

## ***Wisdom and Virtue in Philosophical Counselling<sup>1</sup>*** ***Fleming***

**Jess**

*In the first part of this paper, published in Practical Philosophy 3:1, Jess Fleming compiled a list of virtues which he tentatively suggested philosophical counsellors should aspire to. This is the second and concluding part of his paper.*

Now I want to try to renounce, undo, and subvert most of what I've said so far, which I'm afraid that you may find exasperating, even dismaying. But, after all, do we not learn in philosophy that there are always (at least) two sides to every issue (otherwise it wouldn't be an issue). So far I've portrayed virtue and wisdom in a rather conventional way, but now I want to look at the other side. I'm going to try to upset my own apple cart. I have at least three different kinds of counter-arguments which I will marshal not really to undermine all that I've said above, but to show that it is thus far incomplete in an important way. I began by saying that I want to defend 'uncommon sense' 'divine madness,' and so forth, and I want to now acknowledge a debt to, and the influence of, Schopenhauer. For, like Schopenhauer, I see a close kinship between madness and genius (not a very original thesis I admit, since many other thinkers from the Romantic poets to Freud have suggested as much). I worry that the result of all this philosophical counselling will be individuals (both counsellors and clients) who are well adapted, conventional, well-behaving, and mediocre in living and thinking. Let me quote Schopenhauer so you can perhaps see why I fear that we may be in the business of stifling genius with all this 'virtue' and 'wisdom.' Schopenhauer said, "...no cool or sober man can be a genius";<sup>2</sup> he also said, "...even the extremely intelligent and rational man, whom we might almost call wise, is very different from the genius; and indeed he is so because his intellect retains a practical [Schopenhauer's emphasis] tendency."<sup>3</sup> How so? Schopenhauer elaborates, "In fact, every child is to a certain extent a genius, and every genius to a certain extent a child. The relationship between the two shows itself primarily in the naivety and sublime ingenuousness that are fundamental characteristics of true genius... Therefore every genius is already a big child, since he looks out into the world as into something strange and foreign... Accordingly, just like the child, he does not have the dull gravity and earnestness of ordinary men, who, being capable of nothing but subjective interests, always see in things merely motives for their actions. He who throughout his life does not, to a certain extent, remain a big child, but becomes an earnest, sober, thoroughly composed and rational man, can be a very useful and capable citizen of this world; but he will never be a genius."<sup>4</sup> I know what you are thinking, or at least I think I do, based on what I would think if I heard someone cite this passage from Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer's key point is that the genius is not practical; he is not interested in furthering his personal interests, or indeed in any particular material thing,<sup>5</sup> but only in the universal (i.e. the Platonic 'Forms'), in which he has no personal interest.<sup>5</sup> Thus, such a person has what is in Aristotle's view is essential to a life of *eudaimonia*, namely the intellectual virtue of 'theoretical wisdom' (*sophia*), but such a person lacks

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was originally presented at the *Fourth International Conference on Philosophical Practice* (Koeln, 1998)

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, vol. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Schopenhauer said he was most influenced by Plato, Kant, and the Hindu *Upanishads*, and the influence of Socrates and Plato here is clear.

'practical wisdom' (*phronesis*), which is the ability to judge changing circumstances and choose ends and means wisely. From an Aristotelian perspective such a person is a lopsided monstrosity, having fulfilled only the highest part of his human nature, but having neglected to fulfil other moral and intellectual 'virtues' (*aretai*, 'excellences') such as justice (*dikaiosyne*) and moderation (*sophrosyne*). You must also be wondering if I mean to suggest that philosophical counselling is always in danger of pandering to mediocrity and turning every client into a stifled genius, a pedestrian bourgeois. Of course not. As Schopenhauer says, and as we all know, the Einsteins, Picassos, and Beethovens of the world are few and far between. But, still, the point is that mere wisdom may be a short-sighted goal in rare (very rare) cases of philosophical counselling. Imagine if some philosophical counsellor had gotten his hands on Nietzsche or Van Gogh – we might today have no Zarathustra or Sunflowers. So, this is my first argument against the rather conventional picture of virtue and wisdom which I outlined in the first half of my paper. Fortunately, Schopenhauer's remarks about the virtue of being childlike lead smoothly into my next argument based on the eccentric and exotic philosophy of Chuang Tzu (4<sup>th</sup> c. B.C., Taoist philosopher from China).

