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The Interdependence between Ethical Knowledge and Living Ethically

Peter Jonkers*

First and foremost, I want to extend my greetings to all participants in this conference. Despite my inability to be physically present, my greetings are no less heartfelt. It is gratifying to observe that a significant number of scholars have responded positively to the invitation for this conference, thereby demonstrating that philosophy is a vibrant field of academic interest in India. Furthermore, I want to thank Tattva: Journal of Philosophy, the Department of English and Cultural Studies at Christ University, and the Department of Philosophy of St. Anthony's College, Shillong, for their institutional support in organising this Third Annual International Conference, as well as all those who contributed to making this conference possible, both academically and practically. Finally, I thank the organisers of this conference for inviting me to discuss some ideas concerning the theme of this year's conference, Living Ethically in the 21st Century.

Introduction

As articulated in the call for papers and evidenced by the variety of presentations at this conference, the first quarter of this century has confronted humanity with numerous crises, ecological, technological, socio-cultural, political, and economic, thus making the theme of this conference academically highly relevant and societally topical. Furthermore, the majority of these crises are not limited to a specific region or country but rather have a global impact. Consequently, the contemporary epoch can legitimately be designated as characterised by polycrisis. Politicians, scientists, activists, practitioners, as well as thinkers and opinion-makers, have analysed the causes of this polycrisis and proposed ways to respond to it. Obviously, these responses exhibit a considerable degree of variation, not only in relation to the disciplinary, geographical, and socio-cultural distinctions among the participants, but also concerning the diversity of approaches adopted in dealing with these crises. Scientists and philosophers, for instance, characteristically adopt a theoretical stance, focusing on the analysis of the causes of the polycrisis,

* Dept. of Systematic Theology and Philosophy, Tilburg University, Netherlands; P.H.A.I.Jonkers@tilburguniversity.edu

both empirically and conceptually, and proposing general solutions. However, these solutions frequently fail to address the specific needs and challenges faced by individuals and societies, leading to some scepticism towards them. Conversely, practitioners tend to prioritise resolving specific issues, often disregarding the broader ramifications of their solutions. Politicians must strike a balance between the policy recommendations provided by experts, their ideological priorities, and the impact of concrete measures on the broader population. Activists frequently disapprove of the pragmatism of politicians and instead concentrate on a single, pressing issue, attempting to sway public opinion in favour of their cause through their actions.

In the Western philosophical tradition, which will be the focus of my contribution, ethics is conceptualised as a reflection on the good life for all people, on how the person as a moral being should act, and on the virtues and moral imperatives that follow from it. In its theoretical capacity, philosophical ethics exerts only a limited influence on the question of how to live ethically in the context of the practical contingencies and challenges of daily life. By focusing on how to *live* ethically, this conference adopts a different, rather existential stance on ethics, thereby transcending the prevailing Western dichotomy between theoretical reflection on ethical issues and living ethically. As stated in the concluding sentence of the call for papers, "this conference […] follows the spirit of what Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai have called *maitri* – a relation between multiple socials based on the rationality of being-with rather than knowing-that." In my view, such an integration of theoretical reflection and practical action is required to overcome the polycrisis of our times, thus demonstrating the Indian philosophical tradition's capacity to criticise the one-sidedness of Western philosophy as a theoretical discipline.

The focus of my contribution is to discuss two underlying questions of living ethically, namely, 1) the integration of theoretical reflection on ethical dilemmas and the practice of living ethically, and 2) the relation between living ethically and orientation in life. In my view, exploring practical wisdom is crucial to shedding light on these two questions [1] It has been observed by many authors that wisdom is experiencing a resurgence in popularity, after being associated for a long time with old people, tradition, and conservative caution in a culture of youth, modernisation, innovation, and risky exploration. The resurgence of wisdom is particularly pronounced in domains where knowledge and (technical) expertise come up against questions of values, beauty, the shaping and flourishing of the whole person, the common good, and long-term perspectives. [2] The resurgence of wisdom can be explained as a reaction against the negative effects of the dominance of scientific rationality, which boasts of its

objectivity and its independence from ethical and existential considerations, but at the same time shows its incapacity to offer a balanced, reasoned response to the pressing questions of individuals and communities about how to live ethically. Nowadays, the common opinion seems to be that the only way to respond to existential questions is to rely on one's inner, subjective, or gut feeling. Against this background, it is no wonder that many people find themselves contemplating the following question: "How might the contemporary world recover a wisdom, that is to say, a knowledge, a conscience that is not solely dependent on objects of knowledge, but is also contingent on life itself as it is experienced daily, on a way of living and existing?"[3] This question bears a strong resemblance to the one posed by Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai's focus on being-with rather than knowing-that.

