

Dear reader,

This is an author-produced version of an article published in Detlef Staude / Eckart Ruschmann (eds.), *Understanding the Other and Oneself. Essays on Philosophical Practice from the 14th International Conference on Philosophical Practice*. It agrees with the manuscript submitted by the author for publication but does not include the final publisher's layout or pagination.

Original publication:

Riedenauer, Markus

Philosophical practice as midwifery of the self. How to bridge the gap between philosophical anthropology and individual human existence

in: Detlef Staude / Eckart Ruschmann (eds.), *Understanding the Other and Oneself. Essays on Philosophical Practice from the 14th International Conference on Philosophical Practice*, pp. 42–57
Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2018

Access to the published version may require subscription.

Published in accordance with the policy of Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Your IxTheo team

Liebe*r Leser*in,

dies ist eine von dem/der Autor*in zur Verfügung gestellte Manuskriptversion eines Aufsatzes, der in Detlef Staude / Eckart Ruschmann (Hg.), *Understanding the Other and Oneself. Essays on Philosophical Practice from the 14th International Conference on Philosophical Practice*, erschienen ist. Der Text stimmt mit dem Manuskript überein, das der/die Autor*in zur Veröffentlichung eingereicht hat, enthält jedoch *nicht* das Layout des Verlags oder die endgültige Seitenzählung.

Originalpublikation:

Riedenauer, Markus

Philosophical practice as midwifery of the self. How to bridge the gap between philosophical anthropology and individual human existence

in: Detlef Staude / Eckart Ruschmann (Hg.), *Understanding the Other and Oneself. Essays on Philosophical Practice from the 14th International Conference on Philosophical Practice*, S. 42–57
Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2018

Die Verlagsversion ist möglicherweise nur gegen Bezahlung zugänglich.

Diese Manuskriptversion wird im Einklang mit der Policy des Verlags Cambridge Scholars Publishing publiziert.

Ihr IxTheo-Team

Markus Riedenauer:

Philosophical practice as midwifery of the self.
How to bridge the gap between philosophical anthropology
and individual human existence

Socrates compared his job as a philosopher with that of a midwife¹: As she helps with the birth of children, he assists in his dialogues in birthing good thoughts. From the context of this famous metaphor we can understand that what comes to light with the help of Socrates' midwifery (*maieutics*) are general insights. In the horizon of Platonic epistemology and ontology, the highest knowledge would be that of eternal, immutable ideas. But philosophical practice cannot restrict itself to theoretical and general knowledge. As already Aristotle saw (the real founder of practical philosophy), assistance is needed for specific decisions in the lives of individual characters who want to become good themselves². So we need to enlarge the metaphor: the goal is not only the birth of knowledge, but the birth of the self itself. A kind of philosophy which is unable to bridge the gap between the general and the individual is irrelevant for practice, it does not arrive at the client seeking orientation.

The following reflections arise from experiences of ethical counselling in a classical sense: helping clients with their questions about a good, meaningful, successful existence for themselves as unique persons in specific situations. „Happiness“ might seem to be a word with too many or too big connotations, but „fulfilled life“ is a good translation of Aristotle's *eudaimonia*. Of course, there are other approaches to philosophical practice like the investigation of an individual worldview³, also in epistemological or metaphysical dimensions. Some clients may be interested in clarifying certain concepts (possibly related to their professional activities), and there is the whole field of philosophical practice as an educational enterprise in various forms⁴. All this may be good philosophical practice, but this

¹ Plato: *Theait.* 149-151.

² *Nicomachean Ethics* II,2 1103b 26-29.

³ „Weltanschauung“, as E. Ruschmann unfolds his approach in his contribution to this volume.

⁴ See my overview articles: *Philosophische Praxis: Bildung oder Beratung oder Psychotherapie? Reflexionen zu ihrer Standortbestimmung*; in: Thomas Gutknecht /

article is dedicated to understanding better the self-understanding of individuals searching for their good.

