

# An Unwritten Philosophical Autobiography

Ora Gruengard

Ora Gruengard, PhD, *practices philosophical counseling in Israel since 1992. She was inspired by Shlomit's pioneer activity in Israel and her propagation of Achenbach's approach, but developed her own approach. It is based on her academic knowledge (philosophy, economics, cognitive psychology, family therapy), life experience, including teaching and doing research in philosophy (mainly at Israeli universities and colleges) and practical psychological work, as a student and volunteer, with individuals, groups and families in distress. She has published many essays and articles and teaches at Shenkar, Engineering, Design, Art. Institute of Higher Education, Ramat Gan, Israel. Email address: [ora.gruengard@gmail.com](mailto:ora.gruengard@gmail.com)*

Abstract: Shlomit Schuster's article on the Greek Orthodox ascetic practices and the consoling meaning that such an "ascent" in "Jacob's ladder" may have for the mourning and dying, throws light not only on Shlomit's confrontation with death but also on her conception of philosophical life and philosophical autobiography. Some connections between that conception and Shlomit's life and philosophical practices are examined.

In her article about the ancient Byzantine hermits who had chosen to retreat to the wilderness, Shlomit Schuster admits that from a modern perspective, "the alternative desert road as traveled by [...them] is not attractive, and the search for Eternity is considered foolish". Yet, she adds, "the advice of [those] Christian ascetics may be very helpful" [...] to those whose suffering is due to "a lack of philosophy and spirituality in their life", whereas modern psychology "often cannot offer answers". She argues that the fact that ascetic monks and nuns that can still be found in solitary dwellings or monasteries in the Judean and the Sinai deserts, "living authentically the ancient [way of ] life" – a way that she herself considered as holy – demonstrates that the heritage of those "desert fathers and mothers" is "still valued". She claims, furthermore, that "looking for and meeting today's ascetics [...] is an adventure that may steer [one] to new and different thoughts", for such persons "offer mankind", by their "exemplary and virtuous lives", a "new hope for inner change, transfiguration of the self, and lasting joy" (Schuster 2010, p. 14).

Shlomit, who would later ask to be buried in the graveyard of a Greek Orthodox Church, had indeed been steered by her encounter with Christian monks to new and different

thoughts. Under that impact she allowed herself finally to leave to others the campaign for philosophical practice and dedicate herself, with the support of the Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Jerusalem, to the exploration of the Byzantine "philosophical tradition". She concentrated on the life narratives of some ascetics who were living in the Sinai desert in the fifth and sixth centuries AD, and their writings about ways to "cultivate the soul" towards "spiritual self-mastery". This should, in the terms of the metaphor of the most conspicuous among them, Saint John Climacus, enable its climbing step by step the ladder of Jacob, and ascending, like the (good) angels in Jacob's dream, and achieving eventually, when the 30 stages would be completed (but not without God's Grace) "the blissful happiness of the Theosis", i.e. "transfiguration or deification" (ibid, p. 11).

I do not know whether Shlomit hoped for otherworldly blissful happiness. I do not know to what extent she shared their theology. What she admired was the "inner watchfulness over thoughts and feelings", which is supposed to lead "to a complete new way of being in the world" (ibid, p. 2), and was fascinated by Climacus' description of the vices that are abandoned one by one while new virtues are gradually acquired in "the way up" . She cites his saying that at the twenty-fourth step (out of the prescribed thirty) the monk is supposed to reach the "higher virtues of Meekness, Humility, and Discernment, while beyond these are four contemplative virtues namely Stillness, Prayer, Dispassion and Faith, Hope and Love". She shared, it seems, the ascetics' scales of virtues and vices and their taste for mental as well as corporeal "soul-purifying" practices. She mentions that Freud too believed in the healing effects of "catharsis", but that position was misunderstood or abandoned for other reasons by psychoanalysts (ibid).<sup>1</sup>



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The Ladder of Divine Ascent (Jacob's ladder),  
12<sup>th</sup> century, St Catherine's monastery, Sinai

