Wisdom and Virtue in Philosophical Counselling

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When one thinks of 'virtues' if one is familiar with Western philosophy, one almost immediately thinks of the Aristotelian virtues (aretai) of courage, justice, wisdom, moderation, magnanimity, friendliness, wittiness and pride, and Aristotle's distinction between moral and intellectual virtues. One also thinks of the Christian virtues of faith, hope, charity, and brotherly love. There is no end to the various lists of competing virtues which one could appeal to in trying to decide what virtues (if any) philosophical counsellors should have or which virtues (if any) clients should be helped to develop. For instance, Benjamin Franklin's list of utilitarian virtues including cleanliness, silence, and frugality, or a short list given by Dries Boele: perseverance, patience, listening, expressing intuitions, trusting one's doubts, talking frankly, postponing one's judgement, and willingness to revise one's opinion (Boele, 1998). This cautious suspension of judgement as a sign of wisdom, was emphasised by Achenbach in his keynote speech at the New York conference. But, as Alasdair Maclntyre says in After Virtue, when we talk about virtue (or wisdom), who are "we" exactly? Do we mean "we readers" or "we in the West" or "we philosophers"? In the Chinese tradition (which I will discuss in more detail later) there are two main alternative views on virtue. The Confucian view emphasises the communitarian and collectivist virtues including benevolence, dutifulness, decorum and filial piety, whilst the Taoist tradition stresses the importance of rejecting such 'artificial' values in favour of spontaneity, simplicity, naturalness, freedom from constraint, individualism, innocence, childlikeness and flexibility.

In formulating my own list of virtues which might be necessary or useful to a counsellor and/or a client, I came up with the following:

- courage
- moral and psychological stability (or equilibrium)
- listening
- patience
- humility
- timing,
- irony and humour (especially the ability to laugh at oneself, and not take oneself too seriously)
- warmth and friendliness

Others, not necessarily less important, but which for lack of space I will not be discussing here, include: honesty, sincerity, empathy, non-judgmental acceptance, authenticity, epoche (i.e. suspension of judgement), moderation (sophrosyne), equanimity (ataraxia), confrontation (agon), self-confidence, creativity, spontaneity, and, of course, wisdom.

When I think of the various 'clients' (mostly my students, but also including one person referred to me by a physician doing her residency in psychiatry in Taiwan) I have tried to help, I find it hard to deny that both counsellor and client need courage. The client needs courage (and encouragement) in facing reality, not running away from their

1 An earlier version of this paper was originally presented at the Fourth International Conference on Philosophical Practice (Koeln, 1998)
predicament, but instead doing what they know they must do. And the counsellor needs the courage to be somewhat self-confident in order for the client to believe in their own competence and authority; this facilitates the so-called 'placebo effect' which amounts to quasi-hypnotic 'suggestion' which is bound to influence the philosophical counsellor's practice just as it does the physician's or the psychotherapist's. Courage was required of one of my clients, who I will refer to as Jane, an elderly American woman in poor health now living in Taiwan who called me to talk about whether she should remain in Taiwan where she feels neglected and unable to get proper health care, or whether she should uproot herself (after a quarter century living in Taiwan) and move back to the States. It is easy to talk about the counsellor's duty to listen patiently, understand empathetically, and give the client an opportunity to think things through and reach a decision. But in my experience, it is almost humanly impossible (and often undesirable) to remain silent and non-committal, leaving the burden and responsibility for making a decision entirely up to the client. In this case, Jane and I weighed together the pros and cons of her moving back, and her decision was that she really has no choice but to move – all I really did for her was help her consider carefully her options and see the reality that she really has no choice. Other examples where courage (and encouragement) were required were two of my students who came to me with 'broken heart syndrome' and I tried to help them face the fact that apparently, at least to me as an outside 'objective' bystander, their romantic relationship had been terminated by the other party and there really did not seem any other course but to carry on courageously, in a sense 'hopelessly' – once again just facing the reality that there really is no choice to be made.