Since the mid of the fifth century before Christ, the temple of Apollo in Delphi carried the inscription: *Gnothi seauton!* This imperative „Know thyself!“ is ascribed to various wise people, so self-understanding is a goal at the origin of philosophy. The other classical imperative to „become who you are!“, emphatically embraced by Friedrich Nietzsche⁵, presupposes an insight into my self. To know myself is the basis for accepting myself, becoming myself, realising and determining myself.

It seems very important to me to discern two sides of self-knowledge: a general one, understanding of the human being as a human being, that is what I share with all men and/or women - in classical times understood mostly as a knowledge of human life in the context of the whole reality, or knowledge of „The Human Place in the Cosmos“, as still Max Scheler titled his famous book of 1928⁶. This is the realm of philosophical anthropology which elaborates dimensions of human existence like being endowed with speech and mind (*logos*), being in a body and sexuality, living by nature in a society and in history, affectivity and intentionality, mortality etc. All this can become important in the philosophical practice, at least should counsellors have a background in philosophical anthropology - but my article focuses on the other side, the individual one: the understanding of myself/yourself as an individual being, including the differences to other people. The reason for this focus is not due to the fact that an individualistic culture is sceptical about the general anthropological side and that some people prefer an idea of self-creation to the idea of a self-understanding which includes a given human nature (a position for which there also exist philosophical arguments in existentialism up

Heidemarie Bennent-Vahle / Thomas Polednitschek (Eds.): *Lust am Logos* (4. Jahrbuch der IGPP), Münster (LIT) 2011; pp. 185-195 and *Erleuchtung durch Philosophie?*; in: Markus Riedenauer / Eugen Maria Schulak (Eds.): *Mehr Licht! Erfahrungen aus der philosophischen Praxis*, Vienna (Braumüller) 2011; pp. 1-11.

⁵ *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* 3 § 290 (KGA 5/2, p. 157) *passim*. Heidegger, too, mentions this maxim (*Being and Time* § 31).

⁶ Max Scheler: *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*, Darmstadt (Reichl, 1928). Cf. Pierre Hadot: *Überlegungen zum Begriff der »Selbstkultur«*; in: Ewald, François / Waldenfels, Bernhard (Eds.): *Spiele der Wahrheit*. Michel Foucaults Denken, Frankfurt (Suhrkamp) 1991; pp. 219-228.

to post-modern aesthetics of existence). But I will talk about selfunderstanding as an individual because academic philosophers have much more difficulties with this side; it furthermore seems to drift into the competence of psychotherapy or counselling. Still, clients expect from a philosophical practitioner some maieutical help in their very individual self-understanding. And they are right to do so. The study of philosophy at a university at best makes one a master of the general, but in philosophical practice the philosopher is faced with a unique human being who exists exactly once in the whole world.

1. Narrative Exploration

The first and fundamental approach is the narrative one. Since Augustin it is also part of our philosophical heritage. In his „Confessions“ (even if they are more stylised than a modern autobiography) he tells the reader how he became the man who he is. The fact that Augustin talks to God is a proof that we tell our story always to somebody, even if the addressee of a book is indeterminate. Such narration may be the original form of dialogue, i.e. going through a topic or a story one step after the other. The Greek word *dialegein* literally means collecting thoroughly, talking through (and has nothing to do with the number of interlocutors).

The anthropological background consists in an understanding of the human being as the answering being. In Aristotle's definition of man as *zoon logon echon*⁷ it is already implied, if the having of mind (*logos*) is understood in the right way, not like the having of a nose. If we take Aristotle's *De anima* into consideration, we can understand that he means with his famous definition that man is the being living in the openness of *logos* for the whole reality, who can understand everything as a call to give answer: The soul is somehow everything⁸, in so far as it can become everything in perception and knowledge, but also in reasonable decision and action.

The Platonic formulation of *logon didonai*⁹, usually understood as

⁷ Aristotle: *Politics* I,2 1253a 9f.

⁸ *De anima* III,7 431b21f.: *he psyche ta onta pos esti panta*. Cf. DA II,2 414a 13f.: Psyche is through which we primarily live, perceive and think.

