Can Wisdom Be Taught? Kant, Sage Philosophy, and Ethnographic Reflections from the Swahili Coast

Kai Kresse

What Kant said about philosophizing, is true of wisdom itself: it ‘can be learned only through practice and the use of one’s own reason’.

(cf. Kant 1974: 29)

Introduction

This chapter seeks to develop some general reflections on wisdom while using the Swahili coast as a regional example in an African setting. This region displays a specific intercultural context which is also part of wider Indian Ocean networks. It has its own historically grown discursive traditions within which ‘wisdom’ may be displayed, socially appreciated, and observed. I will sketch out an ethnographically informed case study of the Swahili context, to reflect on wisdom as discursive performance and social practice. In the process, I will draw from Immanuel Kant and Henry Odera Oruka as relevant philosophers for orientation. On strictly ethnographic terms, the sequence of my reflections, from Kant via Oruka to Swahili case studies, may seem problematic, as they start with a working-definition of ‘wisdom’ coined outside the ethnographic setting itself. The main purpose here, however, is to contribute to a general and comparative discussion on ‘wisdom’. As a result, and within the given limits and parameters of presentation here, I have interspersed my own reflections with references to philosophical accounts and ethnographic descriptions. Also, the development of my overall argument here is based on the assumption of intercultural comparability of ‘wisdom’. It would be a separate task to critically investigate and consolidate this assumption.

Kant: Philosophy as ‘Doctrine of Wisdom’

In the history of Western philosophy, as is well known, wisdom is at the heart of a classic understanding of philosophy and indeed the meaning of ‘philosophy’ itself, as literally the ‘love of wisdom.’ Even though philosophy has developed im-
mensely as a body of thought and as an academic discipline over many centuries—developing sub-fields with highly technical languages within this process—this characterization has not lost its appeal when it comes to general reflections of what philosophy is, and how it is connected to the world of everyday life. Among German mainstream philosophers in the 1980s, wisdom was still discussed as immanently at the core of philosophy, despite the conceptual uncertainties that modernity and post-modernity brought with them (Oelmueller 1989). This discussion was led largely with reference to Kant, and from him I want to pick up one particular expression, namely his characterization of philosophy as a ‘doctrine of wisdom.’

I will try to explain why I find this expression helpful for thinking about wisdom as a universal capacity of humans, which, as specific intellectual practice, is nevertheless shaped and influenced by the concrete social, cultural, and historical contexts that individuals are embedded in. It is crucial for an adequate intercultural understanding of wisdom to balance the points for a shared human ability and practice with an emphasis on the specific and diverse features that may qualify someone as wise in different societies around the world. Kant provides a useful conceptual approach to this issue, and other thinkers from Western and non-Western contexts could probably provide us with a similar basis. The point here is to present an exemplary starting-point to draw on from later in the discussion. This section simply seeks to support one particular case in point: the characterization of wisdom at the heart of philosophy. In his Logik, Kant emphasizes the interplay between two major sub-aspects of philosophy, a scholarly conception of philosophy, Philosophie im Schulbegriff, and a worldly conception of philosophy, Philosophie im Weltbegriff. The latter, as a ‘doctrine of wisdom’, ultimately characterizes the character of true philosophical thinking and reflection, Kant says.¹

Philosophy, linked to wisdom in this sense and constantly connected to it, is not at its core about ‘historical knowledge’—this, for Kant, is factual knowledge of empirical events that can easily be taught and learned. Philosophy as doctrine of wisdom is characterized by the effort of a rational synthesis within one’s thinking while trying to orient oneself in the world—thus the ‘worldly conception’ (Weltbegriff) of philosophy. As such it refers to an original attempt at making sense, of creating an intellectual guideline for oneself where no secure pathways can be found. Importantly, this also means that a certain level of education (such as being an academic, trained within a particular school of thought, or even being literate) is not a necessary condition for this ability per se, even if it may have a crucial input. This is because, strictly speaking, these are not preconditions for producing a new insight of synthetic knowledge which we call ‘wisdom’. More bluntly, there is no privileged shortcut from education to wisdom. Thus Kant’s conception helps us to reject an elitist understanding of philosophy which is exclusivist, both in social and in intercultural respects. Wisdom, from this general perspective, then, cannot be taught—but only sought. It is achieved as a synthesis in reflection by individuals who are facing a practical need or a theoretical challenge of orientation that potentially applies to all human beings within their common world. This is what I take Kant to mean when he says that philosophy in the Weltbegriff, i.e. as linked to and determined by ‘wisdom’ (as we saw above), addresses what is ‘of necessary interest to everyone’.²