Shlomit pays particular attention to Climacus' approach to mourning, which is nowadays associated with "the bereavement, loss, depression and grief" that are experienced mainly "in the context of terminal illness and the death of loved ones". She states that the prevalent modern approach conceives mourning as a time-limited process, involved with denial, anger and depression, which normally leads to acceptance of the loss and return to the "normal way of life". Its "abnormal" prolongation is therefore considered by psychologists as a symptom of clinical depression, and a reason for recommending psychotherapeutic treatment or administration of psycho-drugs. Climacus' position represents, according to Shlomit, the perspective that "ancient philosophy and spiritual disciplines have about the remembrance of death and suffering" (ibid, p.11). It suggests, in contrast, to recognize mourning as "a part of a [continuous] process of repentance", and treat it as "an emotion allowing for spiritual change, growth, and purification". Mourning in such a "Godly" way is therefore "a virtue a person should seek and embrace till the end of the earthly life". She adds, referring to a former paper (Schuster 2002), that the treatment of sufferers of post-traumatic stress disorder would greatly benefit from "philosophical and theological

understandings of tragedy and suffering" (Schuster 2010, p. 11). Following Climacus, however, she insists on the difference made by that spiritual tradition between the virtuous grief, which consists "of weeping over one's own faults and [...] the weakness of one's neighbors " and the vicious grief, which "comes from the enemy, full of mockery", expressing a mental state of despondency, i.e., melancholic fatigue, that "should be cast off the spirit" by prayer. She also insists like him on the difference between "fake" and "true tears" as well as that between "blind tears", which "are suitable only to irrational beings (although "there are some people who try, when they weep, to stifle all thought"), and tears that "are actually the product of thought, and the father of thought is a rational mind"<sup>2</sup>. According to her understanding the proper context for mourning is not only sickness and death of others, but the remembering of one's own death (ibid). She tells us, finally, that Climacus, the father of the idea of the "joyful sorrow", maintains indeed that "the real profit of tears (the "true mourning" to which he ascribed "great redemptive powers") is only "discovered at death". But as it enables the mourner to experience "the spiritual laughter of the soul", it is also a "temporary consolation" in the present life, and therefore he recommended a daily remembering of the eminent death. Shlomit herself expresses the belief that "true mourning" is "a possible short cut to inner transformation (ibid., p. 10), and a way of fearing death, which is natural, without experiencing "the terror of death" (ibid)<sup>3</sup>.

One does not have to share the explicit religious beliefs, tacit metaphysical presuppositions, ethical preferences or personal values that seem to justify the choices of Climacus or other ascetics, nor agree with Shlomit's opinion about their benefits, in order to understand Shlomit's "steering adventure" as the last chapter in the philosophical autobiography that she preferred not to write. The theme of somehow discovering, or re-discovering, God, or the search for Him, as well as the idea of some or other sort of conversion in one's life, appears not only in the analysis by which she endeavored to connect

harmoniously Saint Augustine's most famous life-narrative, the *Confessions*, to his later writings and activities; it also appears, much less obviously, in her treatments of the two other life-narratives that she originally analyzed in her 1997 doctoral dissertation and later included as case studies in her book about philosophical autobiographies (Schuster, 2003), those of Rousseau and Sartre. Her approach to philosophical autobiography, which she conceives as a philosophical self-analysis that not only describes the development of the narrator's philosophical ideas on the background of past life events and in response to them, but also examines philosophically his life and thereby transforms his ideas, life and personality (cf. *ibid*, p. 193), is, of course, also applied to the case of Climacus. The fact that Climacus' own approach to self-analysis may seem similar to hers should not surprise those that have already discerned in her, as well as in his writings, traces of the Augustinian approach (which reflects Greek myths about the journey of the soul, and is reflected in the philosophy behind the German *Bildungsroman*). In accordance to Shlomit's claim that the narrative of philosophical life should show, despite transformations and conversions, a great measure of consistency and continuity (*ibid*, p. 146), I would say that for me, she was always, in some respects, a follower of Saint Augustine, and much closer to his asceticism and taste for spirituality than to the romantic idealism and manners of Rousseau or to Sartre's tough free loves and rough existentialism. Of course, she never pretended to be graced with the "natural light" that according to the Augustinians guarantees the truth of subjective rational evidences, but she shared their subjectivism, and the conviction that true philosophy is neither a collection of opposing theories supported or refuted by abstract arguments nor a set of inherited dogmas and principles, but rather the fruit of personal examinations, and in particular, examination of one's way of living. Being a true philosopher meant for her *living* philosophically, i.e., re-examining and changing life in light of philosophical convictions and re-examining philosophy in light of life experiences, giving a special weight to what she called "spiritual

experiences". By saying that Shlomit could have written a philosophical autobiography I suggest, first of all, that her life was, according to her conception, philosophical. But that statement, as well as the claim that the "steering adventure" that had led her to explore Climacus' legacy could have been the last chapter in the autobiography that she did write, and *would not have written*, needs clarification.

