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Philosophical Counseling as a Practice of Emancipation

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Abstract

This is a second ‘field report’ of a Levinasian philosophical counseling practice. The first part elaborates the practice by means of a ‘threefold logic’ of ground, path and fruition. While the ground and path remain a Levinasian ‘good practice’ of relationship and dialogue, the fruition of the work is now seen as ‘emancipation’, understood broadly as ‘the fact or process of being set free from restrictions’, rather than ‘therapy’, understood narrowly as ‘treatment to relieve a disorder’ (Oxford Dictionary). The turn to emancipation is explored by way of Jacques Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. Philosophy as a practice of emancipation is the work of equals.

Keywords: *emancipation, equality, ethics, Jacotot, Levinas, philosophical counseling, psychotherapy, Rancière*

Introduction

An article called ‘Levinas in practice: Face to face and side by side’, published in *Philosophical Practice* in 2008, began like this:

This is a report from the field of a philosophical counseling practice, grounded in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, that attempts to discover philosophy as good practice, as a practice of ethics which transcends and is prior to any ethical code or principles; engaged dialogue with and for the other, with no prior convictions, ambitions or theoretical ground; an event that takes place in the relationship and relatedness of persons, each one unique, irreducible and irreplaceable. (Douglas 2008, 226)

It described the practice as ‘twofold’:

both face-to-face in proximity with the other, and side-by-side, engaged together with the other in the work of dialogue. These roles, or phases, are interdependent; each in turn gives rise to and interrupts the other. The counselor or therapist primarily bears responsibility for maintaining the relationship face-to-face, while the guest (patient or client) leads the work side-by-side. (Douglas 2008, 226)

The current paper is a second report from the same field, six years on. The first part elaborates this philosophical counseling practice by means of a ‘threefold logic’ of ground, path and fruition. While the ground and path remain a Levinasian ‘good practice’ of relationship and dialogue, the fruition of this work is now seen as ‘emancipation’, understood broadly as ‘the fact or process of being set free from restrictions’, rather than ‘therapy’, understood narrowly as ‘treatment to relieve a disorder’ (Oxford Dictionary). This turn to emancipation is explored by way of Jacques Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. Philosophy as a practice of emancipation must be the work of equals.

1. Levinas in Practice: a Threefold Logic

Buddhism's threefold logic of ground, path and fruition offers a simple and elegant structure for describing natural processes of change. Ground (or view) is where one starts from, everything that is given in a situation; path is the way of proceeding that arises from that ground; and fruition is where one arrives or what is achieved on that path. Today's fruition lays the ground for tomorrow's path, and so on.

In the case of a Levinasian counseling practice, the ground is the asymmetric face-to-face relationship understood as one's infinite responsibility for the other. The path is the 'side by side' work of dialogue. The fruition is some form of emancipation.

This logic can be unfolded through a series of maxims or practice slogans. Note that these concern the counselor, not the guest. To be a good companion for another, one needs to work with one's own mind. Levinas calls it 'the difficult working on oneself: to go toward the Other where he is truly other... that place from which, for an insufficiently mature soul, hatred flows naturally or is deduced with infallible logic' (Levinas 1999, 87–8).

The Ground. Welcome and hospitality, face to face

1. First of all, do no harm

Someone arrives at your door at an appointed time. He or she (let's say he) is in some kind of trouble and looking for your help to get through or out of it. There is a degree of vulnerability and also, immediately, a command in his eyes—his Face, in Levinas's term—that says "don't destroy me." You accept both the possibility that you could and the decree that you must not.

2. Be present, open, receptive

Your presence is required in order to attend to the other. As one would care for an infant. Or wait upon a king. You encounter the other as you would a lover: attentive, wide open, already responsive, already in relationship with him. To the Face that says "thou shall not murder," the constant response is "here I am."

