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Wisdom for sale?

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**English transcript
to the
podcast**

Wisdom for sale?

Podcast on Philosophical Practice

English transcript

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ES = Eliane Schmid

EVS = Eva Schiffer

ES: Hello and welcome to Wisdom Talks, the podcast accompanying the METIS project.

METIS is an internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices, which can be accessed via www.metis.ethz.ch.

Today I am delighted to have Eva Schiffer in the studio with me. Eva is practicing philosophy as a free philosopher. She is lecturing and teaching English and philosophy whilst also engaging in philosophical counseling. My name is Eliane Schmid, and I am delighted to welcome our listeners and of course Eva Schiffer to today's Wisdom Talks.

ES: Hello Eva!

EVS: Hello Eliane!

ES: So, my first intuition was that you have a philosophical practice - is that something like a dental practice and I was also wondering, so, are you some kind of doctor, a psychologist? Is this comparable, do you have therapy sessions? Could you please describe what you actually do?

EVS: Great, ok. Practice is perhaps an irritating word because we think of a dental practice indeed, or also psychotherapy, a psychoanalytic, praxis of a psychoanalyst and all the other

practices there are. Medical professions, I mean what we do, philosophical practitioners, is not a medical profession. We are not psychiatrists, we are not dentists, we are not medical doctors. We do not really in any narrow sense of the word cure anything, we do not treat patients, the people who come to see us are our visitors, our guests, and we do not treat their illnesses. They are not ill. They come with questions, and what we do treat indeed, is their questions, and we treat them together with them. So, any kind of question they might have about life, about philosophy, philosophical questions, very acute problems, they come to talk to a philosopher, not because they want to be cured of any problem or illness. We offer dialogue. They do not want diagnosis, they want dialogue. That's a big difference.

ES: So, what kind of clients, or guests do you have in that case? Can anyone come, or do you have to be an academic, and do you have to have a specific question to start this, or can you just come?

EVS: Anybody can come if he wants to. Nobody is forced in any way. There is no coercion or anything. It's entirely free and that's already very important. Anybody can come, people do not have to have any academic backgrounds but some people do, but not as philosophers as a rule, maybe lawyers, or whatever they may have done at university, and a lot of people who come, have never been to university but they come because they want to talk to a philosopher, and they do not want to talk to a psychoanalyst, to a psychotherapist, not because they would find that bad, but that's not what they need. They need an interlocutor, a partner, to talk about what moves them, what interests them, and that's what we are here for.

ES: So, is this a one-on-one talk that you are having, or is it a group session, what's the hierarchy, kind of, is there one even, or is it just like a talk between friends?

EVS: It's not a talk between friends, because people pay me. Perhaps you could say I have a mandate from them. It can be one-to-one and very often the problems they come with are acute personal, existential problems. I mean people come with all varieties of distress and despair, and they want to talk about them, not to have them cured, which is a difference, to understand them, and the philosopher is trying to deal with the questions of a visitor,

always before or against the cultural historical background in general. So it's not just my personal problem that first and foremost we feel, indeed if it's despair or distress that's very close to the bone, but we try to treat the question always against the background of cultural history, intellectual history, our tradition, and modern contemporary philosophy, and literature, and theatre, and cinema. There is a lot to be found in there, they are sources of the self as one philosopher, Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor calls it. A book by him is called 'Sources of the Self'.

ES: So, you said "our" history, and you quoted a Canadian philosopher. What kind of texts do you use for your sessions in that case? Is it just Western philosophy that you're looking at or are there, kind of, wisdom texts from all over the world?

EVS: I am looking at anything that I am capable of doing. I mean, I do group sessions as well, that is very important, seminars, I do kinds of like "introduction of a thinker", like, for example, Martha Nussbaum, very interesting American lady, who is writing now, anything because it might interest people, I'm giving a portrait, an introduction to people who are interested but not themselves philosophers, and we do work a lot with texts in my practice, I mean, I'm not the measure of all philosophy practice. That's very important. There are practitioners who do not work with texts as much as I do. But in my experience, people love working with texts and very often they come with a text, or with the experience of having tried to read a text, and not having understood it. One example is that they've seen a flyer announcing a series of lectures of an American philosopher. Then they google that Philosopher, in this case it was a lady, Susan Wolf, and they didn't understand much of what they found, clips of lectures, a television program, an interview with her. They found it was interesting, they felt it was something they would like to know more about, but they couldn't really follow. That's also one of the reasons why people come and then we look at it together. We read the text together.

