Philosophical Practice as Contemplative Philosophy

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As philosophical practitioners we are often asked: ‘What is philosophical practice all about?’ And it is not easy to find a good answer, other than something like: ‘Well, philosophical practice is not one thing. There are all kinds of approaches.’

In this paper I would like to offer a distinction between what seems to me three fundamentally different kinds of philosophical practice that are based on three different visions of the nature of philosophising. Through this classification I will characterise a vision of philosophical practice that is close to my heart, which I feel is important and inspiring, but which is, unfortunately, often neglected.

The Problem-Solving Approach

I think that in the eyes of many practitioners nowadays, the main goal of philosophical practice is to help counselees deal with their everyday difficulties and predicaments: with their marriage problems, their low self-esteem, their choice of career, their burn-out at work. The goal of this kind of philosophical practice is to satisfy clients’ unsatisfied needs; or, more accurately, what they perceive to be their needs. The underlying conception here can be called the problem-solving approach (or, therapeutic approach) of philosophical practice, because its main aim is to develop solutions for specific problems and thus to relieve suffering.

It should be noted that not every philosophical counselling that deals with counselees’ personal problems necessarily aims at problem-solving. A counsellor may discuss personal problems not in order to solve them, but as a means for raising broader philosophical issues. For example, a conversation about the counselee’s sense of worthlessness may be used as a doorway that leads to a more general philosophical self-examination. It would therefore not belong to the problem-solving approach, which is characterised in terms of the final end towards which the counselling is directed.

What is interesting about the problem-solving approach is that it aims at supplying goods tailored to fit the client’s needs, just like the doctor who supplies remedies for pains and illnesses, just like the furniture-maker who aims at satisfying people’s desire for convenience, just like the Hollywood film-maker who addresses people’s need for entertainment. Here, philosophy, which was once perceived as a critic of society, has become an agent of society and its market economy. We may wonder what is left of philosophy’s traditional lofty ideals—the quest for wisdom and self-knowledge as goals in themselves. Somehow, the problem-solving approach chooses to ignore the ancient realisation that the quest for wisdom often requires giving up one’s comfort or security or riches, and sacrificing one’s pleasures. Far from being concerned with wisdom, this approach accepts the client’s verdict about what is desirable, and adjusts philosophy to the demands of the market.

But, hold on, one might say, is there anything wrong with this contemporary trend? After all, people in today’s world want solutions to their problems, self-gratification, recognition, profit, comfort, fun—so why should philosophers be different? Why shouldn’t they, too, join the market economy and sell what they have to offer to those willing to pay?

My answer is that I don’t see anything wrong with helping people feel better, on the contrary. But doing so is not really philosophy in the original, deep sense of the word. It is no longer philo-sophia—a search inspired by yearning for wisdom, but rather a process dictated by the client’s desire for comfort or security or satisfaction. Its ultimate goal is not to grapple with fundamental life-issues, but to find workable solutions to specific problems. To see this, think of how you would conduct a philosophical conversation on, say, the nature of love. Obviously, if you are speaking with a heart-broken counselee whose husband has just left her, and your aim in using philosophy is to alleviate her pain, then you would steer the counselling conversation in a direction which you think would eventually yield comforting results. For example, you might want to pay special attention to the view that a meaningful life need not include romantic relations. This would be very different from a philosophical conversation in which you seek the deepest possible understanding of the meaning of love, and which might—who can tell in advance?—worsen the counselee’s sense of hopelessness. The two conversations would be dictated by different considerations, would use different philosophical ideas or texts, and would develop towards different ends.

Towards a Wisdom-Inspired Vision of Philosophical Practice

An alternative to the problem-solving approach, suggested by the literal meaning of the term ‘philo-sophia’, is a wisdom-oriented vision. And this naturally raises the question: What is wisdom? This is a hard question, since wisdom, by its very nature, always goes beyond any pre-conceived formula. Nevertheless, a few preliminary observations would be helpful here.

