

Philosophical Counselling as a Process of Fostering Wisdom in the Form of Virtues

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Abstract

The main theme of this article is that an adequate understanding of the concept of wisdom enables philosophical counsellors to identify their proper tasks. The concept refers to a great number of cognitive and practical virtues, and philosophical counselling is a process where the counsellee's powers of virtue are examined and encouraged. This is often therapeutic in the sense that it enhances the counsellee's well-being.

Keywords: Philosophical Counselling, wisdom, virtue, well-being, therapy

Introduction

It has often been said that the goal of philosophical practice is wisdom (Achenbach, 1998 and 2002; Lahav, 2001 and 2006). This is of course not a surprising view, given the original notion of philosophy as love of wisdom. But wisdom is a philosophically challenging concept: it is by no means obvious what we mean by it. Since we do not wish to be ignorant about our aims, some explication is necessary.¹

I will first provide a virtue-based account of wisdom, and then discuss some of the implications of this view to philosophical counselling. The first implication is that philosophical counselling is a process of fostering virtues. The second implication is that philosophical counselling can be therapeutic.

Virtues as Wisdom

Robert Nozick (1989, p.267) characterises wisdom in these terms: 'Wisdom is what you need to understand in order to live well and cope with the central problems and avoid the dangers in the predicament(s) human beings find themselves in.' He says that a wise person needs to understand many things: the most important goals and values of life; what means will reach these goals without too great a cost; what limitations are unavoidable and how to accept them; knowing when certain goals are sufficiently achieved; how to tell what is appropriate at a given time. John Kekes (1983), Sharon Ryan (1999) and Gerd Achenbach (2000, 2001) similarly emphasise that wisdom has to do with knowing how to live well.

¹ We cannot know whether the conceptions of wisdom of different people overlap each other without examining them together. This article can be seen as a contribution to such an effort. On the one hand I do not see any reason to assume *a priori* that all readers have the same conception of wisdom. Philosophy as love of wisdom may correspondingly mean different things to different people. On the other hand I do not believe that agreement of conceptions is impossible; and perhaps there are even now more similarities in our conceptions of wisdom than one might initially assume. Such an agreement might bring a sense of unity to a field that can appear bewilderingly varied.

The conception that wisdom is concerned with knowing how to live well means that philosophers have to set emphasis on the skills, dispositions and mental states that make living well possible. The concept of virtue should occupy a central position in our account: any effort to live well depends crucially on virtues.² Attachment to virtues has of course been a part of the philosophical self-understanding from the very beginning, and we do not have any reason to sever this link.

The following is not a complete catalogue of the virtues that belong to wisdom but rather examples from a vast set with fuzzy borders. Let us first briefly discuss cognitive virtues and then practical virtues. As will become evident, the difference between these two categories is not sharp.

Self-knowledge is an important virtue. This importance derives at least partly from the fact that self-knowledge enables us to pursue goals that we find personally fulfilling instead of being controlled by external, to some extent haphazard, influences. The idea that philosophical counselling is essentially 'world view interpretation' (Lahav, 1995 and 2008a) or 'critical examination of life-directing conceptions' (Scheffczyk, 1995) becomes understandable from the standpoint of self-knowledge: the self that philosophical counsellors wish to elucidate by their questions and remarks certainly includes the counselees' conceptions. But we do not have to reduce the philosophically interesting self to beliefs and other such relatively cognitive elements. The virtue of self-knowledge also concerns our bodies and emotions.

Knowledge of the external world can be seen as a virtue to the extent that it enables us to lead personally satisfactory and morally acceptable lives (Cohen, 2005; Maxwell, 2000 and 2007; Ryan, 1999 and 2007). The truth of our beliefs about physical and social realities is important because the success of our activities depends on it. Ignorance may also lead us astray with respect to morally required ends. In our time knowledge of ecological threats and disasters, for example, might be seen as morally important.

Nozick says that a wise person needs to know what means will reach the most important goals of life without too great a cost. The ability to form balanced overall judgments concerning the feasibility and appropriateness of different courses of action to worthy ends can be called good judgment. Good judgment is both a cognitive and a practical virtue. Technological know-how can be a part of this virtue, but a person with good judgement takes into account many additional factors in her deliberations.

Openness to new ways of understanding ourselves and our world is a cognitive virtue (Lahav, 2001, 2006, 2008c and 2008d; Mattila, 2001a; Tukiainen, 2000). Occasionally we need radically new perspectives and novel concepts, and some of these notions may not be logically deducible from our present views. Such changes in point of view may be identical with, or at least lead to, re-evaluations of our situation. Reframing can also affect our feelings and behaviour, as Epictetus and many other philosophers have recognised (see for instance Cohen, 2003, pp.53–56; Mattila, 2001b).

