloterdijk is presenting something similar. His efforts to recover pure thought and transcendent experience get sort of manic in the last chapter when he talks about various attempts to "assassinate" the neutral observer i.e. the one Husserl tried to create (or revive). The assassins include Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger (although the last one recanted after WWII), and then, get this, the nuclear bomb! I always did enjoy the passage in the Symposium where Socrates was lost in thought, but Sloterdijk makes a big deal of this, as also the idea that philosophy is practicing to die. Frankly, one cannot know what Socrates' contemplative moments gave him, and it is hard to make any sense at all of practicing to die unless you really believe in an afterlife or the possibility of

complete detachment from the body. Readers who want to follow the *vita contempliva* could get more out of the Zen Buddhist tradition which at least gives one various meditative practices tested over time.

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