Wisdom can be defined as a knowledge that provides a reasoned orientation in people's existential search for the good life,[4] that is, to live ethically. Hence, a wise person possesses not only a profound comprehension of what is true and good but also the capacity to relate this insight in a meaningful way to the particular existential situations of concrete individuals or societies, including one's own life. This suggests that a wise person is someone who not only *possesses* wisdom but also engages with and lives it.[5] In essence, a wise person embodies a spiritual way of life, characterised by the ability to integrate theoretical comprehension of divine, that is, eternal and unchangeable truths, with practical and political expertise. Therefore, wisdom is a prerequisite for living ethically. Moreover, wisdom is not a matter of wise individuals, but is something communal: all spiritual traditions around the world, such as Hinduism, the mythologies of ancient Egypt, ancient Greece, and Northern Europe, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity, comprise teachings about living ethically and can, therefore, be defined as schools of wisdom.[6]

The relation between ethical knowledge and living ethically

In this presentation, I will analyse the constitutive elements of practical wisdom in more detail and their relevance to living ethically. As French philosopher Pierre Hadot has argued, ancient philosophy did not make the typically modern separation between theoretical wisdom or science, aimed at the knowledge of the world, and practical wisdom as a holistic knowledge about all aspects of human life as it is lived. The Greek word *Sophia* is defined as know-how, resulting from an education by a master, the fruit of long experience, and a gift received through divine inspiration. Furthermore, *Sophia* was not only characterised by her way of speaking and

arguing, but also by a distinct way of being, acting, and perceiving the world.[7]

The introduction of the term "philosophy" in the fourth century BCE meant a pivotal shift in the understanding of the sage. It led to a deep suspicion against all expressions of pretended wisdom, promoted by the sophists and often promoted as an instrument of political manipulation. The conviction of Socrates by a populist tribunal is particularly noteworthy in this context, as it served to enlighten his disciples about the divine nature of true wisdom and of the vast chasm that separates it from human wisdom. [8] Plato exemplifies this suspicion with his sharp distinction between the perfect knowledge of the Gods, who possess true wisdom, and the philosophers, whose lives are devoted to coming closer to the transcendent ideal of wisdom, but without reaching it.[9] Aristotle offers a similar definition of a philosophical way of life: by leading a life of wisdom, the philosopher fulfils his vocation in the most superb way, but also realises that wisdom, because of its divine nature, is beyond the human condition.[10] In essence, philosophy can be defined as the essentially *human* exercise to attain *divine* wisdom. This pursuit consequently establishes the philosopher as an ironic and tragic figure: he is *ironic,* because he knows that he knows nothing, knows that he is not wise, and he is *tragic* since he loves to attain a wisdom that escapes him.[11]

The views of Plato and especially those of Aristotle provide a framework for understanding why the modern separation of theoretical knowledge and practical wisdom in Western philosophy is so problematic. This separation is exemplified by the 'scientification' of philosophy and the concomitant reduction of practical wisdom to private opinion. This shows that it is timely to rebalance the relation between these two aspects of wisdom. [12] Comprehension of this problem also facilitates a better understanding of what the expression "living ethically" means. Aristotle defines practical wisdom as a true and reasoned capacity to act with regard to what is good or bad for man. Because these things are by nature particular and contingent, practical wisdom is unable to attain the same degree of exactness and certainty as theoretical wisdom.[13] Nevertheless, given that practical wisdom is essentially a *reasoned* capacity, it cannot be reduced to private opinion or technical know-how. Instead, it integrates theoretical knowledge about what is truly good for all human beings, thus enabling practical wisdom to distinguish true insight from self-conceit, reasonable deliberation from phantasy. Consequently, practical wisdom uses the general moral rules and principles of theoretical wisdom to provide an accurate assessment of existential situations. However, given the inherently mutable, indeterminate, and particular or non-repeatable nature of the practical domain, it is also crucial that the person endowed

with practical wisdom is a thoroughly human being, that is, someone who does not attempt to stand outside of the conditions of human life, but bases her judgment on a long and broad experience of these conditions.[14]

This analysis of practical wisdom elucidates what it means to live ethically. A person who lives ethically does not diminish the significance of theoretical knowledge of the common good and universal moral rules that follow from it. However, she recognises that these rules cannot and should not serve as the sole standard for ethical decisions in contingent situations because they are unable to capture the fine detail of the concrete particular. The constitutive values for living ethically are plural and incommensurable and therefore need to be valued for their own sake. Consequently, a person who aims at living ethically needs to seize theoretical ethical principles in a confrontation with the situation itself, and to do so, a degree of flexibility is necessary. In essence, living ethically requires a thorough examination of whether the universal, theoretical principles and rules that one adheres to are indeed ethical. The subsequent step is to relate these principles to particular, existential situations in a meaningful way. Adopting this approach constitutes a perpetual, painstaking undertaking that requires considerable creativity and sensitivity to the particular situation.