Let us think of a wise man or woman, whether real or imaginary. What kind of a person are we imagining? Clearly, he or she need not be smart (a wise old man does not necessarily have the smartness of a computer whiz, and a smart computer whiz is not necessarily wise) or knowledgeable (an uneducated fisherman may be wise, though illiterate). Wisdom has little to do with any kind of possession — of reasoning skills, of knowledge, of talent. When we imagine a wise person, we think of a form of being and not of having; we think about a way of taking
part in the world, not about possessing a thinking-tool to manipulate one’s world. Thus, it is hard to see how somebody can be said to be a wise person if she is self-indulgent or petty or self-centred, regardless of how much knowledge or cleverness she might possess. Evidently, preoccupation with oneself, with one’s self-centred concerns, with one’s own limited perspective, is incongruent with wisdom.

Wisdom, then, implies being open to a wider world beyond one’s narrow self. It is a way of understanding that opens us to realities beyond our ordinary self-centred worldview. It is not a tool for analysing and simplifying and solving problems, but on the contrary, an openness to the complexity of human reality, to richer horizons of meanings, of facets, of perspectives. This is the source of the lure of wisdom, but also of the difficulty in walking its path. And this is perhaps why many philosophical counselors despair of the idea of wisdom and opt for well-defined, pragmatic, manageable goals, which are often familiar therapeutic aims imported from the field of psychotherapy.

I can see no possible compromise between the problem-solving approach and a wisdom-based vision of philosophical practice. The two are fundamentally different. As a philosophical practitioner, either I am in the business of helping to develop solutions to my interlocutors’ predicaments, or in the business of cultivating perplexity, wonder and even confusion; either I focus on satisfying my interlocutors’ needs, or on putting their needs in question; either I aim at clarifying and simplifying their worldview, or at complicating and enriching it; either I try to reduce every issue into a clear bottom line, or to turn apparent bottom lines into open issues. In short, either I am guided by my counselees’ desire to reach a satisfying resolution, or by the yearning to the openness that is called wisdom.

It is unclear to me why we use the same title — ‘philosophical practitioner’ — to denote these two very different practices. They resemble each other no more than art and art-therapy, music composition and music-therapy, literature and bibliotherapy. Just as a therapist who uses art to help his clients feel better is not doing art but art-therapy, the same should apply to a therapist who uses philosophy for this purpose. Philosophy and philosophy-therapy (or -counselling) require different capacities, different kinds of sensitivities, even different personalities. One is a need-centred or satisfaction-centred practice, the other a wisdom-centred endeavour. One is primarily a form of counselling, the other a form of philo-sophia. Let us stop calling these two practices by the same name and reserve the name ‘philosophical therapy’ for a problem-solving, need-centred kind of counselling, and let us refer to the other practice as ‘philo-sophical practice’ — to emphasise that a counselling aimed at problem-solving is not a form of philo-sophia at all.

The Critical-Reasoning Vision of Philo-Sophical Practice

If philo-sophical practice is not a problem-solving process, then what is it?

Many philosophical practitioners use Socrates as a paradigm for philosophising, or indeed for what philosophical practice is all about. The basic idea here is that Socrates demands that our views be clarified and supported by reason so that they pass the test of critical examination. According to this view, Socrates tells us that we need to clarify the concepts we are using, expose our hidden assumptions, and give convincing reasons that support our views or theories.

I am not at all sure that this approach reflects the real historical Socrates, so instead of calling it ‘the Socratic vision’ I prefer to call it ‘the critical-reasoning vision of philosophical practice’. It implies that the task of philosophical practice is to help counselees examine their worldview in a critical way, expose its presuppositions, analyse its inner logic, and improve it in order to make it more acceptable. Ideally, the improved worldview should be a coherent body of ideas that rests upon a firm foundation of good reasoning and acceptable axiomatic assumptions.

