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In Quest of Platonopolis:
Excerpts from Research Visits to Philosophical Communities

In general, the idea of a completely contemplative life, of a studious leisure whose pleasantness would be still further enhanced by the pure pleasure of the spiritual friendship, exerted on all of Antiquity a fascination which seemed to only increase at the end of the Roman Empire. One hundred years after Plotinus, Augustine too, before his conversion, would dream of a phalanstery of philosophers, where, in leisure and complete communal ownership of possessions, he and his friends could "flee the noise and annoyances of human life."[1]

Introduction:

What ever happened to this philosophical dream? Sure, young philosophers create small groups of friends during their graduate philosophical education. Yes, some of them may become lifelong friends. A few of them even discuss dreams of a better institution, where they could do "philosophy how it should be done." But mostly these dreams come to not, and the graduated philosopher continues a journey to build "a solitary philosophical burrow."[2]

Philosophy being solely an isolated enterprise is a rather new occurrence in the history of philosophical praxis. There was (and still are in a few corners of the world) robust houses, communities, schools, and other forms of associated philosophical living. In fact, associated community living was long one of the most common

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1) Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus, or, The Simplicity of Vision* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 98.

2) A reference to William James' sardonic quip in response to a call to help create and support the American Philosophical Association: "The philosopher is a lone beast dwelling in his individual burrow – count me o u t !" William James, "Letter to T.H. Gardiner, Cambridge, Nov. 14, 1901," in *The Letters of William James: 2 Volumes Combined* (New York: Cosimo, 2008 [1920]), 164.

"modes" of philosophical praxis. Today, most academics are only familiar with the individualized modes of philosophy. In fact, individualized philosophy is so pervasive that other philosophical modes of practice are treated as non-existent.

The most common individualized modes today also have their roots in philosophical tradition. There are philosophical geniuses who make models of reality in their "solitary burrows," (such as Kant and Pierce) and philosophical wanderers whom have an embodied errant praxis, supporting wisdom wherever they travel (such as Diogenes of Sinope and Takuan Soho).[3] There is, however, another largely neglected mode of philosophy that has mutually reinforced ethical praxis rooted in a shared personal place. I call this mode of philosophy, which is a shared dream of many young philosophers, philosophical community.

In my doctoral dissertation in philosophy, I characterize and defend this neglected mode of philosophy, "philosophical community," by describing the constellation of ethical principles — general, axiological, cultural, and dialectical — that cultivate its values. One can find the origins of this mode of philosophy in ancient philosophical schools and monasteries. In the Western and Middle-Eastern traditions, a pivotal philosophical community was Plato's Academy, which integrated the Athenian higher education model as introduced by the Sophists, with Socratic philosophy and dialectics.[4]

The Problem of Professionalism and the Need for Philosophical Community

As part of this project, I explore how the philosophical community mode can address the challenges created by current professional philosophy. Professionalized philosophy has been a double-edged sword. Since the German Research university gained hegemonic dominance and disciplines solidified in their modern form in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, professionalization has shifted the academy away from an organic model of progress. Philosophical professionalism has narrowed what counts as knowledge, under-valued teaching, further individualized philosophy, promoted career anxiety, protected racist and sexist practices, created a Machiavellian arena for academics to vie for limited resources, and offered limited job protections when it comes to serious questions about controversial scholarship. One of philosophy's perennial tasks has been to explore the nature of philosophy. In the twentieth century, with the rise of the professionalized academy, this resulted in an endless conversation about whether philosophy had its own respective field of knowledge, and if and how that field of knowledge progressed (and was perhaps completed). This conversation ignored the central insight of ancient philosophical practice, that if philosophy is to mean anything, it is as a reflective praxis which transforms self and society. Further, it held that such a praxis becomes honed as a shared life praxis with others, and becomes intelligible and powerful for others when seen as a collective activity they may participate in.

Philosophy lost its heart as a way of life in the name of professionalization. It has become a "phil-episteme," a love of knowledge. The love of knowledge model has cultivated philosophy departments that aim at creating individualized philosophers supposed to be "creative geniuses" or at the very least professional technicians/certifiers. They were not designed to support robust community life. To the contrary the aim of such departments

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3) Although, such a mode of philosophy will inevitably create and support philosophical geniuses and philosophical wanderers. Further, an occasional philosophical genius or philosophical wanderer will create, or at least attempt to create, a philosophical community. Thomas Davidson and Kongzi are two notable examples of the latter. Their communities/schools are be drawn upon throughout my dissertation.