ES: That sounds super interesting, so things that you encounter in daily life you can, if you don't get any further in that case, I can come with my questions to you, and we discuss it alone or in a group. But can I actually as a patient for example, or as a client, can I decide if I want to be in a group or not, or...?

EVS: Yeah.

ES: I can decide if I want to come alone?

EVS: You decide everything in a way. I mean there are some rules, which are so obvious that it is not necessary to say them. There's basic trust, there's strict confidentiality. If somebody trusts me with something, I'm not going to tell anybody else, that's clear. And for example, a man comes alone with a very personal problem, he is really in a very bad state, he comes back three or four times and in some way the problem isn't solved but it seems to wane, to not go away, but to become less important. The man then asks, he sees my flyers, he sees my website, and he says: "Can I come to your Saturday seminars?" - I say: "Yes, of course you can, there's still enough room for you and try." And now he is in this Saturday seminars where we read texts and sometimes rather difficult texts, or excerpts, and his problem is no longer, I don't know what he did with it, occasionally he mentions it, and it's no longer so important. So the client, who is not a patient, you are not ill if you have questions, comes to see me because he or she wants to do philosophy to deal with a personal, or intellectual problem, or question in a philosophical way. Not be cured of it, it's human to have these questions, and to talk to a philosopher, and be helped or be also... I familiarize people with things they didn't know. So much is lying fallow in people, and on the other side in texts, in the tradition, in what is being written now. I'm a kind of mediator as well, trying to bring them together, and the person chooses, like, if he reads something they find they would not like to continue, or they come with something and they chose a text, and we look at it together.

ES: And now I'm wondering how can we actually find you? I mean, it's called 'Philosophische Praxis', but me for example, I didn't know those things existed until we had our talk today and I am wondering how can people find, like, this help that you're offering because it sounds wonderful, and I'm just wondering if this is also something that you can find worldwide, or is this innate to your 'Philosophische Praxis'?

EVS: You probably would... there is, there are various websites. There's an international society of philosophy practice, which has a website, there's a Swiss one of course, every

country has one. It's not as new as one thinks. It started perhaps in Australia, Israel, Sweden, the States, it's about 40-50 years old, or even more, and if you googled "philosophical practice", you would get quite a lot of information, and then if somebody is looking for a person that's suitable for her or him, they would just, I mean, look at the websites, and then go and try, dare, risk a first session. And when somebody comes to see me or people come on telephone, or they've written a mail, I never ask "How did you find me?" because I somehow feel it's, I don't know, if they want to tell me, they do. Very often people tell me such and such has told me, somebody who was listening to a lecture, sitting into a seminar, who has been a client, or is a client still, so it's a lot of personal recommendation and website as well. You have to find a way of articulating your profile that reaches the right kind of person. That I was very afraid of when I started, that the wrong kind of person would come, you know, people trying to find some kind of esotericism in the negative sense of the word, or whatever healing of this kind, which I am not offering at all, but this hasn't happened. It's strange people seem to find me.

ES: And how long have you been doing this, actually?

EVS: I have been doing it for a very long time. I taught philosophy, and then I gradually started to do philosophical practice, and it's now, in my, I'm in my 27th year. And I must say that having studied in England, we were made aware with students that studying philosophy doesn't mean necessarily that you become a teacher, a professor, a lecturer, a journalist, that's what people did with philosophy or something totally different. But there was philosophy practice, and I very early on started to look around what that was, and to also visit colleagues, go to see them, talk to them, and finding it's a good thing to do.

ES: And now I'm going to be a bit provocative but is this, would you say, a proper job? Can you be a philosophical practitioner as a full-time job?