3. Have no projects for the other

Have some respect. You can't get ahead of the other. You can't lead. You don't know where he is going or how he is to get there. Any expectations you have would be pre-emptive, a sign of your own plans, your desire, your intolerance or impatience. They also distract your attention from the present. Get over yourself and let him be.

4. Hold the space; maintain the connection

In this relationship, he is always in motion, moving towards you and withdrawing. The distance between you is the space in which you work. Guard it carefully, neither too tight nor too loose. Too tight and there's no room to move: you get mixed up and confused. Too loose and you might lose touch completely, and you can't chase after him like a vampire. Over time, you learn to maintain the relational field across a greater range of conditions.

The Path. The work of conversation, side by side

The (face to face) welcome continually evolves into the (side by side) work you do together, work of clarification, making meaning, and finding a way. It takes place as conversation.

5. You don't understand

The question of ethics that grounds your hospitality is not derived from principles or expertise. It arises immediately in the approach of the other, from the command and vulnerability of this Face. You didn't choose; you were chosen. You don't know who he is, where he comes from or what he needs. You can't be certain you understand what he means. This is not a position of skepticism you've strategically adopted. You really don't know. Neither does he. You speak with each other in order to find out.

6. The lost one is your guide

You trust this one who is lost to lead the way, and by leading find it. By speaking, he learns to speak, to find his voice, his idiom, his native tongue. He will direct the work by the lights of his own desire, his own beliefs and values—and so discover them (Douglas 2008, 232). Everything about him interests you. You've never seen the like. His difference conjures up a certain non-indifference in you. Even when you feel bored with him—how interesting! You don't have to force it; it's a matter of confidence.

Listening, you acquire a taste for the qualities of his speech and presence: how he holds and expresses himself; how he tells the truth or avoids telling it; his judgments, values, identifications. This is not listening to assess or objectify, but as a deeper and more particular welcome. To make his acquaintance. To become familiar with him. For him to become less strange to himself.

7. Conversation: keeping company

You start moving as partners as the dialogue takes form. Your comments and enquiries respond to his questions: what he is searching for. You take part by asking for descriptions, clarifications and verifications. You respond to his questions as best you can—drawing from your own experience and what you've thought through—and let him make of it what he will. You pay attention to what comes up. You speak and respond as you are moved to, in a manner that allays his defensiveness and painful self-consciousness. Even when you challenge his view (and you will), there is no harm.

8. Be a martial artist

He has to find his own way, but he can't do it on his own. You are willing to go through it all with him, and there is no place for your aggression or reactivity. Also, you must take care of yourself. Martial arts principles are helpful. For example, from the two-person taijiquan form of 'pushing hands': 'yield and stick, join and follow, neutralize and destroy'. Or, from karate: 'don't be where the punch lands'.

9. Practice virtue

The path of conversation calls for—and calls forth—courage, patience, discipline, compassion, integrity, humility and humor. Reject cowardice. Don't indulge despair. The only demand you make is this: that he not disrespect himself, you, or your work together.

The Fruition. Emancipation

What emerges is some kind of emancipation, freedom from fetters. The quest of the question achieves its conquest. It's very personal and real, often small, rarely absolute or final. Wittgenstein is good here, when he describes philosophy's goal as to be able to go on; to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle; to be able to stop doing philosophy when one wants to (PI 179; 309; 133).

10. It's the other's call

He is the measure of his own realization or satisfaction. What he takes away is his business and not yours to understand or stamp with your approval: it's your gift. And anyway, he has done it himself.

11. Return to self

When it's time to go, you let him go—just as, when you welcomed him, you let him be. 'Embrace tiger, return to mountain' is another image from taijiquan: the tiger goes on his way and you're alone again, just as you were (only different).

12. Love, and do as you will

Remaining with the Levinasian ground of interrelatedness and responsibility (love, in other words) while engaging together in the work of conversation develops confidence and spontaneity. The philosopher also finds freedom in this ongoing practice of alignment, of going out and coming back, until it's as simple and natural as a tide or a breath.

