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Mateusz Salwa
Editor
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4988-8912
mateusz.salwa@uw.edu.pl

# Philosophy and the Urban Everyday

It is not a gross exaggeration to state that philosophy is an inherently urban phenomenon. Born and largely practiced in the Greek polis, it was developed throughout the ages in various places that more often than not were situated within city walls. Even if, udoubtedly, philosophy has never been limited solely to urban spaces, it has become more and more embedded in cities over the centuries. Consequently, from the 19th century on it has been part and parcel of the intellectual life whose main centers have been towns since it has been almost exclusively researched on and taught within academic institutions.

These circumstances have been taken for granted by philosophers for a long time as if the cityscape in which they lived and worked were only an everyday backdrop of their activity, a background whose down-to-earth, practical dimension made it separated from the kingdom of theory, and hence, philosophically uninteresting. Consequently, even if it is true that "philosophy is … born form the city"[1] this birth has been mainly a conceptual dimension. Henri Lefebvre, the author of the words quoted just above as well as one of the pillars of contemporary urban theory, states that:

> For philosophical meditation aiming at totality through speculative systematization, that is, classical philosophy from Plato to Hegel, the city was much more than a secondary theme, an object among others. The links between philosophical thought and urban life appear clearly upon reflection, although they need to be made explicit. The city and the town were not for philosophers and

1) Henri Lefebvre, "Philosophy and the City," in *Writings on Cities*, translated and edited by Eleonore Kofman and Elisabeth Lebas (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 88.

> philosophy a simple objective condition, a sociological context, an exterior element. Philosophers have thought the city: they have brought to language and concept urban life.[2]

Yet, the concept of urban life seemed to have little to do with the urban life itself, as if the city was solely a place where "I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends," as David Hume famously wrote, and where even more down-to-earth practices necessarily take place. As such it could at best be a source of figures of thought useful in a "classical philosophy."

This approach has recently changed and the city has been, so to say, discovered as an object of philosophical considerations, comparable to nature, history, man, and so forth; that is discovered as an "objective condition, a sociological context" worthy of particular philosophical attention. The conjuction "philosophy and the city" or – which seems to be even more inspiring – the concept of "the philosophy of the city" have recently gained popularity quite rapidly as it is proved, for example, by a number of recently published books and issues of journals.[3] Consequently, philosophy has been included in the wide spectrum of disciplines vividly evolving from the 19th century on that today are jointly termed *urban studies*. Henri Lefebvre, then, was right when he wrote in the late 60s:

> It is not proven that philosophy has said its last word on the city. For example, one can perfectly conceive of a *phenomenological* description of urban life. Or construct a *semiology* of urban reality which would correspond for the present city to what was the logos in the Greek city… . To consider "the city" is not already to extend philosophy, to reintroduce philosophy into the city or the city into philosophy?[4]

It is noteworthy that at the same time he made a remark which can be interpreted as a warning and suggestion how not to practice "philosophy of the city":

> A certain number of contemporary thinkers have pondered on the city. They see themselves, more or less clearly, as philosophers of the city. For this reason these thinkers want to inspire architects and planners, and make the link between urban preoccupations and the old humanism. But these philosophers lack breadth. The philosophers who claim to think the city and put forward a philosophy of the city by extending traditional philosophy, discourse on the "essence" of the city or on the city as "spirit," as "life" or "life force," as being or "organic whole." In brief, sometime as subject, sometime as abstract system. This leads to nothing.[5]

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2) Ibid., 86

3) See for example Ferenc Hörcher, *The Political Philosophy of the European City* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021); Keith Jacobs and Jeff Malpas, eds., *Philosophy and the City. Interdisciplinary and Transcultural Perspectives* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019). Sharon M.Meager, ed., *Philosophy and the City: Classic to Contemporary Writings* (New York: State of New York University Press, 2007); Sharon M. Meager, Samantha Noll, and Joseph S. Biel, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of the City* (New York: Routledge, 2020); Ewa Rewers. *Wstęp do filozofii ponowoczesnego miasta* (Kraków: Universitas, 2005); see also texts published in special volumes of the journals *Contemporary Aesthetics* 8 (2020); *Open Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2020), *Topoi* 40 (2021); as well as an issue of *The Philosophy of the City Journal*. See also http://www.philosophyandthecity.org; https://www.philosophyofthecityturin.com, accessed 20/08/2023.