This form of practical philosophy is no longer a problem-solving endeavour, because its primary aim is to promote the counselee’s self-understanding. To be sure, it is perhaps true that better self-understanding often leads to better problem-solving capacities and thus to the satisfaction of needs. But this alleged therapeutic benefit is only a by-product of the primary goal, which is self-understanding. Problem-solving considerations do not dictate the counsellor-counselee dialogue. The vision underlying this approach to philo-sophical practice is, therefore, a vision of self-understanding, which might be understood as part of wisdom.

I was once sympathetic to this approach and tried to develop it, but several years ago I came to believe that it is not very helpful for philo-sophical practice, and if taken too seriously is likely to lead us to a dead-end. For one thing, it is much too analytic and critical: It analyses, or breaks down worldviews into elements, but does not sufficiently help the counselee to find new alternative ways of understanding life. Furthermore, although critical reasoning may help the person understand her current worldview, it does not seem to give her the inspiration and tools to transcend her current worldview and develop herself towards a new attitude to life. Self-transformation towards a new self-understanding requires more than just critical analysis.

But there is a more fundamental reason why this vision is problematic. It seems to me that this vision is based on a misguided conception of philosophy that has been extremely popular in Western philosophy. I call it the myth of abstract reasoning: It is the view that the task of philosophy is to use abstract reasoning to examine ideas (theories, explanations, etc.) in order to determine whether or not they are acceptable. This means that the philosopher’s role is to construct philosophical ideas that are supported by reason. Her role, in other words, is to put to test alternative ideas, to discard those that are problematic, and to validate the better-founded ones.
This conception of the role of philosophy is particularly prominent in Anglo-American philosophy, where the game of inventing arguments and counterarguments is especially popular. Indeed, when we examine what philosophy professors actually write about, we often find them arguing in support of utilitarianism or against it, trying to prove that the dualist theory of the mind is correct or incorrect, and so on.

However, the idea that this is the main task of philosophers seems to me highly questionable. For it is my strong impression that no important philosophical theory has ever been based on reasons that are capable of convincing the unbeliever. I have never seen a philosopher being convinced by the sheer logical force of an argument and logically forced to switch from, say, the dualist camp to the physicalist camp, or from utilitarianism to deontology. I have seen, of course, people changing their philosophical convictions, but not because some abstract reasoning forced them to do so.

I am not denying that philosophers use reasonings, or that arguments are an important philosophical tool (at least in certain styles of philosophy). What I am denying, rather, is that the role of arguments is to prove or disprove ideas by showing that they are acceptable or unacceptable. Centuries of philosophy have produced wonderful philosophical treasures, despite the fact that no single philosophical theory has been conclusively proved (or disproved) by arguments. Thus, the value of arguments is not in convincing the unbeliever, but mostly as a tool that helps the believer develop her theory.

This implies that when I change my mind about a philosophical issue, what happens to me is not a logical assent to the unavoidable power of abstract reasoning. Rather, what happens to me is, we might say, a change of heart. I come to see things differently, as invested with new meanings and as hanging together in new ways. The new philosophical theory now ‘speaks’ to me, it ‘appeals’ to me, it makes sense to me—to me, to the specific individual who is me. I am now reconciled with it and let it determine the structure of my world.

Exceptions are, maybe, theories in logic or philosophy of mathematics, which perhaps can be proved right or wrong. But the more we move away from the domain of pure logic to concrete life, the less arguments are capable of convincing. When I philosophise about the nature of love, the meaning of life, the morality of adultery, philosophical ideas no longer speak primarily to my pure reason. They speak, rather, to my personal way of relating to the world, to my experience of myself and of others, to my way of feeling and thinking, or in short, to the person I am.

I don’t mean to say that accepting a philosophical idea is a matter of arbitrary subjective taste. After all, a discussion with a friend about some theory can lead me to see the topic in a new light, perhaps to the point of accepting or rejecting the theory. This implies that accepting a philosophical theory is a matter of understanding, not of subjective whim. But my point is that this understanding is not a matter of pure reason (if there is such a thing), of an impersonal assent to a logical calculation. What a philosophical idea does to me is that it allows me to understand the world in my entire being: as a person with a certain way of living life and relating to life, with a particular way of thinking and emoting and behaving, or in short, with a certain way of being. And it is precisely because of this that a new understanding has the power to influence and transform me.