⁹ Cf. e.g. *Politeia* VI 510 or *Laches* 187.

giving reasons for claims or justifying one's deeds can be used to better understand Aristotle's definition insofar as the "giving" of *logos* complements the "having" of *logos*. When it is being said that humans live in a "space of reasons", we should not forget the breadth and depth of the concept of *logos*. In principle, we are living in an unlimited horizon, we can question everything, we interpret what we perceive and we act, because we can understand everything as an appeal which calls on us to give answers. „To give *logos*“ means to justify, to give reasons, but also to tell a story or to calculate, and it includes actions in which human beings respond to reality including the reality of one's own life history and its calls for integration and future formation.

In order to see that not only Aristotle interprets human existence in this way, we can have a brief look at Cicero: in his theory of the different meanings of personality, he starts with the already classical definition of man as the animal endowed with *logos* or rationality¹⁰. Cicero immediately adds that the bodies and souls of different human beings show significant differences. This aspect of psychological and personal individuality or character he sees as a positive foundation for forming one's life: We should act in accordance with human nature in general, but also with the norm of our own individual nature¹¹.

A third element apart from the general human personality and the individuality needs to be integrated, that is the role and the responsibilities which one is given or offered in society. The final dimension of personality integrates all this in a kind of choice: "Most importantly we have to constitute who and how we want to be and in which form of life."¹² This implies decisions regarding a deliberate self-development, a conscious cultivation of one's individuality and dispositions.

At the birth of a child the mother and the midwife have completely different tasks and roles, and so it is in philosophical midwifery. The philosophical practitioner has an idea of what could happen in

¹⁰ *omnes participes sumus rationis praestantiaeque eius, qua antecellimus bestiis, a qua omne honestum decorumque trahitur (De officiis I, n. 107).*

¹¹ *Sic enim est faciendum, ut contra universam naturam nihil contendamus, ea tamen conservata propriam nostram sequamur, ut... nos studia nostra nostrae naturae regula metiamur. (De off. I, n.110)*

¹² *in primis autem constituendum est, quos nos et quales esse velimus et in quo genere vitae (n. 117).*

the process on the basis of his knowledge and experience and he can recommend helpful exercises and methods which alleviate the birth¹³. The criterion for selection are always the needs of the baby and the mother, as is the case with a good midwife (not always in the obstetrics department of a clinic, where sometimes a caesarean section is performed without indication, possibly due to the change of shifts of the staff).

In the early philosophical practice in Germany it seemed important to some colleagues like Achenbach to mark a difference between their work and such therapeutical obstetrics and they claimed that philosophical practice should be free from all methods. Without arguing this point I want to understand the metaphor of midwifery to the effect that while it may be unnecessary to give growth to one's good thoughts in a highly structured „clinical“ surrounding, a methodically competent midwife of one's choice would be of good service. Between objectifying a patient or a client as just one example of a class of cases to be treated with standard methods on the one hand, and a refusal to provide one or the other adequate method on the other side, there are many possibilities in the middle. The most important criterion seems to be process-competence instead of result orientation.

Questioning

Probably we have all had the experience that a person who listens well helps to bring forth more than is possible in a simple monologue. Now a person who knows how to listen shows interest and empathy. She asks questions of different kinds: on the one hand "horizontal" questions which support the successive unfolding of the story told. In the simplest form we ask "And then?" If we are told a story with a gap, we ask for the missing part in order to understand how things developed on the timeline. On the other hand, "vertical" questions allow to enter deeper into the story of the client by connecting the surface level of what happened with the deeper levels of what he perceived, felt, interpreted, thought and wanted. The structural model of philosophical counselling developed by Ruschmann is very helpful in the exploration of the clients world in all its

¹³ The relation of counsellor and client and hermeneutical principles are elaborated in: Riedenauer: *Zur Philosophie des Coaching. Anthropologische, hermeneutische und ethische Implikationen*; in: OSC 11/2004; pp. 365-378.

dimensions.

So questioning in general is essential - which specific methods are helpful, belongs into basic counselling training. While I am convinced that every philosophical counselor should be competent in such fundamental counselling skills, I just underline the two most important points in my view: two basic kinds of questions and the necessary disposition or *ethos*.