4) For more, on sophistic models of higher education on which the academy and lyceum drew upon in Ancient Athens, see: John Patrick Lynch, *Aristotle's School: A Study of a Greek Educational Institution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 32–67. For more on the position of Plato's Academy, see: Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 55–76.

is to make more "phil-epistemers," to make them technicians, or, if they are lucky, geniuses, who have strong c.v.'s, not a community that reinforces practices of self-cultivation. Nevertheless, neither philosophy, nor any academic discipline that has survived, would exist without the security professionalization afforded.

It would be foolish to argue that it was unwise for James Edwin Creighton,[5] who helped create, and then lead, the American Philosophical situation, his counter-parts in Europe, and others in their respective disciplines, it would be foolish to argue that it was unwise for him to act as he did within the context of their historical situation. Nonetheless, the unforeseen p r e s e n t   c o n s e q u e n c e s of their decisions have resulted in a conception of professionalism that rarifies information and techniques, and reduces all knowledge to them. This conception of professional life fails to achieve a holistic vision of culture. It also fails at cultivating philosophical community as a way of life. In turn, the academy in general, and philosophy in particular, has become increasingly irrelevant to the growth of our cultural life. Philosophy has steadily become more foreign to the public and ever less potent in making a difference in our public lives.

Our present problematic situation centers on asking how we can reconstruct the best of professionalism while ridding ourselves of the rest, all to support a new generation of philosophers as agents of the revitalization and advancement of culture. It is highly alarming that no place exists for such a discussion to occur. The foundations of higher education are largely in the hands of student services and administrators, a task "professional academics" relinquished as a secondary concern. We ought to come together to revitalize the best of philosophy as a way of life.

Philosophical community has been one leg of this project, and right now our tripod is bereft without it. The individualized philosophy of the twentieth century seems to have left little influence on culture. If we hope to leave a legacy such as the Hellenists left us, robust philosophical community life is needed.

Method:

My philosophical methodology in the dissertation is radically empirical philosophy of culture. I take all experience, and especially the relationships we find in experience, as real and concrete. By "principle," at the very least, I mean a hypothetical ground presupposed in successful inquiry. If my project is successful, taken together, the constellation of ethical principles should help us refine for ourselves a vision of the best of philosophical community life, which should also help us frame a new *brocard* for this mode of philosophy in the twenty-first century.

By experience, I mean a hypothesis about our immediate relationship to the world. Since there is, after-all, more to the world then we can count, qualify, and magnify (with imagination), and yet we experience the blooming-buzzing confusion as real, intelligible, and affective against our own bodies, in any present moment, it is a safe bet to take it as "real." The first hypothetical postulate of radical empiricism becomes "whatever is actual is possible" or whatever is affective and immediate ought to be taken as real and the basis on which we can safely speculative. I avoid the supposition that experience requires some transcendental sinew or connective tissue from "next to next" (as James put it so well), or that we should make fictitious connections to account for nominal entities. I do so by taking the relationships we experience, from loving a partner, to the chilly winds blowing from the window that are not yet cognitive but felt, as real given their i n t e l l i g i b l e affective capacity. We recognize in such non-cognized feelings that the possibility in contrast to our actual experience is intelligible. The order of the possible has intelligible relationships to the actual that we can tease out to some capacity. I thus follow in the tradition of Whiteheadian radical empiricism, as a peculiar branch of this currant, by suggesting that the possible can also be treated as real.

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5) For more on Creighton and formation of the American Philosophical Association, see: Randall Auxier, *Time, Will, and Purpose: Living Ideas from the Philosophy of Josiah Royce* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2013), 309–350.

