Academic Advising and Philosophy

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The field of philosophy has much to contribute to academic advising, both because of the kinds of training philosophers typically receive and because of the sorts of projects on which they work. Because of these factors, philosophers have the potential to make excellent academic advisors, and they can broaden and enrich the theoretical investigations into the nature of academic advising. Philosophers can and should embrace the field of academic advising, both as a practice that is critical to a successful academe and as a potential research area. The reverse is also true: Any advisor would benefit from the study of philosophy.

KEY WORDS: advising approaches, advising profession, tools for advising

Introduction

As a philosophy professor and faculty member who regularly advises between 30 and 40 undergraduates in a public, liberal arts college each semester, I firmly believe that philosophers have the potential to make significant contributions to academic advising. In this paper, I argue that the training philosophers typically receive in undergraduate and graduate programs provides them with a good background to advise. Moreover, I claim that many philosophers work on research projects that, at first glance, might seem far removed from the concerns of academic advisors but provide important insights into the nature of the advising field. This intersection of training and research has helped create a pool of scholars well qualified to help advance the goal of developing, as Guest Editor of this *NACADA Journal* issue, Peter Hagen (personal communication, 2004), put it, "a diverse and substantive body of work on the theory of academic advising comparable to that found in other professions." If these conclusions about philosophy and advising hold true, then ramifications for the debate about professionalization of academic advising are certain, and questions will only be further intensified by the expansion of the theoretical literature on academic advising.

What Do Philosophers Do?

My training as a philosopher involved a number of courses, even some at the undergraduate level, that proved extremely important to me when I became an academic advisor. Although academic advisors who are reading this article may already be familiar with the philosophy curricula of their own schools, they may not know much about the training of philosophers in general. Graduate and undergraduate philosophy programs vary a great deal. Still, some commonalities can be found both in the kinds of subjects the students study and in the demands placed on students taking courses within these programs. Many, if not most, philosophy majors are required to take courses in logic, the history of philosophy, ethics, social/political philosophy, metaphysics, and epistemology. In addition, most will supplement these core offerings with classes in an area of interest or specialization of the faculty, such as the philosophy of religion, aesthetics, philosophy of science, Asian philosophy, applied ethics, cognitive science, philosophy of language, continental philosophy, as well as classes that focus on only one or two philosophers for an entire semester.

For discussion, I have selected three areas that I believe are both fairly common for philosophers and have clearly helped me in my work as an advisor. I maintain that the study of any of these areas is potentially beneficial for any advisor who seeks to improve his or her practice of advising.

Logic or Critical Thinking

The field known as logic or critical thinking can be defined in many ways, but all of the courses concern teaching people about arguments. Arguments are one of the primary vehicles for reasoning, which has always been a central part of higher learning. Philosophers are especially well grounded in reasoning and argument, and this plays out in advising.

An ability to analyze the structure of arguments is one of the skills that students gain through course work in logic and critical thinking (a standard component of most degree programs in philosophy). Some arguments are primarily based on serial reasoning: One premise is directly dependent upon the one immediately preceding it until the argument ends with the conclusion. Other arguments are based on divergent lines of thought that provide separate sources of support for the conclusion, while still others consist of interdependent strains that succeed or fail only when considered together. The training philosophers receive in distinguishing these different types of arguments helps them, as advisors, show students how to work through problems. For

example, when an advisor can help a student see that a proposed course of action (such as choosing a particular major) is based on premises that do not withstand logical scrutiny ("my friend is majoring in English, so I want to as well"), then meaningful assessment can be pursued.

Part of an advisor's task is to help students improve their reasoning clearly so that they can make the best possible decisions. Often a student's plan of action seems logical on the surface but is based on fallacious reasoning. Logicians have developed an extensive taxonomy of fallacious reasoning, which includes those with such colorful names as amphiboly, post hoc ergo propter hoc, argumentum ad hominem, tu quoque, poisoning the well, circumstantial ad hominem, biased sample, and dozens more.

