Reflections

Personal reflections from Philosophical Practitioners around the world on the uses of Philosophy in the individual’s search for wisdom or enlightenment, as a method of individual reflection or meditation, or as a tool or context for therapy and counselling.

Sapiential Philosophy: My Approach to Philosophical Counselling

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My dedication to Philosophical Practice reflects my personal path. When I first became aware of the existence of Philosophical Counselling, I knew immediately that I wanted to dedicate myself to this activity because, in fact, I had already been dedicated to it — for years I had been organising philosophical courses and workshops aimed at transformational understanding of our concrete lives. Philosophical Counselling gave a title and a socially recognised framework to what was already my vocation and my way of understanding and practising philosophy.

At that time I had already finished my doctoral thesis about non-dualism in Heidegger and Eastern metaphysics (Cavallé, 2000), and I had also published Wisdom Recovered: Philosophy as Therapy (Cavalle, 2001). In both works I vindicate the ‘therapeutic’ (in the sense of transformative) dimension of philosophy, and drawn a distinction between what I designate ‘sapiential philosophy’ — the philosophy that does not dissociate knowledge from transformation, objective truth from subjective veracity, science from inner liberation — and the primarily speculative philosophy which has predominated the Western academic world, and which is focused on conceptual contents.

The boundary between these two orientations is approximate rather than rigid. Yet, the distinction between them is not merely superficial or formal, for it implies two qualitatively different conceptions of philosophy. My acquaintance with Eastern philosophy allowed me to understand and outline the nature of this difference, because Eastern metaphysics are paradigmatic examples of sapiential philosophy, although the latter has been central in all cultures, including our own, I believe, in fact, it corresponds to Western philosophy in its original form.

Let me spell out several characteristics of Eastern sapiential philosophies which can be extended to apply to all sapiential philosophies. These define the conception of ‘philosophy’ that underlies my practice of Philosophical Counselling:
a) What I call sapiential philosophies are neither philosophy nor religion in the usual contemporary Western, restricted sense of these terms. These are characteristically euro-Christian notions which are not applicable to the main Eastern sapiential philosophies. In my opinion, only if we refer to the ancient Western conception of philosophy as a wisdom that leads to inner liberation - a conception that was prior to the artificial split between speculative philosophy and liberating disciplines that have determined the history of ideas in the West - will we be able to comprehend Eastern teachings without distortion.

b) The method par excellence of sapiential philosophies is critical investigation based on one’s own experience. For that reason these teachings lack confessional or dogmatic bias. As Krishnamurti states, ‘Doubt, skepticism, questioning - such attitudes that with their immense vitality clean the mind from illusions, far from being distinctive of heretics, have been and are in India and in the Asian world the method par excellence of philosophical and spiritual investigation.’ (Pupul Jayakar, 1996, pp. 399-400)

c) Critical investigation uses the instrument of reason, but this is a kind of reason that is not exhausted by its individual and logical-conceptual dimensions. Rather, it has a supra-individual root (like the original Greek notion of *logos*) and includes diverse and superior modalities of knowledge, some of which are inseparable from love.

d) As implied by the previous point, for Eastern sapiential thought philosophical investigation is not concerned with a specific aspect of the person - namely the mental faculty - but rather with all the dimensions of the person’s being. The Eastern wise person is not equivalent to the *pandit* (an Indian term referring to the mere scholar, who is sometimes ironically described as the donkey loaded with books).

e) Philosophical knowledge is for these teachings not something we ‘have’ but something we ‘are’ - a lucid experience of life, a state of being and of consciousness.

f) Another characteristic of Eastern sapiential philosophies that follows from the previous points is the relativity of theoretical doctrines (‘The Tao that can be stated is not the true Tao’. Lao tse, 1995). Intellectual speech - philosophy in its conceptual content - has no value in itself. Its value consists in its capacity to act as a set of suggestions or instructions that are designed to enable everyone to verify for his or herself the truth of a teaching through direct experience and certain existential practices. For Eastern sapiential philosophies, real philosophical knowledge exists only in this intimate and direct experience of reality. Intellectual explanations do not have any value in themselves and are only an illusory semblance of knowledge.

g) Another characteristic of these teachings is their emphasis on existential questions. They all agree, for example, that their highest priority is to understand suffering and liberation from suffering. Some Western scholars have taken this as a sign of the ‘inferior’ character of these philosophies, because it seems to imply that...
Reflections

pure knowledge is subordinated to praxis. This presumably distorts the desirable disinterested character of philosophical knowledge. This alleged subordination of theory to praxis does not really exist in Eastern teachings because inner liberation is not viewed as an extrinsic by-product of knowledge, but rather as identical to it - the source of inner slavery and suffering is ignorance of reality, and it vanishes under the light of knowledge just as darkness dissipates in the light, because the two have opposite natures. Knowledge and liberation are, simply stated, identical.

h) Eastern wisdom traditions compare the acquisition of this liberating knowledge to an awakening — one who comes to this kind of knowledge, like one who wakes up, does not acquire merely more information, but is literally no longer the same person; nor is the world he contemplates the same. Another level of being, of perception, and of reality is born, within which one realises the illusory nature of one’s previous state of consciousness, symbolically described as a ‘dream’. Liberation is not seen as taking place in a hypothetical ‘beyond’ - it is always a present human possibility. It is equivalent to a leap in our level of consciousness that enables us to transcend our ordinary state of ignorance and confusion.

To summarise, my acquaintance with Eastern thought allowed me to understand the radical difference in spirit between sapiential philosophy and merely speculative philosophy. It helped me to see with new eyes our own tradition, and to recognise and rediscover the forgotten sapiential traditions of the West, especially ancient Western thought which in many respects is closer in spirit to Eastern wisdoms than to modern Western thought. It also helped me to realise how our culture’s conception of philosophy has led to the disappearance of sapiential philosophy in the West, by making us forget that ‘One single teacher of life is preferable to a thousand teachers of words’ (Meister Eckhart, saying 8, 1962, p. 599).

References

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