

The Role of Philosophical Courage in Philosophical Counseling

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Abstract: Traditionally we are familiar with at least two forms of courage: physical and moral. But the virtue has other forms which have not been widely recognized. One such form is “psychological courage” required to overcome psychological problems. Another form is “philosophical courage” required for philosophical counseling. In this paper, I argue that whether implicitly or explicitly, both counselor and client need courage, in its form as “philosophical courage,” for successful counseling. Moreover, the degree of such courage in both client and counselor will determine the extent to which issues are brought into question. Beginning with a classification of the different forms of courage, I move to a definition of philosophical counseling as a method involving two processes—critique and creation. I suggest that neither process can take place without philosophical courage. I conclude by noting that the level of philosophical insight gained will depend not only on the client’s philosophical courage, but also on that of the counselor. The counselor’s courage must at least match that of the client, if the client’s potential is to be realized fully. This leads to the suggestion that the counselor, as philosopher, must have the philosophical courage to counsel.

Commenting on the metamorphoses of the spirit, Friedrich Nietzsche unfolds “how the spirit shall become a camel, and the camel a lion, and the lion at last a child.”ⁱ The first metamorphosis indicates the spirit’s movement from infancy to adulthood, where it is laden with all the values and knowledge given to it. It enters adulthood with a heavy, unquestioned burden and soon discovers a need to free itself from what has been given to it. And so, the second metamorphosis occurs where the camel becomes a lion, questioning and bringing into doubt all that was given, and creating a space for new values. But as a lion, the spirit cannot create. It must undergo its third metamorphosis and become a child; a new beginning allowing for the creation of new values.

The transformation from the camel to the lion and the lion to the child describes well in metaphoric terms the two central processes of philosophical counseling.ⁱⁱ Upon arrival, the average, philosophically unsophisticated client, is at the initial stages of the second metamorphosis troubled by some issue that has drawn her or him to a philosophical counselor. The counseling sessions, therefore, become a medium through which the second and third metamorphoses occur. Only after the final metamorphosis should the sessions be terminated, for it is then that the client is ready for a new beginning.ⁱⁱⁱ In this paper, I will suggest that this transformational process requires at least one necessary ingredient without which *philosophical* counseling would not be possible. Whether implicitly or explicitly, both counselor and client need the virtue of courage in its form as “philosophical courage” in order for the counseling to be successful. Moreover, the degree of such courage in both client and counselor will determine the extent to which issues are brought into question. But first, some clarification on the forms of courage.

Traditionally, we are familiar with at least two forms of courage. First, there is physical courage, the type paradigmatically displayed by the soldier in defense of her or his country.^{iv} Second, there is moral courage as exemplified in the case of an individual publicly upholding a value that goes against the values of her or his particular social group or society. But there are also a third and a fourth form of courage distinguishable from the previous two. Daniel Putman speaks of “psychological courage,” a form of the virtue required to overcome psychological problems.^v Such is the form of courage required to deal with, for example, destructive habits or irrational anxieties. Finally, there is another form of courage—philosophical courage—required of individuals in dealing with their most fundamental beliefs and values. Though dealing with such basic issues at an abstract level may require some “philosophical courage,” the crucial requirement for philosophical counseling is dealing with fundamentals such as the meaning of life, of death, of truth, of ethics, at a personal level.

In any particular situation, any combination of the different forms of courage may be at play. As such, the distinctions between them must not be considered mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, we can demarcate roughly the different forms. Under a traditional analysis, such a process of demarcation would focus on the possible fear involved with each form of the virtue. Putman, for example, differentiates the forms of courage according to the fear associated with them.^{vi} Indeed, Gregory Pence has suggested that there may be in fact a conceptual connection between courage and fear, and if so, without fear there would not be courage.^{vii} But such an emphasis on fear is problematic as Andrew Moore, Philippa Foot, and others have suggested.^{viii} According to Moore, “fear seems in fact to be inessential to courage” as indicated by Socrates, “the paradigm case of the morally courageous person.”^{ix} Confronting death, he fearlessly defended his moral convictions.