4) Lefebvre, "Philosophy and the City," 92.

5) Ibid., 93.

More than half a century after Lefebvre's critical remarks, it seems that a totalizing approach toward the idea of city and urban life has been largely eliminated from philosophy and – paradoxically – if one were particularily interested in it, one should reach for contemporary architectural theory, especially one exposed by theoreticians devoted to nothing else than classical philosophy.

It goes without saying that questions like "what it means for a city to be good?", "what is citizenship?", "what is urban justice?", and similar are still asked and that philosophy of the city is still interested in "the nature of the city itself and the modes of life and existence that the city enables,"[6] yet today's "metrosophy"[7] is a multifaceted project. On one hand it is oriented toward identifying "philosophy and the city" motives in classic and contemporary writings, on the other it aims at offering philosophical analyses of an immense variety of aspects of cities, approaching the latter as spaces shaped by material and social factors as much as objects of individual and collective experiences. The fact that metrosophy is nowadays case-sensitive is crucial since this guarantees that philosophical attention is focused on particularities of urban lifes and spaces, which makes it possible to avoid any sort of essentialism. Indeed, one cannot deny that "there can be no unique 'philosophy of the city' any more than there can be one city that is the model for all cities or for the modes of life the city enables."[8]

An adage verging on triviality is that the future will be that of metropolises. In fact, according to different estimates, the number of people living in cities (or rather mega-cities) will outgrow that of people living in non-urbanized areas in a very short time. This implies that cities are about to become everyday enviroments for the majority of several billions of people around the world. As a consequence, philosophy of the city will inevitably be turned into philosophy of the everyday and vice versa.

In fact, what has been said above about the relationship between philosophy and the city holds true when the relationships between philosophical thought and everyday life are at stake. On the one hand, the idea of philosophy as a way of living, which implies its everyday character, has a very long history; but on the other hand this sort of existence was interpreted as a spiritual exercise aimed at freeing or at least distancing the subject from all that was deemed down-to-earth and mundane, even if indispensable for intellectual life. In other words, the everyday has long seemed to be a sphere interesting only for those whom Georg W. Hegel named "psychologistists" and claimed that they were "particularly fond of contemplating those peculiarities of great historical figures which appertain to them as private persons."[9] He believed that this "*valet-de-chambre's*" perspective could only show that their masters were ordinary men and an ordinary individual "must eat and drink; he sustains relations to friends and acquaintances; he has passing impulses and ebullitions of temper."[10] Consequently, Hegel claimed that a valet:

> Takes off the hero's boots, assists him to bed, knows that he prefers champagne, &c. historical personages waited upon in historical literature by such psychological valets, come poorly off; they are brought down by these their attendants to a level with – or rather a few degrees below the level of – the morality of such exquisite discerners of spirits.[11]

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6) Jacobs and Malpas, "Introduction: On the Philosophy of the City," x.

7) David Kishik, "Metrosophy: Philosophy and the City," (*The New York Times*, July 6, 2015).

8) Jacobs and Malpas, "Introduction: On the Philosophy of the City," x.

9) Georg W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History. Introduction*, translated by H.B. Nisbet. Introduction by Duncan Forbes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 87 (§34).

10) Ibid.

11) Ibid.

Of course, in making these remarks Hegel was interested in philosophy of history, yet he expressed in them – in all probability, quite unwillingly – a belief widely held until recently, namely that the everyday (epitomized by *valets-de-chambre*, that is servants responsible for freeing their masters from their most basic daily cores), is located below the sphere of philosophical interest.

