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Philosophical Counseling in Search of Edification

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Since the birth of Western philosophy, some twenty-six centuries ago, philosophers have been discussing basic life-issues such as what is the good life, what is true love, what is morally right and wrong, or what makes life meaningful. One could therefore expect philosophy to be of interest not just to professional philosophers but to any thinking human being. Unfortunately, however, this expectation has not been fulfilled by mainstream philosophy. Contemporary philosophy tends to be abstract and general, and therefore remote from the concerns of the person in the street.

This gap between philosophical discourse and everyday life has not always been as deep as it is nowadays. In the ancient Hellenistic world, most philosophical schools attempted to guide individuals in their daily behavior and to help them in their search for the good life.¹ The Stoics, the Epicureans, the Neo-Platonists and others sought to incorporate philosophical principles in people's everyday life with the help of philosophical self-reflection and a variety of philosophical exercises.

In later times, however, this practical orientation to philosophy has been largely neglected, and philosophy has become an abstract academic discourse. Nevertheless, in the past three decades a new movement has been developing around the world – Philosophical Practice, which seeks to restore the ancient vision of philosophy as a practical activity.² In this paper I would like to examine this vision and articulate some of the principles on which it can be based.

A brief history of the philosophical practice movement

The philosophical practice movement was born in the early 1980s, when the German philosopher Gerd Achenbach opened his counseling practice and started seeing individual clients for sessions of philosophical reflection on their life and predicaments. Shortly afterwards he founded an association for philosophical practice, and the idea was quickly adopted by a group of philosophy students in Holland who started their own association. It took more than a decade for the new field to spread to other countries, in part thanks to the First International Conference on Philosophical Counseling which took place in 1994 at the University of British Columbia, and which I had the honor of initiating and co-organizing with Lou Marinoff. Today there are groups and associations devoted to the field in virtually every Western European country, in North America and Latin America, and in other parts of the world.

The fundamental vision of the philosophical practice movement is that philosophy should not be confined to university lecture halls and professional journals, because it is relevant to the life of the person in the street. Philosophical practitioners have been exploring ways to realize this vision, and in the process developed several different formats of practicing. The most popular format is *philosophical counseling* in which (like in Achenbach's original practice) a philosophical counselor meets a client for counseling sessions, usually once a week, and the two reflect philosophically on the client's life or predicament. This format is similar to that of standard psychological counseling, but the content is different: The counseling conversations deal not with psychological process or mechanisms, but rather with ideas, specifically with those philosophical ideas that are relevant to the counselee's life. Further, the philosophical counselor is not a professional who has answers, who makes diagnoses, and who applies professional theories and methods to the case of the client, but rather an experienced companion in an open-ended journey of self-reflection.

Other formats of philosophical practice include *group counseling*, *self-reflection groups* in which participants examine their lives from the perspective of various philosophical topics or texts, the *philosophical café* which is more discussion-oriented, and *Socratic dialogue workshop* in which a philosopher guides the participants through a well-structured discussion about a selected life-issue.³

I would like to focus here on the format of philosophical counseling, both because of its centrality in the philosophical practice world, and because more than any other format it is challenged by the gap between philosophy and everyday life. After all, individual clients normally seek the help of a counselor not in order to engage in abstract impersonal discussions, but in order to deal with their personal predicaments. As a result, when philosophical practitioners attempt to apply philosophical thought to the context of counseling, they encounter a peculiar tension between two aspects of philosophy. On the one hand, mainstream philosophy seems very promising in terms of its content, since it deals

with the kind of fundamental life-issues which we all encounter, such as issues of meaning, of authenticity, or of true love. On the other hand, in terms of its method of discourse, philosophy seems very unpromising, since it usually discusses these issues abstractly, with little interest in the specific, concrete conditions of the individual person. One might say that this is a tension between the *what* and the *how* of mainstream philosophy.

It follows that if we wish to use philosophy for counseling individuals, we must answer the question: How can we change the academic philosophical discourse so that it would deal with the same traditional contents but in new ways – ways that are personal and relevant to the predicaments of the person in the street?

This seems to me the central challenge of philosophical counseling. I suggest that the various approaches to philosophical counseling operating today can be seen as different attempts to address this issue and bridge the apparent gap between philosophy and life.

Perhaps the most common response to this challenge among philosophical counselors is to utilize those elements in mainstream philosophy that are easily applicable to life, and to throw out those elements that are too abstract for the context of counseling. Thus, general philosophical theories are often thought to be too remote from life to be of any use for the philosophical counselor, but philosophical thinking tools – or so-called critical thinking tools – are thought to be easily applicable to everyday situations. The term “critical thinking” refers to rational methods of analyzing and evaluating ideas: exposing hidden assumptions, examining whether an idea is coherent or tenable, determining whether or not a given argument is valid, and so on. The result is what can be called “the critical thinking approach” to philosophical counseling, which avoids dealing with general philosophical theories, and focuses instead on philosophical thinking tools.⁴ According to this approach, the philosophical counselor’s main task is to use critical thinking tools to help counselees reflect on their behaviors and attitudes, critique them and improve them.