By "culture," I seek to demarcate that field of inquiry which examines the manifestations of experience known as *Geist,* or self-conscious symbolic life activity, and a particularly late development of it at that. As Whitehead might put it, I am interested in the "higher thresholds" of the "higher phases of experience." In order to follow concepts that are never wholly determinate, and that illuminate aspects of the intensive experience and expression of *Geist,* I have chosen to engage and build upon Cassirer's field work in philosophy and the *Geisteswissenschaften,* or the cultural/humanistic sciences (in the German sense of the term). However, instead of relying on the groundwork of "critical philosophy," I ground my methodology in radical empiricism, and in particular Dewey's denotative method. Apart from the aforementioned methodological commitment to experience as the concrete ground from which to build theories, I also have limited myself to an inquiry that arose from a "genuine problem" i n experience. My dissertation arose from a "problematic situation." If the current mode of professional philosophy has not proven successful, is there a shared form of philosophical life that could provide an alternative? To support a new model philosophical program, I need to explore the principles that have supported successful philosophical community in the past and present.

The dissertation uses the experiences of communities of philosophers as the ground upon which to base the ethical principles. I drew upon primary sources, secondary sources, as well as direct field research to ground these principles in the experiences of philosophical communities. When I reviewed historical documents, or conducted interviews of adherents at currently existing communities, I looked for repeated patterns of successful practice, say, for example, repeated mentioning of *philiac* friendship or techniques of mutually reinforced self-discipline, as helping cultivate a rich philosophical life with others. Once those patterns were listed, I attempted to speculate on what sort of interrelated whole was presupposed by these relationships. The principles a s s y s t e m a t i c u n i t y is my attempt at articulating that whole.

My dissertation is not doing empirical social science, nor any "science" if one means the narrow sense of that word. I am not seeking to collect a data set that could measure the success of philosophical community life. My method also has some rationalistic elements since, as a good Whiteheadian radical empiricist, I use sophisticated abstract systems. But such systems need to ultimately provide a coherent and adequate account of, and be affective for, experience. If my system is not "useful" and applicable, then its abstractions have no force, they are "vacuous actualities," as Whitehead would put it.

The s y s t e m a (my term to describe the levels of generality in my dissertation) were modified as I read more primary sources and did site visits. The whole project can be seen as one big shifting space. Think of it as a sort of ever adjusting "map." If I found out there is another island nation in that world, I would adjust my map accordingly. Occasionally a radical shift in perspective requires completely changing the map. As one principle or approach gets modified, the whole gets adjusted, and if a major empirical experience inside a community challenged my fundamental ideas, say about the relation of interpretation between those outside and inside of communities, I had to change a whole s y s t e m a or even the whole structure of the project.

These ethical principles then, as previously discussed, at the very least, are articulations of common practices in certain successful inquiries. Principles should articulate for us what we have done already (as refined over generations) when we are most successful at cultivating and maintaining communal philosophical activity. When we think about principles, we superadd that mongrel breed of necessity which enables us to recognize the relation of such principles to our successes and failures. The principles carry no necessity save as our best (practical) articulations of philosophical community at its most intense and successful. In short, they develop necessity not as critical or transcendental limits to human activity, but as time-proven methods for successful philosophical community. By bringing the field of philosophy of culture under radical empiricism, I have a methodology that will keep the focus of the principles on human praxis. Further, the principles' relationships as a coordinate whole are speculative. When speculatively coordinating the principles, new insights about the

nature of philosophical community life became apparent. The genetic and coordinate analysis of Whiteheadian radical empiricism thus adds new insight that might be missed with a more Jamesian radical empirical study.

After consultation with knowledgeable parties, I chose to visit and interview adherents of an odd collection of institutions across the United States and Europe. These places either are still what I call philosophical communities, or they are exemplars of some aspects of robust philosophical community life. The California Institute for Integral Studies and the Munich School of philosophy are good examples of the former, while Deep Springs College and St. John's College are good examples of the latter sort of institution. Some interviewees have allowed me to collect our discussions and put them in an archive that will be made available to the public at the American Institute for Philosophical and Cultural Thought.[6]

I used a (semi-formal) hermeneutical, as opposed to phenomenological, interview protocol. Instead of trying to give a rich phenomenological account of the experience of being in these communities (each would take a lengthy study that would be its own project), I used interviewees interpretation of their own communities as a basis on which to draw my principles. After the interviews were completed, I transcribed them and organized them through social science software for the purposes of my own reflective organization.