Closed questions are usually answered with "yes", "no" or with the naming of a fact. They narrow down the focus, close a line of thought and do not lead further or deeper. They belong to the binary logic of "either/or" and demand for a decision. But reality, particularly the reality of human existence, is much more complex and oftentimes characterised by "on the one hand - on the other", by the adequacy of two or even more possibilities. A premature reduction of this complexity seems to be a philosophical mistake at least in the dialogue phase of exploration.

Therefore, open questions are suited much better, because they encourage to explain in a broader or deeper way, to give more extensive answers and room to new aspects. "How did you feel in that situation?" sounds completely different than "You felt like being in the wrong place?" I use such closed questions if I want to receive a feedback on my interpretation of the situation or if I want to summarise it in one concise formulation. A question like "Did you think this was immoral?" provokes the answer "yes/no" or maybe "partially", while an open question leaves more room, for example: "Which points of view seem to be relevant for the evaluation?"

The second basic point is the disposition or *ethos* of questioning. The necessary precondition is to be open for the other person, but it can be obscured by different personal attitudes and states: my own intellectual preferences, my own favourite ideas, my own experiences or emotions need to be kept in the background in order to project less into the client's story and to minimise the natural selectivity of my perception. To put it positively, I should be as free as possible from myself, in a freedom for the other person in the way she is showing herself in dialogue (including sometimes a significant lack of certain aspects which are not shown).

A possible misunderstanding needs to be clarified: The fundamental narrative approach does not reveal a finished personal identity.

This does not exist as long as a human being is alive, but narration uncovers which past experiences demand discernment and integration: important events, insights, hopes, fears, delusions, goals, ways of relating to the world, patterns of interpreting and acting etc. Being alive, we constantly give a future to our past. Martin Heidegger seems to elaborate the Augustinian triad of memory, expectation and attention¹⁴ when he says that *Dasein* comes back to its past out of the horizon of future possibilities and that it gives a future to moments of the past existence, always collecting the past and the future in a qualified present¹⁵. In a good dialogue, the client understands which elements of her past seem to be capable of carrying a future, with which she identifies herself, what she wants to develop further - and what not, because it doesn't fit any more into her life. Even a partial breaking with one's own history, or better: a new beginning, has reasons and mediated by them stands in relation to the past: a conscious, reflected and decided relation: „I now start anew because I see that I have been going into a blind alley" is a self-determination which ideally includes a self-knowledge of where and why I went in a direction which I don't regard as fitting any more. A good dialogue of telling and listening thereby shows options of life which can constitute a meaningful development of the person.

2. Systematic Explorations

There are many possibilities for a methodical self-assessment beyond a narrative dialogue of telling, asking and uncovering the possible meaning of past events. The purpose of the following paradigmatic methods is not a complete analysis of value dispositions, personality traits, competences and the like, but to show examples of structured ways to enter into a deep dialogue. A direct personal exploration with the help of the structural model of Ruschmann¹⁶ is

¹⁴ *memoria, contuitus/adtentio, expectatio* (Confessions XI, 14-28), integrated into the present: *praesens de praeteritis, praesens de praesentibus, praesens de futuribus* (XI, 20). Time is ultimately an extension of the soul: *distentio animi* (XI, 26).

¹⁵ Heidegger: *Die Metaphysik des Deutschen Idealismus*; GA vol. 49 (Klostermann 1991); p. 50. Cf. *Being and Time* §6: *Dasein* is its past in the way it happens out of a future.

¹⁶ Cf. [Eckart Ruschmanns contribution to this volume](#).

also regarded as an excellent way to reach that goal. But it presupposes more counselling competence on the side of the philosophical practitioner and it seems wise to have a few systematic tools at hand. Already the Stoic philosophical schools had a repertoire of methods to watch oneself, control thoughts and emotions, to manage one's time, to meditate and memorise principles, to analyse dreams and scrutinise oneself in the evenings etc. As B. Jones explains in line with the research of Pierre Hadot, it is important to see that such exercises had their place in the life of a philosophical community¹⁷. Members practised the dialogue of *parresia* which can be translated as giving each other free and sincere feedback.