In the classical Chinese language in which early philosophical texts, such as the *Chuang Tzu*, were written, the word for virtue is *te*, and it is interesting that in Taoist philosophy *te*, like the Greek word *arete* and the English word virtue, has both a moral meaning and an amoral meaning. Morally speaking, it is closely associated with the concept of fate (*ming*). For example, Chuang Tzu, like most Chinese today thinks that many important life events, as well as one's death, are destined, and that it is a virtue or sign of wisdom if one is able to stoically resign oneself to the inevitable, and remain tranquil in the face of such fated events and transitions. The amoral meaning of 'te' lies in its close association with the concept of Tao (from whence Taoism derives its name). Generally speaking, we can say that the Tao signifies the source and origin of all things, and also the 'great reservoir' to which they will in the end return. The Tao is also characterised as 'non-being' (*wu*, as in *wu wei*, non-action), and as the natural process of cyclic, seasonal, change which encompasses and embraces all things. *Te*, we may say is the Tao individuated and manifested in the inborn natures of all things. Thus, for Chuang Tzu virtue (*te*), signifies the ability not only to live in accord with one's external destiny and one's internal nature, but also the ability to nourish the indefiniteness, uncertainty, the non-being (or emptiness) at one's core, allowing one to live in creative, spontaneous, novel ways, which in fact benefit all around one, but without intending to benefit either oneself or others. For Chuang Tzu it is essential to forget oneself, and forget others. Trying too hard to be good or benevolent, as the Confucians do, is he thinks counterproductive and self-defeating. Chuang Tzu says that, "When the Tao is lost, virtue (*te*) arises; when virtue is lost, benevolence (*jen*) arises; and when benevolence is lost, righteousness (*yi*) arises." In other words, conventional morality which emphasises typical virtues such as benevolence and righteousness, is a sign of decline from a state of nature, when men lived with one another in an anarchic utopia, without laws, leaders, government, tradition, culture, education, etc. – all of which to Chuang Tzu are so much useless baggage. It is best, I think, to interpret this myth metaphorically, as saying that there are three levels of moral development. Lowest is when men behave selfishly and viciously, seeking fame, fortune, and (political) power. Next highest is when men learn to care for one another and have feelings of shame, guilt, fellow-feeling, duty, and so forth. But, somewhat like Nietzsche, the highest level of moral development is "beyond good and evil." One is able to imitate the Tao and live with others, as the animals do, namely with no inflexible social hierarchy, self-consciousness, or feelings duty or shame, and yet in a natural condition of harmony and

mutual benefit. This may sound unrealistic, but I think it is not difficult to think of examples of behaviour (either by individuals, or governments), whose well-intended 'moral' behaviour backfired and actually harmed the intended beneficiary of our good intentions, and there are similarly examples where by not intervening or trying to improve the situation, or help others, the situation corrects itself. What this means for philosophical counselling is manifold. First of all don't try too hard, in fact often it is best to leave things alone and do nothing (*wu wei*), or do something unexpected and innovative. Are you sure, Chuang Tzu would ask, there are no situations when it is better to be cowardly, impatient, insincere, proud, upset, inattentive, etc. towards your client, and is it inconceivable that the client might not thrive better in his crisis or predicament by behaving in similarly unexpected ways? Chuang Tzu's philosophy is a kind of epistemological perspectivalism, with many stories about animals illustrating that we humans falsely assume to know definitely and absolutely what is true and false, what is beautiful and ugly, what is useful and what is useless, but we forget that we are viewing things (such as our natural environment) from a limited, human, perspective, which is not necessarily superior to the perspectives of other creatures. Thus, how can we be certain that courage, honesty, sincerity, and so forth are really virtues? Perhaps from some different perspective they are actually harmful vices.