This popular approach seems to me unsatisfactory for several reasons. First, philosophy is much more than critical thinking. The history of philosophy is rich with insights and ideas, and one cannot ignore them in favor of logical tools without losing the very substance of philosophy. Second, it is questionable whether mere logical analysis can help individuals address significant personal issues and live a better life. It is hard to see how mere reasoning can be of much help to an individual who suffers from a sense of emptiness, or loneliness, or shyness.

Normalization versus edification

It seems, therefore, that if we don’t want to get rid of the treasures of philosophical thought in favor of mere thinking tools, then we are still stuck with the same issue with which we

began: How can philosophy, which is a highly abstract and general discourse, possibly make a helpful impact on the individual's life?

The answer depends on the kind of impact we seek, in other words on the goals we set for philosophical counseling. I believe that in the world of philosophical practice we can find two main ways of answering this question: those approaches that seek normalization, and those that seek edification. To the first group belong those approaches that attempt to help counselees solve their personal problems, deal with adverse conditions more efficiently, or in short help them function better. The hope here is that after a series of counseling session, the counselee would be able to return to normal life with greater satisfaction. A normal, functional, stress-free, satisfying life is the ideal.

Despite the popularity of this line of thought, it seems to me that a second, minority group, is much more interesting. According to this second group, normalcy or functionality is not an appropriate goal for philosophy. Philosophy's goal has always been getting out of the box of "normal" ways of thinking, not fitting life into the box. Philosophy, by its very nature, does not aim at compromising with societal norms, but at opening us to greater perspectives and exploring the broader horizons of human existence. True philosophy cannot satisfy itself with mere normalcy, comfort, convenience, satisfaction. Since ancient times it has taken upon itself the role of the provocateur, of the visionary, the educator who seeks to edify people and expand their world.

This is what I call the "edification approach" to philosophical counseling, which I and others practice.⁵ Its roots can be found throughout the history of philosophy. Numerous important thinkers in all historical periods envisioned ways in which philosophy can help transform life beyond its normal boundaries. These thinkers, whom I call "Transformational Philosophers," include Plato, Marcus Aurelius, Baruch Spinoza, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, Gabriel Marcel, Martin Buber, and others.

At a first glance, it might seem bizarre that I am grouping together such diverse thinkers. They belong to different historical periods and very different schools of thought. They are concerned with different issues, and they use different assumptions, concepts, and methods. It is hard to see what is common to a rationalist like Plato who believes in the power of reason to reveal eternal truths, a philosopher of change like Bergson who sees the world as a flux that defies reason, a poetic transcendentalist like Emerson, a materialist and staunch individualist like Nietzsche who rejects any absolute truth and any transcendent reality, and Martin Buber whose philosophical viewpoint centers on interpersonal relationships. In fact, I am not familiar with any philosophy text that groups those philosophers together.

I suggest, however, that these apparent differences seem extreme only because of a bias that is common in academic philosophy, a bias that gives special importance to metaphysics and epistemology. Indeed, if we focus on what these thinkers say about the nature of the world and how we can know it, then the differences between them become enormous. But if we put

in the center not their metaphysics and epistemology, but rather their views on the good life, then a striking similarity comes to the fore: All those philosophers hold that human life is normally superficial and limited, that it is usually constrained by adverse psychological powers, but that it does not have to be like that. Life can be transformed – whether for a short while or once and for all, whether by will-power or by openness to grace. It can become fuller, deeper, richer than it normally is. We might say that all these philosophers have a vision of personal self-transformation.

Plato, for example, envisioned a process in which philosophy guides us to step out of the “cave” in which we are imprisoned and reach greater truths.⁶ For the Stoic emperor and philosopher Marcus Aurelius, philosophy’s role is to help liberate us from the shackles of our normal emotional reactions, and assume an attitude of calmness, acceptance, and connection with the cosmos.⁷ For Jean-Jacques Rousseau, philosophy shows us the kind of education that can liberate us from alienating societal powers which distance us from ourselves, and in this way find our true, natural self.⁸ The American philosopher Ralph Woodrow Emerson calls us to open our limited individual self to broader sources of insight and inspiration, or what he sometimes calls the “oversoul.”⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche calls us to overcome our weak and conformist self and become a self-creating “overman.”¹⁰ Henri Bergson shows us, in his non-rationalist philosophy, that we can sometimes be free of the rigid structures of our superficial self, and flow with the holistic flow of the deeper self.¹¹ And Martin Buber tells us that life can be fuller once we assume relationships of togetherness – I-You relationships – with other people, with our environment, and with God.¹²

These thinkers are obviously very different from each other. And yet, beyond these undeniable differences, they entertain a similar vision: that philosophy can show us how to edify life so as to live more fully, truly, richly. Personally, these philosophers have inspired me tremendously in my work as a philosophical counselor.