The counsellor also sometimes needs the courage to confront the client, especially when the counsellor suspects self-deception, even though this may make the client uncomfortable. In America I have a friend who is a neurologist who told me that when patients complain of “neurotic” symptoms such as insomnia or anxiety, he often sternly looks them in the eye and tells them to go home and get over it; there is no doubt that in some cultures, where physicians are powerful authority figures, such “doctor’s orders” do often work, at least to some degree. Ernesto Spinelli (in his Demystifying Therapy) and David Jopling (in his paper, “First Do No Harm.”) discuss this phenomenon in disparaging terms, but I do not see why it cannot be exploited usefully by the philosophical counsellor to help his or her client, on some occasions. Furthermore, in some cultures such as most Asian cultures, teachers, psychiatrists, etc. are expected to take a more or less parental role and actively advise their students or patients (including judicious use of their authority to “suggest” to those under their care that they just “go home and get over it”); as Spinelli points out (p. 78), many clients often feel threatened in the face of their psychotherapist’s silence, and Asian clients are apt to even feel disappointed or cheated, if the therapist or counsellor doesn’t “do” something.

Jopling makes the point (p.100, “First Do No Harm.”) that “The goal of philosophy – truth – may be in conflict with the goals of counselling – healing and well-being.” Indeed, just as Freud and other psychoanalysts have pointed out, it is sometimes better to leave well enough alone rather than tamper with a patient’s/client’s defence mechanisms and self-deceptions. Likewise, the philosophical counsellor must be sensitive in his “interventions” and “interpretations” not to so discomfit the client by calling all his fundamental beliefs (about himself, his world, his relationships to significant Others, his values, etc.) to such a degree that the client becomes overwhelmed with self-doubt. Is a philosophical counsellor’s main task to comfort the client and alleviate his suffering and confusion, or to shed light on the client’s life in pursuit of philosophical insight, regardless
parallel to the relationship between Aristotelian friends (i.e. friends whose friendship is based on virtue and mutual respect and concern for one another’s moral condition), insofar as it may at times be necessary to forfeit the relationship if moral confrontation/correction/conflict – even condemnation – seem called for out of concern for the friend’s (or client’s) well-being. One of the main ideas I want to defend here (which I will get back to later in connection with the issue of certification and/or licensing of philosophical counsellors) is that, as in psychotherapy, there can be no fixed model or definite procedure for philosophical counselling – everything depends on the situation, the particular client, the counsellor’s personal style, and timing. Just as a good teacher must tailor the content and delivery of his instruction according to the aptitudes of his pupils, so must a counsellor (whether psychotherapeutic or philosophical) tailor his remarks, strategies, and so forth, according to the particularities of his client. The only formula is that there is no formula. Hence, in my view, there is no behaviour whatever which could not conceivably be deployed by the counsellor in his attempt to assist his client – including, on rare occasions, outright moral condemnation. Someone told me that his psychiatrist once suddenly announced to him “You are a damned fool!” Perhaps such remarks seem outrageous and uncalled for, but I view all our speech acts as inevitably freighted with not only conceptual content, but perlocutionary and illocutionary force, such that a counsellor may often have to speak or act in unexpected, unconventional, unpredictable ways. In this I am much influenced by the behaviour Zen masters who would stop at nothing in order to help their followers attain ‘enlightenment’ (satori).

Philosophers, particularly philosophers in the West, often conceive of philosophy (and mutatis mutandis philosophical counselling) as a purely cognitive and intellectual enterprise, and that there are out there people who suffer from purely intellectual quandaries, confusions and dilemmas. But, in my experience, all such intellectual quandaries are accompanied by emotional distress and disturbance. Which of the following ‘life problems’ are purely intellectual?

- Is it right to have an affair?
- Should I commit suicide?
- What should I do with my life after I graduate?
- Should I leave my husband or wife?