I know that Shlomit had lost her parents a few years before she wrote the paper about Climacus, and had been herself already ill, eventually terminally ill. I have no doubt, therefore, that writing about mourning, fear of death, consolation and hope, in general, was also about her own experience in face of the impending death. But although I knew Shlomit personally, I do not know much about her life. Self-centered writing did not fit her humility, which is, as said, a virtue that is to be acquired in one of the highest steps of the ascetic "ladder", but also the reason, according to her explanation, for the avoidance of philosophically and spiritually inspired Jews, who were "ascending" in their parallel "ladders", from writing autobiographies. Self-exposure, moreover, did not fit her discretion, and unless such sharing could contribute to her counseling or teaching *in intimate one-to-one conversations*, she was rather reluctant to talk about her private life and inner world (or asking others about theirs). I know, for example, that she was born in Suriname, the former Dutch Guiana, to an Ashkenazi Jewish family from Germany that had lived there from the eighteenth century (and immigrated to Holland only when the colony gained its independence) just because I, assuming that they always lived in Europe, asked her how her parents had survived the Holocaust. All the rest, life in a minority group within a minority group of whites in a multicultural colonial society, the periods of social and political unrest, the disruption of routines with the emigration, the experience of having different background and mentality and other difficulties of adaptation in Holland, are just conjectures that I could have based on internet information about Suriname, and my general acquaintances with

immigrants and their stories. But inferring from the general to the personal is always misleading, and especially wrong in the case of Shlomit, for whom nothing could replace the subjective perspective. I also do not know why Shlomit moved later to Israel, nor what she did before she started studying philosophical counseling with Achenbach. I do not know whether she was already acquainted with philosophical ideas in her Surinamese youth, nor which knowledge she had acquired in which institute before her doctoral studies at the philosophy department at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I know that her last supervisor was a catholic monk,<sup>4</sup> but I do not know when her first encounter with Augustinian ideas was. I do know, however, that she was impressed by Laing's criticism of psychological and psychiatric treatments before her first encounter with Achenbach's ideas, and I gather from the little she had disclosed to me, that she had her own reasons for criticizing them. She therefore hoped to find in philosophy an approach that would enable the counselor to trust the subjective narratives of the counselees and their subjective attitudes and choices, and was working towards it ever since. I know, in a word, enough in order to claim that from that time on, her campaign against psychotherapy and for philosophical counseling was not just a recurrent theme, which appears also in the paper about Climacus, but a central issue that would have been considered by Sartre, if he had written her biography, as her "life project". Her encounter with Climacus' ideas enabled the prolongation of that project towards death, believing that philosophy and spirituality can offer a "temporary consolation" and a "joyful sorrow" whereas psychology continues to send the continuous mourners to "normalizing" psychotherapies and medications.

One does not have to agree with Shlomit's (and Achenbach's) radical bifurcation between "philosophical counseling" and "psychological treatment" in order to share her opposition to both medically oriented psychiatry, which might use drugs and other physical measures with complete disregard for the patient's subjective *explanations* for his state of

mind, and dogmatic psychoanalytic approaches, which interpret the subjective explanations of the patient as "rationalizations" or other "defensive" symptoms of his "neurosis". Drugs, whether medical or not, sometimes alleviate suffering, which is important, especially in the eyes of those who doubt the healing capacities of pain, and they may also change moods; but they do not indeed offer answers to any questions, let alone queries about moral worth, purpose or meaning. Psychoanalytic treatments, despite their disrespect for the patient's self-interpretations and their instrumental use of suffering are sometimes beneficial; but the *explanations* that they offer to life-narratives are just interpretations, and not always the most instructive, useful or interesting ones. Shlomit, who was inspired by Sartre's idea of a "philosophical psychoanalysis", did not seek, however, to show that reading philosophical autobiographies from a "philosophical analytic" perspective is more instructive, useful or interesting *for the reader*, but rather that the *writer*, i.e., the *telling subject*, however "neurotic" he might be considered from the psychoanalyst's perspective (and in contrast to the latter's general claims about "neurotic personalities"), is able to tell a *consistent and continuous life story*, remember reliably (and does not repress or defensively distorts) past events, including unpleasant ones, be aware of details that are incompatible with the general story and conflicts between opposing aims or values (and is not unconscious of his conflicts), and admit of failures to live according to declared aims, values and ideals (and do not "rationalize" their "neurotic behavior") . She sought to show that the philosophical life-narrator, who knows his inner world, is more reliable than any outside observer. But as her understanding of "philosophical psychoanalysis" was basically Augustinian, she did not follow the method that Sartre used in the biographies he wrote. She did try to show how the person perused his "life project", as a conflict-laden attempt to determine autonomously one's destiny while assuming that it is already determined and seeking to fulfil the others' expectations and yet revolting against them (like Freud's "project" in his *Freud's Scenario*



