

Philosophical biography: Its relevance to philosophical practice

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Is the biography of a philosophical counselor relevant to his practice? Some philosophers insist that as a psychological issue, if not just gossip, it has nothing to do with the validity of his past or present theoretical claims and is irrelevant to the adequacy of his practical approach to counseling. They would concede, perhaps, that having a problematic past, such as psychotic attacks or a criminal record, which imply the risk of abusive behavior and maltreatment of colleagues, students or counselees, should be taken into account when the question is whether to allow him teaching or counseling. Some would go even further and recommend preventing him access to influential positions. Yet they insist, as many of the defenders of Heidegger's legacy do, on the separation between political vices and personal defects on the one hand and philosophical virtues (or *vice versa*), on the other hand, in order to avoid the *ad hominem* fallacy. I am not sure that such a separation is that simple, but let me first examine whether the *philosophical* biography is relevant.

It is certainly relevant from a Platonic perspective. In that tradition one has a biography that merits the title "philosophical" when one's life consists in a relentless search for philosophical wisdom and a consistent striving, despite occasional failures, to realize the philosophical ideals that are allegedly dictated by that wisdom. Whether it is conceived as knowledge, understanding or existential commitment, and whether it is supposed to be attainable merely by conceptual and otherwise analytic dialogues or a further, post-discursive, "intuition" is needed, the life of the "true philosopher" is the story of his progress towards it. That tradition inspired not only religious conceptions of elevation

through spiritual exercises and atheistic psychoanalytic growing through therapeutic conversations but also some existentialists that speak of individual authenticity yet pretend to be "gurus" They all believe in initiation by someone who has already been initiated and further guidance by someone who has already achieved the goal, or has at least advanced further than the guided in the climb towards it. In that tradition one's philosophical biography is relevant because only by living philosophically one acquires philosophical wisdom which enables and entitles one to create one's own theoretical version of the philosophical truths and initiate and guide others.

Is one's philosophical biography relevant from the perspective of a non-Platonic tradition? I believe it does, but I suggest, in accordance with my approach to philosophical education and counseling, an alternative conception of a philosophical biography. Let me start with the Aristotelian legacy.

In many respect Aristotle stayed loyal to the Platonic tradition, but developing his own way, he insisted that his teacher, Plato, "is a friend", but truth is "more friend" to himⁱ. And indeed, at least four of his convictions were non-Platonic: Two of them regard matters of knowledge: 1) The quest for knowledge or wisdom starts with a "wonder" rather than a sheer love for perfection motivated by awareness of one's own cognitive, moral or existential imperfection. That "wonder" is not a thought- paralyzing amazement; it is an intriguing question, dilemma, problem, with no obvious solution. 2) At least in the domains of "mundane" human affairs we have to substitute the "epistemic" quest for the *true* (where alternatives are all *false*) by the "prudential" search for the most *reasonable* among a *plurality* of *possible* approaches. The two others regard human behavior: 3) "Earthly" emotions and desires are relevant and meaningful to human affairs, and should be reasonably administrated rather than denigrated and eventually overcome by the "celestial" love of the enlightened Intellect. 4) Good reasoning is not a guarantee for reasonable opinions and behaviors: People may think, act and react against their own best judgment. From such a perspective one's entire biography is certainly not "philosophical"; yet we can say that some chapters or aspects of one's biography may merit that title. But while an

Aristotelian would identify the "philosophical" chapters with periods in which one succeeds to think, act and react reasonably, I suggest to recognize a chapter in one's biography as such if one is motivated in it to make philosophical explorations by personally experienced "wondering". According to that conception, inspired by modern philosophers that explored innovative thinking, philosophical practice in education as well as counseling consists in encouraging and enabling students or counselees to have some such chapters in their biography.

One does not have to be a philosopher in order to have philosophical phases in one's life. The scientist or jurist, interpret or critics, artist or therapist, that finds that the professional problem that intrigues him cannot be properly coped with unless, in Kuhn's jargonⁱⁱ, the dominant "paradigm" is replaced by another, and is thereby motivated to examine critically its tacit and seemingly obvious philosophical assumptions, is living a philosophical phase even if he is not fully aware that he is thereby doing philosophical rather than professional job. He, just like the more philosophically-minded founder of a new discipline endeavoring to distinguish it from others and define its specific methodology and the less intellectual breaking-through statesman, is having an experience that is not less philosophical than that of the "pure" philosopher that realizes that adherence to existing philosophical conceptions prevent satisfactory coping with the philosophical problem that bothers him. Philosophical chapters may, moreover, be part of the biography of less sophisticated persons, who are unable to express themselves in general and abstract terms yet have realized that they will not be able to cope with a problem that bothers them unless they change some of their opinions, values or attitudes. Philosophical counseling consists in assisting people that do not know how to cope with some or other problem that intrigues them by inviting them to explore the opinions, values and attitudes, or in one word the tacit personal philosophy, that might impede better coping. Can every philosopher assist such a counselee?