Similarly, all emotional disorders and disturbances have a cognitive aspect. Hence, philosophical counselling and psychotherapy cannot be artificially divorced. Philosophical counsellors must be prepared to encounter (if not 'treat') emotional problems that accompany intellectual ones. How can they do this? Well, one of the consequences to the client? Philosophy is no doubt ‘dangerous’ sometimes in calling into question all our cherished assumptions, and I for one question the wisdom of always pursuing the truth at all costs. No doubt Socrates helped some by sowing the seeds of uncertainty, but surely some of his fellow interlocutors went away so perplexed that they did indeed end up sceptics and sophists, if not worse.

And, of course, in the best of all possible worlds, psychotherapists would have some sophistication, or at least sensitivity to, philosophical issues complicating their clients’ lives. However, just as we cannot realistically expect psychotherapists to be trained philosophers, we cannot expect philosophical counsellors to be trained psychotherapists. But, I think it were better if philosophical counsellors had at least the ability to spot the symptoms of serious mental and emotional disorders in order to refer their clients to
(unusual) virtues I listed is moral and psychological stability. Maxmen and Ward in their widely used textbook, *Essential Psychopathology and its Treatment*, remark that it is depressing to be around depressed people; this is one of the occupational hazards for psychotherapists (and philosophical counsellors), but I would argue that the converse is also true, that a depressed, neurotic or psychopathological philosophical counsellor is likely to infect his or her client. I think on the one hand it is seriously dishonest to pretend that we philosophers are disembodied intellects with no emotional vicissitudes, or that our only duty is to be trained to think clearly and rigorously. I raised this issue at the first conference in Vancouver some years ago, and I remember that someone retorted that to ask a philosophical counsellor to maintain a degree of mental, emotional, and moral health is as unreasonable as asking a lawyer to do the same; my antagonist reasoned that an unconscious conflict or neurotic condition will not necessarily interfere with the professional work of either a lawyer or a philosophical counsellor. I remain unconvinced by his arguments, basing my objections not on theory but on practice. Clients in an enfeebled (mentally, emotionally or morally) condition are somewhat childlike in their dependency, and like children they pick up unconscious (or, unintended, if you will) attitudes and emotions from their counsellors, just as children pick up such unconscious cues from their parents. This is no different from asking a psychiatrist to refrain from seeing patients as long as he has the flu (or a surgeon with AIDS to refrain from practising surgery).

As for the virtue of listening, there is a growing body of literature on the topic demonstrating that it is by no means as easy as one might think to simply listen carefully and intently to what a client is saying. There is always the temptation to fill up awkward pauses in the conversation with what Heidegger called “idle chatter” (*Gerede*). Let me just add that a philosophical counsellor might also cultivate the ability to ‘hear’ what the client is saying by hearing what he is not saying, and by understanding his philosophy of life as it is lived out in his behaviour, body posture, body language, etc.

5 competent professionals for appropriate help. I continue to worry about the (not unlikely) scenario of a philosophical counsellor who is talking with a client and does not realise the client is presenting symptoms of clinical depression (for example), which happens to be one of the main causes of suicide; this unfortunate scenario parallels the example of a psychoanalyst who uses ‘the talking cure’ with a patient without realising that he is suffering from a brain tumour which is the source of his insomnia, anxiety and so forth. Freud recommended that prospective patients about to undergo psychoanalytic treatment first have a full physical examination; perhaps it is a good idea if prospective clients about to engage in philosophical counselling first undergo (at least in some cases) a psychological/psychiatric and physical examination to rule out all organic pathogens; in some cases, I would argue, psychotherapists should refer their patients to philosophical counsellors for ‘examination’ before (or in conjunction with) psychotherapeutic treatment. At a conference in Vienna several years ago, after I read my paper on *Asian Philosophy and Philosophical Counselling*, a couple of psychiatrists told me they thought it would be a good idea if philosophical counselling were used along with psychotherapy, at least in some cases. By the way, this issue of what (if any) competence in spotting (i.e. diagnosing in a rough and ready way) mental/emotional disorders should be required of all philosophical counsellors, is one of the issues which I would like to see more discussion of in connection with the certification/licensing issue.