The inspirational power of ideas

All this suggests that philosophical counseling can be rooted in this long tradition of philosophical thought which envisions a personal transformation to a fuller life. A philosophical counseling that accepts this orientation no longer needs to contrive forced connections between life and philosophy, as does the critical thinking approach, because it can avail itself to the visions of self-transformation that are found throughout the history of philosophy.

A philosophical counseling that aims at personal edification can use philosophical ideas and writings as sources of inspiration for self-change. Ideas – not just philosophical ideas – have an immense power to inspire us. For example, as a result of a new social idea, people are capable of leaving their previous way of life and devoting themselves to new causes. As a result of a new moral conviction people can change their eating or social behavior, even at

the expense of great difficulties. An existential awareness of death can inspire a person to change his attitude to life. Ideas have a great power to motivate us and change our lives.

As a philosophical counselor who seeks edification, or self-transformation, I use the power of ideas. It is outside the scope of this paper to discuss specific counseling methods, but I would like to suggest that by reflecting together on selected philosophical ideas, the counselor can inspire the counselee to relate to life in new ways. This is in fact a strategy used by several ancient schools of philosophy. By offering key ideas and sentences for reflection, these schools inspired their adherents to follow their ways. Thus, the well-known *Meditations* by the emperor and philosopher Marcus Aurelius is believed to be a personal notebook of exercises intended precisely for this purpose.¹³

This does not mean that philosophical counseling should indoctrinate counsees into believing in specific philosophies in of life. Indoctrination is clearly not the way of philosophy. Any philosophical counseling which does not wish to be dogmatic cannot commit itself to one single philosophy of self-transformation. Philosophy by its very nature is the art of questioning, and it cannot take for granted the approach of Plato or of Rousseau or Nietzsche as the ultimate truth.

In order to avoid this dogmatism, the philosophical counselor must regard the different historical approaches to transformation as different legitimate approaches which can serve as sources of inspiration. The variety of conceptions of transformation can be seen as different voices in the same human choir, different expressions of the same basic human yearning to grow and expand. The role of philosophical counseling is not to impose on life one pre-determined kind of transformation, but rather to help counsees find the kind of personal transformation that is most alive and fruitful for them. Needless to say, the counselee's self-transformation need not conform to any already-existing theory. But reflections on existing theories can serve as a starting point for new inspirations and new personal exploration. Philosophical texts are rich with ideas which can serve as raw materials for the counselor and counselee to modify, develop, or alternatively reject.

Is self-transformation possible?

Many of the transformational philosophers mentioned above aimed at a very dramatic self-transformation. They envisioned the transformed individuals – the true Stoic, Rousseau's man of nature, the Nietzschean overman – as radically different from ordinary people. Such transformed individuals are not subject to the usual temptations, social pressures, and weaknesses which afflict most of us. They are not motivated by petty desires and are not moved by automatic psychological powers. Like enlightened sages, they are truly higher human beings. Naturally, one might wonder whether such radical transformations are humanly possible for most of us.

I confess that I doubt that such extreme transformations are either possible or desirable. The normal psychological powers that operate in us are much too strong and inflexible, many of them are hard-wired into our brain, and they perform important functions which we cannot do without. The vision of freeing ourselves from all psychological powers to become a higher person strikes me as unattainable as the dream of a clover weed to become a huge eucalyptus tree. This is not the sort of transformation that is possible in life.

However, while a complete radical transformation is unattainable, it is possible to aim at more local or temporary transformations. And indeed, some of the above-mentioned transformational thinkers talk about temporary transformations that do not last for long. Buber, for example, never claims that it is possible to maintain the I-You relationship of togetherness for a long time, nor does he suggest that we have complete control over it. The usual I-It relationship of distance and objectification are inevitably common in everyday life. Moments of I-You relations are relatively rare – but when they do happen, they color our life as a whole and impart on us meaning beyond the few moments in which they occur.

Similarly, for Bergson it is only rarely that we are in touch with the holistic, free flow of our deeper self. We are usually limited to our superficial self, which is fragmented and mechanical. And yet, those few moments of true freedom give us a deeper understanding of our lives, and color life as a whole with fuller poetic meanings.