2. Emancipation in Practice

The founder of modern philosophical counseling in Germany, Gerd Achenbach, describes it as 'the method of having no method':

Philosophical thinking does not follow pre-arranged ways but rather looks for the 'right way' forever anew... The object is to help the guest advance in his own way. This presupposes an attitude in the philosopher that respects the other 'neither with approval nor with reproach' (to use Goethe's words)... Only as a fellow thinker and fellow feeler is [the philosopher] able to liberate the visitor from his loneliness or forlornness, and by these means help him to change his opinions about life and his circumstances. (Achenbach, no date, translation slightly edited)

This kind of open-mindedness is key, but it doesn't mean empty-headedness. If we intend to welcome a guest, there must be some nourishment and shelter on offer. So what should be in the cupboard? This question was raised 'for future consideration' in the 'Levinas in practice' paper: "From the origins of such a practice—being called to respond in every moment in one's own self to this very person before us—it seems that this "knowledge base" can hardly be standardized' (Douglas 2008, 233), but surely a philosophical counselor should know something. What would it be?

Clearly, it would include the skills learned in the academic discipline of philosophy: to be able to reason; to follow, unpack and evaluate arguments and lines of thought; to be familiar with a range of ideas and worldviews and able to see problems from different angles; to be aware of the history of philosophy; to have language skills built through wrestling with difficult texts and the practices of writing and rhetoric.

A counseling philosopher's resources would also include the experience of benefiting from this discipline, and consequently believing it could be helpful for others. A survey of people active in the field would likely yield a broad range of thinkers who have informed their lives and shaped their work, as Levinas has for me. That might be an interesting exercise but, just as our work with guests is much too intimate to generalize, it wouldn't yield a primer of texts for all prospective counselors to study.

As Achenbach says, what matters is that counselors and guests recognize each other as "fellow feelers and fellow thinkers", even though the philosophers may have had more formal experience. For an emancipatory philosophical practice, this fellowship is perhaps the one thing we must know.

Lessons in Emancipation

Jacques Rancière makes the same case for emancipatory education in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. The book describes the work of Joseph Jacotot, a Frenchman who lived from 1770 to 1840. A professor of Latin at the age of 19, Jacotot went on to study law and mathematics. He organized the youth of his native Dijon to defend the French Revolution and conducted himself 'with bravery and distinction' in the campaign of Belgium. He later became involved in military training and public education, and was a member of the chamber of deputies. After the Second Restoration, he found refuge in Belgium ('Joseph Jacotot').

There, in 1818, Jacotot was required to teach French literature to a class of Flemish-speaking students. Without a common language, he could not explain the texts to the class, and so he set them to work memorizing the French and working out the meaning with a Flemish translation. When this proved remarkably effective, he realized that he had stumbled into a natural and universal way of learning. *We don't need to be taught in order to understand*. We apply our intelligence and our will and make sense of things for ourselves. This is how children learn their mother tongue while they are still too young for schoolmasters and explication:

All their effort, all their exploration, is strained toward this: someone has addressed words to them that they want to recognize and respond to ... We speak to them and we speak around them. They hear and retain, imitate and repeat, make mistakes and correct themselves, succeed by chance and begin again methodically ... Explication is not necessary to remedy an incapacity to understand. (Rancière 1991, 10, 5–6)

After testing this 'universal teaching' in other contexts, Jacotot developed a radical critique of the public education system and the way it bolstered social inequalities. 'Everything is still played out according to a sole principle, the inequality of intelligence. If this principle is granted, then one consequence alone can logically be deduced from it: the intelligent caste's management of the stupid multitude. Republicans and all sincere men of progress feel heavy-hearted at this consequence' (Rancière 1991, 131).