The counselees, whether they are troubled by "mundane" difficulties or "spiritual" confusions, practical questions or metaphysical curiosity, existential anxieties or a sense of meaninglessness, emotional conflicts or moral dilemmas, expect the philosophical

counselor to help them *as a philosopher*. They believe, perhaps, that the counselor is acquainted with philosophical ideas that are relevant to their problem, but even if they assume that his knowledge has been accumulated by thorough and critical reading of philosophical texts rather than acquired superficially by participation in some workshops for counseling methods or a quick search for citations in internet webs, their *trust* does not follow from that belief. It is based on their assumption that he believes that his philosophical knowledge is relevant to their concerns and, moreover, that that conviction is corroborated by his personal experience. In other words, they expect him to believe that philosophy matters because he has personally experienced that his philosophical explorations helped him to cope better at least with some of the problems that bothered him, and has, furthermore, a reasonable faith that such explorations may, despite the personal differences, help them as well. They expect him, briefly, to have some philosophical chapters in his biography.

There are, however, many professional philosophers that are doing brilliantly the *technical jobs* of what Kuhn called "normal science" under the roof of this or that "paradigm" of philosophizing, using fluently its rhetorical tools, asking acceptable questions, making references to authors from the adequate lists etc., with no background of real, personal, philosophical "wondering", no history of philosophical explorations in the effort to cope with personally meaningful problems, no personal commitments to theories or approaches, and no concern for the relevance of philosophizing to the ability to cope with personal problems. Not every so-called philosopher, or a student or graduate following his ways, is, briefly, a Wittgenstein. Yet a philosopher does not have to be as revolutionary as the latter or other great philosophers - who both "changed the paradigm" and explored the variety of implications of the change on theoretical as well as practical, general and personal level - in order to have a philosophical experience of "wondering" that is relevant to his philosophical explorations and commitments. Having such an experience, even on a modest scale, is relevant not only to the subjective meaningfulness of his philosophical positions, but also to the validity of his approach to counseling and personal commitment to the

counselees. I believe that philosophers that create their own way of counseling have such an experience. I am not sure whether the candidates for learning philosophical counseling from others have it. The training of philosophical counselors has therefore to start with the invitation to live or relive personal experiences in which philosophizing really mattered to them.. It should continue with examination of personal and cultural differences as well as differences in emotional sensitivity, temperament, openness to humor and self-respect among the participants in the training, and between them and their possible counselees. It should mobilize the participants' ability to tolerate plurality of opinions and understand various ways of reasoning and feeling, their willingness to administrate her own affects as well as her readiness to translate the others' personal concerns into a sharable philosophical "wondering". It should encourage them, moreover, to constantly "wonder" whether what they are doing as counselors is relevant and helpful to the counselee's concern, rather than train them technically to apply dogmatically some or other counseling tricks.

I return to my initial question: Is the philosopher's biography relevant to the validity of his theoretical claims and practical approach to counseling? The validity of a geometrical theorem should certainly not be called into question because the mathematicians asserting it are not triangles, but is the famous analogy between the non-triangular mathematician and the immoral philosopher of ethics reasonable? Is the validity of a theory about the proper behavior (or thinking, feeling, etc.) is never shattered by the improper conduct of its author (or admiring readers)? The logical distinction between the truth of a proposition and the virtues or vices of the person that asserts or negates it is perhaps in place when the philosopher deals with the nature or language of morality (rationality, authenticity etc.) *on a meta-level*, and like other "technicians" of "normal science" philosophizing, does not take position on the level of judgments and practical decisions. When a philosophers is, however, bothered personally by a moral problem, a dilemma that he does not see how to solve, or an unexplainable feeling of guilt or regret, and is motivated thereby to explore and revise some of his philosophical presuppositions, the moral theory that he proposes in consequence should not be considered as a *proposition* that is logically detached from him

but rather as a *speech act with illocutionary elements*. Such a speech act is not analogous to that of the mathematician, although both, if honest, commit themselves, by their act, to the *demonstration* of their claim; for the mathematician, who has never promised to be a triangle, is committed to provide a mathematical proof for his geometrical theorem, whereas the philosopher is committed to demonstrate in his own life the adequacy of his statement. In other words, proposing a philosophical conception is not making a descriptive utterance; it is making, at least tacitly, a *prescription* that according to his best judgment promises something, be it more happiness or justice, rationality or meaningfulness, freedom or authenticity, peace or adventure, responsibility or self-realization, tools for struggling with difficulties or ways of coping with failures. If one fails to live by one's prescription, the reason may be one's personal so-called weakness of will; but if the prescription was made dishonestly or else one believes that one's behavior is compatible with it - the prescription itself should be revised. It may be defective, like some theories that seem to prescribe universalistic treatment but are too vague with regards to the inclusion of whole groups of "others" in the "universal" community, or some conceptions of personal authenticity that are incoherent enough to embrace community determinism, inconsistent enough to allow for flight from individual as well as collective responsibility and, mainly, too dogmatic to enable revision of analyses in front of new "wonders", from a wider horizon and other perspectives of experiences and dilemmas. The question, whether the biography of the philosophical counselor is relevant to the validity of his theoretical conception and practical approach, is relevant to philosophical counseling because by offering counseling one obliges oneself to explore on oneself and on one's trainees, whether and how his philosophy really matters.

ⁱ Paraphrasing [Nicomachean Ethics](#) 1096a11-15:

ⁱⁱ In Kuhn, T. S.: *The structure of Scientific Revolutions*: 3rd ed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996.