I think this fits well with Ran Lahav’s view (if I understand him correctly) that a person’s philosophy can be expressed in actions as well as words.
Patience and humility are two more virtues on my list. The need for patience seems obvious, and fits well with both humility and the 'virtue' of timing, for an impatient counsellor who proudly thinks he has the answer and cannot wait for the optimum time to ask a question or give an opinion, is unlikely to ever fully understand his client's life, his client's values, his client's problem, or his client's perspective. Clients also, of course (like everyone, not only counsellors) need to cultivate the virtues of patience (especially in regard to carrying out life changes which often take time, and must proceed gradually, one might say organically); this is not however to deny that there are times when one (whether counsellor or client) must act decisively, burning one's bridges so to speak, in a way such that there is no turning back. As always, every rule has its exception (including this rule?).

Timing is likewise a virtue which clients should cultivate; there is a right time to leave your marital partner (as I advised my client “Ms. Hsieh”), or to ask your father for permission (and money) to go abroad to study law (as I advised my student, “Jenny”). Humility is a virtue highly valued in most Asian cultures, at least traditionally, and at least in appearance. In regard to the philosophical counsellor, humility means recognising that although he may have certain knowledge and skills which the client lacks, it is doubtful if he has the answers (definitely and unequivocally) to any of the Big Questions (What is the meaning of life? Is there a God? What is death and how shall we face it?). Philosophical counselling as I conceive it, and as I’ve practised it (on an admittedly limited basis) is like philosophy itself, only more so; it is humbling to sit with someone and struggle with issues which are no longer merely academic; I see philosophical counselling as very much a co-operative enterprise where two or more individuals (at least one of whom claims on some grounds to be a ‘philosopher’) discuss issues generally of vital importance to the conduct of life, and where the philosopher himself is searching for wisdom and insight as much as the client is. As someone remarked on Lance Fletcher’s internet discussion list, philo-sophia means the love of wisdom, not the possession of wisdom. It goes without saying that wisdom in large measure lies in knowing that one does not know, or possess wisdom (at least not completely). The philosophical dialogue between counsellor and client, if successful, leaves both counsellor and client a bit wiser (i.e. a bit less foolish), and it can be expected that as things proceed there may evolve a dialectical reversal of roles (to some degree), whereby the counsellor is counselled (albeit inadvertently, unintentionally, indirectly) by the client.

Irony and humour, these also are on my list of virtues. Let me only add that, despite the warning I gave in an earlier paper about undue and untimely mirth and joviality in the face of a client’s misery, sometimes life seems so gratuitously and absurdly unfair, unjust, and trouble-filled (“slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”), that I consider the only reasonable response is to laugh at it. In fact, we do this all the time when we read farces or see comedies such as those by Aristophanes, or Moliere, or Marx (Groucho, not Karl), which always have a tragic element. But, in regard to humour as a virtue, I especially want to emphasise the importance of counsellor and client (and everyone in fact) cultivating the ego-deflating virtue of laughing at oneself, not taking oneself too seriously as I said before. This is not to say that one should never take oneself seriously, but in philosophy there is a greater tendency for people to take themselves too seriously rather than too lightly. My presumption that I have anything of high significance to say about wisdom or virtue strikes me as ludicrous, which is to say that if you understand my meaning you will hopefully laugh along with (even at) me.

