Is it simple to be parents in philosophy? A kitchen table dialogue

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Tillie Olsen (1978) drew attention to an evident, yet underappreciated fact of writing, which is that it takes time: 'Where the claims of creation cannot be primary, the results are atrophy; unfinished work; minor effort and accomplishment; silences' (p. 13). Drawing from our experiences as a precariously employed PhD student and a postdoc in philosophy with parenting responsibilities, we want to address this type of silencing in a manner that stylistically corresponds to the exhaustion, lack of time, and lack of leisure experienced by many caregivers in academia. For this, we want to record one of the few occasions in our daily routine where there is sufficient time and mental capacity to reflect on our own situation: the conversation at the kitchen table in the evening when the chores are done. Our contribution consists in a redacted transcription of this conversation for which we propose the term 'autotheoretical dialogue' (see Fournier 2021; Young 1997). Our dialogue covers topics such as: care in relation to class and gender (Lightman & Link 2021); teaching in higher education as a form of care work in contrast to the more prestigious work of research (Cardozo 2017); the precarious working conditions in academia and their relation to parenting (Spina et al. 2022); the ignorance and hostility towards parenthood in academia; the effects of this marginalisation like fatigue, self-doubt, and depression, but also the ambivalence that arises from the conflict of the joy of caring; and the institutional and cultural difficulties of reconciling academic work with parenthood.

Keywords: *parenthood; academia; dialogue; autotheory, care; marginalisation; class*

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We, the authors, are a PhD candidate and postdoc in philosophy situated in Vienna, both coming from working-class families, and parents of a three-year-old child. Our academic work is characterised by precarious temporary employments, scholarship-hopping, and underpaid teaching contracts. In this format, we decided to come together after our daily chores are done and engage in a conversation about philosophy and care. These conversations took place at our kitchen table, as we freely followed Sandra Cisneros' advice 'to write as if you were sitting at your kitchen table with your pajamas on' (Hinojosa 1995, p. 18, cited after Gac-Artigas 2009). The kitchen thus not only represents daily unpaid labour and subjugation to us, but rather a place, where historically those marginalised in philosophy and other academic disciplines often found time to write, think, and read in between their multiple (care-)work responsibilities and where critical, sometimes even 'revolutionary' reflections on the conditions of intellectual production and the joys and sorrows of the 'people making business' were hatched (see Cox and Federici 1975; Schütte-Lihotzky 1927; Gac-Artigas 2009). We recorded the dialogue in three sessions, translated it into English, and made a few edits, mainly adding references and shortening the text. Other than that, we did not make any changes to the dialogue.

EMA: Just tell us how you're feeling at the moment, what's on your mind, etc.

JO: I'm just thinking about the paper we still have to write. That I still have to write my project proposal, ideally in the summer, because otherwise everything will be very tight again and delayed due to the reviews. That I'm tired. That I also have to do sports somewhere in between. That Winnie is ill. And that rat poison was lying around in the kindergarten and now we have to check if he's not poisoned. Stuff like that… I'm glad that we did a lot of laundry today, even if the pile of clothes is still big.

EMA: I would like to put to record that we can have this conversation, because my mother is here, who volunteered to come without us organising, which is great, but also very rare. She came by herself, even though Winnie is sick. I also showed her the heaps of laundry we did today and explained to her that Winnie threw up all over our sheets this morning.

JO: In a beautiful gush of curdled milk. So, thank you to your mother, who is one of the very few people that helps us. It's interesting, of course, that it's the mothers who are helping out and not the fathers. On top of that, my parents don't live close to Vienna, so they can't really help out much. How are you doing?

EMA: I'm pretty tired, I'd actually much rather be lying in bed and sleeping right now. Winnie and I have been spending a lot of time together lately because it's the time between May and June where all these public holidays come up here in Austria, which I never expect and never used to notice. It's winter, the child is sick all the time, then you think you've made it. In March, April he's fine, then there are all these holidays in May and then it's summer. It was really nice to spend time with Winnie, but now I have all the more stress to get something done, which Winnie doesn't understand.

JO: Yes, public holidays are precisely not free, especially with the PhD and the time pressure, precarious employment, etc. These days are not only not free, but actually take time away.

EMA: For me, personally, public holidays are the worst, because every day I have to take off is one day less in the scholarship on which I have done something for the PhD thesis. The scholarship is a unique opportunity for me, the only one I have. It's gotten better, but I remember that in the first two years, every single day I didn't take advantage of, caused panic.

I knew I had this one chance, and it was incredibly stressful to get this funding. Here we could switch to Corona, because with the first scholarship installment, I got the positive pregnancy test, during the first public lockdown.

JO: Really?

