

The Place of Practical Wisdom (Phronesis) in Philosophical Practice

Abstract

(For a Lecture in the Section 1. Papers, essays and theoretical reflections)

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Philosophical practitioner Ran Lahav has recently made a distinction between three different approaches to philosophical practice, each aiming at different goals. The first one he calls the **Problem-solving** or **Therapeutic** approach, which aims at **satisfying the client's needs** and **relieving suffering** by helping the clients to **solve their problems**. For Lahav this approach is not philosophy in an "original, deeper sense", because it is not inspired by a longing for wisdom.

The second approach to philosophical practice Lahav calls **Critical thinking** or the **Worldview interpretation** approach. This way of doing philosophical practice aims at helping the client to gain self-understanding and to clarify the concepts underlying her attitudes and presuppositions within her own philosophy of life. But for Lahav this approach is "too analytic, too critical" and is based too much on logical reasoning alone.

Lahav's third path is called the **Contemplative** approach and it aims at **wisdom** or **spiritual edification** of the clients. This is done by promoting practices of meditation and philosophical dialogue. For Lahav this seems to represent the "highest", "most authentic" approach to philosophical practice. (Lahav, 1995, 2001, 2006)

In this paper I will argue that even though all three of Lahav's approaches seem to be useful in philosophical practice, his classification leaves out the most important area of concerns in our client's lives, namely the **Ethical** questions. These include such considerations as "How should we live?" and "How can we reach "the good life?" This involves the knowledge or understanding that enables us "to act well" or "to do the right thing."

I will also argue that for a philosophical practitioner a useful way to approach these questions is through **Virtue ethics**. The central concepts in this tradition are **arête (virtue or excellence)**, **phronesis (practical wisdom)** and **eudaimonia (happiness or flourishing)**. The importance of

virtue ethics in philosophical counseling has been noted before by several other philosophical practitioners (Achenbach, 1997; 2002; Arnaud & LeBon, 2000; Feary, 2003; Macaro, 2005).

Finally, I will explore the different skills involved with practical wisdom, such as **deliberation (euboulia) / situational appreciation (nous) / cleverness (deinotes) / making a choice (prohairesis)**. I will also look into some ways to cultivate these skills in philosophical practice with the help of case examples.

Sources:

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