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I put warmth and friendliness on my list of virtues (especially important for the counsellor) since research in psychotherapy has shown that these qualities are the most highly valued by clients of psychotherapists, and I doubt if a statistical survey of clients of philosophical counsellors would differ significantly. A cold and unfriendly philosophical counsellor might appeal to some clients and be able to help them, but I suspect such clients are few. Now I want to make another key point about how the philosophical counsellor actually “helps” clients with their problems, predicaments, quandaries, and what not. As I’ve already said, I think it is false to characterise philosophy as a purely logical, cognitive, intellectual exercise. Ergo, the philosophical counsellor is not merely a thinking machine for hire, but a living breathing human being, fundamentally not different from the client. How do psychotherapists actually help their unhappy clients? Not by theory and not even by their training, according to much research on the topic. The crucial factor is the personality, or ‘way of being-in-the-world’ of the psychotherapist, or one could say the ‘bond’ or relationship between the therapist and the client. I believe the same holds true for the philosopher and his client. In the end it is not so much what was asked or said which counts, nor even insights gained or assumptions uncovered or inconsistencies removed, but rather the shared presence of someone genuinely in possession of some degree of ‘wisdom’ (and other virtues). Perhaps our experiences differ (as Hume said when he looked “inside himself” for a self and could find no such self), but in my own experience of fellow philosophers and teachers of philosophy who have influenced me the most, taught me the most (and the most important things), it has not been what they said which counted but what they did, how they comport/conducted themselves in this tortuous labyrinth called life. To use Wittgenstein’s distinction, it is not a matter of saying but of showing. And revealing oneself is always, for all living creatures, dangerous. Hence, philosophical counselling, properly conducted, is dangerous, not only for the client who may be discomfited and unsettled by challenges to his assumptions, but for the counsellor too insofar as he shows his true colours, and questions his own values and assumptions. So, it turns out, as Nietzsche would have it (“Live dangerously!” he said), that living dangerously is virtuous and wise for both counsellor and client.

Although my list reminds me of the list of virtues I was taught in my youth as a boy-scout in America, I do see good reason in each case why each of the moral qualities or values might often be useful or even necessary for successful interaction between counsellor and client. One tentative suggestion I have is that we might distinguish between first order virtues, such as courage and honesty, and higher-order ‘meta-virtues’ which are relatively universal such as empathy and timing which would take priority over lower order virtues in situations where there is a conflict between virtues and one does not see how to be both honest and non-judgmental for example. My suggestion that empathy and timing might take priority over other virtues is somewhat arbitrary, but it does seem to me that some kind of hierarchy of the virtues, or at least a strategy for resolving conflicting duties toward different virtues is needed. Aristotle, of course, thought that justice is such a supervening virtue, without which other virtues such as friendliness and magnanimity are impossible, just as in Confucian thought ‘humanity’ (jen) is the chief virtue and foundational to all other particular virtues such as filial piety (hsiao) or righteousness (yi). Interestingly, it would also seem that in both the ancient Greek and Chinese moral traditions, moderation (in Chinese, chung yung) is yet another candidate for

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6 See Ernesto Spinelli, *Demystifying Therapy*, p. 78.
status as a supervening, overarching, virtue which all other virtues must be guided by.\(^8\) Some such hierarchical arrangement of the virtues should make it easier to cultivate 'virtuous cycles' instead of 'vicious cycles'. By being able to resolve conflicts between competing virtues which one feels obligated to, it should be easier to act in ways which lead to further virtuous actions, just as when one acts viciously due to moral disorientation, one vicious act often leads to another (such as jealousy leading to murder, or one lie leading to another).\(^9\)

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*In the second part of this paper, to be printed in the next issue, the author promises to "renounce, undo, and subvert" most of what he’s said in the above!*

References

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\(^8\) The Chinese words, *chung yung*, together signify a 'golden mean' between extremes, but it is interesting that the second word, *yung*, by itself, signifies conformity to what is common and ordinary in one’s community; thus, for the Chinese, “moderation” is conducive to harmony and “concord in human relations” (as Wing-tsit Chan says, in his *Source Book on Chinese Philosophy*), but for many Western thinkers such as Heidegger, such conformity to mob opinion is “inauthentic’ (*Uneigentlich*).

\(^9\) MacIntyre mentions (p. 224), in *After Virtue*, the apparent need for such a “principle of priority between moral principles [virtues]” but does not as far as I can see formulate such a principle anywhere in his book.