Furthermore, integral to Taoist thought, is the *yin/yang* polarity. *Yin* and *yang*, of course designate the two great forces at work in the universe, as impersonal agents of, or manifestations of, the Tao, such that when they are balanced (as in a person's metabolism, or lifestyle) all is well. But they also symbolise all other polarised dichotomies which we assume to be mutually exclusive and together exhaustive. True/false, beautiful/ugly, useful/useless, life/death, action/inaction, wisdom/folly, virtue/vice, are other examples of so-called opposites (whether contradictories or contraries), which in fact lie on a continuum and cyclically transmute into one another. Thus, 'courage' in fact is cowardice (only in a minimal degree), 'honesty' in fact is a form of dishonesty, 'sincerity' is a form of insincerity, and vice versa. This sounds facetious, facile, and fallacious, but are there no examples of seeming honesty which in fact is in the service of dishonesty (half-truths, for example)? Can one not imagine an example of apparent cowardice which in fact could be viewed from a different perspective as courage? And has Sartre not also shown that 'sincerity' (the attempt to be and show what one essentially is) is a sign of insincerity and bad faith? For philosophical counselling, this implies that there may be times when it is better to cultivate what are conventionally considered vices, such as lethargy and indifference, rather than empathy and warm concern. I can think of at least one occasion when I myself went to a fellow professor for more or less philosophical advice/counselling, and his cool indifference and apparent unconcern were helpful to me, helping me to see that my problem was not as serious as I thought, and that it might be better to laugh it off and go on with other things. As for 'wisdom' in particular, I have no doubt that Chuang Tzu would say that much of what passes for wisdom is from a different perspective, foolish, and much of what appears foolish or even mad, is from a different perspective, adaptive survival behaviour. Chuang Tzu has numerous amusing, yet profound, anecdotes to make his meaning clear. For example, there is the story of the young disciple of Confucius who plans to go to a nearby country in political and moral chaos, and rectify the ruler and the people. He is warned by a Taoist sage that by taking the moral high-ground he will only offend and alienate the barbarous, immoral ruler and get himself killed. Better, says the sage, is to mirror the criminal behaviour of the ruler and gain his confidence, see his perspective, and then guide him back towards the Tao without trying to or intending to. One of my own clients, a former student in his early thirties who shows signs of manic/depressive

behaviour sometimes visits me in his high energy phase and I usually just join in with him in his zealous frenzy (so that he doesn't feel he is too 'abnormal'), and when he is down, I sometimes join him, but at other times buoy him up without consciously trying to lift his spirits (to reassure him indirectly, without saying so, that his condition is transient and nothing to worry about). Once again, as I'm sure Chuang Tzu would agree, everything depends on the particular circumstances (which are always in flux). One last story from the *Chuang Tzu* which illustrates his moral (or amoral) point of view, is the story about the virtues of thieves. Thieves have their own virtues, he says; for example, wisdom is required in knowing when to rob a house, courage is required to enter and steal, and justice is required to fairly divide up the stolen loot. Such stories in the *Chuang Tzu*, like good poetry, usually have more than one meaning (depending on one's perspective). Perhaps part of Chuang Tzu's meaning is to warn us again that what we perceive as 'virtue' may be from a different angle 'vice', and vice versa.

