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Rooting Philosophy in Lived Experience: some Notes on Petra von Morstein's Lecture and Workshop in Oslo, March 2005

Introduction

To make life and philosophy go together is what caused Petra von Morstein to rethink her academical career and start as a philosophical counselor in the late 1980's. Realizing that her personal life and her academical life as a philosophy professor in Calgary had no connection, she felt the urge to bridge this gap by turning to philosophical counseling. This she told us during her Oslo visit in March 2005, where she gave a lecture at the University of Oslo, and conducted a weekend workshop with Norwegian philosophical counselors and students. Also bridging the gap between anglo american analytical philosophy and European continental philosophy, due to her being a German who crossed the Atlantic after she had completed her philosophical education, Petra von Morstein possesses a quite substantial body of knowledge of different philosophical stances to make use of in her counseling.

Although Petra von Morstein belongs to the beyond method camp of philosophical counselors, her performance during a counseling session (she agreed to have one in public during the workshop) is quite different from that of Anders Lindseth, and probably also from that of Gerd Achenbach. This I will deal with later on. There is also a difference in her theoretical outline on philosophical counseling, but this has more to do with her emphasis on different aspects than with any disagreements with Lindseth and Achenbach, which seem to be of minor importance, if they at all exist. She probably would have subscribed to most of what Lindseth said during his weekend seminar in Oslo in February 2005 (see my paper on this), so my brief presentation of the views she offered should be read as some different facets of the big picture of a beyond method theoretical approach to philosophical counseling, and not as some dissident remarks.

Being counseled by dead authors

At the core of von Morstein's conviction is the view that all the big philosophical notions, like freedom, truth, what is good and bad, are rooted in lived experience, and that the great philosophical texts were written with a great personal urge to investigate into the topic in question. To read them in an academical, footnote manner, as if they were pure intellectual text without any significant connections to what their authors found important in life, is to miss what they really are about. In total earnesty (and I believed her) von Morstein confessed that Kant's not exactly page-turning work *Critique of Pure Reason* had sometimes moved her to tears because of Kant's very earnest and very urgent need to find out what we really can know. Yes, both Kant and the other great philosophers have in fact written quite moving works, if we only allow ourselves to see this. In short: To read philosophical texts as expressions of urgent concerns is the best way to learn philosophical counseling.

Another example she is fond of, is Descartes, who in his *Meditations* describes his skepticist qualms of not finding any criteria for reliable knowledge as if he were floating downstreams in the water without being able to get a foothold, or head above water. This is a very strong metaphor indeed, and a good examples of self-counseling, von Morstein contends.

Often philosophical issues forcefully appear when people are chocked out of their way of life, as Descartes apparently have been when he wrote his *Meditations*.

Not surprisingly, von Morstein states that her best tutors of philosophical counseling are dead authors, namely Kant and Descartes and the other great philosophers, who have taught her most of what she knows about counseling, due to the urgency imminent in their works. To understand how this urgency is rooted in real, lived life is thus the key to be apt at philosophical counseling. “They will not even charge you for their counseling,” she adds, “they only demand that you spend time with them in reading their works.”

Having internalized a considerable variety of philosophical stances in this life-connected manner, to the extent that they may enter into her mind during a consultation session spontaneously, without her needing to ponder on what stance to offer the guest, von Morstein quickly grasps what might be philosophically significant in the guest’s speech and points it out to him. Or, as she likes to put it: “When I sit there with a guest, Kant, or maybe Nietzsche, or Wittgenstein, will enter the room and say that ‘I have something to say on what you are discussing.’ Then I convey their view to the guest.” She might also draw on her analytical capacity by telling the guest that “I now have to ask you a very boring analytical question of what you mean by truth,” or whatever concept in need of clarification. But without indulging in lengthy analytical investigations, or Socratic examinations.

