***From concern to concept: How Philosophical Practitioners work with end-of-life-topics***

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Often perceived as detached from the practicalities of everyday life, philosophy assumes a distinctive role when confronted with the demands of lived experience. Although not conventionally recognized for its applicability, instances arise in life that inherently elicit profound philosophical inquiry. Philosophical Practice emerges as a seamless connection of philosophical reflection to the intricate tapestry of daily existence, especially in the midst of challenging life circumstances.

In the fields of palliative care and hospice, which are inherently rife with existential considerations, philosophical questions inevitably arise among both patients and health care professionals. Thus, at the intersection of philosophical practice and palliative care contexts, important and so far neglected questions about the modus operandi of philosophical practitioners arise.

In navigating the nuanced landscapes of palliative care, how do Philosophical Practitioners engage with the interplay between philosophy and the visceral realities of dying? This inquiry, part of our research project "Philosophical Practice in Palliative Care and Hospice Work. The Role of Philosophical Reflection for Developing Caring Cultures and Death Literacy" (funded by the Austrian science fund FWF, P 35627-G) at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Aging and Care (CIRAC) at the University of Graz, seeks to unravel the approaches taken by Philosophical Practitioners when confronted at these intersections. In this talk, I present the preliminary findings of a qualitative exploration of Philosophical Practice in this context.

In the nascent stages of the hospice movement beginning in the 1960ies, a discernible truth has emerged - hospice transcends mere institutional frameworks - it embodies a profound ethos (Schuchter 2020)[[1]](#footnote-1): Beyond the provision of specialized services, the essence of hospice crystallizes into a cultural paradigm of care that is indispensable wherever the facets of aging, mortality, bereavement, and mutual support intertwine. This ethos not only requires the establishment of specialized care infrastructures, but also extends its scope to the central task of dismantling the social taboo surrounding death. At the same time, this ethos beckons an engagement with the existential questions that permeate the very fabric of human existence - the ultimate questions that underscore the human condition. In cultivating a hospice culture of care, this ethos mandates a transformative engagement with the sociocultural constructs surrounding mortality. This discourse delves into the philosophical underpinnings that animate the hospice ethos, deciphering the intricate interplay between institutional mechanisms, societal perceptions of death, and the broader existential questions that lie at the core of the human experience.

Our inquiry seeks to elucidate the nuanced applicability of philosophy by exploring the extent to which this conceptual framework enriches our understanding of the existential dimensions woven into the fabric of hospice and palliative care. How might any philosophical idea illuminate the ontological underpinnings that underscore encounters with death within these compassionate care contexts? Since philosophy is not an elitist affair, one might ask how philosophical insights can find their way into the field of hospice and palliative care.

This is where, in our opinion, Philosophical Practice can have an impact (Schuchter et al. 2023). In our ongoing research project, we are trying to answer questions like: What does Philosophical Practice contribute (already actually and potentially) to the development of a hospice care culture in our society?, and, What is the significance of Philosophical Practice for end-of-life care?

The study aspires to describe Philosophical Practice and differ Philosophical Practice from known reflective practices in the context of palliative care and hospice and shed light on its potential for the sector. From our perspective and research, we outline the qualitative requirements for Philosophical Practice which integrates with the ethos of hospice. We also explore the existential and philosophical issues illuminated by Philosophical Practice in palliative care that would otherwise remain hidden, and the rich implications of the findings are presented for philosophical interpretation and discussion. Furthermore, we consider how existential and philosophical issues can be illuminated by Philosophical Practice in palliative care and draw theoretical and practical implications for further philosophical interpretation and discussion.

Since literature on Philosophical Practice in Palliative Care and hospice is still rare – especially on literature which gives insight into the actual, concrete, situated practice – we conducted an interview study with active Philosophical Practitioners. There are certainly research projects that deal with philosophical practice in the area of dying, death and mourning, such as a publication by Ben Delgado "Philosophical Practice During End of Life Care"[[2]](#footnote-2), or Anders Lindseth's work on illness, Jeanette Knox's research, Luis de Miranda's work on philosophical health, and Omar Ibrahim and Caroline Krüger's efforts to promote philosophical care in Switzerland, just to name a few. But so far the number of possible sources does not seem to be numerous.