My experience is that clients do like to fill out a questionnaire or a workshop which helps them to a certain systematic self-exploration without forgetting important elements - as a basis for the dialogue and as inspiration for further reflection to take home.

The theoretical background is that the dimensions of human existence as reflected in philosophical anthropology allow for different ways of actualisation, individual modes of being reasonable, being a body, of feeling and wanting, of relating to one's own mortality etc. Regarding values, there is also a legitimate plurality within a space delimited by vices and demerits like injustice, arrogance, cruelty and the like. Different people are just or self-assured in different ways - something which is not a topic of normative moral philosophy. But it was reflected upon in classical ethics: Aristotle's theory of virtues and vices assumes that the reasonable middle of virtue between its two opposed vices is not a point but a space with a certain width, capable of different individual specifications¹⁸. The first circumstance which needs to be taken into account when defining the most appropriate action is „who“ is acting¹⁹. The measure of the human good is finally always a single

¹⁷ Cf. Barbara Shanti Jones: *A Model for Philosophical Groups*; in APPA Journal 11 (2016); pp. 1771-1777; Pierre Hadot: *Philosophie als Lebensform. Geistige Übungen in der Antike*, Berlin 1991 / Frankfurt 2002.

¹⁸ Cf. my interpretation of Aristotle's ethics: *OREXIS & EUPRAXIA. Ethikbegründung im Streben bei Aristoteles*, Würzburg (Königshausen & Neumann) 2000

¹⁹ Cf. the definition of virtue as a disposition to act according to the mean „relative to us“ (*Nicomachean Ethics* II,6 1106b 36-1107a 2) and the enumeration of morally relevant circumstances the first of which is the „who“ (III,1 1111a 3-6).

convincing moral person (*spoudaios*²⁰).

Self-understanding is lacking in an arrogant, overly self-confident person, but also in the pusillanimous person, who does not believe in being capable of any achievements. In between there are different good ways of cognitively relating to one's self. Hans Krämer's „integrative ethics“ wants to give room to these important aspects with the development of conciliatory ethics - room for ethically good self knowledge and self-determination²¹. Philosophical practice has to be capable of dealing with individual modes.

Value profiling

One important area with a legitimate plurality of *ethos*-forms are values; individuals have their peculiar value-profiles. Particularly in view of important decisions, it is necessary to talk about them in philosophical practice. But „values“ are polysemic, people using this word may mean different things. As I have argued elsewhere²², philosophers should not be deterred by this fact to use it, because it plays an important role in the general discourse on ethical questions in our societies. In my view, „values“ mostly mean (1) practical principles, including moral principles for social institutions and laws (e.g., justice in taxation). Sometimes they mean (2) goals for individual and communal action, e.g. when companies describe what they want to implement in their procedures. Quite often they mean (3) virtues, which in fact are dispositions to realise values - the virtue of justice, for example, can be described as the ethical disposition to take into account the legitimate interests of others. Originally (4) value was an economic concept, thus we speak of objects of value.

So it is quite understandable that we may receive rather confused answers when asking a client about his values. How can we speak

²⁰ EN III,4 1113a 30-35.

²¹ Hans Krämer: *Integrative Ethik*, Frankfurt (Suhrkamp) 1995. Seneca sums up the benefit of philosophy as counselling: *Vis scire quid philosophia promittat generi humano? consilium*. (Seneca: *Epistulae morales* V, 48.6)

²² See Riedenauer: *Zum philosophischen Wert des Wertbegriffs oder: Die Renaissance der Werte und die Frage nach der geeignetsten Geburtsklinik*, in: Martina Fürst / Wolfgang Gombocz / Christian Hiebaum (Eds.): *Analysen, Argumente, Ansätze Band 2*, Heusenstamm (Ontos) 2008; pp. 447-455 and Markus Riedenauer/Andrea Tschirf: *Zeitmanagement und Selbstorganisation in der Wissenschaft. Ein selbstbestimmtes Leben in Balance*, Wien (UTB - facultas) 2012; pp. 27-31.