² A stronger claim would be that wisdom equals virtues. Although this is not far-fetched view, the present claim is a more modest one: virtues are necessary for wisdom.

Cognitive virtues like knowledge, good judgment and openness to new conceptions are only a part of wisdom. Philosophical practitioners should be able to see a wider vista which includes virtues like sincerity, patience, mercy and justice (see Achenbach, 2001, p.36). Ran Lahav (2008b) says that wisdom excludes being petty and self-involved, and there seems to be no reason not to count many other vices among philosophically repulsive character traits. Cruelty, ruthlessness, thoughtlessness, manipulativeness, treachery, recklessness, irascibility, stubbornness, ingratitude, bitterness, dishonesty, malice, greed, gluttony and hubris surely do not fit our conception of wisdom. Let us take a few more examples of these moral and existential virtues.

Considered as a practical virtue, objectivity means distancing oneself from one's immediate concerns and seeing them in a larger context of human and non-human life, or even from a cosmic perspective. Plato's lofty view that human things seem puny from a 'satellite perspective' of soul's flight is a good imaginative-pictorial representation of this virtue (Hadot, 1995, pp.238-250). The virtue of justice may presuppose, or at least benefit from, an objective view of things. And as Plato remarked, the aerial perspective gives rise to greatness of soul (Hadot, 2004, p.68). Bertrand Russell (2006, p.159) says that a person with greatness of soul sees 'himself and life and the world as truly as our human limitations will permit', and realizes 'the brevity and minuteness of human life'. Russell also writes in a rather Platonic and Stoic manner that a person 'who has once perceived, however temporarily and however briefly, what makes greatness of soul, can no longer be happy if he allows himself to be petty, self-seeking, troubled by trivial misfortunes, dreading what fate may have in store for him.'

The virtue of disinterestedness is an ability to experience the world as it is *in itself*, and not only as it is *for us* and our projects (Hadot, 1995, p.254; see also Curnow, 2000). Disinterestedness requires that we are able to disengage ourselves from our everyday cares and motives of action, and this means that we have to let go of an evaluative attitude towards our experiences and the world. Any genuinely philosophical attitude involves a dimension of disinterested perception of life and the universe.

Nozick's definition of wisdom suggests that our conceptions of virtue should have room for skills and dispositions that are oriented towards avoiding dangers to our personal well-being and enabling us to cope with difficulties in our own lives. Some practical virtues like flexibility in one's aims and hopes are not so much moral virtues as ways of securing a personally tolerable or even satisfactory life. This does not mean that moral virtues do not enhance our sense of personal well-being. Often they do; and in many cases one and the same virtue—objectivity, disinterestedness, forbearance, foresight, moderation, carefulness or courage, for example—has both moral aspects and aspects that have more to do with the health of our own souls (von Wright 1963, ch.7).

To take some historical examples of these self-regarding virtues and their objectives, Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Cynicism deepened our understanding of the ideals of *ataraxia* (tranquillity) and *euthymia* (a steady, contented state of mind); and of course they were also concerned with the practical means of attaining these ideals. *Autarkeia* (self-sufficiency), for example, was valued because it was seen to lead to a calm state of mind without disturbing emotions. Other important virtues included moderation in one's expectations of worldly success, the readiness to

accept failure, and the ability to maintain one's mental independence from unreasonable social conventions.

In the contemporary philosophical counselling movement Elliot D. Cohen (2005; see also 2003 and 2008) has drawn attention to many virtues that are clearly self-regarding in the sense we are discussing. For instance, an ability to accept imperfections in ourselves and external reality is conducive to peace of mind. Authenticity and temperance will similarly enhance a person's capacity to lead a satisfactory life.³

To complete this cursory overview of the great domain of virtues, let us recall that wisdom and virtue are also concerned with ways of preserving bodily health and attaining pleasure. For instance, Schopenhauer (1995, p.50) counsels physical exercise as a means of preserving good health, and Seneca frequently gave the same piece of advice to his counselees. The centrality of the notion of 'living well' in philosophy appears to make their advice quite understandable. Bodily pleasure was the objective of the Cyrenaics, and perhaps we should have some place for this notion in our philosophical thinking as well. Even Seneca—generally a defender of an austere way of life—writes to Serenus that we should occasionally relax properly and drink ourselves 'to the point of intoxication' because this will wash away our cares (2004, p.105).

Although there may not be any exhaustive, final list of the virtues that belong to wisdom, we should not assume that the virtues we need must be invented on a case-by-case basis. This would amount to forgetting that the worries and difficulties of different people are often the same, and that very similar virtues apply to a great number of individual cases. It would also amount to overlooking the fact that the human condition is in its main features much the same as it was two thousand years ago. The major world religions seem to get along through centuries with the same old virtues, and to a certain extent this is also true in philosophy. The view that there is 'nothing new under the sun' with respect to virtues is probably closer to truth than the idea that we should, or even could, invent something genuinely new.