EMA: Yes, and right now I have the strong feeling again that it's so nice to be with Winnie, I really long to spend more time with him, but in the last few days, when I've tried to concentrate on my work again and have had to detach myself from him, somehow. And whenever we get into an argument, it's so devastating to think that it was somehow clear from the start that I wouldn't be able to manage it anyway, that it was in vain from the beginning. When I just can't do it anymore, I feel like I shouldn't have tried from the start because it's clear that it can't be done anyway.

JO: You're talking about children and academia.

EMA: Yes, especially as a woman. Sure, having children has worsened your chances, but they were never zero. I knew that statistically it would reduce my chances to zero.

JO: But still, against all odds, you're about to finish your thesis.

EMA: It's not done until it's done. I could still lose it and that's really getting me down at the moment. It's also caused a lot of conflict between us, because I'm so torn about your work. I used to support it unconditionally, but at the moment it really gets me down when I see you correcting the book, because I have the feeling that you already have a lot to show for and I don't know if I'll make it.

JO: Yes, I know that too, somehow. It's a complicated situation. The way we work in academia means we only pull together to a certain extent and ultimately have to negotiate resources against each other. For instance, how much time is left for work, how much has to be invested in care, how much time is otherwise free if you want to relax or sleep. It seems to me that all of this is an overall balance, and in the view of this we are not just allies.

EMA: Yes, we are put in competition with each other. An important realisation for me was that as an individual, you simply can't compete with these structural conditions. There is simply no awareness for the fact that life has to develop and grow. It is pretended that none of this exists. It's not easy to counter this. Also the question of gender and academia: it is so old and deeply rooted in the structures that it seems impossible to deconstruct it on your own, even with the best of intentions.

JO: Speaking of parenthood and academia: the DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft/German Research Foundation) considers parenthood to be a form of 'special personal circumstances', including disability, displacement, asylum, illness, caring for sick relatives, etc. (DFG 2022). From the point of view of Germany's largest research funding institution, parenthood is something bad that can happen to you in extreme cases, but it's still a special circumstance, a stroke of fate. But even then, only some of the time is counted. The fact that this counting - how long it takes to get from one career step to another - is perhaps fundamentally problematic is not considered.

EMA: This sentence from one of my mentors, as true as it is, stuck with me: if I don't finish soon, then I'll be too old and will have no chance of getting follow-up funding. The sentence haunts my mind when I'm at the playground with Winnie.

JO: I think the sentence also shows that the structural conditions, such as the fact that parenthood is a massive competitive disadvantage, especially in terms of funding, are already influencing the beliefs of colleagues themselves to a certain extent. It's somewhat ironic, of course, à la: 'We know it's bad, but unfortunately that's just how business works'. But we still engage with these criteria on a daily basis and act in accordance with them. I think that's also one reason why colleagues in academia have an inherent problem with children and parenthood.

EMA: In what way?

JO: It's because they've internalised the structural hostility towards children and parents in academia. Having kids can make it harder to work, and your work might suffer as a result. It's basically seen as a negative thing, a kind of social handicap in academia. That's how it's typically viewed, at least.

EMA: This also has to do with the image that you always have to prove that you belong to the chosen ones, to those who are allowed to do this special work. Especially at the beginning of the PhD, I had the feeling that I didn't deserve it if I didn't dedicate all my time to it. This was also reinforced by my friends in academia back then. But it goes beyond children: everything you do 'besides' your academic work is judged.

JO: I think this is also related to this old *topos* in European philosophy, very prominent with Nietzsche, for example: getting pregnant with the work. It's terribly misogynistic in the end, and it's pretty obvious that there's some birth envy going on. Perhaps European philosophy simply has a fundamental problem when it comes to life, creation, and growth. Maybe that's why it's so hostile when it comes to this form of physical creation.

II

EMA: We have what I would call 'educational stress' with our child. Winnie is three now and, thanks to our intensified efforts, he was already able to read the alphabet and some words. Now I've been away, he has forgotten a lot. This stresses me out, because of course I feel like he has to reproduce our educational progress.

JO: It is clear that the head-start you can give when you have a concept that education is the only exit option to the confinement of class is absolutely central to the child's educational success. Ultimately, this is the only way to pass on the educational and thus class advancement to the next generation. But I think we also have an advantage in that we can reflect on this conceptually due to our work. If it were an educational advancement in a different context, I think it would be implicitly clear what needs to be done, if only from personal experience. But since we deal with it theoretically, the structures are more present and clearer, the mechanisms more transparent and therefore easier to attack and exploit.

EMA: It's like the gender issue: I teach feminist theory, but on a personal level and in everyday life, I haven't managed it any better than any other couple in our circle of acquaintances, which

consists of mainly liberal or leftist feminists. They all describe the same problem: they fall back into traditional role divisions as soon as they have children.