This approach has also changed lately and the everyday has been recently more and more appreciated by philosophers and consequently – as in the case of philosophy of the city – philosophy joined other disciplines in recognizing the fundamental role of the everyday. This shift was made possible not only by a number of twentieth-century philosophers more and more interested in human *Lebenswelt*, but by anthropologists, culture studies scholars, ethnographers, historians, and sociologists who discovered the everyday as their field of research long before philosophers.

Undoubtedly, one of the issues with the everyday – one that quite possibly begs a philosophical analysis more than others – is the fact that is hard to define. One may offer a list of synonyms (banal, commonplace, down-to-earth, familiar, habitual, mundane, ordinary, routine), but this does not change much, since what counts as everyday is not fixed and depends on the subject, circumstances, place, and time. The everyday, like the city, does not allow for any totalizing approach, therefore the best way to grasp it is to attempt an ostensive definition, endorsing all the limitations of such a move. This what was done by, for example, Ben Highmore in the opening lines of his book *Ordinary Lives. Studies in the Everyday*:

> Somewhere a clock is ticking like it always does, you are getting hungry like you always do, the telephone is ringing like it always will, and the TV is playing in an empty room. Somewhere someone is dying, someone is being born, someone is making love; somewhere a war is being fought… . The everyday is the accumulation of "small things" that constitute a more expansive but hard to register "big thing." But like fissures in a stream of constancy the everyday is also punctuated by interruptions and irruptions: a knock on the door, a stubbed toe, an argument, an unexpected present, a broken glass, a tear, a desperate embrace.[12]

It is noteworthy that Highmore, a culture theorist, is interested in answersing questions that sound quite ordinary, but at the same time have a philosophical flavour:

> How does everyday life feel to you? Do the habits and routines of the day-to-day press down on you like a dull weight? Do they comfort you with their worn and tender familiarity, or do they pull irritably at you, rubbing your face in their lack of spontaneity and event? … Can domestic routines become precious moments snatched from more thoroughly exhaustive work practices, or do their rhythms constantly signal their lack of value? And how, supposing we wanted to, would we call attention to such "non-events," without betraying them, without disloyalty to the particularity of their experience, without simply turning them into "events"?[13]

The character of these questions is determined by the fact that Highmore claims that the everyday is inherently aesthetic. Such a belief seems uncontroversial since it is more than obvious that everyday life is a rich source of aesthetic experiences, positive or negative, which are inherent to our daily activities taking place in private or public spaces and inevitably having economic, political, social, as well as ethical meanings.

12) Ben Highmore, Ordinary Lives. Studies in the Everyday (London: Routledge, 2011), 1.

13) Ibid.

It is then no wonder that within the array of possible philosophical approaches to the urban everyday, a privileged place is occupied by aesthetics, which offers an important input to the philosophy of the city. This, in turn, results from the fact that philosophical aesthetics has deeply changed in the past two or three decades as it has extensively broadened its range, covering not only its traditional field, namely art, but also other areas traditionally conceived of as devoid of aesthetic qualities worthy of philosophical considerations. Natural environments, urban space, business, law, sports, popular culture, medicine, science: the list of new philosophical directions is long and far from being closed. Contemporary aesthetics, then, already far from being a philosophy of arts or philosophy of art criticism, extensively contributes to the efforts of philosophy to keep up with the contemporary world and its problems.