Briefly, Jacotot's reading of orthodox pedagogy goes like this: the 'old master' knows what the student lacks and how she can be made to acquire it. The student follows the path set out for her. As she advances, she begins to see the superiority of her own intelligence over those who have not come so far. As she advances, the master remains her superior and guide. Equality is always still-to-come, infinitely deferred. Hence, each step stupefies and stultifies (the French verb is *abrutir*: to render stupid, to treat like a beast). Even those who want to 'uplift' the 'previously disadvantaged'—as in post-revolutionary France, as in post-apartheid South Africa—can see this. Jacotot caustically described 'Public Instruction' as 'the way to equalize inequality progressively, that is to say, to unequalize equality indefinitely' (Rancière 1991, 131).

The Ignorant Schoolmaster asks us to consider another possibility:

what if equality, instead, were to provide the point of departure? What would it mean to make equality a presupposition rather than a goal, a practice rather than a reward situated firmly in some distant future so as to all the better explain its present infeasibility? (Rancière 1991, xix, translator's introduction)

Jacotot ascribes the obvious differences in intellectual performance to attention and the will, and names 'will' as the master of intelligence:

I will not say that this one's faculties are inferior to the other's. I will only suppose that the two faculties have not been equally exercised . . . Man is a will served by an intelligence. Perhaps saying that wills are unequally demanding suffices to explain the differences in attention that would perhaps suffice to explain the inequality of intellectual performances. (Rancière, 50, 51–52)

Once equality of intelligence is posited, the work of education is no longer instruction—one only instructs inferiors—but emancipation, which means 'that every common person might conceive of his human dignity, take the measure of his intellectual capacity and decide how to use it' (Rancière 1991, 17).

Accordingly, in classrooms that would emancipate rather than stultify, students apply their will – now seen as the faculty of reason—in order to learn for themselves, and the task of the emancipated master is to reveal to them their innate intellectual power. How? By asking questions or assigning exercises to verify that the students have learned something. This is not the examination of the 'old master.' As Rancière says,

whoever wishes to emancipate someone must interrogate him in the manner of men and not in the manner of scholars, in order to be instructed, not to instruct. And that can only be performed by someone who effectively knows no more than the student, who has never made the voyage before him: the ignorant master. (Rancière 1991, 29–30)

Students learn to learn for themselves:

whoever looks always finds – not necessarily what he was looking for or what he was supposed to find. . . . What is essential is the continuous vigilance, the attention that never subsides without irrationality setting in . . . The [ignorant and emancipated] master is he who keeps the researcher on his own route, the one that he alone is following and keeps following. (Rancière 1991, 33)

The emancipated student discovers her own relationship with truth, knows herself in her actions and has the power to make herself understood. Her views are subject to verification by others—who have the same intelligence as she. As Rancière notes:

The problem is not to create scholars. It is to raise up those who believe themselves inferior in intelligence, to make them leave the swamp where they are stagnating—not the swamp of ignorance, but the swamp of self-contempt, of contempt in and of itself for the reasonable creature. It is to make emancipated and emancipating men. (Rancière 1991, 101–2)

The Ignorant Philosopher

That brief sketch does not do justice to the ‘five lessons’ of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, nor have I raised any of the criticisms that could be made. It should be enough, though, to suggest how fluently Jacotot’s example can translate into the situation of an ignorant philosopher. To recall the threefold logic: if the ground of a Levinasian philosophical practice is the imperative for ethical relationship, the path of conversation as the work of equals ripens the fruition of emancipation.

Stultification happens in psychotherapy as it does in education. The psychiatrist, the psychoanalyst and the psychologist perform a similar replication of inequality. But now it is not just a person’s intelligence that is put on the scale but also their sanity and moral integrity.

Someone who seeks counsel is confounded in two ways, by both the situation and her inability to extricate herself from it. With a good therapist, an ‘old master’ who treats her with well-founded diagnoses and symptom-alleviating medication, she might well find some relief—but if she isn’t encouraged to find her own way to her own desire and its meaning, she will also pick up a distorted sense of dependency and a reinforced experience of her own inadequacy.

