

QUESTIONS FOR PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELLING

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Abstract: The article poses three questions relating to the self-definition of philosophical counselling: 1. Is it an alternative to psychological and psychotherapeutic approaches? 2. What is the therapeutic nature of philosophical counselling? 3. Is it contemplation or critical reasoning? The first part introduces some examples of the concepts that sharply distinguish philosophical counselling from psychological and psychotherapeutic approaches. It also considers those that mix these different approaches. The second part deals with the question of whether or not philosophical counselling can be considered to be a therapy. Some philosophical counsellors work on the belief that there is a synchrony between modern philosophical counselling and the classical conception of philosophy as therapy. Many, however, are of the opinion that it is not possible to speak of it in terms of therapy. The third part gives examples of the way in which philosophical counselling is understood to be contemplation and on the other hand of those who employ approaches based on critical thinking in philosophical counselling.

Keywords: philosophical counselling, therapy, critical thinking, contemplative philosophy

Introduction

During the 1970s philosophy began to interest psychiatrists, psychologists and other practitioners who deal with issues of mental health. In particular, existentialism and phenomenology became inseparable components of their therapeutic mission. Indeed, in the end, some philosophers, encouraged by this interest in philosophical knowledge and skills, accepted the challenge and began helping people to reflect on everyday issues (S. C. Schuster 1999b). Thus it was that the modern-day movement of philosophical counselling began to develop widely, and is now part of a wider shift in philosophical practice realised through philosophical cafes, organised counselling, group counselling and individual counselling for clients. Professional organisations, which sprung up on the international level, are in the process of defining their own professional ethics codes, certified methods, scientific standards and organisational tasks (Mehuron 2011). Gutknecht (2006) considers the philosophical counselling movement to be a global affair today. He sees it as a reaction to the disorientation that characterises our current ways of life and the developments taking place in nature, politics, society and technology. This disorientation, he believes, manifests itself in three different ways: a decline in awareness of the self, a loss of mental and spiritual energy, and a renouncing of autonomy in relation to science, fundamentalism, nihilism

and relativism. Overcoming these trends is vital for people living in the current era and philosophy should help in this by means of counselling.

One could give many examples of how philosophy has historically focused on the question of “how should we live?” in connection with helping a person explore their own life. Modern philosophical counselling is interlinked with this tradition, while largely relying on the ideas elaborated by philosophers working in this field. There are, however, great differences and many ambiguities to be found amongst the approaches of the individual protagonists. Let us suppose that the three questions we formulate within this article will help us shed more light on the mission and method of philosophical counselling.

The three questions concern self-definitions of philosophical counselling: 1. *Is it an alternative to psychological and psychotherapeutic approaches?* 2. *What is the therapeutic nature of philosophical counselling?* 3. *Is it contemplation or critical reasoning?* First we shall outline the various approaches adopted by philosophical counsellors and then at the end we shall consider our own standpoint.

An alternative to psychological and psychotherapeutic approaches?

In seeking the answer to the first question we encounter a number of concepts which sharply distinguish philosophical counselling from psychological and psychotherapeutic approaches and that claim that what distinguishes the two fields is the “division of labour”. One such author is R. Lahav (1995) who is of the opinion that worldview interpretation is fundamental to philosophical counselling and thus it should not interfere in solving problems that are the domain of psychotherapy. Philosophers should not use psychotherapeutic techniques that they are not qualified to practice; only those who are equipped with empirical knowledge from the field of psychotherapy and who are qualified to work in this area should do so. As an expert in worldview interpretation the philosophical counsellor helps clients to uncover various meanings expressed in their life paths and to critically investigate the problematic aspects that are reflected in these dilemmas. By providing this kind of help, the counsellor can enrich and develop the worldview of the client and help the process of change. At the same time, the counsellor should not offer instant solutions or philosophical theories, but philosophical skills relating to the analysis of the concepts, depictions of the consequences, phenomenological descriptions, etc. In this sense philosophical counselling is analogous to the art of criticism, which is the antithesis of psychological skills.

According to V. M. Feary (1999) psychology and/or psychotherapy does not have the competence to deal with issues of a higher order. She considers it impossible for psychologists to fully understand the worldviews of their clients and their value conflicts.

The founder of the modern-day movement of philosophical counselling G. Achenbach (1995) believes that the relationship between philosophy and psychotherapy is one of both cooperation and competition, which means that their relationship is dialectical. What is significant in philosophical consultations is that rather than classifying the visitor's problematic situation as a complex or deviation, the philosopher considers the situation to be unique and thus does not view it in terms of generalisations or reductions. The philosophical consultant takes the client through a series of situations in which the client sees the problem via a philosophical understanding. The client formulates questions or difficulties and the

philosophical practitioner helps him/her to arrange the problematic issues in a philosophical structure.