I suggest that the traditional attempt to distinguish between the faculty of reason and of emotion, and to pretend that philosophy aims only at the faculty of pure reason, is misguided. It is misguided especially in philo-sophical practice, which deals with ways of understanding life concretely—that is to say, ways in which we live our understandings, not merely think them. Philo-sophising should not be seen as a game of abstract ideas but as a dialogue that engages our capacity to understand from our depths: from those aspects of ourselves which are prior to the superficial division between reason and emotion, and which embody our overall relationship with life. Philosophical understandings cannot be separated from the person I am.

The Platonic Vision of Philo-Sophical Practice

It seems to me, therefore, that contrary to the critical-reasoning vision of philosophy, philo-sophical practice should seek to engage not just a fragmented ‘island’ of our being such as our reasoning, but ourselves as full persons. Here, Plato’s cave allegory is useful. According to this allegory, most of us live like cave-dwellers who are tied to their chairs and see only the shadows displayed on the wall. Since we are unable to turn around and see the fire behind our back, much less to get out of the cave and see the sun, we believe that the shadows are reality itself. In other words, most of us are preoccupied with the shadows of life: with limited, superficial, self-centered ideas, hopes, fears and the like. Our concerns usually focus on improving our lives as if it is within the cave, on satisfying our current needs and interests: how to get along with our boss, how to feel better about ourselves, how to buy a new house or a bigger car. Many of these desires may be understandable, but they are not the business of philo-sophia. The philosopher’s goal is not to help cave-dwellers deal with their shadows and satisfy their current desire for more satisfying shadows, but rather to help them transcend the realm of shadows and arouse in their hearts new yearnings: to get out of the cave and get closer to the light, which for Plato is the Beautiful, the True, the Real. The goal, in other words, is to incorporate in our lives new and deeper ways of understanding reality.

I suggest that Plato’s cave allegory is a wonderful metaphor for philo-sophical practice. It illustrates, first, that the role of philo-sophia is to call the person to transcend the everyday level of understanding one’s life towards a deeper, richer vision of life. Second, it emphasises that the process of philo-sophising is not that of reasoning or theorising about the light, but that of directly encountering hidden aspects of our reality and taking part in them. Third, the aim of the process is not limited to a certain faculty within the person, but consists of a conversion of the entire person: the entire person must turn around towards the light. And fourth, the power that compels the person to turn around—and Plato emphasises that the person is...
forced to do so—is the Platonic Eros: a yearning to encounter the Real, to achieve a more truthful understanding of reality.

This is what I call the Platonic vision of philosophical practice. It tells us that the goal of philosophising is to arouse in us the yearning for wisdom, to pull us out of our limited, superficial self-understanding—and thus needs and concerns, and to help us live a greater vision of life.

**Philo-sophia as Contemplative Philosophy**

I believe that this Platonic philo-sophia must be contemplative; ‘contemplative’ in the sense that it requires me to attend to life and respond to it from (what can be called) my depth understanding: not from the understanding which my thoughts verbalise, but from the understanding which I live, and which I embody in my way of being.

Most of the ideas that we encounter in everyday life remain limited to a specific aspect of ourselves or our behaviour. I can hear, for example, about an earthquake catastrophe, and even be rationally convinced that helping the victims is a moral obligation, and yet continue to live my life just as before. These lofty moral ideals simply do not motivate or inspire me. My everyday actions, concerns and thoughts remain basically unchanged, as if no earthquake has ever happened. At most I can force myself to act by imposing on myself a theoretical moral ideal.

But at other time, something different happens: my understanding of the meaning of the earthquake infiltrates my entire being, and this understanding motivates me to think and feel and act. In fact, it transforms me.