I learned much from visiting these communities. Some of them are vibrant and offer new opportunities for the future of philosophical practice; others are struggling but have old, hard won principles and lessons that we all should take seriously. Philosophy for these communities is more than the next professional essay or a new systematic attack on the latest trend in philosophy. Rather, they see philosophy as a mutually reinforced ethical praxis that should make a difference in living the good life.

Example Visits

So what exactly did I learn during my research travel? Although I certainly cannot begin to answer that question here, in what follows I include journal entries from my a few select site visits to illuminate my experience and what kinds of principles I drew from these visits.

Abbey of Gethsemani (New Haven, Kentucky, USA), November 25-28, 2016,
Short Overview:
Thomas Merton lived and worked at this peculiar Trappist monastery. It has kept much of his interfaith and cosmopolitan philosophical legacy. Besides the vestiges of philosophy as way of life carried into Christian monasticism, and Merton's own philosophical charisma, there is a more direct legacy of philosophical community at the abbey. Merton's philosophical teacher Dan Walsh (who received his doctorate of philosophy from the University of Toronto alongside Étienne Gilson), moved to the monastery and started a successful small philosophy program for the monks.[7]

11/25/2016 (Day One)
First Impressions:
"My friend and I arrived around 1:30 in the afternoon. We took the long winding road through a quaint town, seemingly stuck in 1955, named New Haven. We steadily headed up through the rolling Kentucky hills. The Abbey sits on a low hill top. In the grey light, amongst the autumn leaves, and the soft silence, I found myself drawn into reflection; to quiet.

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6) For more, see: "Home," American Institute for Philosophical and Cultural Thought, Accessed September 23, 2017, http://americanphilosophy.net/.

7) For more information, see: "Home," Abbey of Gethsemani, accessed June 27, 2017, http://www.monks.org/.

The Abbey is quite large with a hotel sized retreat center. They have simple but elegant rooms. We are in the older men's dorms. They have shared bathrooms and comfortable cells. We have had to adjust from the rambunctious, excited philosophical dialectic of graduate school to the quiet of Benedictine contemplation. After eating lunch in the little tourist town of Bardstown, we returned to the Monastery around 2:30 pm. We took a walk in the garden. Much of the abbey is off limits to us. We can enter the church, the retreat center, and some of the gardens (and long lengths of trails), but the main monastic area is inaccessible to us.

The whole geography of the monastery is systematic and meant to return one to the reflective life. For example, the death of Jesus in parable form is displayed in a series of carven images, set a few feet apart, on a short path in the back garden, or in the off limits grounds (which I can see from my window), a sculpture reminiscent of Jesus' thorny crown dominates the center of the courtyard. Even slight details in the church's sparse design, and in the architecture of the retreat house cells, bounces one back into one's inner life.

Two aspects of life here thus far seem to be important lessons for my dissertation:

One aspect is the architecture of the place. Everything is designed to reinforce the way of life. The second aspect is the aforementioned silence. The quiet of the place is not eerie. It is not even intense (though I'm sure it is for the monks), it is peaceful and death-like. It is death-like not in the sense of dread, or fear, or doom, but peace and the lifting of burdens, release form the mortal coil. A certain death-ease…

I met Brother Paul today. He was warm kind and welcoming, an exemplary example of hospitality. He genuinely welcomed us; there was a care, even though we were not his close friends, to meet and greet us as persons. I felt recognized and immediately at ease.

There is separate cooking staff, as well as gift shop staff. They remind me that there is a peculiar relationship the monks have with those outside the community. I'm curious to hear what folks in Bardstown and New Haven think of the Monastery. Hopefully, we will be able to stop by and talk to people in those towns about their relationship with the abbey.

It is a relief to know such places still exist in the world. This experience has made me wonder about whether there is a place for such religious communities outside the normal world. The world might be better with such places around (mostly divorced from the world). Philosophical communities probably ought to be on the edge of culture (geographically and metaphorically), but I don't think religious communities ought to be."