EVS: It's a good question, I mean, first of all as a philosopher, not only as a philosophical practitioner, but as a philosopher, you would question the very concept of a "proper job". I mean the people who came to see me, a great part of those people, have been doing, or are doing proper jobs, very proper, some of them, and I have heard so many stories about

feeling tainted, for example by solicitors and lawyers, about contributing to aspects of modern civilization that are destructive that we all know about but you work in an enterprise which contributes to this, you're producing social wealth which is supposed to be what a proper job is doing, but it is only material wealth, you're not allowed, you haven't the time and the energy to think about what the wealth is produced for, and whether wealth can be exclusively material wealth, if there isn't also something like mental, emotional, spiritual wealth, so I would question the concept of a proper job in the first place. In this sense I'm not doing a proper job. I am not contributing to the material wealth of our society. But I think it is a proper job, we are sometimes working full-time, more than that, and sometimes less, like any freelance person. We are in that perspective perhaps a bit more like artists. But more importantly, I think talking to people, encouraging them to be thoughtful, to work on themselves, which is an old tradition, it's not our idea, this is ancient, to walk through life, to go through life more thoughtfully, is a kind of contribution to social wealth. So in this respect I would say yes, it's a very proper job, what we're doing, also questioning the kind of prejudices, more remarkable aspects of our civilization, also the more blatantly pathological aspects of our civilization, question them philosophically, not like the media do, is incredibly important, and I think that's a reason why people come to see me. You know, how can you think about things in a different way, and how can you be more creatively imaginative, rather than just prolonging the fantasies of a kind of science fiction greatness, or power, or eternal life, which are so predominant in our time.

ES: You mentioned just before the word 'thoughtfulness' and I was reminded of the word 'mindfulness', which is kind of related, and it has become, kind of, a trend word, I think, in the past couple of years, so I am wondering has your practice, kind of, had an upsurge in recent times just because of this concept of 'being mindful' that has been circulating?

EVS: 'Thoughtfulness', you mean the word 'thoughtfulness', that's very important what you say, this mindfulness business, that's a big problem with wisdom. You know this is a portal under the title of 'wisdom', and I'm always cringing a little, getting a bit nervous when words like 'wisdom', 'meditation', 'spirituality' fly about, and I often have been invited to, sort of, colloquiums and sessions where those were the themes. It's unbelievable, the nonsense and the kitsch that is around under these titles. The philosopher exactly has the

task to make visible or to sensitize for what wisdom really could mean. It certainly isn't the very unfortunate kitsch, the premature belief that you can get redemption prematurely without thinking a thought, without being in any way alert to what's wrong in the world. All these people tell you, you hear for example sentences: there is a war, there is despair, there is murder, there is all the problems, or the dire problems we are grappling with, which are self-induced to a very great extent. People will tell you something like: "What is all this against eternity?" and that is very premature, because of course what is anything human against eternity? But we do, as human beings, we are moral agents, and we think, we are capable of thinking, we use language, and as a philosopher it is very important to show and to somehow communicate that the wisdom creeds and the values 'wisdom' means, wisdom is to do with values, have very much to do with human responsibility, with human concerns, with the virtues, which not only Christian virtues, but ancient ideas about virtues, and life skills like temperance, or modesty, or also humor, laughter is also a virtue that we have to think about these questions and we have to think about the question: "What does it mean to lead a good life?" and the kitsch factor, I think, is very important, if you look at publications of sages or concerning wisdom practices or meditation, look at the very covers of these books, they are all pink, and sky blue, and somebody is always sitting cross-leggedly, and smiling, and it's unfortunate, also some books, which are very good look so kitschy and that's misleading.

ES: So, do you think that - just because you mentioned all these kitschy books and ways of speaking - do you think there has, kind of, developed a need, or even a greed for wisdom that these bestsellers are appearing?