(Sartre, 1985): to revenge his father's humiliation by showing the Anti-Semites how clever, *qua* Jew, he is, and how "non-Jewish" is his clever theory, revolt against the father's Jewish heritage and yet conceive himself as inherently Jew, etc.). She conceived the philosophical psychoanalysis as a self-examining analysis that enables the writer, as classical psychoanalysis pretends to do, to change his personality and quality of life in ways that are beyond the horizon of Sartre's existentialist or later regards. The "rehabilitation" of the telling subject from the "non-philosophical" psychoanalytic "onslaughts" was so important to her that she left to others the critical comparisons between alternative philosophical interpretations of the same life stories and the disputes about the honesty of the writer or his rhetoric devices, the role of his didactic or persuasive purposes. From her point of view, a philosophical autobiography is as subjective as the ascetic repentance, its communication to others through writing is non-substantial. Shlomit would not have written her autobiography also because she believed that its *writing* – and its reading by feedback-giving others – was *irrelevant*.

Enabling the counseled subject tell her life story, feel safe, respected and trusted, yet encouraging her to examine herself, change in order to find new hope and harmony, and eventually be transformed to a new life on a higher level of meaningfulness, that was the aim of Shlomit's teaching and counseling. According to another ideal whose name she borrowed from Sartre, "authenticity", she also sought to show that the self-examiner, the self-teller of a philosophical autobiography, the one who lives philosophically, also ascends in the ladder of authenticity. She endeavored, accordingly, to encourage her counselees to gradually liberate themselves both from inherited dogmas, such as the "regard of the other", and become aware of their freedom of choice despite the causal tyranny of past facts and the stress of current material conditions by helping them realize the significance of their philosophical stance and their ability to choose it. She also sought to liberate them from what she, like Saint Augustine

and his philosophical teachers and followers, but unlike Sartre, considered as the servility to earthly desires, submission to despondent moods, and subordination to mundane values. Shlomit herself, in her campaign for the cause of philosophical counseling, refused to let economic facts determine her to make concessions, and was not deterred by disrespecting critics. The difficulties of some academic philosophers to follow her way of philosophizing about the philosophical life never discouraged her. I do not know which early influences she had to overcome and with which temptations she had to struggle, but I am nevertheless convinced that according to her own criteria she lived authentically.

My conception of philosophy and approach to philosophical counseling is, in many respects, different from that of Shlomit, but our frictions were around the issue of authenticity. I mention this in an article written in her memory because I think that Shlomit would have agreed with me that the common cause justifies a discussion: I first met her ideas about autobiographies, authenticity and freedom when she asked me to translate the abstract of her dissertation into Hebrew. Saint Augustine, Rousseau and Sartre were its protagonists, and I wondered why all three, despite of their care for authentic living and inner-directness, are associated in my philosophical memories with some or other kind of coercion, the first with the canonical rules of his Order, the second with the pretense, relying on his *Social Contract*, of Robespierre *et al.* to have the right "to force people be free", and the third, Sartre, with the stubborn defense of Stalin when the dimensions of the latter's oppression were already obvious enough. I added that there are some other partisans of authenticity whom, with all my respect for their good intentions, I tend to associate with totalitarian outcomes. She was very upset. Actually we were already at odd a year before, when she presented to me her approach to philosophical counseling, and claimed to be open-minded and unbiased by her own philosophical conceptions, while I, coming from a tradition of philosophical dialogues and debates rather than confessional monologues, maintained that

she could be unaware of her tacit philosophical presuppositions, the implications of her explicit statements (or questions), and the possible impact of both on the counselee's space to form rationally his own opinion and make his own choices. As I do not think any of us is endowed with "natural light", and believe, like Wittgenstein, that self-examinations that rely only on subjective evidences are like measuring one's height by one's putting one's hand on one's own head, I suggested to explore the issue in a mutual counseling, which she refused. I already felt than that she was tuned – and tuning – to one kind of music, and thought that it was up to the counselee to decide which kind he preferred. I was thinking then of opposite opinions from the philosophical discursive tradition, not of a choice between the extremities of serene ascetic practices, and say, the greedy adventurousness of a gold-rush...