Her bridge between the anglo american tradition and the continental tradition of “German fog,” as members of the former tradition like to call the latter, apparently is Wittgenstein, and she quotes this great crossover philosopher in stating that to demand a definition of a concept is a bogus question. How to understand this statement surely is a matter to be discussed, as von Morstein herself does not forbid herself to ask “boring analytical questions” from time to time, and does not seem to be hostile to Socrates viewed as a philosophical counselor. But she swiftly refers to Wittgenstein’s concept of language games, and I suppose that asking for definitions is OK if such a definition propels the discussion into a certain language game, and the counselor is well aware of this. While analytical elaborations of concepts torn loose from the way they are used in real life is something to avoid.

Two rock bottom convictions

As Petra von Morstein welcomes any of the great dead philosophers who wants to enter into her consultation room, she is opposed to the idea that there should be one basic theory of philosophical counseling. To me such a view makes sense without necessarily being mere eclecticism of an “anything goes” kind. How could there be a basic theory, I will ask along this line, if any of the great dead philosophers should be allowed to enter the consultation room without our being unduly biased towards them in different ways?

Nevertheless she has ended up with two rock bottom convictions that she cannot do away with, and which are underlying premises for her counseling work. At this point she quotes Wittgenstein’s spade metaphor: here the spade reaches rock bottom; if you try to dig deeper, it bends. So, von Morstein’s rock bottom convictions are:

1. To be a person who says “I” presupposes a self who is interconnected with other selves (cf. Hegel, Buber).
2. We cannot understand reality as a whole (with our cognitive abilities); that is: reality as it is in itself (cf. Kant).

During her lecture she also stressed that “to be human is to be necessarily dialogical,” which may be seen as another way of stating the first conviction. If the issue in question is “truth,” there is truth moving in dialogue, and not just “my truth” versus “your truth.” Later on, during the workshop, she stated that human beings are truth searchers, and discussed briefly the question of loneliness versus human connectedness in light of the concept of truth: If you as a counselor help a guest to find “his truth,” opposed to “my truth,” or other people's

truth, he will remain lonely. What he might need is rather human connectedness, and to make him experience truth moving in dialogue could establish this sense of connectedness.

Her emphasis on Wittgenstein's language games surely connects to the second conviction, as reality must be grasped through words used in different language games, and cannot grasp a reality as it "is in itself," outside any language game. Without words, she also states, we can have no ownership of our experiences. There is no human experience without language, and no language without human experience. They are one, inseparable.

Seen in this light, all the basic philosophical notions, like truth, freedom, what is good, and beautiful, are present in our lives. From time to time, and especially when in difficulties, every person with normally developed cognitive abilities will encounter questions containing these notions, arising out of lived life, of experiences. This is bound to happen because basic philosophical notions are *lived* questions, that is: questions to be lived with, and not answered.

What are for instance the experiences we express when we use the word "freedom"? Asking such a question implies a way of examining oneself. What exactly do we express when we speak of "freedom," "truth" etc.? Do we for instance speak of freedom of choice, or of an unconditioned freedom? If so: Are we ever unconditioned? That would of course be an incorrect supposition, as we among other things are bodily conditioned.

When relating to a guest during a counseling session, Petra von Morstein finds the Aristotelian *Poetic* to be a major source of inspiration. When watching a drama or reading a novel, she claims that: "Then I am *at one* with a character like king Oedipus – which does not mean that I identify with him in the sense of *becoming* him. I can nevertheless be *with him* and thus know what his state of mind is like, without any merging of identities. In this way we can experience humanity concretely, regardless of the story's having actually happened or not (as most often is the case in dramas and novels)." This experience of being totally absorbed can be described as purpose-free, beyond causal explicability. A philosophical counselor should in a similar way try to be moved by the guest's expression during a philosophical counseling session. As von Morstein often has experienced herself: At certain moments you don't relate to the other person, you are *at one* with him.

Thus, as a counselor you must 1) be attentive, 2) suspend your own emotional and spiritual concerns, and 3) enter the space of the other with as little baggage as possible. This means that the counselor must put herself in a situation beyond good and evil.