This is, I suggest, the direction which philosophical counseling should take. The aim of the philosophical counselor cannot reasonably be to change the counselee from a clover weed to a eucalyptus tree, from psychological mechanisms to complete freedom, from flesh-and-blood to angelic light. The goal is to inspire counselees to open themselves to occasional sparks of light, to be attuned to moments of transformation, when for brief moments or hours we experience true freedom, true love, true wisdom. One spark of light can give light to a lot of darkness, and one special moment can inspire an entire life. It is in this direction, I suggest, that philosophical counseling should seek to make an edifying impact on counselees.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss how this lofty vision can be translated into specific methods or strategies in the counseling session. But very general speaking, the writings of the great transformational philosophers throughout the ages suggest a two-stage process. First, counselees must become aware of their limited, fragmented, superficial existence. For this purpose, a philosophical reflection on the human condition in general, and on oneself in particular, can arouse in counselees the awareness of their narrow boundaries, and can awaken in them the yearning to go beyond themselves. Second, reflections on philosophical ideas and texts, especially by transformational writers, can supply counselees with the inspiration to open themselves to moments of transformation, which might lead to openness to richer, deeper, and broader horizons of life.

Conclusion – the edifying counselor

Philosophical counseling, if it takes upon itself the role of edification or self-transformation, is a tremendous task. Philosophical counselors are no longer mere professional service-providers who apply to clients a set of thinking tools or principles, but rather companions who seek to edify, inspire, and awaken new fountains of life in counselees' minds and hearts. They have no scientific theories to rely on, no guidelines to follow, no solutions to offer. They must know their way about in the rich and complex network of philosophical ideas that have been developing in the past twenty-six centuries, but they must also be familiar with the complex paths of life from their own personal experience and knowledge. We might say that an edifying counselor is much closer to the ancient notion of the wise man or the wise woman than to a modern professional.

The notion of wisdom is no longer popular nowadays as it used to be in ancient times. Instead of the wise man of the community who knew the ways of life, we now have competent professionals who can solve specific problems quickly and efficiently. We praise somebody as being smart or clever, as being competent or proficient or professional, but we rarely describe them as being a wise man or a wise woman. In our technological era, it is smartness and efficiency that we regard highly. However, if we want our life to be not just efficient and problem-free but also rich and deep, then I believe we need to revive the importance of the idea of wisdom, and of wise people who can help others deepen their lives. And this is precisely the role of the philosophical counselor as I see it, or more generally of the philosophical practitioner. Philosophy, after all, is philo-sophia, which in ancient Greek means love of wisdom.

Footnotes

- ¹. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995.
- ². See numerous video-interviews with active philosophical practitioners from around the world in Agora, the website of the international community of philosophical practitioners, which I am directing together with my colleague Carmen Zavala, at www.PhiloPractice.org.
- ³. The last two activities were imported from external sources. The first philosophical café started in 1992, in Paris, by the French philosopher Marc Sautet, who was not directly connected to the philosophical practice movement. Contemporary forms of Socratic dialogues were inspired by the Socratic Dialogue movement, founded in the 1920s by the German philosopher Leonard Nelson.
- ⁴. For example Lou Marinoff, *Plato, Not Prozac*, New York: HarperCollins, 1999; Elliot Cohen, *What Would Aristotle Do?*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2003.
- ⁵. For example, Gerd Achenbach, "Philosophy, Philosophical Practice, and Psychotherapy," in Ran Lahav and Maria Tillmanns (eds.), *Essays on Philosophical Counseling*, Lanham: University Press of America, 1995, pp. 61-74. Ran Lahav, "Philosophical Counseling as a Quest for Wisdom," *Practical Philosophy*, 1: 2001. For more details about my approach to philosophical counseling, see my website PhiloLife.net. In Italian, see my book *Oltre la Filosofia: alla ricerca della saggezza* (In Italian: *Beyond Philosophy: the investigation of wisdom*), Milano: Apogeo, 2010. The manuscript will be published in English in the near future.
- ⁶. *Republic*, Book 7, translation by Benjamin Jowett, *The Internet Classic Archive* at <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html>.
- ⁷. *Meditations*, translation by George Long, *The Internet Classic Archive* at <http://classics.mit.edu/Antoninus/meditations.html>.
- ⁸. *Emile*, London: Dutton, 1966.

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- ⁹. “The Oversoul,” *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, New York: New American Library, 1965, pp. 280-295.
- ¹⁰. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, New York: Penguin Books, 1978, pp. 103-442. See especially the self-transformation envisioned in “On the Three Metamorphoses,” *Ibid.* pages 137-140.
- ¹¹. *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, New York: Dover Publications, 2001. See especially the section on “The free act.”
- ¹². *I and Thou*, New York: Scribner, 1970.
- ¹³. Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998. Ran Lahav, “Self-Talk in Marcus Aurelius Meditations,” *Philosophical Practice*, 4: 2009.