Familiarity with these fallacies has been a tremendous aid to me as an advisor, but in a much different context than when I first learned them. Students in philosophy courses on critical thinking are typically trained to look for these false arguments when constructing an argument against an opponent. Advisors too often see students unconsciously employ these arguments against themselves. For example, one of the most common fallacies I encounter is the false dilemma (also known as *false dichotomy, false alternatives, bifurcation*, or *excluded middle*). All advisors have probably encountered students who are frustrated because they see their choices broken down into two seemingly irreconcilable alternatives: "Either I take an overload of classes to complete my degree, thereby stressing myself out, or I don't and I won't graduate on time." Helping the student to see the fault in her or his own reasoning is a first step toward getting her or him to see the possibility of additional solutions. A summer course, an independent study, giving up the notion of graduating in a particular time frame: These are only a few of the solutions, familiar to any advisor, that can be used to break students from the all-too-common tendency to create artificial and obstructing choices.

Obviously, critical thinking is not solely studied by philosophers. Indeed, most professors would probably say that they also pass along critical-thinking skills in the process of teaching their classes. I would argue, however, that philosophers explicitly study critical thinking in a way that makes it readily applicable to the practice of advising.

While reasoning and argument are essential parts of most curricula, the advisor's duty, as outlined in the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) (2003, p. 25) student learning and development outcome domains, is to foster improved reasoning skills in their students. I assert that the concerted study of logic and critical thinking can be of vital importance for academic advisors as they help students reach their goals. Advisors interested in exploring formal logic can consult one or more of several excellent introductory works, such as *Introduction to Logic* by Copi and Cohen (2004). Those interested in informal logic or critical thinking can turn to Govier's (2004) *A Practical Study of Argument*.

Ethics

Ethics courses are frequently divided between theoretical and applied courses. The former might consist of a survey of influential moral theories such as utilitarianism, Kantianism, feminism, social contract theory, and the like, or it may be focused on specific theorists like John Stuart Mill, Aristotle, Hobbes, and so forth. In applied ethics courses, contemporary ethical issues, such as affirmative action and gay rights, are examined. Specialized classes cover applied ethics in particular fields like business or medicine. Both theoretical and applied ethics courses provide a good background for advisors who want to help students achieve the following set of CAS (2003, p. 26) learning outcomes: clarified values, leadership development, social responsibility, satisfying and productive lifestyles.

Applied ethics courses can provide an advisor with experience at recognizing the ways in which intersecting fields, with the unique and varied goals associated with them, can give rise to conflicts. For example, a medical ethics class, in which topics such as euthanasia or health care access are examined, gives an advisor an understanding of the multiple, irreconcilable demands that physicians face. This information can be advantageous when advisors deal with the frequent conflicts faced by students trying to balance complex factors weighting their decisions. The student who asks, "Should I major in what my parents want? After all, they're footing the bill," requires more than a simplistic response of "One should always pursue one's own interests." The student needs an advisor who understands how both self-interest and parental demands pull on him or her. Dealing with complexities is at the very heart of values clarification, one of the explicitly cited goals from the CAS standards (2003, p. 26). Training in applied ethics courses, where I have worked through these kinds of conflicts (albeit in a different arena), has helped me tremendously in my role as an advisor.

The theoretical ethics courses allow one to con-

sider how to live and to think about obligations to oneself and others; according to the CAS (2003, p. 26) professional standards, these are skills that advisors are required to inculcate in students. Studying Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics* (trans. 2002) forces one to contemplate a whole range of issues, such as the nature of virtue and vice, the elements that constitute good judgment, and the connection between individual choice and community. Although likely somewhat different among schools, these topics are common fare in conversations at my institution as faculty members try to structure the curriculum, best guide students, choose the topics to emphasize when working with students, foster a sense of community, and determine the kind of community desired on the campus.

For example, the issue of character crops up regularly in articles in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and other academic journals where ongoing debates are presented about the level in which college personnel should be engaged in the character formation of students. The starting step for character formation is the clarification of the concept itself, and there is no better source than Aristotle (trans. 2002). While impossible to give a complete sense of the complexity, subtlety, and power of his analysis, Aristotle covered the areas that should be addressed in any substantive theory. He began his treatise by pointing out that all persons have desires and impulses, and he concluded that humans cannot expect to eliminate these from their lives. However, by themselves, feelings such as anger and lust are not problems; rather the response to human desires and impulses matters most. Furthermore, he argued that wrong responses are not the result of a simple failure to exercise adequate willpower over these impulses. He would have had little patience for those who say that immoral people know the proper behavior but do not exercise enough willpower to behave properly. According to Aristotle, without the right kind of training and modeling behavior, no one would ever be able to make the correct judgment about proper behavior, and neither would they have developed the habits necessary to control temptations. Whatever one ultimately thinks of it, Aristotle's approach constitutes an essential starting point for anyone concerned with many of the issues that face advisors.