Sticking to Nietzsche, von Morstein is much in favour of this philosopher's notion of "experimental philosophy" – that every philosophical stance or method has to be tried out for a certain purpose. Surely this also must be the case within the field of philosophical counseling, I will add, which should be regarded as an experimental enterprise. Even if it is the world's oldest profession (as von Morstein once remarked), older than prostitution, philosophical counseling is also one of the youngest ones, being some twenty-five years old. As has become obvious to myself and my peers, modern philosophical counseling is still in its infancy, and we have thus to be very undogmatic on notions like "beyond method" and other present guidelines for conducting a session if we are to develop a craft that can really get off the ground. What do we mean when we say "method"? Does "method" amount to pure mechanical, and even algorithmical, conduct, or could "method" also mean something else? What is it to be "beyond method"? Does such a view imply that we should reject any kind of technicality or tricks of the trade, for instance by assembling "good moves" that worked in a previous consultation? I think we are in need of self-counseling on this matter, along the lines of von Morstein's language game investigative approach.

Language and experience is one

In the workshop von Morstein elaborated on the language and human experience interconnectedness by pointing out that people seem to know less and less how to make sense

of experiences. If this is due to the increase of mass media communication by way of sounds and pictures instead of words, she did not say, but it is an interesting thought to look further into (I will not do it in this paper). Another connected point of von Morstein is the question of how philosophical ideas may enter into the counseling situation. How are they to be made explicit?

Her guideline on this: She expects stories from her guests. “Can you tell a story?” is her response to a general intellectual statement. By way of telling a story the guest and the counselor can investigate together into how it is “to own an experience.” Also the emotions inherent in the experience can then be expressed. And, as von Morstein points out: emotions tell us a lot of how we experience the world around us; they are not at all separated from our cognition, but rather a state of cognition.

Such an investigation has much to do with finding an appropriate language game for expressing the experience in question. If no such language game is found, the expression of the experience will tend to be meagre and unsatisfying. von Morstein recalls an interview with the astronauts who first went to the Moon back in 1969, and how she was very disappointed of their answering “Oh, it was great!” and so on, not being able to express their very unique experience in a more enlightening way. But, as she realized later on, she should not have reproached them for not being able to come up with anything better, or more spiritual, as what they had experienced was outside any known language game, and thus made it very hard to find more proper verbal expressions than they did.

As Wittgenstein contends, a word does not *say* the experience, but *shows* the experience by way of its atmosphere besides the lexicographical meaning. This is one of the reasons why language is not merely brought to experience and then expresses it. Language and experience is one.

Thus: “To find a proper verbal expression of your experience is to live *with*, and not *against* the pressure of, this experience,” von Morstein says. We also must remember that “We have language to recognize that cognition goes beyond language.”

Also the hermeneutical need of interpretation is to be acknowledged during counseling. But interpretation can be very oppressive. This is an ambivalence that we must be aware of. (Cf. Heidegger’s distinction *rede/sprache*.) As counselors, we must know that both listening and speaking are creative tasks, and that we have to be authentic in our way of doing this. “When the words uttered are inseparable from you, they cease to be a tool,” von Morstein says. Admittedly the shape – the *gestalt* – of the consultation must be adjusted to the guest, but if the counselor loses her natural way of being, she ceases to be authentic. In the demonstration session to be dealt with later on, von Morstein surely “was herself” in a calm, relaxed and thoughtful way, sometimes allowing herself to respond with phrases like “This sounds alien to me” when trying to grasp what the guest said, or “I can’t hide my bias here” when giving her opinion on something uttered.

Like every other beyond method counselor, von Morstein stresses that she is very aware of the guest’s need to be heard, and to get a response. Thus, doing counseling is basically “an attempt to bring back to the speaker the way I heard it.” To interpret what the guest has said, and maybe take part in it by for instance stating that “I have also sensed that horrible restlessness of not being at home with myself,” or “It must be tiresome to live like that,” is what the counselor should not shy away from.

Counseling is also “an attempt to enable the speaker to hear himself.” Having made the guest hear himself, the question is: How has he dealt with experience, judging from the way he speaks about it? Does the experience appear to be free in the words uttered, or rather encapsulated in these words? As we live in language, we are easily captivated by certain words; that is, to describe an experience in words that do not seem to be an appropriate, or fair, description of it. A sensitivity to the guest’s choice of words, of their connotations’s being in tune, or out of tune, with the experience conveyed, is then what is called for.