Despite that aesthetics of the everyday (or: everyday aesthetics) is of a recent origin, it may already be seen as a fairly well defined field. It is characterized by a set of key questions that are raised and answered in multiple manners in quite an abundant body of literature.[14] Even if it originated mainly in Anglosaxon academia and was inspired by, among other things, the analytic tradition it is nowadays also practiced, and quite extensively so, in other academic centers that have enriched it with other inspirations.[15]

Everyday aesthetics is a result of the abovementioned larger tendency to broaden the scope of aesthetics. Consequently, it should be seen as an extension of the approach defined by the Western tradition as much as its opposite. One way or another it has to be viewed in light of such traditional aesthetic questions as "what aesthetic qualities are there?" or "what is an aesthetic experience?" as well as questions inherent to itself, namely "what is the relationship between art and the everyday?", "is the aesthetic experience of the everyday different from the aesthetic experience of art?", "is it possible to aesthetically experience the everyday as everyday?" The common assumption behind various answers given to the questions is the belief that traditional aesthetics was too much focused on fine arts to be able to cope with everyday objects, places, or situations. As a result, it overlooked a vast sphere of cultural and social reality and tended to claim that it is devoid of aesthetic qualities and cannot be source of aesthetic experience. In other words, it identified aesthetic qualities with those which one can encounter in works of art and aesthetic experience with that of artworks. Yet, it again may be seen as a sign of philosophers' tendency to turn their backs to the commonplace, whereas it is quite uncontroversial that people find not only works of art, but also ordinary objects beautiful or ugly, tragic or comic, and so on.

Aesthetics of the everyday is thus an attempt to fill this philosophical lacuna. The exponents of this approach aim at establishing the aesthetic qualities different from those usually associated with artworks that everyday objects may have, or differently put, what features makes people like or dislike everyday objects – especially when they are unlike paradigmatic artworks (paintings, poems, sculptures), what it means to aesthetically experience everyday objects or places, whether there are any prerequisites of an aesthetic experience, or any criteria of its adequacy or quality. Apart from that, there are two key problems that anyone interested in everyday aesthetics has to perforce cope with. One is the relationship between art and the everyday, namely the question whether it is really possible to move beyond the experience of art and to claim that, aesthetically, the everyday has nothing to do with art and therefore that any sort of "artification" (i.e. treating the everyday as if it were art or looking for its art-like features), is flawed since it compromises the very idea of the everyday. The other issue is whether it is possible to aesthetically experience the everyday as everyday, since the aesthetic experience itself is not everyday (banal, commonplace, ordinary, routine etc.) itself, which may mean that whenever we aesthetically experience an everyday object,

14) A comprehensive bibliography may be found in Yuriko Saito, "Aesthetics of the Everyday," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Spring 2021), ed. Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/aesthetics-of-everyday/.

15) See for example Everyday Aesthetics Network: https://www.evanetwork.eu, accessed August 20, 2023.

space, or situation we inevitably experience it in an unordinary way, which compromises its ordinariness. Finally, it should be added that there is a strong tendency within aesthetics of the everyday to think of aesthetics as intertwined with ethics and therefore such concepts as aesthetics of care or virtue aesthetics have been gaining importance lately.

All of these issues are crucial for the articles included in the present volume. They all address, implicitely or explicitely, aesthetic and ethical dimensions of the contemporary everyday, on the one hand offering inisights of a more general character, on the other – case studies.

Beata Frydryczak in her article "Ruins: Between Past and Present, Between Culture and Nature. Contribution to the Discussion," takes up the subject of a motif well-established within the aesthetics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Ruins, thought of as remnants of the glorious past to be contemplated, were usually approached as artworks even if their aesthetic character was largely due to natural forces. As such they were far from ordinary. Frydryczak, however, is not interested in the ruins that were so fascinating for Romantics, since her focus is on contemporary ruins, ruins that we are all very well familiar with. We do not have to think of the atrocities of the twentieth century to see to what extent ruins have become commonplace: the ruins of the WTC, Fukushima, and today – ruinated cityscapes in Ukraine. This, she believes, requires a new perspective; one that is more centered on ruination as a condition of the contemporary world and follows the agenda of posthumanism in an attempt to see in it a process which not so much ends the past as opens a future.