JO: It didn't take long for me to realise that you don't bring up a child on your own, many other institutions and people are involved. It becomes a mélange.

EMA: There is also no knowledge of how children are wired, what phase of defiance means, how they process things and see the world, why they throw cups on the floor, etc.

JO: These are things that you have to learn and that require an educational effort. But there's no time for that either. I've noticed how relaxed it is when your mother is here, one more person doing care work. It's not like you're hosting a guest or a friend that you don't want to burden, but there's a consensus that you can hand over, there's an implicit agreement that everyone will look after the child a little. It's easy with a child when there's three people taking care.

EMA: Everyone takes on a small task, one cooks, the other wipes Winnie's mouth, the third makes the bed. In between, I also worked a bit on my thesis.

JO: This also includes the topic of mental load. Today, for example, I just cooked without worrying about the fact that I'm short on time because Winnie has to be cleaned and you still need time to write and so on. It's an incredible relief to have someone there who can do that for you. But you're still constantly doing something, you're working and reproducing all the time. But you only think about two things at a time and not five when there's one more person around.

EMA: It was back and forth for me today. I'm currently at a point in my thesis where I'm explaining what time is. Every PhD student in philosophy probably comes to this point where they have to explain what time is. Incredibly difficult, I had to focus, but Winnie is so clingy right now that he comes in every ten minutes and cries, 'Mommy!' I had two hours, had to make lunch too, two different menus because I don't know if he's eating tomato sauce today or not. I like doing that and I'm happy when he's actually eating in the end. But you have to keep it all in your head and the thought rattles in the background: 'What's time for Aristotle?'

JO: When a child eats the food you cook, it's incredibly beautiful. This feeding job, the first job you do with a child. Sleep, nutrition, security. If it all goes well and he eats the food, maybe something healthy even: That's great, an incredibly nice feeling. It's just nice when you can feed people.

EMA: I don't think I'll ever manage to harmonise these roles. Right now, I have the feeling that I want to give up my PhD, I still want something from normal life, to go to the movies, and so on. Today, for example, I was with Winnie all day. I actually just want to be there for him, dawdle as much as he wants. I also have the feeling that we both achieve a lot on these days and that he remembers them for a long time. Two days later, however, I feel that I also want to create something beyond that, because at some point he will be moving out and then I want to have something that is mine.

JO: My impression is that he actually requires an unlimited amount of time, it could all go indefinitely, another game and another, and another question about why and so on. He can fill all the time he is awake, which is about ten to 12 hours a day, with play and questions, which means potentially ten to 12 hours of care work just with Winnie. Not including laundry,

cooking, grocery shopping, etc. It seems like children are designed to soak up as much time and attention as possible so they can learn as much as they can. It is therefore very difficult to make a cut. This is also a question of resources, either you allocate the resource of time to him or to the academic job.

EMA: He also notices immediately when 'we're down to the wire'. And that also feels totally wrong as a parent. But it feels just as wrong not to work on my things. When I sit in the library and read, it actually feels right, what feels wrong is the pressure and stress of no longer belonging if you don't do enough in a day.

JO: For me, that's one of the clearest gender differences. It was relatively clear to me from the beginning that having a child would only work well if I felt that I also had time for my own things. It was clear to me that it wouldn't work if I only did care work. As you mentioned, he'll eventually move out, so I always saw it as an overall balance and had fewer issues with pulling resources away from him, as I felt that it was necessary, insofar it is a long-term project. If I only invest in Winnie for 20 years or longer and burn out, it won't help anyone.

EMA: Yes, I have that feeling too. But on the other hand, I also feel that it's totally wrong to take resources away from him. I don't know exactly why. Perhaps for traditional reasons. I've always had the very strong feeling that I can think and write well and that's what I want to do. It's always hard to defend that and there's also a gender aspect to it. It's just not socially expected for a girl of my class. It wasn't planned for either of us, but for me it's always a luxury: it's nice if you do it, but it's a bonus, you have to earn it. That's one side of it. The other side is this: Winnie simply needs a lot of time and attention. And I enjoy that with him too. It's not that philosophy gives me so little, but this academic business only takes and never gives. A day at the movies with him is actually a lot more philosophical than many conferences.

JO: That's a tough question: why do we go along with all this nonsense? The current state of academia is, quite frankly, a mess (Oßwald 2024). It's unattractive in every respect, it makes you sick, it sucks and it's stupid. So why all this?

EMA: Yes, against life.