The metaphorical use of words is what a counselor should especially dig into, as the guest sooner or later is bound to use words in a metaphorical way, his being aware of it or not. As von Morstein states, she has found it very useful to go into a metaphor when counseling. During the workshop, one student spoke of her urge to “fly” in the sense of having projects all the time, and how tiresome it was. Clearly “flying” was used in a metaphorical sense, and an appropriate question could be: “If you are not flying, then what are you doing?” Making the guest ponder on the alternative to flying, might make her realize that she has deemed this alternative as undesirable in a not too justified way. Or that she has conceived it too narrowly, leaving more viable and appealing alternatives out of the picture.

To elaborate a little more on this: If a guest is preoccupied with a disquieting sense of restlessness, but feels the urge to be on the move – to have projects – all the time, as not having projects appears to be a stillness that is even more disquieting, one could make her distinguish what it is *to have a project*, and *not to have a project*; that is, to make her conceptualize, much likely in a metaphorical way, her view on this. One could also point out the possibility of for instance *being on the move and not being restless*, as when climbing a mountain. Then you may very well move without being restless. More likely, you would experience a state of calmness that goes very well with being physically on the move. By employing examples like this the counselor can explore the concept of moving versus the concept of restlessness, or maybe restlessness versus restfulness, together with the guest. Maybe movement and stillness can become one?

Another example from the workshop: The expression “to land” may have other meanings than simply landing on the ground, as a kind of dead duck. Also a ship is landing at a harbour (at least in English), and stays there only for a while before going to sea again. Then landing does not imply a dead end. “What about the land you have landed at?” the counselor may ask. “Is it well known or strange? What about exploring it together?”

To question basic suppositions in a metaphorical way, in order to open up a new perspective to the guest, is also what von Morstein likes to do. The quest for satisfaction may appear to be self-evident, with no need for further investigation. But can you be constantly satisfied? And could your goal of constant satisfaction be like a prison to you? And: Is satisfaction happiness? These are hard questions that are likely to broaden the guest’s understanding of what it means to be satisfied.

The counseling session: knowing how to reach a philosophically investigative level

The following is not a transcript of the demonstration session Petra von Morstein had with a male student, but focuses on von Morstein’s interventions, in order to highlight her way of bringing the consultation up to a philosophically investigative level. Without spotting any method in her different moves, speaking in a narrow, mechanical sense, I found that she clearly has developed a sharp eye for spotting what might be philosophically interesting in the guest’s words, even if these words initially dealt with an everyday topic as a feeling of uneasiness relating to his aspiring work as a teacher. Whether the following quotes will do justice to von Morstein’s interventions in a way that we can learn from them, I am not certain, but I nevertheless give it a try.

“You speak of loose ends – you want to find your own way?” This was to ascertain early on, to bring out in the open, what was occupying the guest. Answering affirmative to this, the guest spoke about his feeling of uneasiness when trying to be a teacher to quite restless and undisciplined kids, as he neither wanted to act as a peer or as an authoritarian figure.

von Morstein’s question: “How would you imagine the atmosphere in a classroom in which you would feel at one with yourself?”

Which prompted a description of an ideal class.

“You imagine pupils who have already learned how to behave. But how to make them behave? ”

The guest’s struggling with this question made von Morstein pose it in another way: “You go one step back: Instead of imagining pupils coming to you pre-shaped; how to bring it about that they become more what you would hope for?”

The need to exercise authority, and the guest’s ambiguous relation to this need, then was revealed. Which made von Morstein point out that:

“There is a shift now in what you are telling me: authority evokes different feelings: One is OK, and the other is uncomfortable.” The guest affirmed this. Then:

“I would like you to describe to me what it felt like in those two instances. To go more into details on that.”

When the guest lamented on the difficulty of rendering boring and irrelevant knowledge interesting to the pupils, for instance in history classes when he had to teach them stuff like old English kings, von Morstein challenged him with:

“How to shape the context to make history classes on English kings interesting?”

The guest gave it a try, but returned quickly to the uneasiness he felt acting as a teacher. Which made von Morstein say that: “You appear to be stuck in a role that was imposed on you?”