As a possible solution, Moore has suggested an analysis of courage based on the risk or threat involved.^x However, risk or threat seem to be a part of the cost involved in any particular action. As such, I believe the best way to demarcate roughly the different forms of courage, is through an analysis of the cost involved with each form of the virtue. First, with physical courage, the possible cost involved, at the extreme, is the physical loss of life. For example, it is the possibility of such a loss that makes the soldier's action courageous. Second, with moral courage, the possible cost is social rejection and isolation and/or a loss of "ethical integrity or authenticity."^{xi} Third, with "psychological courage," the possible cost perceived by the individual is "psychic death."^{xii} In other words, an alcoholic for example, may perceive her or his addiction to be a way of coping with reality and everyday living. The possible cost involved in overcoming the addiction is a loss of psychic stability and "psychic death." And fourth, with "philosophical courage" the possible cost is philosophical instability where one's most fundamental beliefs and values are brought into doubt. This differs from "psychological courage" in that it demands of the individual a confrontation with fundamental beliefs and values whereas "psychological courage" demands a confrontation and an overcoming of a diagnosed psychological condition.

Within the context of philosophical counseling, it is philosophical courage that is required for the counseling process to occur though other forms of the virtue may play a role also. In general terms, if we are to understand philosophical counseling as the use of philosophical language, tools and methodology, rather than psychological, to examine a variety of life-problems and issues, then philosophical courage is indispensable for both client and

counselor. Without the ability to confront such fundamental issues, the counseling would not be philosophical, though it may be of some other form.

Focusing on the client, I have suggested that there are two processes (metamorphoses) that ideally the client would undergo before the termination of counseling. The first process involves a philosophical analysis of the client's fundamental beliefs and values. Being presented with an issue or conflict, the task of the counselor in this initial process is to discover those philosophical issues related to or associated with the presented conflict.^{xiii} Typically, it is through the use of the Socratic Method that the counselor attempts to reach and analyze fundamentals such as the nature of the self, of truth, of ethics, of death. The extent to which such issues are explored will depend on the client's philosophical courage. This suggests that unlike the other forms of the virtue, philosophical courage is a matter of degree rather than a decision of whether or not to act.

In the case of physical courage, the soldier's decision to act identifies him as courageous. Similarly, with moral courage it is a matter of deciding whether one defends the issue at stake. A similar kind of decision seems required with psychological courage as, for example, in deciding to overcome a certain destructive habit. With philosophical courage, the situation appears to differ. Although the client needs to make an initial decision to seek philosophical counseling, such a decision, unlike with the other forms of the virtue, does not appear to qualify as a courageous act for anyone can easily make such a decision. What is courageous is the extent to which the client is willing to question her or his most fundamental beliefs and values. Accordingly, philosophical courage is a matter of degree. For example, if a client is only willing to question some issue up to a certain level, then that is the amount or

degree of courage she or he has. Beyond that level or depth of questioning is the client's philosophical cowardice.

Clearly, however, not any form of philosophical questioning within philosophical counseling, can be considered courageous. Abstract reflections by the client on different theories of truth or ethics do not seem to necessitate any degree of courage. As I indicated earlier, the crucial requirement for philosophical counseling is dealing with fundamentals at a personal level. It is the client's ability to question *her* or *his* theory of truth and *her* or *his* morals that requires philosophical courage. What degree of such courage is required for the counseling to proceed, I leave as an open question.

At its most profound level, this initial process would probably lead the philosophically unsophisticated client to some form of skepticism or even nihilism. Beliefs and values that the client had accepted with certainty, suddenly become questionable and may indeed become meaningless. For example, in this initial process, the client may come to realize that "truth as correspondence" is not so evident. While such a realization would indicate some philosophical insight, its ramifications are significant with respect to the client's personal beliefs and values. What was previously believed with certainty is suddenly brought into question, introducing doubt where certainty seemed most obvious. Inevitably, such a philosophical awakening would tend to destabilize the client, calling into question what appeared most certain. Indeed, without some such destabilization it is difficult to see how clients achieve any philosophical insight. Within this process, the client must have the courage to question beliefs and values that previously were thought of as unquestionable. And the greater the philosophical courage, the greater is the willingness for questioning, and hence the greater possibility of skepticism or

nihilism. Also, the client must have the courage to confront the possibility of there being no definitive answers. That is, courage is required to accept some form of nihilism as being a part of the philosophical process.