about the individual *ethos* in a reasonable and fruitful way? There are diverse workshops which try to order and prioritise values. One such table is the result of working through several models, ordered in the categories of self-related (with three sub-categories), community-related and object-related values²³. The client is given the following table and asked to grade each single value with points from 1 (low importance) to 5 (highest importance). Of course, he may add what seems to be missing for him. A certain completeness of the overview is more important than the exact category for a value; some of them might be placed in a different one, too - which can already give rise to interesting arguments. In a second step, he should identify his 10 most important values and bring them into an order in an extra list which shows his personal value hierarchy or profile. This can be used to discuss the adequacy of his list in view of challenging ethical questions, if there have been changes in the course of his life or if he wants to revise it in the future. To foster the dialogue of self-exploration is the primary goal of this instrument.

Self-related values - praxis and virtues	grade		grade
self-development, learning		internal security, self-assuredness	
performance, competition		intelligence, prudence	
authenticity		modesty, simplicity	
fortitude, courage, bravery		temperance	
composure, calmness		patience	
Self-related values - competences and liberties			

²³ The table is translated and slightly revised from Riedenauer/Tschirf (2012); pp. 32-34.

professional competences, namely....		autonomy, self-determination	
health, fitness		nutrition	
parsimony		sports	
Self-related values - perception			
looks, appearance		status, reputation	
tension and relaxation		external security, Gemütlichkeit	
humour, serenity		lust	
Community-related values - conditions of coexistence			
just institutions, rule of law		liberal and democratic values	
mercifulness, compassion		religion	
commitment, engagement		solidarity, helpfulness	
peace, non-violence		equality	
tolerance		honesty	
competences in communication and conflict-resolution		discipline, fulfillment of duties, reliability	
trust		fidelity, loyalty	
punctuality		politeness, respect	
honour		friendship, love	
family values		incorruptibility	
influence, power		leadership responsibility	

care, solicitousness		empathy	
generosity, selflessness		forgiveness	
erotic desire, joy, activity		common good-orientation	
Object-related values			
openness, interests		exactness	
creativity		sense of order	
efficiency		practical know-how	
material goods, property		standard of living	
quality products		aesthetic values regarding...	
fine arts		nature	
travels			
Additional personal values			

Such a systematic exploration makes a more complete self-understanding possible, but should not replace the narrative approach. The subsequent dialogue about the individual value profile can lead to the recognition that the preferences have changed in the course of life - just as those of the private or professional community, or of the whole society. Value conflicts become understandable. It may become evident that in the diverse roles of the client different value priorities might be adequate - for example, some values may have their best place in the family, others in the competitive professional life. Clients become more flexible and feel authorised to adapt their value preferences dynamically to different situations.

Among the top topics which oftentimes arise out of a value workshop,

is the polarity of values: Polar values are in contrast to each other and cannot be realised at the same time or in the same context, but without forming a contradictory opposition. For example, a decision between preferring justice or mercifulness is inevitable in a given situation, but in one's life as a whole, it is possible to live both in varying degrees. Such complementary values have an extreme, morally negative opposite each and it helps a lot to see all four elements: In a challenging or even dangerous situation, there is not only the opposition of courage and cowardice or of cautiousness and rashness, but also the relative contrasts of courage and cautiousness (both positive polar values) and the contradiction of cowardice and rashness (both vices). Aristotle's theory of virtues, vices and the reasonable middle (*mesotes*) already contains this insight²⁴; most values turn bad if exaggerated. Another example would be the complementary contrast of precision and speed at work with the opposed extremes of sloppiness or carelessness and a perfectionism which wastes time and energy. Schulz von Thun is well-known for explaining this insight in a popular way²⁵ - even among philosophers, it is less known that Nicolai Hartmann had developed it much earlier²⁶. To bring it into the dialogue has the effect of relativising attributions - a value is put in relation not only with the opposite extreme (which usually happens in self-justifications), but also with its positive opposite and in the complete system of value relations. This allows for more sovereignty in value conflicts, a conscious and constructive dealing with persons who have a different value profile.