After having elaborated on the problem of authority, von Morstein commented that: “You talked *sneeringly* about exercising authority, and then *sneeringly* on ...” etc., plus: “You obviously have a critical attitude of (the issue in question). And you said *powerfully* that ...” Her emphasis on how the guest spoke, and not merely on the content of his words, surely made an impact on the guest, and enabled him to see himself through her reaction.

The metaphor of “some dark place” where the power to (among other things) exercise authority can be found, was then introduced by the guest. von Morstein: “I’d like to hear a little bit more about the darkness you spoke about. What did you find in the dark? Try to imagine it physically.” And then: “When you found that power in the dark – can you describe to me a situation where that power is exercised?”

When the guest had elaborated on this, von Morstein had this response: “But you notice a distinction between exercising power and imposing aggressively something upon someone?” The guest realized this, and the distinction *empowering versus overpowering*, which von Morstein then suggested.

Digging deeper into the question of authority and control, von Morstein asked: “What is your experience of control?”

Her response to the guest’s view on what he ideally should be towards the pupils: “It seems that you would draw their attention to their own humanity – but can such an attention be framed in the way you imagine (in the classroom)?”

An observation that really made the guest see himself: “You use words that don’t make justice to your own experience, as when you say *manipulate* when you want to set the pupils free. If you use your authority and power to set pupils free, is it then appropriate to say that you are manipulating them?”

Her last comment when time was running out: “What we could have worked on in a next session, is your preoccupation with the light and the dark. In the dark you started to connect yourself to being a teacher, without the ambivalence of exercising authority. We could also work on your sense of feeling retrospectively disturbed. And with the metaphor you once used: to feel like a leaf in the wind.” (At this point she offered one of her own favorite metaphors: “The words come out as dead leaves in the devil’s pocket,” from Sartre: *La nausée*)

Petra von Morstein’s way of conducting a counseling session proved to be quite distinct from what Anders Lindseth recently has shown us, and from what we have seen from some

practitioners of the “Oslo school.” Which is to be expected, as the personality factor will be even more decisive in a beyond method counseling manner than in a more method oriented way of counseling.

What struck me is that von Morstein indeed has internalized a substantial number of philosophical stances and questions to the extent that they have become part of her own way of reflecting upon the guest’s problems. Despite the absence of any discernable method, she seemingly effortlessly found a question or a reaction that made the conversation take off, philosophically speaking. Compared with Lindseth, she was more restricted in letting go of her own associations, even if she in principle might be said to have done the same thing. Where Lindseth was firing off loads of suggestions, seemingly in the hope that at least some of them would hit the mark, von Morstein tended to be more like a sharp shooter, carefully ferreting out where the mark could be located, and then firing fewer bullets, but more discriminately, and with higher precision. This also allowed the guest to be at the focus of the conversation, as she was never tempted to “steal the show,” as Lindseth sometimes appeared to be. Even if she was quite active, and exercised a substantial influence by way of listening and reacting and questioning and suggesting, the guest was left with sufficient space to take part in the reflection and think for himself.

von Morstein’s ability of knowing what to do at any stage of the consultation, even if her choice was not the only option one could think of, displayed a sure mark of craftsmanship which proved that counseling in a beyond method way is nothing like relying on inspiration only, and shying away from anything that has a taste of tricks of the trade. She has surely acquired a routine of going into metaphors, of asking for a story, and of investigating the sense of words by looking at their function in language games, that enables her to turn the consultation in a fruitful direction. Compared with what we try to do here in Oslo, I found it both relieving and revealing that von Morstein not once seemed to lose grips on how to deal with the guest’s problems. Whereas a less able beyond method counselor might have succumbed to asking the guest to elaborate on her initial problem, just from not knowing what else to do, even if the guest already has provided enough words to investigate into. To think that we could do much more than that without having developed a set of clues on where to look, and what to ask, even before the consultation starts, would be completely misguided.

As von Morstein has demonstrated, at least to me, there is no need to be fooled into anti-craftmanship by the vague and general nature of beyond method guidelines. They should at the contrary inspire us to identify and develop a wide set of clues on how to conduct a counseling session in a competent and professional manner.

Oslo, March 30., 2005