The goal of philo-sophical practice, as I see it, is precisely to teach us to relate to ourselves and our world from such depth understandings. Put differently, its goal is to teach us to understand from the wholeness of our being and not from our thoughts alone, and to give expression to those understandings in our everyday life. This requires opening inside ourselves an inner space of ‘listening’ which is not cluttered by the usual chatter of our thoughts and is not obscured by our automatic opinions and attitudes. In this process, philosophical texts and ideas serve not as objects of thought and reasoning, but as dynamic ‘voices’ that act inside us, arouse understandings and responses in our depth, and transform us.

We all experience from time to time momentary glimpses of such depth understanding. It sometimes happens to us, for example, when we read a book or watch a movie, even a most boring one, that suddenly a particular sentence touches our heart. The sentence strikes us as intimating to us something of great significance. We feel that a new realisation has been evoked in our depths, but when we try to put this understanding in words, we often find ourselves saying things that sound empty, hackneyed, and hardly new. What happened here was that the sentence we heard evoked in us an understanding that is more than a mere abstract thought—it was an understanding of our heart, as it were, of our being before it was divided into reason and emotion and action. This is why this understanding inspired us in a way it had not before, when we knew it in theory only, and this is why when we try to translate it to the vocabulary of reason alone, we naturally fail to reproduce the experience of understanding. Because the original understanding was not a mere verbal understanding but an understanding of our whole being, or depth understanding.

What, more precisely, does it mean to understand from our whole being? What does it mean for philo-sophia to become contemplative and engage our depth understanding? On a theoretical level, I believe that there is not much more that can be said here, for it is not a matter that can be captured by a theory, but something we must personally explore and experience for ourselves. To search for a theory about contemplative philo-sophia would be to commit again the error of reducing the rich ways of our understanding to abstract thinking. And it is precisely this that we must avoid, if we want philo-sophical practice to go beyond mere critical thinking.

On a more practical level, there is the issue of method, and this, too, I would like to leave open here, as a challenge for further explorations. I have no doubt that there are many appropriate methods, and that different ones could work better with different people. Personally, I have experimented with various meditative techniques, but there is no reason to assume that contemplation, in the sense of attending to human reality and to the understandings that it arouses in our depths, must be limited to organised meditations.

I will only mention that several religious traditions are familiar with the idea of depth understanding, and have developed ways to cultivate it in various ways (though in a religious rather than philosophical direction). One example is the Catholic Lectio Divina, a meditative reading of the scriptures, developed in the Middle Ages by a Carthusian monk. The meditator reads a passage from the scriptures and, with the help of a certain technique, pushes his ordinary thoughts aside and opens an inner space for deep insights to take place in his depths.

I suggest that it is worth exploring these traditions, as well as new ways of relating to texts and ideas that can assist in turning philo-sophia into a contemplative quest, or in other words, a process that engages our depth understanding.

**Philosophical Companionship**

If philo-sophia is to be understood as a contemplative process directed at depth understanding, then it is a never-ending process. Because who among us can say that he or she has already come out of the Platonic cave and seen the ultimate light? Unlike a doctor or psychologist, practitioners of philo-sophia are never professionals who have already finished their training.

Thus, in order to be true philo-sophical practitioners, we must continue to see ourselves first and foremost as students and seekers. Our main philo-sophical task is to keep working on ourselves, before going out to seek other people as clients.

This also suggests that in our interactions among ourselves we should see other practitioners not primarily as colleagues, but as active companions. Our philo-sophical
interaction should not be limited to speaking with clients or about clients, or to occasional collegial conferences. If we seriously take upon ourselves the task of exploring the nature of depth understanding and developing it, then we should focus on contemplative-philosophical interactions among ourselves. Let us, then, form philosophical companionships: networks of philosophical seekers who interact as companions in a personal search for deeper understandings. Let this be a means to a new level of philosophical practice.

A first step in this direction took place last June in Chipiona, Spain, by the Atlantic Ocean, where Jose Barrientos and I have organised a philosophical retreat of contemplative philosophy. Fifteen participants from eight countries spent five days in workshops and discussions, exploring together ways to make philosophy personal, experiential, dynamic, or in short contemplative. I hope that this experience will lead to further explorations of contemplative philo-sophia.

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