Competences, virtues, behaviour preferences

Another pragmatic instrument for a systematic self-exploration is designed to provide clients with an overview of their competences. This modern word can be regarded as a possible translation of *virtus* (virtue): habitualised dispositions for acting well in various types of situations. To know one's individual profile of abilities is particularly important when a biographical decision is due, if for example a client wishes to gain clarity about options like finishing

²⁴ Cf. EN II,8.

²⁵ Friedemann Schulz von Thun: *Miteinander reden 2. Stile, Werte und Persönlichkeitsentwicklung*, Hamburg 1994; pp. 38-47.

²⁶ Hartmann: *Ethik*, Berlin ⁴1962; pp. 565 ff.

his studies or quitting or changing into another discipline. Abilities are the result of natural gifts and education, training and learning. In practice, it is unimportant to discern what is natural and what is cultural in a person's skills, but it should be seen that we usually do well what we like to do and we usually enjoy activities in which we are competent and experience them as meaningful.

For older people who have been educated to focus on their personal weaknesses and to fight them, „self-knowledge“ may convey a negative feeling. Therefore, it is important to stress that the focus is on strengths. Sometimes it is a relief from moral distress and ethical perfectionism to see the broad variety and richness of one's competences - among them will be some which the client has taken for granted and not valued sufficiently. It helps to accept oneself to start with possibly unconscious strengths and to know that there is freedom regarding self-development: The client can decide for himself if he wants to be content with his competence profile at least for the time being, if he prefers to work on his strengths and use them better, and in how far he wants to train specific competences which are less developed. The only attitude which is not recommended is to remain in an ambivalence of the kind „I see a negative trait in myself, I would like to change it, but I feel too weak to improve, or I do not really want to tackle with it.“ It seems healthier to make a conscious decision not to expect too much from oneself or to stretch too far - self-knowledge does not automatically imply an imperative of self-perfection.

The following instrument is meant as an example and inspiration, open for completion and revision. In order to see the breadth of individual competences, it includes some abilities for cooperation, for dealing with information, with material and particular creative skills. Other divisions and classifications are always possible and the philosophical practitioner should creatively develop workshops which she can identify herself with and feels comfortable to offer. Of course, it is also possible and works remarkably well in groups to use Aristotle's table of ethical virtues²⁷. In a professional context, it might be more important to discern specific competences required in the job, social and communication skills, strategic or leadership competences.

Such a table is to be used in a similar way as the value table, by

²⁷ EN II,7 and extensively in the chapters and books starting with III,9.

prioritising the items and thus making the strongest competences visible. After this self-assessment, the free dialogue about the individual self has a structured basis.

Cooperation with people	grade	Dealing with information	grade
founding, building up		administrating	
leading		organising	
mediating		planning, concept development	
serving, complying		structuring, systematic ordering	
teaching, educating		calculating	
supporting with empathy		researching	
speaking publicly, moderating		evaluating	
convincing, selling		adapting, improving	
negotiating		integrating, connecting	
treating			
counselling			
Dealing with material		Creative skills	
caring for plants or animals		making music	
working with natural materials like...		dancing	
electronic engineering		sculpting	
using machines		performing theatre etc.	
building		designing	
repairing		drawing, painting	

decorating		filming, photography	
cooking, baking		writing	
mixing drinks, tasting of wine etc.		presenting	
		sporting	

Other areas of self-exploration which seem very important to me are personality traits and behaviour tendencies. Since the historical differentiation of philosophy and psychology, they belong to the competence of differential and personality psychology. Now, philosophical practitioners need not become psychologists, as there are several serious, scientifically founded and valid personality tests on the training and coaching market which usually require a licence or participation in a program like „train the trainer“. This makes sense beyond the technical level, because the decisive process happens in the dialogue following the client's self-assessment, when ethical questions (in the broad, classical meaning) arise. Here I just recommend to enter into this adjacent field, to complement one's philosophical and counselling competences with some knowledge in psychology of personality and possibly one good instrument for the assessment. The philosophical practitioner who wants to support clients in their self-understanding in a responsible way can gain security (in psychologically difficult cases), professionalism and recognition.