Later (8:00 pm)

"We had dinner with Brother Paul Quenen and his friends. After getting mildly reprimanded for missing Vespers (we didn't understand he asked us to join earlier in the day), we began a wonderful conversation. When we told him we were graduate philosophy students, he immediately brought up how much he enjoyed Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. I learn about the connections Brother Paul saw between Hadot's historical studies of philosophy as a way of life (including philosophical communities) and the monastic life at the abbey. We also saw some of his artwork, and learned more about him. We went to Compline with him, it was beautiful, soft, and quiet. Given my upbringing in a Jewish, democratic socialist household, I felt a bit awkward, to no fault of anyone. It was a profoundly beautiful experience. I look forward to vigils tonight.

No new thoughts on philosophical community, save that it is clear that monastic life (at a place like this at least) has kept important parts of the older Western traditions of philosophical community. "

11/26/2016 (After Terce)

"Other thoughts: Vigils was picturesque (in the pitch black). I'm curious about Mass tomorrow. Here, it is not just friendship that is punctuated by rhythm and ritual, but the whole world. The call to prayer, as in Islam, aligns people to the world around them, even to the seasons, to the night and day. Rhythm and ritual are flip sides of a coin here."

<u>11/27/2016</u>

"My interviews with Brother Paul and Father Michael were excellent. I couldn't have asked for better interviewees. Brother Paul is a beatnik Franciscan in the body of a Trappist. Truly a wonderful person and a gracious host. Both of them embody the spirit of Thomas Merton. In all the monks who were novices under him, you can feel the echoes of his own spirit, especially in their propensity and respect for philosophy. I do hope to return.

I have lots of good notes about how to reframe the interview questions. I think the distance of the monastery from the world leads to a different sort of duration than I was expecting. The out of time feeling is intense here. Very much like Tolkien's fictional Lothlórien... I think philosophical community proper is much more on the precarious edge of the world. "On the threshold" as the Sufi's say. That is a different project than what is done here."

<u>Deep Springs College (Big Pine, California, USA), December 12–14, 2016</u>
Short Overview:

"Founded in 1917, Deep Springs College is a unique institution of higher learning. The educational program is built upon three pillars: academics, self-government, and manual labor. The school is located 40 miles from Bishop, California on an isolated cattle ranch in Deep Springs Valley. Between 12 and 15 students are admitted each year. A scholarship covers the costs of tuition, room, and board for every student offered admission. In exchange, Deep Springs students are expected to dedicate themselves to lives of service to humanity. Alumni have gone on to exemplify this ideal in a wide variety of fields, including politics, science, journalism, academics, agriculture, medicine, law, business and design."[8] This institution has aspects of a robust philosophical community, although it would more properly be understood as a *eutopian*[9] community of higher learning.

<u>12/13/2016</u>

"My friend and I arrived last night at 2:00 am (mountain standard time, which despite being in California, they keep at Deep Springs). We winded up and down a series of intense hills as we headed into the mountains. We finally headed down a mountain side on perhaps the most intense switchbacks I have ever encountered. We turned off the main road onto a dirt road lined by beautiful trees. The campus is centered around a small circular quad. There is one main building with faculty houses surrounding it. Down the road there is a farm and another student run ranch building.

I completed two excellent interviews. I'm currently sitting in on a class, on "Eu-sociality and Super-organisms." It's a research/lab class that has turned into making a review essay for publication. They are currently working through a draft. They are a little behind due to problems (a mix of over-ambition and the fact that the internet went down the night before, etc.). They are excellent seminar participants.

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8) "What Is Deep Springs?" Deep Springs College, accessed June 27, 2017, http://www.deepsprings.edu/about/.

9) My term for actualized and forward looking institutions for the advancement of human dignity and culture. *Eutopian* politics aims at refining human political life through enacting the "good life" in a smaller place, a kind of microcosm. They proffer tantalizing alternatives to the broader culture, which did not seem possible within that culture. In my Master's Thesis, I reimagined *eutopia* (what I then called "actualized utopias") as a cultural concept. I attempted to distinguish what I now call *eutopias* from the popular understanding of utopias. Sir Thomas More's coinage of the word "utopia" had a double meaning; utopia's Greek root is both *ou-topos* (no-place/nowhere) and *eu-topos* (good-place). Although these are idealized dreams of the "good" as manifested in community life, they can be actualized, albeit, under tremendous strain, and on a very limited scale. Given such Greek roots, and to differentiate these kinds of communities, I have used the *eu-* prefix, and thus *utopias* (which have "no place"), are replaced by *eutopias* (which are "good places"). For more see: Eli Kramer, *Utopia and Human Culture: Alternative Communities of Higher Learning in America* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2015).