A profound comprehension of ethical principles is essential for living ethically for yet another reason. As summaries of others' ethical judgments, general rules and principles serve as guidelines for ethical development; furthermore, they guide ethical people tentatively in their approach to the particular, helping them pick out its salient features. In circumstances where there is insufficient time to reach a definitive decision or to thoroughly consider the full impact of all the aspects associated with the case in question, it is preferable to follow a good summary rule than to make a hasty and inadequate concrete choice. Furthermore, rules provide a degree of constancy and stability in situations where bias and passion might otherwise distort our judgment about what living ethically requires in an ethical dilemma. In summary, theoretical ethical principles are necessary because human judgment is not always reliable.[15] Finally and most importantly,

> The particular case would be absurd and unintelligible without the guiding and sorting power of the universal. […] Nor does particular judgment have the kind of rootedness and focus required for goodness of character without a core of commitment to a general conception – albeit one that is continually evolving, ready for surprise, and not rigid. There is, in effect, a two-way illumination between particular and universal.[16]

These characteristics establish a connection between the ancient philosophical schools and religious and secular wisdom traditions. The commonality between these two traditions is not the presentation of a philosophical theory of reality or a religious doctrine concerning the true nature of the divine, but rather the teaching of their disciples a method and the training in how to live ethically.

A noteworthy finding of the aforementioned analysis is that Western philosophy stands to benefit from non-Western ethical traditions. This is evidenced by the insight that the dichotomy between theory and praxis, a hallmark of modern and contemporary philosophy, is by no means self-evident. In the context of the theme of this conference, it is asserted that Indian philosophy can offer Western philosophy concrete, existential examples of living ethically and, thus, of how this separation can be overcome.

Living ethically provides orientation in one's life

A second observation regarding the practice of living ethically is that it is synonymous with giving orientation to seeking the good life. In order to obtain a more nuanced understanding of the intricacies inherent in ethical orientation, I employ Immanuel Kant's seminal work *What is Orientation in Thinking?*.[17] In comparison with the views of Plato and Aristotle on this matter, Kant is far more aware of the finiteness of human reason, especially with regard to the question of whether humans can have univocal knowledge of the idea of the highest good.

In order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies involved in ethical orientation, Kant draws a parallel with geographical orientation. It is evident that every kind of orientation rests on two principles: one objective, external, and one subjective, internal. In the context of geographical orientation, the objective point of reference is, for instance, the position of the sun in the sky at midday; the subjective principle is the awareness of the difference between the left and right hands. The two principles are necessary for a geographical orientation: without an external point of reference, the concept of orientation would be rendered futile. Likewise, the absence of internal awareness of left and right precludes the ability to determine the four points of the compass in relation to one's position, thus rendering directional sense impossible.

In the context of ethical orientation, which Kant refers to as "orientation in thought," people require both an internal and an external principle, too, to guide their moral decision-making. In Kant's philosophical framework, the idea of the highest good is identified as the external principle that governs ethical orientation. Evidently, we could save ourselves a lot of

ethical deliberation if this external principle manifested itself as objective and univocal as the principle of geographical orientation. However, this is impossible due to the fundamental difference between these two kinds of orientation: whilst the sun is an object of sensuous experience, and thus can serve as the univocal principle for geographical orientation, the idea of the highest good is supersensible, and therefore beyond the capacities of objective human knowledge. This poses a paradoxical dilemma to ethical orientation, as people possess an inherent *subjective need* to engage in moral evaluation, yet simultaneously lack the *objective grounds* to make such judgements univocally. Kant's solution to this problem is to assume "a subjective ground for presupposing and accepting something which reason cannot presume to know on objective grounds, and hence for *orienting* ourselves in thought – i.e., in the immeasurable space of the supersensible realm […] – purely by means of the need of reason alone."[18] This subjective, reasonable ground is the highest good. It stands midway between, firstly, an objective knowledge of the highest good, which is impossible, and secondly, yielding to an immediate, subjective intuition of the highest good, which leads to all kinds of fantasy and is therefore unsuited to serve as a trustworthy maxim in ethical orientation. Instead, Kant proposes that the idea of the highest good be regarded as a concept with which ethical reasoning about the experienced world can be congruent. In other words, reason is subjectively justified in assuming that the manifold instances of living ethically in this world are related to the highest good, whose existence must be presupposed to explain that these concrete instances of the good can legitimately be qualified as such.[19] It is only if this condition is fulfilled that the highest good can serve as the foundation for our orientation in thought. Kant designates this attitude as a reasonable belief; it is a conviction of truth which is subjectively adequate, but objectively inadequate.