Nichomachean Ethics is but one example of the works in ethical theory that have informed my work as an advisor and that I believe I have used to contribute to the advising process at my college. Advisors wishing to round out their study of ethics might also wish to read such classics as Plato's *Republic* (trans. 1956), John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859/1975) or *Utilitarianism* (1863/2002), or most any work by John Dewey. In addition, she or he might want to look to contemporary moral theorists such as Annette Baier, Richard Rorty, John Rawls, Peter Singer, and Alasdair MacIntyre. If advisors are to take seriously the CAS standards of social responsibility, clarified values, and leadership development, then they should be familiar with such thinkers.

Epistemology

Though I draw on my training as a philosopher in many ways in my role as an advisor, I offer an in-depth discussion only on epistemology, which is the study of the nature of knowledge; through it, one asks such questions as "Is knowledge possible?" "What constitutes adequate justification for saying one knows something?" "Is all knowledge contextual?" "Is it plausible to draw sharp contrast between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge?" While many of these questions are addressed in philosophy texts in a highly esoteric manner, the basic substance of the questions themselves mirrors the experiences of college students throughout their careers. For example, both epistemologists and students struggle with skepticism. Many students come to college with strong beliefs about such topics as religion, politics, race, and identity. No matter the bases, these belief systems get contested in their classes, and the student struggles with whether a person can ever actually know anything. If this struggle properly challenges students, then the result will inevitably affect the advisor's work. When the academy is truly educating students, the faculty and staff push students beyond simply learning a set of skills or facts and ask students to reflect critically on their deepest held convictions. (See excellent research on this issue from Perry [1999], Garrison [2001], and Baxter [1992].) I argue that such a self-reflective process is essential for students as they articulate their personal and educational goals and develop a greater spiritual awareness as put forth by the CAS standards (2003, p. 26). Illumination on the methods epistemologists have used to grapple with skepticism can help shed light on academic advising.

Philosophers have noted for years that skepticism is hardly a simple notion: It can come in a variety of degrees. The most basic distinction is between *local* and *radical* or *global* versions of skepticism. Radical skeptics claim that knowledge is not possible in any area of life. The ancient Pyrrhonian skeptics constructed arguments challenging human ability to have knowledge in everything from reli-

gion and philosophy to mathematics. However, Immanuel Kant believed that knowledge in physics and mathematics was possible but thought people could never have knowledge about metaphysical issues, such as the nature of God. A whole range of antiskeptics, such as G. E. Moore, Hilary Putnam, and Crispin Wright, has raised a series of challenges against skepticism.

In addition to the wide array of types, skepticism is used in a host of ways. In the first of his six "Meditations Concerning First Philosophy," Descartes (1641/1960) famously raised the possibility that one can never have knowledge about anything, but he offered this idea as part of an explanation of the absolutely certain knowledge he believed humans possess and which he thought is the foundation for all other knowledge claims. Kant (1781/1965) used skepticism to clarify the boundaries and limits of knowledge, thereby preventing people from working on questions that can never be answered. The Pyrrhonians believed that skepticism leads to tranquility, while Montaigne (1580/1958) thought that skepticism shows humans the limits of reasoning and demonstrates that people must make a place for faith in their lives.

By helping them to see that skepticism, and by implication, knowledge itself is a topic with which they must grapple, advisors can help students to become self-reflective on their beliefs and the grounds for accepting or rejecting those beliefs. Students can come to see that ultimately they must sort through these approaches for themselves. If students are encouraged to use skepticism thoughtfully, advising will foster independence and increase student self-esteem, two more goals listed in the CAS standards (2003, pp. 25–26).

I have highlighted only three ways in which training in philosophy provides an advisor with a good background for his or her work. None of this information should be particularly surprising, because a good advisor asks students to think seriously about the topics they want to study, about the kinds of careers they might want to pursue, how they have made their decisions in the past, their goals both inside and outside the college, and whether they are following their own course in life or doing what they think others want them to do. In short, a good advisor does the same as a good philosophy teacher does: seriously challenge students to reflect upon their lives.