At this stage, any number of important questions may arise: Why does radical questioning lead to skepticism or nihilism? Why is the Socratic Method necessarily destructive? Are beliefs and values subject to doubt under all forms of questioning? What if a client reaffirms her or his conviction in certain beliefs and values rather than doubt them? These are all crucially important questions which I will not attempt to address here. However, if this initial process does lead to a form of skepticism or nihilism, then this appears to suggest a problematic psychological consequence of philosophical courage.^{xiv} A client realizing that some of her or his most sacred values are questionable may very well go into a state of psychological anxiety and/or depression. And if anxiety and/or depression were the original reasons for seeking counseling, then this process seems to have aggravated the problem!

Perhaps, as Amélie Rorty suggests, courage is dangerous if not checked and balanced by other virtues.^{xv} Perhaps prudence should play an equally important role in philosophical counseling. However, working alongside philosophical courage, prudence would not enhance that form of the virtue but detract from its full application by suggesting that some issues or values should not be questioned due to the possible psychological risks involved. Depending on the particular client, this might not be such a bad thing. But what “depending on the particular client” really means is “depending on the client’s psychological courage.” That is, prudence is called for if the client lacks the necessary psychological courage required to overcome any psychological states that may arise. During the sessions, the counselor must decide on how far to

pursue questioning. This must in turn depend on the counselor's judgment regarding the client's psychological courage and its ability to overcome any psychological problems that may result.

However, what if the client does not lack the necessary psychological courage to overcome any resulting psychological states? Does prudence still have a role in preventing this process from being psychologically problematic? If the client does not lack the necessary psychological courage, then the creation or aggravation of psychological issues through this initial process is of no great concern. Indeed, it may even be necessary for profound philosophical insight. As such, given sufficient psychological courage, the counselor should not restrict questioning to a certain level, given the client's ability to proceed. If the goal of counseling is, as I believe it is, the attainment of insight, then this initial process should proceed if the client is courageous enough to overcome any psychological problems that may arise. Given sufficient philosophical courage, any restrictions on this initial process would result in minimizing the client's insight.^{xvi}

As the initial process progresses, the sessions eventually arrive at a point where questioning comes to an end and the question "what now?" is finally posed.^{xvii} Given the unique circumstances of each client, it is difficult to demarcate clearly such a point since numerous factors contribute to what is often a natural transition to the second stage. One such factor is the client's philosophical courage and the degree to which she or he is willing to question fundamental beliefs and values. Depending on the particular client and counselor this initial process may be lengthy and extensive or more narrowly focused and short in duration. In either case, the successful passage through the initial process would depend upon the client's

attainment of some minimal philosophical insight at the very least. Without any such insight, it is difficult to see how the initial process is even minimally successful.

Confronting the counselor now is a client that needs to continue living purposefully in some way, constructing or weaving a new or different way of life. This is a difficult task for the counselor especially if the initial process drove the client to high levels of doubt or even nihilism. Indeed, the more profound the insight gained during the initial process, the greater is the difficulty in completing the second process. Thus, there exists an inverse relationship between the two processes: the more profound the initial process, the more difficult is the second. Similarly, the shallower the first process, the easier it is to complete the second. In either case, philosophical courage is required, and it is required to a higher degree if a profound level of insight is gained during the initial process. Indeed, it may be the case that the truest form of philosophical courage is exhibited in this second process of new or different beginnings. However, the possibility remains that from radically questioning her or his deepest beliefs and values during the initial process, a client reaffirms them in an even more radical manner during the second phase.

At a more concrete level, the second stage in counseling involves the application of philosophical insights gained through the initial process. During this stage the counselor's task is not so much that of questioning, as in the initial stage, but of guiding the client as she or he incorporates newly discovered philosophical insights into her or his daily life. Crucially, it is the client who must discover and take responsibility for any such applications as they relate to her or his personal beliefs and values. Also, it is the client who must discover how such philosophical insights relate to her or his relationships with family, friends, and other individuals. Of course, it

is hoped that philosophical insights gained through the initial process would be applied in a “positive” manner alleviating the difficulties reported by the client at the start of counseling. For example, realizing that there are other theories of truth, the client may become a less dogmatic and more accepting and tolerant individual able to see beyond one particular perspective. Such an application of a philosophical insight would inevitably lead to a re-evaluation of certain beliefs, values and attitudes which would also influence relationships with others.