JO: There's nothing good about it. Even what was fun in the beginning, teaching, for example, becomes a burden because of how it is organised. There's not enough time, not enough money, and too many students, for example. But why though? Why are we doing academic philosophy? The only answer I have found for myself is that it allows me to write. But in fact, that's not true at all! We write proposals, articles, for which we have to clear our evenings, but it's not part of my normal daily routine. You have to do so many other things in order to do what it's actually about, philosophy in our case. The balance just isn't right anymore. So why are we doing this, why don't we just stop? Prestige plays a part in it, certainly, and a form of competition or gamification; it's also about having made it, despite all the adversity.

EMA: I think there are many bad reasons, but many good ones, too. That's why I always ask the students at the beginning of a course: Why did you start studying philosophy? Everyone has a very good reason, a calling.[1]

III

JO: What were your good reasons?

EMA: A fellow student once asked me this and immediately got upset: 'Most people don't even know the answer to this question!' I didn't have an answer either.

JO: What were the bad ones?

EMA: The bad ones are that it was imposed on me by my family because they couldn't do it themselves. It was what they thought would bring them the most prestige.

JO: That reminds me of Tom Waits: 'I'm gonna take the sins of my father…'

EMA: Of my grandmother in that case. Those were the bad reasons. I also struggled for a long time with the fact that I chose my studies for the wrong reasons, because I would actually have preferred to study biology.

JO: That's interesting, biology is not necessarily the most prestigious discipline.

EMA: But what were the good reasons? It's just that I wanted to understand things that are not immediately useful, that don't lead anywhere, where you don't know whether it will help. For example, time: I really want to understand what Aristotle thinks about time.

JO: So a kind of sporting ambition.

EMA: Yes, just like Winnie: to catch his interest, it has to be difficult.

JO: I find that relatable. At school, it only ever became interesting where it wasn't clear what the answer was, where it became speculative. And in philosophy it doesn't cost anything, you just have to sit down and read, that would actually be very democratic. Sitting down and reading is a nice thing. I started studying something else, originally physics and other things. The problem was that I had no idea what studying was like, I assumed it would be similar to school. As it turned out, it wasn't quite like that.

EMA: What was the difference?

JO: As I had no role model - no one in my family had studied - I thought that you just do what's in the curriculum and you're good. But that's not quite the case. Ultimately, you have to plan what you need for what and make the necessary changes. In any case, there was the problem

[1] 'Where letters and the sciences are concerned, on the other hand, the usual outlets – teaching, research-work, and a variety of ill-defined careers – are of quite a different character. The student who chooses them does not say goodbye to the world of childhood: on the contrary, he hopes to remain behind in it. (…) Their splendours reside, as do also their miseries, in their being a refuge, on the one hand, or a mission, on the other.' Lévi-Strauss 1961, p. 58.

that it was clear that I wouldn't stay within the standard period of study and that the state student grant (BAFÖG) would only cover the standard period of study. The mathematics was pretty simple: it'd probably take another two or three semesters, and I had to figure out how to pay for it. Then there's also the Master's degree to be done. That's why I decided to change my field of study quite early on.

EMA: I understand, that was a financial decision. Very good, we were just talking about a calling.

JO: I then enrolled in environmental sciences because it gave me the opportunity to integrate all kinds of disciplines. That's when I realised that I could do a relatively wide range of things apart from the actual study program. So I tried it out and sat in on all kinds of lectures. That was incredibly liberating. But at some point, I had to get a degree, which I did in environmental sciences. In my Bachelor's thesis, I also worked somewhat historically, as it was about a field that hadn't really been paradigmatised yet. In the end, the actual subject of the thesis was relatively uninteresting for me, what was much more interesting was the work on the history of science, because it opened up a dimension on science that I simply didn't know before. It also caused a certain skepticism, especially with regard to the ideas of scientific progress. In any case, I wanted to continue in the direction of the history and philosophy of science. In Vienna, there was this possibility at the time, even for people from other disciplines than history or philosophy. In Vienna, everything was a little freer at that time, so a lot of things opened up. At some point, Deleuze came along and that simply interested me. Then Foucault came along and that's how I ended up writing my doctoral thesis, a chain of new interests that I pursued. So there wasn't really an original question, it was more a case of moving from one unsolved problem to the next.

EMA: Had you thought about having children then?

JO: Not at all.

EMA: Was that never a question?

JO: It was categorically out of question.

EMA: When was it a question?

JO: By the end of my twenties it became an issue.

EMA: Why?

JO: I suppose it's because I've gotten older. In my twenties, I took care of myself all the time, without it having done me much good. It still took that time. By the end of my twenties, I had the capacity to take care of other people. I first had to find my way around in the academic world, also because at that time I still had no concept of class difference, I couldn't understand why everything was so difficult, I had no idea about class transitions.

EMA: Yes, that's why it is so hard.

JO: It was always a struggle, everything was harder than with others. But why?

EMA: I used to think it was all about intelligence, I thought it was all about who was the cleverest, the most talented.