Developing visions

Clients seek a better self-understanding in philosophical practice oftentimes because they are facing important decisions, in situations of required changes or transformations. Their interest is not only retrospective, but prospective in view of self-determination or life-planning. A dialogical process of thorough self-understanding and instruments like the ones sketched above already give criteria for preferences, options for anticipation and orientation for self-development and self-realisation. So the development of visions for the client's life follows

organically²⁸ - but it is difficult, for various reasons. There are socio-cultural constraints, objective difficulties to plan the future, as well as sceptical reservations. Some mistake ethics to be purely normative and can be offered a philosophical practice which is optative, not prescriptive. Some mistake visions to be unreal phantasy or irresponsible dreams. Still, it seems recommendable to have paradigmatic ideas of what a meaningful and fulfilled life would look like in the next few years. The talk of „ideas“ and „looks“ belongs to the metaphorical sphere of images - visions contain imagined scenarios of the future. It is very important to see them as open for modifications and revisions - but not to know such scenarios at all means giving up on chances for answering proactively to events, possibilities and challenges which lie ahead. In the long run, it might result in disillusionment and bitterness. Already Seneca recommends that we should look at our whole lives as highest good and warns that we miss ourselves if we think about parts of our lives without deliberating about the whole²⁹. Knowing one's visions, in contrast, conveys clarity, sovereignty, motivation and joy. It means using the human freedom for self-formation and gives a feeling of dignity.

In counselling, young adults sometimes show a reluctance to plan anything for their private lives, particularly regarding their wishes for a future family, because they experience strong pressures to plan their careers and to subjugate everything to their professional success. But here, the polarity of values explained above comes into play: Between the extremes of not deliberating at all about one's future and of planning it with rigidity and too much (unforeseeable) detail lies a spectrum of good attitudes which could be called a conscious, pro-active, curious and flexible-remaining openness. It does not undermine the adventurous character of life, nor the self-responsibility of taking care for oneself. Visionising means a tentative continuation of the narration of one's life into a meaningful future (in line with the fact that already retrospective narration is a creative act). It strengthens the responsive capacity

²⁸ It is possible, but for philosophical practice unnecessary to formulate an „ontological imperative of self-realization“ and self-development, as Nicholas Rescher does: *Moral Absolutes. An Essay on the Nature and Rationale of Morality*, New York 1989; pp. 94f.

²⁹ *Ad summum bonum, propositum totius vitae tuae, respice... Itidem eo peccamus, quia de partibus vitae omnes deliberamus, de tota nemo deliberat* (Seneca: *Epistulae morales VIII, 71.1*).

and entails goals for self-education, i.e. the further development and training of virtues which will be needed in all kinds of different situations.

Visionising demands a less analytical, more creative, even playful attitude. Self-understanding gained in narrative and systematic explorations of the self flows into the integrative imagination of two, better three possible scenarios of the client's meaningful life in the following years. There are various creative methods like drawing visions, describing a journey into the future with important milestones in professional and private roles, or sketching a film script for a movie spanning a major part of one's life.

As we are now leaving the realm of (retrospective) self-understanding and entering self-realisation in self-responsibility, let us not overstretch the topic and summarise the movement of our reflection: The general anthropological dimension of self-knowledge treats the question „What (a kind of being) am I?“ Individual self-knowledge deals with the question „Who am I? How did I become the person I am now?“ This naturally leads to the further question „Who do I want to become? In what respect do I want to develop myself - and how?“

The philosophical practitioner helps in preparing answers to these questions - which are finally given in the client's life itself, by living. The philosophical midwife assists in giving birth to individual self-knowledge regarding peculiar modes of living a human life in its general anthropological dimensions. She has some instruments which support the dialogical self-exploration. Thus, the client brings to light his own insights and visions, while realising that the birth of the self is an ongoing process.