For both processes philosophical courage is then a necessary ingredient. It not only functions within each process, but also determines the level of insight gained through counseling. What I have described however, is the most profound situation to be encountered. Clearly, not all clients will reach such levels, nor will they all be able to go through both processes. Indeed, for some clients who are seeking counseling for a specific issue, the above processes, in being a complete philosophical overhaul, may seem to be rather overwhelming. Why bother with philosophical counseling if there are other forms of counseling that are less overwhelming and more to the point? This suggests that not all clients are suitable for philosophical counseling. What determines the suitable client is not her or his cognitive abilities, but her or his philosophical courage; the courage to question fundamental beliefs and values, and the courage to find a way of living after such questioning. Ultimately, it is the lack of a virtue that would determine the unsuitability of a client. And in this sense, not all clients are suitable for philosophical counseling, as indeed not all individuals are capable of living philosophically.

But even if a client has sufficient courage for counseling, and the counseling is conducted successfully, there is no guarantee that she or he would continue to live a philosophical life fueled by philosophical courage and other forms of the virtue. Indeed it may be

the case that after counseling the client reverts back to her or his original state prior to counseling. But there are other risks as Jopling indicates. These newly acquired philosophical skills may be used to rationalize psychological or behavioral problems. For example, “[t]he symptoms of an organic depression . . . may lend themselves to philosophical re-interpretation as signs of an ontological mood such as Kierkegaardian despair.”^{xviii} Also, “philosophical counselling has all the resources to lead clients to ‘over-philosophize’ their problems, or even create problems that were not there in the first place.”^{xix} These are all definite possibilities that may occur after counseling. But they are some of the reasons for making philosophical counseling a lengthy and profound process, rather than a short dialogue providing the client with a few philosophical tools. It is hoped that in being a lengthy process the client would acquire sufficient skills to avoid such problems after counseling, and the counselor would have sufficient time to make explicit such future possibilities to the client.

At this point one may object that philosophical courage is not strictly a form of the virtue since the philosophically unsophisticated client is not aware of the possible cost involved prior to counseling. With other forms of courage, the individual is aware of the possible risks, and as such, their action is courageous rather than being an act out of ignorance.^{xx} For example, the Aristotelian soldier acting out of rashness and boastfulness is not courageous, for genuine courage requires action “according to the merits of the case and in whatever way reason directs.”^{xxi} Also, courage needs to be motivated by a goal or ideal that is worthy of courage, and it is not so clear what goal is associated with philosophical courage.

The first part of this objection suggests that for philosophical courage to be truly a form of courage, the client must be informed of the possible risks and dangers at the very outset.

Indeed, this may be considered as an ethical obligation on the counselor's part since philosophy can do a great deal of damage to individuals, especially when offered in small doses to the philosophically unsophisticated. If we consider skepticism or nihilism as a form of philosophical damage, then this could lead to psychological, ethical, spiritual, damage. A fairly satisfied client with some issues to resolve may suddenly discover, for example, the tragic nature of existence and become totally lost. This could have drastic psychological and ethical consequences, not only for the client, but for her or his family, friends and associates.

However, one may still object and claim that this is different from the soldier's case, for the soldier understands the meaning of death, whereas the philosophically unsophisticated client does not understand the extent to which philosophy may be a danger to their philosophical and psychological state. While this may be true to some extent, the counselor can explain, without the use of philosophical jargon, the risks involved. But still, it is not clear how much force such a warning will carry especially with philosophically unsophisticated clients. Since I have defined philosophical courage in terms of degree, all that is required is for the warning to carry minimal force. If, given a minimal understanding of what is at stake, the client decides to proceed, then we can talk of philosophical courage in a minimal sense at least. As the counseling progresses, the client would be in a much better position to grasp the dangers and as such, a willingness to continue with counseling, given this knowledge of the process, will indicate a greater degree of philosophical courage. The client then would not be entering the counseling process in an ignorant or rash manner. As with the soldier who must prove her or his courage in the battle field, the client must demonstrate such courage in the counseling process.