JO: It didn't take long for me to figure out that either I'm completely stupid or there's something else that causes all these subtle problems. But I had no idea what it was. That only really came with the PhD. Before that, you just deal with it in a way that's become routine. You know you're annoying people, but you don't know why. It was only during the course of my PhD that I gained the distance and maturity to look back on such things, which are very shameful.

EMA: And that you can afford it because you already have a degree.

JO: I found the distance important. The bourgeois colleagues are basically constantly cutting you down and correcting you. They do it without even realising it, it's a social automatism. It takes time before you stop taking it so personally and start to understand what's happening and why. As I said, the important thing was the concept of class transition, *les transclasses* as Jaquet (2014) calls it.

EMA: But despite all the criticism, you can also see what identity politics can do, how important it is.

JO: For me, it's more about the concept, the power of the concept. These means of thinking are simply essential, and that's what I was missing in my twenties, a concept of who I am. Everything always depended on the individual, there was no idea of structural dimensions.

EMA: But you didn't think about children in your twenties? Why? I know how we met, you were always talking about babies. And that convinced me. I never wanted to have children.

JO: I don't know, it just happened. From the moment I felt that I no longer had to take care of myself, that I was out of the woods. My family is also quite large, like many working-class families. I didn't think it had to be that way, but the hurdle isn't that big. When you grow up with lots of kids your age, it's just normal. I think that's one of the nice things about us 'Prolos' ('proles'): our relaxed relationship to children.

EMA: It's not about the ideal moment, they just pop up without you being able to control it, then you just take them with you, for better or worse.

JO: Sometimes that doesn't work out so well either.

EMA: Yeah, sure.

JO: I think it's a nice approach not to plan it down to the last detail. This idea is mainly about inheritance. In the other case, the children are more or less on their own, it's an event that happens and they're just there, but it's not as if they have to carry on everything. Of course, it was always an issue with my partners at the time, but I was really annoyed by the planning discussion, I think it's so stupid: first this has to happen, then that has to happen and then... I mean, in retrospect it makes perfect sense!

EMA: I only knew from my own environment that it 'just happens'.

JO: The *proles*, the offspring.

IV

JO: Raising children is probably always very complicated. We've also seen an unexpected drop in birth rates across the globe for some time now (GBD 2021 Fertility and Forecasting Collaborators 2024). What is the situation now in academia and in academic philosophy in particular?

EMA: I was still thinking about the Olsen text on Silences (1978, p. 19-21). What I found very inspiring about it was the biography of Olsen herself. She embodies many of the things she writes about, in that she had no opportunity to work in literature until she received a scholarship. This fits with what we have already discussed. Scholarships are very often an essential part of class transitions. Olsen then gave her child to relatives to have time to write, but in the end, she rather broke off the scholarship.

JO: Did she have a partner?

EMA: Yes, he was an unionist.

JO: Did he take care of the children?

EMA: I think she doesn't write about that. What's also important about Olsen is that she is one of the few who lists the conditions of writing, such as having silence, having helpers, usually wives, who make writing possible. All of this is diametrically opposed to the conditions of making humans. I think Fraser calls it that, the 'people making work' (Arruzza, Bhattacharya & Fraser 2019, p. 68), I find it a very useful term. According to Olsen, one of the conditions of writing is 'the flow of daily life made easy and noiseless' (p. 12). For example, she writes about Rilke not even going to his daughter's wedding, and that he considered this to be completely justified. Olsen presents it in such a way that you think, 'What an asshole', but surprisingly she then says that he simply did what was necessary to maintain his creative power (pp. 15-16).

JO: But she still wrote books.

EMA: Yes, but she probably could have produced more. But when she writes about Woolf, she also asks herself whether Woolf is not also mourning what she did not have, children, for example (see Olsen 1978, p. 200). There seems to be a kind of mourning on both sides, the mourning for the books that were not written and the mourning for the children that were not born.

JO: I wonder how we should understand the conditions of production. On the one hand, the examples that Olsen lists are all from the 19th century. On the other hand, it is not so clear for what kind of production they are the conditions for - is it about any kind of writing or about producing so-called world literature?

EMA: Olsen says that women often turn to the so-called minor genres (Olsen 1978, p. 10) because they lack time. Nursery rhymes, jokes or short texts, because they can be written down quickly.

JO: But then the canon is the problem.

EMA: I think what she means is that there is something rotten in the idea we have of the author. The great writer who is freed from the noise of the world, who is only absorbed in 'his' work. That is a bad image, this cult of genius, that is how I would understand Olsen.

JO: What's interesting is that Olsen is looking for the conditions of writing, but at the same time she's deconstructing the type of writer associated with it. This type is very peculiar, and not terribly desirable, in my opinion. It also has something very alienated about it, reminiscent of the highly specialised, repetitive work in a factory, also in isolation and compartmentalisation.