EVS: Yes, there is this almost gluttony about, but even more do we have to try to not serve, or to not give people what they want in this respect but to, in a way, disappoint them first and to show them what it would mean to deal with wisdom seriously. I mean, I have been reading so much wisdom literature in my years as a philosopher anyway, but now preparing this podcast, this talk with you, and it's very important to see what wisdom is all about. I mean it's nothing of all this high-flown nonsense, which is around. You mentioned the word 'mindfulness', I mean the poor concept 'mindfulness' is not to be blamed that it is so misused because it means something very important, and perhaps all we can do as

philosophers is show, sensitized for the values that are like hidden, you could say, in wisdom texts, and wisdom literature, and it seems to me more and more, rather than giving people let's say Buddha or Confucius, there's also Muhammed, which strangely enough is very rarely mentioned. And there's Jewish wisdom and there is Christian wisdom, of course there are the mystics, and it seems more and more important to me to talk to people and to familiarize them with the values that wisdom comprises, that it is something we aspire to. You can't have wisdom by buying some book or going to some colloquium or drumming your head off in a shamanism. I have seen all that, you know, becoming wise by drumming - instantly - and getting this kind of cheap instantaneous happiness and redemption. It's not what wisdom is all about. Wisdom is very pragmatic, very serious and, smiling, there is a distance from self, there is this practicing of the life skills to get a distance from your own concerns but taking them seriously at the same time. That's more now. It's like somebody hunting for gold, always wants the big lump, you know, to take home the whole lump, and it seems to me more and more what we should look for is granules of gold, or dust of gold also in, I mean wisdom is everywhere if you know to look properly. There are so many things, like films, theatre, comedy, contemporary writing. Very ordinary people can sometime be wise, or act wisely, they are not sages. There aren't any sages, but it's a value, or it's a set of values we aspire to. And that brings it in a way down, it frees it from all this kitsch.

ES: Now I'm, if I would come to you and I have actually a specific question and I would ask you, so there is a lot of wisdom literature and we have...you say there are no sages, but many texts, they relate to Confucius, that he was one of THE sages. My question would be is he then not actually a sage, or if I want to go back into the history and find wisdom literature, how can I, kind of, organize all of this, how can I differentiate between wise texts of sages but they're not actually sages? Do you know what I mean?

EVS: Yes, oh, I mean I am not saying that I mean surely Confucius was a wise man - and it's to be assumed - and his texts are extremely helpful, but you don't have to... I would recommend if you come to me, we talk together. I am not the one who tells you what to do, I am not making up your mind for you, it's entirely up to you, but I will show you things, which perhaps you don't know that if we go about wisdom looking at creeds, we are

in danger of falling into the trap of getting fixated on particular creeds that belong into certain epochs, into certain times, which we would then have to understand more the context. Another danger with creeds is that, as we know, they tend to suddenly switch into ideologies, orthodoxies, instruments for oppression, exploitation, murder, you can see it everywhere in India now with Hinduism, and wherever, yet, it's a wisdom creed at core. I would much more like to sensitize you for, like, for example, there is good interpretation of Confucius, there is let's say a philosopher, a French philosopher called François Julien, and he is both a sinologue and a philosopher. And he has this fantastic gift to translate and interpret ancient Chinese thought over and against ancient Western thought, and he shows us the small differences, which matter. They are very small, but they matter, they are different. And then he shows you how you could for example read Confucius, or Mencius, or what they are called, in a more discerning way, and less media-influenced way. And then we would read together, for example, François Julien is very good at showing you after a while, if you are patient, how this kind of thinking and wisdom could work, and could be translated to a certain extent into modern, Western thought, or be fruitful for our concerns, like that.

ES: So, as so often, it's useful to compare texts, to bring different texts together, and especially also from different parts of the world in that case, so we have a broader view on things, and like simple life questions in that case.

EVS: It's... I think so. Again we have to be modest in a way, I mean, you can take in so much, and I am not a sinologue for example, I do not read Sanskrit, but I like to be told by people who are, you know, that then for example, if a Sanskrit scholar tells me that 'Upanishad', you know that old, very old Indian creed, you could say, means the word, means: "sitting down beside" - it's lovely! I mean, so old is the thought of dialogue in the service of human wellbeing. I mean we haven't, it's not our idea, it's not psychoanalysis - that Freud was a genius - but it's a very old idea to sit down beside each other, in a way what we are doing now, and to with the help of language, or because we are human beings, to exchange what it means to be a human being, what it could mean to lead a human life well, to lead a good human life.