The posthumanist perspective is also present in Agata Kowalewska's text "Glimmers of Interspecies Resurgence in Public Art: A Reinterpretation of Joanna Rajkowska's 'Oxygenator'." She offers an intepretation of a highly acclaimed work of public art made by Joanna Rajkowska, one of the most renowned contemporary Polish artists. In 2007 Rajkowska temporarily rearranged one of the squares located in Warsaw's downtown, creating an articial pond surrounded by shrubs, flowers, and benches. Her aim was to create a friendy, welcoming everyday space mainly for local residents and people working nearby. Contrary to the majority of interpretations of this work which focus on its social and cultural meanings, Kowalewska offers a reading according to which *Oxygenerator* creates a human/non-human community and therefeore is an illustration of how everyday city space as an interspecies ecosystem may be recognized and cared for. Viewed this way, Rajkowska's work turns out to be an excellent example of contemporary art critically approaching one of the today's most burning issues, namely the relationship between people and nature in what is going to be the dominant environment, namely cities.

The significance of contemporary art is also discussed by Zoltán Somhegyi who treats it as a tool allowing him to trace cultural complexities permeating everyday environments. In "Cultural Complexities and Their Environment. Investigations of Code-Switching in Contemporary Visual Arts," he offers an interpretation of the works of selected contemporary visual artists (Manit Sriwanichpoom, Nandipha, Mntambo, Michael Rakowitz, Yinka Shonibare and Marja Helander), who illustrate in different media and different cultural contexts what seems to be crucial for the everyday. As it has been long discussed in culture studies, the everyday is the field where meanings are created, modified, and negotiated. The everyday has always been full of cultural complexities, but today when the contacts, intersections, and tensions between various groups are much more intense than before, it is even more heterogenous, dynamic, and idiosyncratic than ever. Consequently, it now seems indispensable to think of the everyday in plural as it is shown by nothing else than contemporary artworks, including those discussed by Somhegyi. This, in turn, allows one to think that art – as non-everyday as it still is – not only offers valuable insights into the everyday, but is also privileged in accomplishing this task because it is always oriented on the particularities of the everyday.

The artists mentioned above delve into "code-switching" mechanisms and processes triggered by cross-cultural relationships. Yet, similar shifts may also be identified within certain traditions typical for partic-

ular cultures. This is the case discussed Tetiana M. Brovarets in her article "'Pigeons Fly off a Stone Mountain…': From a Cooing Lovebird to a War Pigeon, or Modification of Embroidered Rock Dove's Symbolics in Today's Ukrainian Merch." The text is devoted to the Ukrainian tradition of *rushnyks*, embroidered towels characteristic for their iconography and inscriptions. Once widely in use, *rushnyks* fell into oblivion in the second half of the twentieth century and have recently been discovered first as objects symbolizing national identity and then as objects whose iconography may be adjusted to the circumstances determined by the war in Ukraine. *Rushnyks*, together with their contemporary use, are a perfect example of everyday objects whose cultural role is due to their aesthetic qualities, which may easily pass unnoticed if one follows too strictly the path of traditional art-centered aesthetics. Overlooking these everyday aeshetic qualities would, in turn, make it difficult to understand the symbolic shift discussed by the author, since it could occur thanks to their look and the feelings they provoke. What is more, one would not be able to understand the significance of the *rushnyks* recovered from the ruins by volunteers mentioned by Brovarets at the end of the article.

One of the key issues that are addressed by aesthetics of the everyday and are particularly interesting when urban life is concerned is the nature of aesthetic experience. Traditional art-centered aesthetics has identified aesthetic experience with contemplation, namely with attentive observation performed in circumstances favoring it. Such a view poorly fits not only a great deal of contemporary art exhibited in museums, but also a great deal of public art (not to mention that it fits even worse for such ordinary objects as *rushnyks*). This is why Justin L. Harmon, suggests in "Distracted Aesthetics: Towards a Hermeneutics of Engagement with Distractive Works of Art" that we should complement (or even in some cases even replace) this view with one which is based on distraction. By making references to street art – an urban genre *par excellence* that by definition has a deep impact on everyday environments wherever it appears – he shows that a distractive aesthetic experience should be recognized and acknowledged as a fully legitimate manner of experiencing urban art since it is meant to be part of urban space, which is inherently distractive. In fact, one may add that if one were to suggest a universal trait of the everyday, its distractiveness would be a good candidate; the reason is simple: no one can be attentive all the time.