EMA: On the other hand, we also know that when we sit down to write a text, it is good to have a lot of time at a stretch. The theme of helpers is also relevant today, if we think of global care chains, which, as Federici (2016) says, are proof that the problem of care work has still not been solved. What the poet's wife used to do is now done by the domestic worker. A good example is perhaps Rachel Cusk, who writes in 'A Life's Work' about how she had a baby while she was a writer. She is not blowing the horn of 'Regretting Motherhood', which is also a valid perspective. Cusk's position is however consistently ambivalent and therefore more interesting, I think. There is a scene in which she describes how difficult it is to combine authorship with having a child, losing contacts, not having enough time. She decides to hire a babysitter and is dissatisfied with one applicant after another. One of them, a woman called Rosa, who she then fires, calls her a horrible, privileged woman who only pays slave wages (Cusk 2001, p. 242). And she sees it that way herself, she can simply afford to pay someone to look after the child.

JO: What Olsen analyses is the status quo. Under the prevailing circumstances, this and that must be given so that one can write. What I am not sure about is the question - what is Olsen's own position on this? The problem is that the nexus of parenthood/philosophy or parenthood/writing is connected to a whole range of other things: relations of production and reproduction, power relations, ideological relations, etc. The aforementioned birth envy of philosophers and the idea of becoming pregnant with a work is, from this point of view, a very peculiar idea. In any case, I have the impression that the problem of writing, as we have considered it with Olsen, also calls into question the status of philosophy as an academic discipline, as a form of professionalised writing.

EMA: In what way?

JO: I wonder whether it is a good idea to professionalise philosophy as an academic discipline or intellectual work in general. You know the famous passage from Marx that strikes a chord with me: in the association of free people, there would be the possibility of doing this today, that tomorrow, hunting in the morning, then fishing, and criticising after dinner (Marx 1969, p. 33). I don't necessarily have to hunt or fish, but I find the idea that everyone contributes to the vital work, so that everyone can also have a share in the intellectual work, is thoroughly worthy of support.

EMA: But the care aspect would still have to be incorporated. Although didn't Marx take good care of his daughters?

JO: I think he took care of them as well as any man of his century, no more and no less. But maybe I'm wrong.

EMA: But yes, exactly that plus care work. We should align the whole production process, material and immaterial, everything that is done as a profession or wage labor, more with the conditions of life.

JO: Yes, I fully agree. It's clear that the way we organise ourselves undermines living conditions at every level. Not only do we as a species undermine the relationship with the rest of nature in the sense of the sometimes rather shallow discourse of anti-anthropocentrism, but also within the species, since we also undermine our own reproduction.

EMA: It is obvious that current working conditions are not geared towards children and parents. This becomes especially clear in academia. Not only the extreme pressure to publish, which is also starting earlier and earlier, the artificially-created competition, the additional tasks such as administration, 'service to the community', etc. Or the fact that stays abroad are expected as a matter of course. Faßmann (Education Minister of Austria at the time) also emphasised at the scholarship award ceremony that you simply wouldn't have a chance to survive in academia without this experience abroad. That was at an award ceremony, which had been postponed for two years due to Covid. Winnie was there because we had no one to look after him.

JO: Sometimes I get the feeling that the topic of studying abroad is a special fetish of the German-speaking world. In any case, it has completely gone off the rails, especially when you consider the huge social effects that result from it.

EMA: But I'm now completing the foreign scholarship, as I play by the rules. And as we said last time, it's hard to combine that with care. After half a year, it just tears you apart, it messes up your routine at home. And it only works because we manage it in a half-hearted way, moving abroad with the child for six months, the price is usually too high.

JO: Apart from time pressure and reproduction, there are other filters that exclude parents and especially mothers: the pressure to publish, experience abroad, and ultimately all the things that academia is so sick of.

EMA: Yes, the system is designed for mobile single men.

JO: Who are mentally stable, healthy, who don't need any social contacts, and change countries or continents every few years. A very special idea. Maybe it also has to do with the image you mentioned earlier. This immersion in writing and the subordination of everything and everyone to it. This figure is very romantic, the cliché of the artist, and also very old. But strangely enough, it is also perfectly suited to being exploited in a way that has never been seen before, because writing, in our case academic philosophy, is a kind of lifestyle. Employee rights are, of course, ridiculous in the face of this. That is to say, perhaps there is also a very direct interest in maintaining this form of subjectification, however unsustainable it may be, simply because it is ideally suited to squeezing even more work out of the day. A romantic figure that fits perfectly with neoliberal exploitation mechanisms.