Chuang Tzu's perspectivalism is closely related to cultural and ethical relativism. Earlier, we noted the difference between various conceptions of virtue and competing lists of the virtues in the West, as well as somewhat different notions of 'virtue' in the Chinese philosophical tradition. Even within the Chinese culture there are other, different, notions of what constitutes virtue. *The Book of Changes (I Ching)*, for example, emphasises timing, generosity, caution, and especially modesty and humility, which, as MacIntyre notes, "could appear in *no* [MacIntyre's emphasis] Greek list of the virtues."<sup>6</sup> This fact militates, not so much against the idea that virtue and wisdom should play some role in philosophical counselling, as it does against the idea that there are any definite virtues which are universal. It looks very much as though 'virtue' and 'wisdom' are cultural constructs (just as, for example, each culture has its own ideology of love and death), which are culture-bound and culturally relative. This fact is especially important for the philosophical counsellor (or psychotherapist) engaging in cross-cultural ('trans-cultural') counselling. It seems obvious that the counsellor should be sensitive (and informed, as far as possible) about the cultural background and values of clients from cultures alien to his own. Chinese people (and Asians in general), for example do not highly value directness, frankness, and openness in the expression of emotions, in the way most Westerners do.<sup>7</sup> They also tend to somatise emotional and cognitive problems; rather than complain of anxiety for example, they tend to describe their discomfort as a physical discomfort or problem (headache, stomach-ache, etc.) In the end, it would seem that just as the client must find his own way out of his difficulty (albeit with the sometimes active, sometimes passive, assistance of his counsellor), likewise he must decide for himself what constitutes a life of 'virtue' and 'wisdom'. It is also perhaps interesting to note that in modern Chinese the words for 'virtue' and 'wisdom' are *mei-te* and *chih-hui*, respectively. '*Mei-te*' is especially interesting since the two components of this compound, *mei* and *te* mean respectively beautiful (or, alternatively, excellent) and virtue (as we already noted earlier in discussion of classical Chinese conceptions of virtue – *te*). The implications are very suggestive; for example, the contemporary Chinese conception of virtue seems to connote virtuous behaviour and feelings which are somehow beautiful or attractive to observe, or are 'excellent' (fulfilling human nature, in a not un-Aristotelian way).

<sup>6</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 136.

<sup>7</sup> Zack Eleftheriadou, *Transcultural Counselling* (London: Central Book Publishing, 1994), for example notes that in some cultures direct eye contact is perceived as threatening and disrespectful.

If one were to ask what virtues are necessary or useful in other professions (say, teaching, engineering, cooking, etc.), and what wisdom would be in the proper conduct of those professions, it would seem reasonable to begin by defining the profession in question, and its ends (both in the sense of its aims or goals, and in the sense of when it may be considered to have reached an end, or terminal point). It seems reasonable to proceed in the same way with philosophical counselling. Unfortunately, if we ask what philosophy is, or what counselling is, we find that these terms are notoriously difficult to define in a way that would be universally (all times, all places) accepted.<sup>8</sup> What philosophy is, is of course, itself a philosophical question. And not only are there widely variant definitions of philosophy according to different philosophers, and different philosophical cultures/traditions, but as Spinelli points out in regard to counselling, it seems there is only a Wittgensteinian family resemblance between all the different things going under the name philosophy (and likewise for counselling, or philosophical counselling), such that there is apparently no definitive set of necessary and sufficient conditions/criteria which all and only instances of philosophy (or counselling, or philosophical counselling) have in common. In this situation, where it appears virtually impossible to agree on a definition of philosophy, or counselling, or philosophical counselling, how are we determine the proper ends of philosophical counselling and the virtues required of the philosophical counsellor or client?<sup>9</sup>

In conclusion, whereas MacIntyre seems worried that we have lost touch with the moral traditions within which moral discourse about virtues is inevitably embedded (thus making it impossible, he claims, to rationally resolve moral disputes), and whereas Heidegger was worried that modern philosophers have forgotten about Being (*Sein*), I would emphasise that something has gone wrong in modern philosophy, insofar as philosophers today rarely discuss, or even raise the question, "What is wisdom?" Perhaps we philosophical counsellors and practitioners can revive this dormant tradition, and help philosophy return to its roots.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> As for the difficulty in defining 'counselling', see especially Spinelli, *Demystifying Therapy*.

<sup>9</sup> This is yet another reason to pause before promoting legislation regarding licensing of philosophical counselling as a profession.

<sup>10</sup> The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, ed. by Paul Edwards, for example has only a two-page article on 'Wisdom', but an article on 'Meaning' more than ten pages long.

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