The feeling of intensity of life, at least for outsiders, here is perhaps somewhat mitigated due to the fact of the age of many of the adherents. Identity is being formed here, while attempting to be intense adherents of a community (a whole). This need for identity formation was not at Abbey of G. or other places a visited, where most adherents had settled into their personality, and could help others through joining the community. Another way to put it is that robust philosophical community is closer to what we might consider graduate education, and less connected with undergraduate education.

This relationship with graduate education is rooted in more participation, longer years of service, education as life vocation, and more roots to a particular place. Philosophical monasteries and are great at making a close knit and intense inner circle, whose energy is easily felt by those outside of it. Firm identity, with devoted community adherents, creates a shared approach to life that psychically is more intense both for adherents and those who visit from outside the community.

Work on the cattle ranch here is not done for profit or to offset cost. The goal is building a stable community, self-integrity, and autonomy. Work is ritual (something like 20 hours a week). It strengthens the community, outside of its potential financial benefits.

I suspect a principle of philosophical communities is a balance of Leisure/Reflection and Action/Work in one part of their life practice, and service for the world as the other side. I should figure out the details of this triad at different levels of generality as one of the great challenges these communities seem to face. Deep Springs is very Benedictine because of the strength of the leisure and work, and how vague the outlines of service are for them. Deep Springs Reminds me of a milder Abbey G. (in this sense), especially with Merton's influence".

Conclusion:

Some lessons about a community can only be experienced in person. By visiting the Abbey of Gethsemani one learns about how a duration out of our normal experience of time feels, how it is cultivated in a community, and how it affects a community's practice. It is one thing to read about it, another to experience it. It is one thing to learn about an isolated undergraduate college for the cultivation of world leaders, another to see students work on the ranch, go to class, and face solitude in the desert.

Perhaps Plotinus' *Platonopolis*, a city of philosophers, was not so foolish. Perhaps the young dreams of philosophers are not fantasies, but echoes of philosophical communities often neglected and forgotten. These communities are worth our consideration. Some of us need not be in "solitary burrows." Some of us might find a shared home and hearth with fellow travelers on the road of wisdom.

Toward that end I co-created the "Summer Seminar on the Future of Philosophical Practice" held at the University of North Carolina Asheville North Carolina in July 2017. This international summer seminar brought together leaders from across the world interested in supporting robust forms of philosophical practice. Some, like Fred Gifford from the Transdisciplinary Michigan State University philosophy department, taught us how philosophy can and should engage in transforming cultural life from his perspective as a leader in his department. Others like Crispin Sartwell, discussed how the lone philosophy outside of the toxic academy can do their wandering work in the world, especially through editorial writing and personal engagement. Finally, there were those such as myself and Leonard Waks, who explored creating a new philosophical community for our present situation. At the summer seminar, we build a rough outline of how such a community might be created and sustained in novel ways. After the conference a few of us got together as a Philosophical Practice Working Group to explore a number of different projects, including work toward this community. We are

currently working with the International School for Philosophy (Leusden, Netherlands)[10] to build a North American philosophy center that is a graduate school, a resource and networking site, an incubator for new philosophical cultural work, a retreat house and conference center, and a site for other experiments in robust philosophical living.

It seems likely that our interconnected world culture is facing an impending age of decline. Given the destructive effects of climate change, the projected loss of half the world's bio-diversity, the end of peak oil, and related war, violence, and mass migration, humanity is likely to face a tragic period. In the face of a declining world we can turn to the old *eutopian* politics yet again. We may not be able to save the world from a tragic age, but we can make sure that we keep a few bright alternatives available for those in a sad hour. The heart of the constellation of principles is an articulation of what the best philosophical communities can be as bright spots in the tragedy of life. The philosophical community can remind persons of what they can be, even during the world's tragic hours. In fact, it is in those hours that philosophical community can play its strongest role as an illumination of the revitalizing capacity of human culture. Philosophical community can show us that we can always do better, even if it is only with a few close friends.

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10) "Home Page," International School for Philosophy, Accessed December 2, 2017, https://isvw.nl/?lang=en.