EMA: That's what I wanted to emphasise earlier: this 'the flow of life made easy and noiseless'. These 'special circumstances, children, illness or jobs to pay the rent. We once had an event in the doctoral program, the so-called 'Pragmatic Academic' series. It was about designing CVs. The only question that remained unanswered was how to deal with gaps in the CV due to mental health issues. Maternity leave and motherhood, it was said, were great advantages -

absurdly, I hear that all the time. As for the author figure you mentioned, it's also important that there is no additional income, no bread-and-butter job. Many of our colleagues, for example, have been doing proofreading on the side, which is not far-fetched for philosophers, especially since external teaching is difficult to make a living from. Many however considered them to have 'failed' in academia - one minimal deviation and you're out, so to speak. This also shows what a bourgeois endeavour academic philosophy is.

JO: And incredibly uncritical. All the things that lead to these 'failed' careers or biographies, such as the fact that there are far too few jobs, that everything is precarious, that there is no non-professorial tenured staff anymore, all this is part of a process that has been going on since the 1970s and that has fallen on very fertile ground in academia, since there is hardly any union organisation here and there is therefore little resistance to the deterioration of working conditions. There are countless examples of how union organisation and traditional industrial action are effective. The fact that this figure, as we have discussed, is so powerful due to these circumstances is completely ignored.

EMA: Yes, everything is negotiated at the individual rather than the structural level.

JO: Exactly, it's your own achievement or your own failure. But it's also important to see that these connections are also co-produced by those who suffer from them. That's the strange thing about it, we reproduce it at every level, subjecting ourselves to the evaluation criteria of 'good' science, accepting these idiotic publication hierarchies with good and bad journals, good and bad publishers, etc. We're all in on it! The problem is that we think we're only doing it 'ironically', as if we didn't really mean it. So, from a business perspective, it's something we have to do, even though we'd prefer to focus on philosophy and not get bogged down in the nitty-gritty of the world. I think we overestimate ourselves. As long as we reproduce these practices, it doesn't matter if we really mean it. The effect remains the same, whether we believe in it or not.

EMA: On the other hand, it's true that if you participate, it creates conditions in which you can work well. However, it is strange that continuity in one's biography is valued so highly. How is that supposed to be possible with fixed-term contracts of three to four years?

JO: Today I received an email offering me a fixed-term teaching position. The email also said that I should find out about any additional income limits if I wanted to combine the teaching position with unemployment benefits. This means that the university is perfectly aware that this is normal for many people, a now-normal life and work model. On the one hand, it's a step in the right direction, at least they're no longer closing their eyes to it. On the other hand, it's also very typical of academic philosophy how uncritically it is simply accepted. It's just taken for granted on both sides: there are people who get unemployment benefit or social security and teach at our institute. And then in such a bureaucratically brutal way: Please make sure that we as a university have no problems with this, yes, thank you. In any case, precariousness is an integral part of teaching and research at universities and is no longer denied by them.

EMA: How nice of them. But let's go back to this author figure: I have the impression that it is very old and firmly anchored in philosophy. There are only a few exceptions, Aristotle is one, Spinoza too, who was a lens grinder by profession. But those are exceptions. Another example would be Kierkegaard, who inherited from the father he hated.

JO: Yes, the image is probably much older than that. I was thinking of the cliché of the consumptive writer who somehow pours the last pages of his life's work into a novel with his last ounce of strength and wastes away at the age of 35.

EMA: So Novalis is to blame for everything?[2]

JO: That's exactly how it is.

V

JO: Writing and publishing are just one part of academic philosophy, most also teach, although the importance of teaching for a career is secondary. The only thing that counts is publishing, teaching is just a sideline. This naturally suggests a parallel with care work, in the sense of teaching as a necessary but marginalised reproductive activity in the academic field, as opposed to publishing and research as prestigious, 'productive' work (Cardozo 2017). And it's not just the structure or organisation of the academic field, there are also other aspects that are surprisingly similar. For example, the affective investment, in that we deal with people in teaching, which also means that we have relationships, and the resulting difficulties of pulling out, setting boundaries in terms of working hours. You realise that you're always doing too little, the students always need more supervision and discussion than you can provide. As in care work, teaching, at least for us precariously-employed people, is hardly financially recognised; the salary is ridiculously low, but for money nobody does it anyway. But it's also fun to share knowledge and to see how much joy students get from doing philosophy. It's also incredibly satisfying to see how a person's thinking and writing develops. All of this is very similar to care work.

EMA: Yes, also because there is a growth, especially in philosophy, where it is not only about factual knowledge. You can see that it liberates people, these one-and-a-half hours where they are in a room that is a bit freed from the usual rules: We are doing something useless here and nobody can stop us. That is a great freedom.