In order to be considered for an interview, the Philosophical Practitioners had to have stated in advance that their Philosophical Practice dealt with typical philosophical topics in the field of hospice and palliative care. We therefore already foregrounded the topics of dying, death, and mourning.

Fifteen native German-speaking Philosophical Practitioners based in Switzerland, Germany and Austria participated in one-on-one interviews which were conducted in 2023. In the interviews we delved into their actual Philosophical Practice and how they approach the life topics of dying, death, and mourning with their conversational partners. This interview was guided by interview questions which could be posed in flexible order and dealt with in greater and lesser detail. This flexibility should allow the interviewer and interviewee to dive deeper into issues that emerged as particularly relevant during the interview. Following our research interests our interview guideline covered the following topics: description of the Practitioners´ own Philosophical Practice, biography and history of identifying as a Philosophical Practitioner, reoccurring themes brought up by conversational partners and themselves, contribution and impact of their Philosophical Practice, methodology, relationship to other members of the Philosophical Practice, and general philosophical views relevant to Philosophical Practice. Our eventual dataset consisted of 1328 minutes of audio recording, which were transcribed for the purposes of qualitative content analysis.

The interviewees describe their Philosophical Practices in different ways and have different offerings, ranging from individual discussions to philosophical walks.

* The interviewees' experience in the field of Philosophical Practice ranges from over 40 years to only a few months, and from full self-employment with a Philosophical Practice to part-time self-employment to philosophical coloring of the bread-and-butter job in another profession.
* There are very individual academic paths to the profession of Philosophical Practice among the interviewees, ranging from emeritus professors of philosophy to practicing family physicians with further philosophical training.
* Among the interviewees, only a few have additional training in the field of Philosophical Practice, such as is offered at the University of Vienna or as part of the German Professional Association for Philosophical Practice (Berufsverband für Philosophische Praxis BV-PP). It is worth noting, however, that these training opportunities have existed for far fewer years than Philosophical Practice itself has been known by this name.
* Many of those interviewed are themselves involved in teaching Philosophical Practice. Philosophical Practitioner is not a by-law protected profession that implies a specific training.
* When asked about the contribution and impact of their Philosophical Practice, interviewees were requested to tell a specific case history. In some cases, this makes it possible to identify a particular approach of the Practitioner, which may represent a specific feature of this person's Philosophical Practice, but also of Philosophical Practice itself.

Reported criteria of “good” philosophical practice when dealing with the topics death, dying, and mourning or in the context of Palliative Care

According to the first results, ambiguities regarding the methodology of Philosophical Practice or the reluctance to describe one's own application technique as such are striking. In several cases, the use of a specific methodology is rejected outright in the interviews, in favor of a personal interpersonal encounter in which the philosophically trained Philosophical Practitioner acts as such.

To quote one of the interviewees:

*"So that's what I think about when I think about people who accompany someone else, which is always something essential, which is actually always, I can bring hundreds of thousands of methods, I can bring hundreds of thousands of quotes, but if there's not a certain attitude, then all the methods are useless."*

At the same time, there is at least one clear difference in statements regarding the distinction between Philosophical Practice and (forms of) psychotherapy: Philosophical Practice does not offer answers to specific concerns, but rather philosophical conceptual work. In most cases, at least one specific education or training was suggested: A purely human ability to philosophize as a Philosophical Practitioner was viewed critically at this point at the latest. In addition to philosophical training, such as a deep academic background, it is very often a personal experience that led our interviewees to philosophy or Philosophical Practice. It is also a common motivation to visit a Philosophical Practice to discuss a personal problem on a conceptual level in order to gain philosophical insights. Another preliminary insight is that issues and wishes of professionalization and institutionalization of Philosophical Practice recurred in various forms in the data.