Potential Contributions from Philosophy Research

A philosopher could contribute in a number of ways to the process of academic-advising theory construction. She or he could articulate a philosophy of academic advising that provides the reader with a theoretical framework for the process. Such a framework would include a definition of advising, an outline of the goals of the field, a statement about the nature of the advisor-advisee relationship, and perhaps a presentation of some of the potential ongoing ethical dilemmas of the field. However, my purpose in this paper is not to draft a comprehensive philosophy of advising. Rather I want to show how philosophy, seen as one among many fields, can contribute to a theory or philosophy of advising. Most likely, the deepening of the theoretical work on academic advising will be the result of contributions from a wide range of fields, including philosophy. I make this contention because academic advising is an inherently interdisciplinary process. (I subsequently elaborate on this claim, but for this portion of my treatise, I will simply assume it to be the case.) If this claim is correct, then as a natural first step in creating a substantive theory or philosophy of advising, participants in this collaborative process should introduce themselves to each other and explain their respective fields.

The research projects of contemporary philosophers are as varied as in any field, and many of them probably do not have any more of a connection with academic advising than does a research project in particle physics or graphic arts. However, a wide number have ramifications for advising, yet this may not necessarily seem so at first glance. Therefore, as an illustration, I lay out one example of the way in which a philosophy research project can help in constructing academic advising theory.

Cognitive science, which has become an increasingly popular area of research in philosophy since the 1970s, might seem to be far removed from academic advising. It is the intersection of philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, and artificial intelligence. Through it, scientists examine such questions as "What is the nature of consciousness?" "Does the way in which a person acquires language explain his or her moral framework?" "Have the evolutionary forces that shape human physical structure also structure human conceptual framework?" "Are the ideas and concepts employed dictated in large part by the physical structure of the brain?" I believe, as unlikely as it may seem, that this area of philosophy has some important precepts to inform academic advising theory. However, to show that the contribution is more than a possibility, I roughly sketch out the ramifications that a recent work in cognitive science has on academic advising.

In their 1999 work, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson continue the work they started in 1980 with their book *Metaphors We Live By*. One of the central theses of both books is that humans understand the world via metaphors. According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphorical language is not the unusual or aberrant case of language usage; it is normal, pervasive, and deeply wired into people. This metaphorical way of looking at the world permeates a person's most basic concepts, from notions of causality, to views about right and wrong, to political theories. They argue that studies in neuroscience, language acquisition, psychology, and evolutionary science all support their philosophical thesis about the way human beings construct their realities.

Lakoff and Johnson (1999) contended that the highly complex metaphorical repertoire is built up from sets of primary metaphors that were initiated in early, specific, sensorimotor experiences. For young children, subjective (nonsensorimotor) experiences and judgments as well as sensorimotor experiences are so regularly conflated—undifferentiated in experience—that for a time children do not distinguish between the two when they occur together. For example, for an infant, the subjective experience of affection is typically correlated with the sensory experience of warmth, the warmth of being held. During the period of conflation, associations are automatically built up between the two domains. Later, during a period of differentiation, children are able to separate out the domains, but the cross-domain associations persist. These persisting associations are the mappings of a conceptual metaphor that will lead the same infant, later in life, to speak of "a warm smile," "a big problem," and "a close friend" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 46).

On the basis of this observation of children and a great deal of other evidence, Lakoff and Johnson (1999) concluded that people need to be much more cognizant of the significance of metaphor in reasoning because it lies at the core of many kinds of reasoning. They argued that because humans are bound to think metaphorically, people should try to employ greater self-awareness when generating metaphor and thereby develop more effectual ways of dealing with the world.

What should the academic advisor take away from such a thesis? At the very least, advisors need to be aware that much of their interactions with students will be necessarily structured in terms of metaphors, and that this is a good thing. Though it seems counterintuitive to say so, too much focus on precision or detail in conversations about student goals may not reach students the way the advisor would hope. Unless advisors can reach them metaphorically, students may not adequately process the information or data provided to them.