ES: So, you said you are thinking a lot about, and reading a lot about what it is to lead a good life, and sitting next to one another, and thinking about this, talking about this, so would you say that as a philosophical practitioner you are, kind of, an expert in the “art of living”?

EVS: I like that question. I see you smiling. I take it you mean that a bit tongue in cheek. It would be a funny philosopher who claimed to be an expert in anything because philosophers aren't experts. Experts are people who are very knowledgeable, and capable, and learned in a certain area, clearly delineated area of knowledge, and research, and that's exactly what philosophers are not. But an expert in the art of living doesn't exist because the art of living isn't clearly delineated and it's so complex that nobody can be an expert in this but you could say perhaps, I mean taking the question, taking it up, no I'm not. I mean that's the answer. But other than perhaps non-philosophers, or people not thinking philosophically, philosophers, as the word means, you know that philosophy means “the friend of wisdom”: a philo of Sophia, also of Metis. “We love philosophy” is the idea and this strive for it, we long for it, and it's the orientation. We orient ourselves towards the values of wisdom, not as an aspiration of becoming a sage at all, but the wish to live according to those virtues in ancient philosophy, pre-Christian virtues. The idea that humor, and friendship, and generosity, and justice, are virtues, and in Ancient Greece a few more, than we are used to, that is skills, they are life skills, have to be practiced. The word 'askesis' means practice, it doesn't mean first of all renunciation, being good, in this narrow sense of the word, God fearing or so on, it means to practice what is good for life and the virtue, or the skill of enjoyment is very important in this kind of philosophical and wisdom creed-inspired 'living well', the idea of 'living well' has nothing to do with being completely off any enjoyment, that wouldn't be wise at all. Not at all.

ES: So, you're more a curious searcher for a, for your personal good way of living in that case?

EVS: I am, and I think there are a few things, which would probably be important for everybody, let's say what the media want to make us believe, you know, that you have to consume more and more, you have to fly all over the place, you have to do this and that

and the other, dress in a certain way. I mean, you do need to practice a certain strength and resistance against this idea, particularly very young people. I have talked recently to quite a few very young people, it's very difficult to, in a way, also show them that there are ways of enjoyment, which are deeper and if you like more true, but not in a moralistic sense of way, but in a sense of better enjoyment. You know, for example reading is such a pleasure, listening to music is such a pleasure, but you have to practice being receptive for this kind of pleasure, you know, having a conversation, which is not just to prattle away, which is nice as well but sometimes you want to exchange thoughts. You have a deep need of somehow practicing your intelligence, and that is such an enjoyment, and I think you want to share that with people. I want to familiarize people with possibilities of somehow knowing the world as it is, not going into a Never-neverland, somewhere in the beyond. Knowing more of the world as it is, but knowing more of it in a way, in the here and now, thanks to literature, to philosophy, to films, theatre, wisdom creeds as well.

ES: I really like this idea that thinking about life, or the art of living, is something enjoyable, and that we can take our time to just ponder, and then also ponder with others as you said. And today - it's a beautiful autumn day - so I think I'll go out later on, and take out a book, and enjoy the nice weather, and think about all that we talked about, and maybe going a bit deeper into different aspects. And because time is slowly running out, I would, at this point thank you very much for being here today, and explaining what philosophical practicing actually is. Thank you very much, Eva Schiffer, for coming today.

EVS: And I thank you, Eliane, for your inspiring questions.

ES: Thank you! I would like to invite our listeners to follow further Wisdom-Talks as well as to curiously plunge into the medial offers of the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices on metis.ethz.ch. For example, you can access the link to our text archive directly below the podcast in the show notes.

Thank you for your time and goodbye!

ES: This podcast was produced by Martin Münnich with support from ETH Zurich and the Udo Keller Foundation, Forum Humanum in Hamburg.