The third friction occurred in a conversation about the advantages of membership in an association. I (and the others) found that mutual feedback could improve our counseling practice when the issue was whether our way of dealing with the counselee's problem might benefit or harm him in his specific situation, while Shlomit saw such mutuality as an intervention with the authenticity of the counselor. Some cases that Shlomit preferred to present to the anonymous readers of her writings support our position (e.g., it may be harmful to suggest repentance to victims of traumas [Schuster 2010] and add to their suffering, besides their perhaps unwarranted feeling of its being their own fault, the guilt of their sins and vices). They also throw light on the issue of responsibility for a third party (e.g., it may be insufficient to try to dissuade, in an emergency phone call, a woman who talks about her suicidal intention and hopes that with her growing trust she will come to counseling and start a transformative process, when that woman says that she intends to kill her child with herself (Schuster, 1999). When I read Shlomit's book about autobiographies (Schuster 2003) I realized that she was not only aware of "external" criticisms similar to mine of her protagonists, and not only knew better than me different opinions and deeds of those

philosophers that were incompatible with her ideal of authenticity, but believed to be able to save, with their own explanations, their "consistency and continuity" as well as basic goodness. The issue, however, is not whether they were bad guys or persons with good intentions, but rather whether something is missing in the subjectivist approach. In her anti-psychoanalytic defense of Rousseau, Shlomit attempted to show that the man was aware of his paranoid sides, and argued (Schuster, 2003) that from his subjective perspective there was no inconsistency between his dedication to the cause of education and his sending his ("or perhaps not his") children to a foundling house, for he thought (according to Rousseau, 1782) that that was the best that he could do for them. But the self-awareness of the paranoid does not mean that he should not take responsibility and look for ways, even when it involves limiting his liberty, to avoid driving his friends crazy; and personal convictions of a father, even one with the best intentions, that he cannot do better for his children, do not necessarily mean that he indeed cannot, as others can see from their different perspectives possibilities that do not occur to him in the depth – or prison – of his subjectivity. The question of his educational duties towards the children who are perhaps not his is, whether these duties are legal or moral, not a subjective matter. Fathers who care, like Rousseau, about the origin and persistence of inequality and develop pedagogical plans that foster all the inner virtues that were so dear to Jean-Jacques and Shlomit, without taking into account that such plans are accessible only to the privileged few whose families can afford it, are perhaps acting in socially irresponsible way. It is not the role of the philosopher to protect their "subjectivity" and prevent "external" critics from accusing them with a failure to learn from their own life experience... The rights and well-being of other persons are not guaranteed by one's authenticity even when one refuses to consider persons with bad intentions as authentic. Similarly, the rights and the well-being of a third party are not guaranteed by good intentions, inner coherence and all fine virtues that the counselor could have acquired by ascetic

exercises. The philosophy of authenticity is entangled by conceptual confusions that mix different meanings of terms like "subject" and "object", "subjective" and "objective", and neglect the Husserlian insight that whether the real issue is a thing, a person, or a state of affairs, it can have different aspects that are perceivable from different perspectives. We can transcend our horizons by learning about the sights from the perspectives of others. If we want to act responsibly in the real, intersubjective, world, we also should.

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Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Freud himself abandoned that belief, and quite early in his career, but it is irrelevant, since, as Shlomit herself says, he spoke (like Aristotle) of an emotional and not ethical catharsis.

<sup>2</sup> I guess that that is one of the reasons for considering that dogmatic adaptation of ideas borrowed from the Hellenistic philosophical tradition as itself philosophical.

<sup>3</sup> The "joyfulness" of the sorrow, the *charmolypti*, is what differentiates Climacus' advice from the austere Catholic *memento mori*, which is similarly conceived as an efficient mean for soul-cleansing and character perfection.

<sup>4</sup> Also Chair of the Philosophy Department at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Israel (Editor's note).