Alternatively, if Rancière and Jacotot are right to say that we don’t need explication in order to understand something, then we don’t need to be ‘treated’ in order to live well. In an emancipatory counseling practice, the presupposition of equality therefore can’t stop with intelligence. I have found it increasingly useful and reliable to suppose that we all come with intelligence, sanity and goodness as standard equipment, and that apparent differences can perhaps be ascribed to will and attention instead of some underlying deficiency. This is not faith, idealism or ideology. It is a hypothesis that, as Jacotot also noted, can’t finally be proved either way. But, like him, we can pay attention to what happens if we stop assuming that some people are mentally or morally unstable—sad, bad, mad or stupid—and look instead for evidence to validate equality.

Judgments of inequality do diminish us, as does any judgment that objectifies in order to explain or account for a person. If I can decide you are mad or stupid (sane and intelligent as I am, of course), I don’t have to take you seriously. I only have to correct you, maybe try to improve you. Where I believe myself inferior, I won’t present myself for the other to test me. That shyness also holds a kernel of aggression. There is no place for it in a counseling relationship. If we’re going to get anywhere together, I have to presume equality. I have to be emancipated to assist the other to realize his or her own capacity for intelligence, sanity and goodness, to assist the other find his or her own way.

Equality doesn’t mean ‘the same’. We are still in relationship. I’m still the one who has been asked for help and the other is the one in need. She is still the one who knows what I don’t. But we share a fellowship. We are companions.

Even to my own surprise, I find that my guests do know perfectly well and are perfectly capable. Just like me, they know what is good for them, and what is not. They know the truth when they hear it. They are capable of expressing themselves in words and works. And yet they are also mistaken, unbalanced, neurotic and dispirited. They suffer and they cause suffering. They need help. What can an emancipated, ignorant, Levinas-inspired counseling philosopher offer? Just this: philosophy as a practice of emancipation.

As the ‘ignorant’ philosopher, it is to reveal to the other his own power to see, to judge and to act. It is to keep the other on track, without knowing what that track is, by encouraging him to exercise his will and attention (heart and mind), and by testing what he comes up with.

As ‘emancipated’, it is also to thoroughly corroborate the other’s equality. Living in entrenched systems of inequality as we do, measuring-up has become a matter of huge insecurity and inordinate pride and shame. There is so much at stake in being—or being seen to be—mad or wicked or stupid (or sane or good or smart). With an emancipated counselor or therapist, someone who no longer gives credit to those categories, people can dare to show up as they are, in order to consider what is actually going on in their world and what holds them in bondage. When a person’s human dignity is simply not in question, much of the ground for fear and neurosis falls away. Then the will naturally comes into play in a ‘thinking subject who is aware of himself through the action he exerts’, for an emancipated subject who ‘might conceive of his human dignity, take the measure of his intellectual capacity and decide how to use it’.

As a ‘counselor’, it is to respond to the other with care and respect. We always come to ourselves through others, and the one who ‘comes to’ in the responsive and non-aggressive regard of another can always find a way.

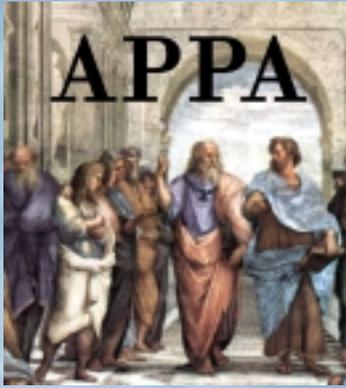
As a ‘Levinasian,’ it is to remember that ethics and emancipation are synonymous terms, but only because ‘the equality of all is ultimately borne by my inequality’ (Levinas 1981, 159) before this Face that commands me to my responsibility with no corresponding right.

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Aims and Scope

Philosophical Practice is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

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