In order to better understand the difference between a distractive aesthetic experience and an attentive aesthetic experience one may reach for Adam Lipszyc's article "Häm on the Wall: Hamacher, Celan, and Two Simple Questions." The author endorses Werner Hamacher's view of deconstruction and puts it into practice in order to offer his reading of Paul Celan's poem entitled *Mauerspruch* (*Words on the Wall*), written during the student revolution in 1968. The form of the poem, resembling a "fleeting graffito," as Lipszyc states: its title referring to slogans written on walls, as well as the moment in which it was written give it a strong urban flavour. Yet, it definitely may be tasted only through meticoulous analyses and sophisticated interpretations requiring time, peace and silence (that is, all that which urban spaces cannot offer).

The present volumes also hosts Andrzej Leder's article, "Transformation of Trust into Capital, Financialization and the Moment of Betrayal," devoted to the thorough analysis of the role of trust and distrust in the contemporary world and the link between these feelings and attitudes so crucial for interpersonal relationships and global economy. Indeed, it seems that another universal trait of contemporary everyday – at least in the European context – is a general lack of trust and that, consequently, acknowledging trust as a new fundament of a future everyday sounds promising, even if utopian. Given that the future is going to be urbanized, we need such political projects as there may be no doubt that what is needed is a new type of global *polis*.

These topics are also discussed in the interviews with Scott Shapiro and Adam Chmielewski. The former is devoted to the War in Ukraine and a possibility of establishing a New World Order, while the latter offers a view of how philosophy may be useful for urban studies. There is no doubt that the everyday has always been challenging because of its complexity and tumultuousness (maybe it is another of its general feautures), and

that people have always had to cope with it one way or another. And one way to do it is to offer philosophical analyses and interpretations.

Philosophy together with its potential to ask fundamental questions concerning aesthetics, environment, ethics, politics, society, technology, law, and so on, offers a good ground to consider the particular nexus between everyday life and the city, or to put it differently: the urban everyday which, as it has just been said, is going to be one of the major factors shaping the future world. Yet, if this capacity is supposed to be realized in a satisfying manner, one has to bear in mind what Henri Lefebvre wrote (to quote him one last time):

> In order to formulate the problematic of the city (to articulate problems by linking them), the following must be clearly distinguished:
> 1. The philosopher and philosophies of the city who define it speculatively as whole by defining the "*homo urbanicus*" as man in general, the world or the cosmos, society, history.
> 2. Partial knowledge concerning the city (its elements, functions, structures).
> 3. Technical application of this knowledge (in particular context defined by strategic and political decisions).
> 4. Planning as doctrine, that is, as ideology, interpreting partial knowledge, justifying its application and raising these (by extrapolation) to a poorly based or legimitated totaity.

The radical critique of philosophies of the city as well as of ideology is vital, as much on the theoretical level. It can be made in the name of public health. However, it cannot be carried out without extensive research, rigorous analyses and the patient study of texts and contexts.[16]

We believe that the articles in the present volume, taken individually or together, are inspiring contributions to "the problematic of the city"; ones that offer philosophical insights or may be used as a basis for them, successfully combining a degree of speculation, yet without any inclinations towards totalization or ideology, with reliable analyses of case studies. Hence, we believe that the content of the present volume is another step on the never-ending path leading to a better understanding of our everyday lives.

16) Henri Lefebvre, "Philosophy of the City and Planning Ideology," in *Writings on Cities*, translated and edited by Eleonore Kofman and Elisabeth Lebas (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 97.