As several interviewees described in a multifaceted way, it is not the professional discussion with a guest in their Philosophical Practice that is the essence of their work. In fact, such a discussion is hardly ever held. Rather, it is the in-depth conversation of the Philosophical Practitioner as a person steeped in philosophy, who proves to be a companion to the guest on a human level. Usefulness is not immediately visible, but the stimulation of new, personal insights, which only arise from the philosophical conversation, proves to broaden the horizons of the guests in the long term. At the same time, it is a certain ethos as an attitude towards work in the field of palliative care and hospice that motivates the people working there. The experience of being touched by the last life of the dying has a transformative effect on the professional and volunteer caregivers.

What Philosophical Practice, especially Philosophical Care, has in common with the hospice movement, especially the spiritual care aspect, is the idea of “sitting with suffering”[[3]](#footnote-3). (Krüger 2022) For it is these philosophical aspects of palliative care and hospice work that Philosophical Practitioners can address, especially because they have cultivated the ability to engage in profound conversations about existential questions through their philosophical way of life and work.

Conclusions

In summary, in the context of Philosophical Practice, personal concerns derived from experience are raised to the level of philosophical concepts. At least according to most of those we interviewed. Since there is no visible agreement on the methods of Philosophical Practice, the movement from personal concerns to philosophical concepts seems to be the least common denominator for Philosophical Practice in general.

Looking at the different ways in which our interviewees have come to be Philosophical Practitioners, it is difficult to find the clear characteristics that make a philosophical practitioner a philosophical practitioner. What emerges is a not insignificant difference between counseling in the sense of, for example, prescribing philosophical reading and Philosophical Practice as a kind of life accompaniment through conversations in which the Philosophical Practitioner, as a host to a guest, also shows him- or herself to be touchable as a human being.

In the context of philosophical practice in palliative care or when dealing with death, dying, and mourning, it seems necessary to fulfill these preconditions, as our interviewees stated:

* Philosophical Practice differs from Psychotherapy since it has a different purpose: Philosophical Practice does not aim to help but to deepen thoughts.
* Philosophical Practice does not have a specific method: The personality of the Philosophical Practitioner is of more importance.

This is why the question of quality of a Philosophical Practitioner in the context of hospice and palliative care is to be raised. Since Philosophical Practice does not follow strict rules, it is to be seen as in-depth-conversation. But this is only one aspect of philosophical practice.

Based on the interviews, these aspects seem relevant:

1. A good Philosophical Practitioner needs to have an academic background in philosophy and unfolded an effect on the life of the Practitioner.
2. A personal connection with death and experience in “sitting with the suffering” (Krüger 2022) has led to a transformation of the Practitioner.
3. Philosophical Practice is a form of accompaniment at eye level between two or more touchable persons.

Discussion of philosophical concepts that arise in the field of palliative care and hospice has been proven useful for caregivers, as demonstrated by other elements of our research project.

Further and more concrete results from other research elements are expected and we look forward to sharing them with you in publications and conferences, e.g. our conference in Graz in October 2025.

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1. "...to provide a setting where dying in dignity among friends and family became possible." P.117.

and "...the original idea of the hospice movement was to reintegrate death into everyday life and to make dying and loss an accepted and valued part of life; more recently, public health approaches to end-of-life care have gained prominence". P.117. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. International Journal of Philosophical Practice. Volume 4, No. 3 (Spring 2017). pp. 32-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Philosophical care describes a careful, thoughtful and attentive mindful accompaniment of people in difficult situations. The awareness that the human condition includes dependence, neediness and relationship is helpful because philosophical care is not primarily about solving problems, but about dealing with the unsolvable, the existential. Endurance, "sitting with suffering", is an important element that links philosophical element that connects philosophical care with spiritual care. To find words in this endurance, to find terms can be helpful, and philosophy is predestined for this.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)