Kant's analysis of orientation in thought offers a fascinating elucidation of the complexities of living ethically. Firstly, it demonstrates that the necessity for ethical orientation is profoundly embedded within the ethical life of human beings. This necessity has become particularly acute in the contemporary era, characterised by an abundance of information and profound transformations across diverse domains. In ethical matters, people frequently encounter difficulties in discerning the fundamental ethical issues that are at stake from the peripheral aspects of information.

Secondly, the practice of living ethically requires an external orientation point, in the absence of which ethical life would devolve into a matter of intuitive, instinctual decision-making. Throughout history, religious and secular traditions of wisdom have provided these external points of reference, spiritual sources of meaning against which people have

situated their lives.[20] Contrary to the prevalent belief that moral orientation with the help of external principles is in direct opposition to autonomy and self-determination, it is Kant, of all people, who subscribes to the opposed perspective. He argues that the idea of the highest good is a postulate of practical reason, and that this idea is essential to give meaning and orientation to moral autonomy. Kant asserts that without postulating the reality of the highest good, morality would remain an empty ideal, prone to ideological perversion.[21] Thirdly, the highest good, as an objective, external orientation point, is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for living ethically. An internal, subjective principle is required for ethical orientation, as external points of reference can only fulfil their orienting role if a person can relate them in a meaningful way to their particular moral situation. This internal principle is defined as a person's ethical consciousness, which is situated within the human life-world and thus enables human beings to live ethically.

Conclusion

These philosophical reflections on living ethically have generated some important insights. The philosophical contributions of Plato and Aristotle have demonstrated that wise counsel on ethical life cannot be reduced to a mere set of practical life-lessons or to a handbook for achieving happiness. Instead, it should incorporate a theoretical reflection on the good life. However, the (theoretical) principle of the good life requires flexibility to ensure that living ethically remains connected to the contingencies of human existence. Furthermore, Kant's assertion that wise ethical counsel can only offer a truthful orientation to human beings in existential matters if it rests on an external point of reference is indeed valid. However, given that the latter is the idea of the highest good, it cannot be known univocally, particularly when it comes to defining its concrete implications for human beings in the wide historical and cultural contingencies of their existence. Consequently, living ethically requires the establishment of a reflexive equilibrium between theoretical knowledge and practical sensitivity.

Endnotes

[1] This analysis of wisdom summarizes a part of two of my publications: Peter Jonkers, "Philosophy and (Christian) Wisdom," in Peter Jonkers and Patrick Laude (eds.), *Philosophy as Love of Wisdom and Its Relevance to the Global Crisis of Meaning* (Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2019), 29-48..; Peter Jonkers, "Philosophy and Wisdom," *ANTW* 112, no. 3 (2020): 261-277.

[2] David Ford, *Christian Wisdom. Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.
[3] Pierre Hadot, "La figure du sage dans l'Antiquité gréco-latine," in Idem, *Discours et mode de vie philosophique* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2014), 176.
[4] See e.g. Andreas Speer, "Weisheit," in Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer, and Gottfried Gabriel (eds.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie, Band 12* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2004), 371
[5] Robert Nozick, "What Is Wisdom and Why Do Philosophers Love It So?," in Idem, *The Examined Life. Philosophical Meditations* (New York: Touchstone, 1989), 275. See also Daniel A. Kaufman, "Knowledge, Wisdom, and the Philosopher," *Philosophy* 81 (2006), 130.
[6] For a broad, cross-cultural, historical overview of wisdom see Curnow, *Wisdom. A History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015).
[7] Hadot, *Discours et mode de vie philosophique,* 177f. See also Idem, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* (Paris : Gallimard, 1995), 334.
[8] Hadot, *Discours et mode de vie philosophique*, 178f.
[9] Plato, *Symposium* 204a f.; Idem, *Phaedrus* 278d. See also: Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?*, 84f.
[10] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* X 7, 1177b 26ff.
[11] Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?*, 81.
[12] For my analysis, I am largely dependent on Martha Nussbaum, *The fragility of goodness. Luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 290-317.
[13] Aristotle, *Metaphysics,* I 1, 981b-982b; Idem, *Nicomachean Ethics,* VI 3-7, 1139b-1141b; VI 8, 1142a 23-4.
[14] Nussbaum, *The fragility of goodness,* 290.
[15] Ibid., 304.
[16] Ibid., 306.
[17] Immanuel Kant, *Werke in zehn Bänden*. *Band 5: Schriften zur Metaphysik und Logik,* ed. by Wilhelm Weischedel (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975), 267-283.
[18] Idem, 271.
[19] Idem, 273.
[20] See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 91-107.
[21] Kant, *Schriften zur Metaphysik und Logik*, 274.