The second part of the objection stems from the claim that virtue theory cannot do all the work of ethics, as eliminativism would like it to. As Greg Pence indicates, eliminativism, the idea that an ethical theory can be based on character alone, faces serious problems when confronted with a situation where a soldier is fighting to defend slavery.^{xxii} Though the action of the soldier may be courageous, it is based on an unacceptable moral principle, and there is no way for a character based theory of ethics to account for the principle. Accordingly, virtue theory cannot do all the work of ethics. If this is correct, which I believe it is, then gaining philosophical insight is not by itself sufficient to be characterized as a form of courage. Insight and the construction of a meaningful life must be based on some kind of truth rather than any type of self-deception. For philosophical courage to be a form of courage, it must be guided by something of value.^{xxiii} But could it not be argued that if the client values self-deception over truth, then this is enough for philosophical courage to be a form of courage? No, for courage is a virtue that is attributed by others to an individual, and is not typically decided by the individual. Indeed, most courageous individuals do not think of themselves as courageous, but as doing what they felt they had to do. However, this issue connects with the complex issue of truth and philosophical counseling which I leave to a future paper. My point here is to indicate only that there is a relation between philosophical courage and the goal of counseling.

Finally, it is crucial to note that the level of philosophical insight gained will depend not only on the client's philosophical courage, but also on that of the counselor. The counselor's courage must at least match that of the client, if the client's potential is to be realized fully. From a fairly recent study in psychotherapy on the relationship between personal philosophy and effectiveness in counselors, there is a positive relationship between the effectiveness of

counselors and their personal philosophy, beliefs and attitudes.^{xxiv} This finding suggests, within the context of philosophical counseling, that the counselor's courage must be a part of her or his personal philosophy rather than just a methodological tool brought to the sessions. If so, then we must be assured of the counselor's philosophical courage to counsel!

NOTES

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1. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Of the Three Metamorphoses," *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, (New York: Penguin, 1961).

2. I outline in much greater detail these two processes in my "A General Framework for Philosophical Counseling," *Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1998, pp. 1-9.

3. Since my focus in this paper is on philosophical courage and its role in philosophical counseling, I shall not enter into a debate on the different forms of philosophical counseling. Although I will situate philosophical courage within my understanding of philosophical counseling, I do believe that my remarks on philosophical courage are applicable to various forms of philosophical counseling.

4. Aristotle, "Nicomachean Ethics," in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, (New Jersey: Princeton U. Press, 1984), 1115a25-34.

5. Daniel Putman, "Psychological Courage," *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology*, vol. 4, no. 1, March, 1997, pp. 1-11.

6. Ibid.

7. Gregory E. Pence, "Recent Work on Virtues," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 4, 1984, pp. 281-297.

8. See Andrew Moore, "Commentary on Psychological Courage," *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology*, vol. 4, no. 1, March, 1997, pp. 13-14; Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U. of California Press, 1978); and James D. Wallace, *Virtues and Vices*, (Ithaca: Cornell U. Press, 1978).

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Putman, p.1.

12. Putman, p. 2.

13. This raises two issues which I will not consider here. First, what counts as philosophical? Second, there are various concerns revolving around the client's first-person report.

14. David Jopling first indicated this issue to me.

15. A.O. Rorty, "The Two Faces of Courage," *Mind in Action*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).

16. I have characterized the nature of this insight in greater detail in my "A General Framework" See note 2.

17. The details of this second process are discussed in my "A General Framework" In this paper, I only discuss it to the extent of situating philosophical courage.

18. David Jopling, "First Do No Harm: Over-Philosophizing and Pseudo-Philosophizing in Philosophical Counseling," *Inquiry: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines*, vol. 17, no. 3, Spring, 1998, pp. 100-112.

19. Ibid.

20. Putman, p. 4, raises this point in relation to the addict and the alcoholic. "Genuine courage for the alcoholic or addict will probably involve admitting the problem and getting help." This is in comparison to Aristotle's soldier who must not be acting out of rashness if he is to be considered courageous.

21. Aristotle, 1115b20.

22. Greg Pence, "Virtue Theory," *A Companion To Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

23. See Linda T. Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*, (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1996) 131.

24. John McLeod and Julia McLeod, "The relationship between personal philosophy and effectiveness in counsellors," *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1993, pp. 121-129.