Different social environments and situations of life may of course require and highlight different virtues (see Fleming, 2000). For example, military virtues like being prepared to kill are not relevant in the lives of the majority of contemporary Europeans, and neither do they appear to believe that silent submission to political authorities is a virtue.

If virtues are the essence of wisdom, the core of philosophy is love of virtues. It is important to bear in mind in this connection that philosophy does not always mean any kind of discussion—and still less lecturing or research. It is also a way of life and an 'existential attitude' (Hadot, 1995 and 2004; Curnow 2006). Philosophers do not necessarily write anything, and some of them do not even discuss our concepts and lives in way that could be characterised as philosophical (Hadot, 2004, p.173). But they show their love and understanding of wisdom by their acts and manner of living.

³ Cohen (2005) states that the eleven cardinal virtues he mentions 'define the concept of happiness' in the kind of philosophical counselling he practices (Logic-Based Therapy), and that an individual is happy to the extent that these virtues are attained. Happiness is clearly one of the traditional aims of philosophy. This article does not claim that virtues are sufficient for happiness, but only that they increase the likelihood of a tolerable and even satisfactory life.

Philosophical Counselling as a Process of Fostering Virtues

Counselling is an invitation to a philosophical way of life with its inevitable emphasis on virtues. An attempt to separate philosophical practice from virtues would lead to an impoverished and unnatural image of counselling. Impoverished, because without them philosophical thinking loses much of its power to reduce our sufferings and to guide our lives. Unnatural, because philosophy has always been inspired by life-orienting ideals, and if philosophers are asked to remain as virtue-neutral as possible, they are quite simply asked to be something else than they are. All, or at least most, forms of philosophical counselling subscribe to cognitive virtues like self-knowledge; but these are just a part of a much larger set of moral and non-moral virtues.

The point of philosophical counselling is not so much to discuss virtues but to help the counsellee to modify her thoughts, feelings or behaviour through the power of virtues. Philosophical counsellors ought to assume that all kinds of predicaments provide opportunities for virtues to show their force. Examples include increasing the counsellee's self-understanding and authenticity through questions; enabling the counsellee to see that her anxiety-producing beliefs about some social facts are distorted; assistance in finding the best course of action in a complicated family situation; mentioning the pleasures of disinterested contemplation; discussing the thoughtlessness of a companion and how to avoid getting disturbed about it; finding good reasons not to feel that a personal failure implies total worthlessness; helping the counsellee to see that a professional disaster might also offer opportunities; inducing the counsellee to assume a tolerant, accepting attitude towards her seemingly bad situation when there is little hope of improving it; indicating that acquiescence to negative emotions one cannot get rid of might be the best available option; showing how the counsellee can be less driven by social pressure and commercial influence. This is what many philosophical counsellors have been doing for decades. The concept of virtue gives coherence and historical depth to these activities.

One good way of understanding philosophical counselling is this: we seek to clarify together what a wise person would think and do in the counsellee's situation. On the one hand, virtue-oriented counselling must of course take into account the counsellee's unique circumstances and way of thinking. We have to start from the understanding we have and strive to find and foster what is good within us. The idea that philosophical counsellors should suggest to their counsellees notions that have no connection whatever—logical or associative—with their present way of seeing things, or views that they cannot adopt as their own, is surely misguided (see Zinaich 2005). On the other hand, it seems that the counsellor has an obligation to try and give voice to her own perception of what 'Lady Wisdom' would counsel. This is what Seneca did in his letters, and this is what contemporary philosophical counsellors should do. Seneca's letters were probably intended for large audiences despite seemingly being addressed to a friend, but philosophical counsellors can, and ought to, tailor their proposals to each individual case. Counsellors cannot know in advance what kinds of inner powers of virtue need to be examined and stimulated to grow.

In some cases a virtue might be present in the counsellee's mind and heart in a hidden or *nascent* form to be amplified and encouraged. It is my experience that most people have thoughts and attitudes that are not a part of their

mainstream self (see also Lahav, 2008d). For example, a person might not have given much thought to virtues like flexibility, patience and disinterestedness, but this does not mean that she does not or cannot understand their meaning and importance. If she begins to hope that these virtues could help her towards peace of mind, she may want to accord them a larger role in her life.