Advisors should consider carefully the kind of metaphorical language that might be effective in motivating students to think about both their immediate and long-term goals. Advisors rarely exchange ideas about the kind of metaphorical language they should adopt for their advising sessions, literature, Web sites, and so forth, but if this philosophical position is correct, they should be engaging in these discussions. A full-blown discussion at a NACADA conference on the effective use of metaphors in academic advising would be most interesting. Likewise, researchers exploring the ways in which students employ metaphors in describing their own experiences in college and in life could tell advisors how students perceive the world, which could then assist advisors in guiding them.

Obviously, this brief presentation of one part of Lakoff and Johnson's (1980, 1999) work does not constitute an adequate argument for the role of cognitive science in developing a substantive theory of academic advising. Indeed, it is mere hand waving at best. However, my goal is not to persuade academic advisors of the value of cognitive science; rather, I want to provide an example of my claim that philosophers work on many kinds of projects that can provide surprising contributions to theories about academic advising.

I hope that as a result of this discussion, philosophers working on their own research projects would consider whether their work can contribute to academic advising and write articles that lay out a sustained, fully developed argument for the connections between their research areas and the questions faced by academic advisors at both the theoretical and practical level. I could easily see how philosophers who are experts on a particular thinker, such Wittgenstein or Aquinas, or who specialize in particular types of philosophy, such as phenomenology or pragmatism, could think of numerous ways in which their work applied to advising. Of course, the challenges facing this kind of project are the same that present themselves whenever one tries to engage in interdisciplinary work: How can researchers clearly express ideas to people who do not share the researcher's background? How can authors avoid overuse of technical jargon? Is the theoretical framework adequately sensitive to the particularities of the field of academic advising?

Philosophy and Academic Advising

I conclude this discussion on philosophy and academic advising by explicating two different ways in which the discussion on research and epistemology intersect. First, the kind of training philosophers undergo is advantageous because it teaches those trained by it to regularly question even their own most basic assumptions. I argued that having these kinds of experiences is highly useful from a purely practical basis when working with advisees. Students may need to be pushed into a reflective stance, and advisors who have done it for themselves will find the experience to be valuable. I also sought to demonstrate that the questioning of fundamental assumptions in philosophical research can yield significant contributions to the construction of a body of theory on academic advising. Just as the conclusions of Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999) impacted the understanding of cognitive acquisition, researchers who question the fundamental assumptions about the field will offer much to theory of advising. Although academic advisors have probably always been open to new ideas from communication theorists or computer scientists or educational psychologists, are they open to relatively radical kinds of questioning? For constructing substantive theories about academic advising, they must embrace any and all kinds of questioning, even those that might initially seem quite far afield.

Second, as theories of academic advising are further developed, the issue of professionalization will loom even larger than it does today. The process of constructing theories about the nature of academic advising will further the exploration of excellent advising criteria and the identification of skills most prevalent in those practicing excellent advising. Therefore, questions regarding the kinds of backgrounds and training best suited for advisors as well as discussions about the exclusiveness of such preparations are both natural and unsurprising.

The curricula in the professions have frequently featured a path in which students move from diversity to specialization. In recent years, the field of bioethics stands as a clear example of the trend toward specialization. Students of bioethics were initially drawn from a wide range of sources, and bioethicists were also specialists in another discipline such as medicine, philosophy, sociology, history, law, or religion. Now, a number of people have argued that the field has grown to the point that a person who calls him or herself a bioethicist should have been specifically trained in the field. One can also easily imagine a large university offering a master's of art degree in advising as part of a professional-study degree program.

I hope that by showing that philosophers can contribute both in the realm of praxis and in theory, I have helped undercut such an argument for specialization of academic advising. Philosophers' potential role should not be restricted because they are not participants in a formal degree program of academic advising. Professionalization of the field does not preclude the contributions of philosophers; other professions draw on the work of people who study outside the area. Unfortunately, anyone who has experience in professional collaborations knows that the very nature of a profession is to distinguish members from nonmembers so that a dichotomy is set up between those on the inside and those on the outside. All too often those on the outside become progressively more marginalized as the profession moves toward specialization. This would be a shame to someone such as me who sees the practice of academic advising as being ever more essential to academe, who believes that a deepening reflection on the nature of the field is essential, and who thinks that philosophers can play a key role in both areas.

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