JO: But very fundamental transformations also happen, because these are very young people, in their early twenties. They may be thinking about certain things for the first time. School cannot teach something like that as an institution that is epistemically, politically, power-theoretically and organisationally very much part of the 19th century. On the other hand, it may simply not have been possible to think certain things before, simply because of the level of maturity. It's not just about the grand ontological or cosmological questions, for example, Foucault was a shattering experience for me in the best sense of the word. A transformative experience, in that afterwards you not only see things differently, but also live differently. You open up new areas of thought and ways of thinking that were simply not possible before. It's incredibly exciting to be there, also in terms of the increase in power or potentiality in the Spinozist sense that the students undergo.

[2] In our conversation, we referred to the German Romantic poet Friedrich von Hardenberg, who chose the pseudonym Novalis, as he seems to be the perfect example of the aristocratic dandy-like poet exclusively committed to his work (who also tragically died at a very young age). Surprisingly though, he was also a successful and pragmatic businessman who, only in his twenties, became assessor and director of the salt mines in Weissenfels.

EMA: But it's true: it's not seen as that important and, as you know, there are many colleagues who can't see the point of teaching at all, but just look down on the students, like 'prove to me that you're even worth reading your seminar papers.

JO: Yes, that's not uncommon. The grading and the pressure to grade is also unspeakable and ultimately hinders development. It also shows how much we are still trapped in the schools of the 19th century, as if these grades had some meaning beyond the necessities of the bureaucratic apparatus. As if the abilities and developments of students could somehow be objectively measured, especially when it comes to producing text. For example, isn't it much more impressive and a greater achievement when a student improves their writing by several levels in a seminar than a good piece of work by someone who - for whatever reason - can already write well? I think there is simply a lack of obvious principles for objectifying performance in a course.

EMA: I would like to talk about autotheory (Fournier 2021, p. 7; Young 1997, p. 62; see also Wallraven 2007). Because it's not just about mixing personal experiences with theoretical elements, but also about reflecting on how a theory has influenced your own life or helped you to interpret your own circumstances, such as parenthood. We had already talked briefly about this, for example about gender roles and the knowledge of how we are pushed to fulfill them. At the same time, however, this knowledge has not helped much, not that it was completely useless, but it was less effective on a practical level than I had hoped.

JO: I would agree with that. On the other hand, perhaps the expectations are a little too high. It is of course understandable since we have been talking about the feminist movement, the liberation of women, etc., for 150 or 200 years, and that things have not progressed as much as we had hoped. There has been progress, no question about it, but the foundations, the fundamental injustices, are still very stable. Perhaps this is the source of our impatience. But the point is that we are fighting against centuries-old forms of subjectification and centuries-old power technologies. This cannot be solved in the blink of an eye by one generation, and certainly not as a side issue. I always find it grotesque that we assume that we can solve one of the most fundamental political problems on the side in care work.

EMA: Yes, maybe. In any case, when I didn't have a child yet, I thought that theory could do more. I hadn't yet seen how many singular acts are needed every day to resist the normalised roles. Faderman also describes something similar (Faderman 1981, pp. 213–214): in lesbian relationships, as fruitful as they most often have been for women writers, it has sometimes happened that, as soon as one of them devotes herself to writing, the other is pushed into patriarchal dependencies and care work, even if both had academic ambitions.

JO: That's very perfidious. The pattern is always that social pressure is privatised, which means that it is not translated into a political momentum, but is vented at home, in private or in therapy. For example, we argue about how we divide up our time. This makes it a problem that affects couples or families in their private lives, as if we could somehow just regulate the basic structures that lead to the problems. And yet the most important things are not in our power, by and large. The ridiculous wages, the housing shortage, the ecological disasters, the concrete institutional, social and administrative incentives to perpetuate the patriarchal organisation, etc. A certain part, certainly, is within our power. But not everything, which is why the privatisation of problems is a very efficient way to make criticism ineffective.

EMA: Okay, I'll leave it at that. I recently saw a book in the library with the title: 'If you just hadn't had children' (Steger 2014). That's typical, it's always about the argument, well, why are you whining that you can't write, if you hadn't had children, then... As if the incompatibility were somehow natural. We also saw quite quickly after the birth of our child what we also found in Marx and Federici: children are not a private matter, but they are socially essential. In addition, everyone else is involved because they are dependent on children in one way or another. It is not a private pleasure and we do not raise these children alone. In a strange way, it is the basis of everything and at the same time not thought of.

JO: The academic world in particular is inherently hostile to life. Or inherently hostile to children and therefore to parents. A final word?

EMA: No, no, that won't be my final word...

JO: I would like to say hello to my mom.

EMA: You haven't called her back in a month.

JO: I'm sorry, I didn't find the time.

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