Philosophical Counselling Can Be Therapeutic

Virtues can help us either to avoid or to accept many sources of anxiety and irritation. For instance, a capacity to take a distant, objective look at our lives enables us to see the smallness of our worries. Mercifulness with respect to our own shortcomings and those of others soothes our feelings of anger and disappointment, and an attitude of benign indifference towards external matters makes us readier to accept our circumstances even when they appear distressing. Forward-looking virtues like prudence protect us from many sorrows and causes of resentment, and a realistic appreciation of all the contingencies that can ruin us will enable us to maintain our composure when we actually end up in disasters.⁴ The fact that virtues enable us to cope with actual and potential problems of life entails that the distinction between philosophy and therapeutic alleviation of suffering is not sharp; and since philosophical counselling is a process of fostering virtues, it can often be regarded as therapy.

Lahav (2006) has argued that philosophy should not be seen as therapy. He is right when he says that philosophers should avoid a pampering attitude that causes them to refrain from questioning their counselees' wishes, desires and views (see also Fastvold, 2006; Tuedio, 2008). In particular, the consumer ideology of trying to find the means of reaching the counsellee's goals irrespective of their specific nature is unsuitable for philosophy. Lahav is also right when he writes that philosophers should try to help their counselees to escape from narrow conceptions of their lives, and encourage them to open their minds to new ways of understanding themselves and the world. But these points do not justify a complete break with the concept of therapy.⁵ Philosophy as love of wisdom is therapeutic in essence, not through a clever add-on for marketing purposes. This view accords with the age-old analogy between medicine and philosophy: while medicine treats our bodily ailments, philosophy heals our souls (see for example Nussbaum, 1994, pp.13–47).

⁴ Peter B. Raabe (2000, p.171) points out that philosophical thinking may enable us to prevent problems of life from arising. This is true; but we should add to his view that some problems cannot be solved, eliminated or avoided but only tolerated and endured; and from the Stoic perspective we need philosophy precisely when we *cannot* solve our problems—when we run against something that will not yield and that cannot be circumvented. According to Epictetus (2005) the basic philosophical problem is our attitude towards things that are not in our power: the starting point of philosophy is the awareness of our own weakness and helplessness. As the example of Boethius shows, philosophical ideas may offer consolation and enable us to 'take a kindly view even of misfortunes' (Seneca, 2004, p.98). Endurance and acceptance are virtues. As Nozick says (see above), wisdom includes knowing what limitations are unavoidable and how to accept them.

⁵ Lahav (2006) says that wisdom means richness of understanding and non-egocentric openness to realities beyond one's world view. A wise person lets a great number of realities speak through her attitudes, emotions, views and actions. These are very abstract descriptions of wisdom. Awareness of a wide range of virtues enables us to adopt a more concrete and practical conception of philosophy and philosophical counselling. It also enables us to see more clearly how philosophy can be therapeutic.

Virtues do not seem to belong to the vocabulary of psychological theories and psychotherapeutic techniques in any essential way, and this is an important difference between philosophy and these therapies. But the difference does not imply that philosophy is not therapeutic. Virtue is the distinctively philosophical contribution to therapeutic activities.

However, if the central therapeutic aim is thought to be alleviation of suffering, regarding philosophy *merely* as therapy would be an error. Wisdom as the goal of philosophy may necessitate many enquiries and actions that this aim neither requires nor justifies. For instance, understanding the place of mental phenomena in a seemingly material universe may not offer any therapeutic gains, and even if some therapists might be interested in politics, the dominating professional attitude appears to be one of exclusion; but politics and the ontological status of mental events can be seen as philosophically important issues. The philosophical emphasis on moral and cognitive virtues even when cultivating them does *not* heighten our sense of personal well-being appears to be foreign to the notion of philosophy as therapy. In sum, we have to avoid the simplistic view according to which philosophy either is or is not therapy. In some ways it is, in some others it is not.

There is no simple way of dividing philosophical enquiries into those that can have therapeutic value and those that cannot. Philosophy of mind in particular can have a therapeutic dimension even if it may initially seem like a very abstract and theoretical pursuit. For example, the idea that our minds and selves are not separate from what we usually think of as external reality can have a calming effect, because it leads us to let go of self-centred thoughts. If we do not stand opposite to the world, we do not have to assert our will against it. The distinction between the subject and the object of thought and perception can become either blurred or obliterated; and this is not always merely a theoretical insight but also an experience, an aspect of life. Wittgenstein has a concise description of this experience: 'The world and life are one' (2001, remark 5.621). Although Lahav makes a strict distinction between philosophy and therapy, he has presented similar statements that could be regarded as potentially therapeutic. For instance, he says that 'you are in everything there is, and everything is in you' (Lahav 2008e).

Conclusion

This article has suggested that virtues are essential to wisdom, and that philosophical counselling can find a sense of identity and direction by paying attention to them. Philosophical counselling should be seen as a process where the counsellee's inner and often neglected powers of virtue are unearthed and allowed to modify her thoughts, feelings and behaviour. While virtues can be therapeutic in the sense of alleviation of suffering, they might also necessitate enquiries and actions without any obvious connection to therapeutic aims.

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