Another theorist who believes that philosophical counselling is an alternative to psychological and psychotherapeutic approaches is S. C. Schuster (1999). She states that philosophical counselling is an autonomous sphere and not some sort of a hybrid between philosophy and psychology. The end goal of philosophical counselling is to philosophise together with the client. She believes that often it is not necessary to “de-analyse” or “de-diagnose” a client who has undergone various psychology-based approaches in order to begin “a free philosophical interpretation of any problems or issues” (Schuster 1996, 24).

Mehuron (2011) emphasises that the goal of psychotherapy is one of treatment in a psychological sense: to establish the client’s mental health; while the primary focus of philosophical counselling is self-understanding, which occurs when a client reflects upon their own problems via reasoning, values and alternative belief systems. Although the client may begin to feel better, that is not the main aim of philosophical counselling. Philosophical counselling is designed for those clients who are rational, who can function in everyday life and who can exploit a philosophical grasp of philosophy so that they can exert control over or resolve their problems. Philosophical counselling is an alternative to psychotherapy; however, it need not be in contradiction to psychotherapy.

L. Marinoff (1999) believes that if a person has a psychological problem, then they should seek a psychologist, if they have a psychiatric problem, then they should seek a psychiatrist, and if they have a philosophical problem then they should turn to a philosopher. Philosophical counselling is for people who have problems connected to sense, purpose, values, goals, conflicts, relationships, loss, gain, and career changes. None of these problems within themselves are signs of mental illness. None of them require that the person should return to their childhood and identify the events that would explain why he or she has a problem now. Philosophical counselling investigates life by means of philosophical discourse. Dialogue, in contrast to diagnosis, is a sign of well-being, and not of illness. If a client is able to function well, but has some philosophical questions, then a diagnosis is not required. The aim of philosophical counselling is not to cure deep-rooted chronic illness; its subjects are healthy individuals. The aim is to instil a sense of philosophical self-sufficiency in the client.

According to Raabe (2001) philosophical counselling is quite different to psychotherapy in that the clients are autonomous actors, capable of understanding (with help where required) their own situation and of changing their own life for the better, whereas most psychologically-oriented practice presupposes that the client is the product of internal psychological forces, over which they have no control.

The counsellor, according to Raabe, should help the client explain and reconstruct their worldview via a client-oriented dialogue, which contains description (phenomenology), interpretation (hermeneutics) and critical thinking. At the same time it resolves a number of problems, not only those that deal with conceptual issues but also those that deal with issues concerning the meaning of life. Others include emotional and behavioural issues, such as the emotions, attitudes and conduct that is guided by thinking or reasoning. Counselling should enable the client to deepen his or her self-awareness, autonomy and authenticity (*ibid.*).

Other authors have not relinquished psychological approaches and combine them instead with philosophy. Examples include J. Elliott and K. Elliott, who call their method

“clinical philosophy”. This method is a combination of a psychotherapeutic approach and non-academic philosophy applied to everyday problems. E. D. Cohen also uses philosophy in combination with psychology in his method of philosophical counselling. He uses “logic-based therapy” (LBT). As he puts it, it is a modality of philosophical practice (or philosophical counselling). Thus, as is the case with the psychological practice, philosophical practice is also aimed at helping the client solve behavioural and emotional problems. LBT is based on the belief that philosophical therapy is logical therapy—it helps the client identify, repair and overcome their erroneous logic. This approach dispenses with the classical psychological search for the causes of the behavioural and emotional problems clients have and searches instead for the etiology of these problems from directly within a logical framework. An example of other combined psychological and philosophical approaches is the approach adopted by P. Grimes (1997, 1999), which he calls “philosophical midwifery”. It is based on Socrates’ maieutics from the Plato dialogue *Theaetetus*.

Is philosophical counselling of a therapeutic nature?

Let us now outline the various approaches to the issue of whether philosophical counselling can be considered a therapy or not. Some philosophical counsellors are convinced that there is a synchrony between modern philosophical counselling and the classical conception of philosophy as a therapy, and most of these are based on M. Nussbaum’s (1994) approach, which presents the Hellenist ideal of the philosopher as someone who through his or her compassion is able to assuage ever-present human suffering. Nussbaum’s conception of philosophy as a therapy is based on the belief that philosophy should not focus simply on cognitive problems, but also on those that are emotional: not only on invalid conclusions and misguided assumptions, but also on irrational fears. Nussbaum (2003) shows how the good life cannot be sustained simply on the boundaries of reason. Emotions themselves are valid constituent elements of a good human life.

Marinoff (1999) considers philosophical counselling to be a kind of therapy. He claims, however, that the concept of “therapy” is not used in the same sense as it is in psychotherapy or medicine, since it is therapy without diagnosis and therapy for the mentally healthy (*ibid.*, 2002).

In order to implement the approaches outlined above, Marinoff established a five-stage method for philosophical counselling, where the first three stages of the process are identical to what happens during psychological counselling and it is only the last two stages, contemplation and equilibrium, that are philosophical.

Raabe (2001, 125-166) explains philosophical counselling as a certain kind of therapy which attempts to bring together the most varied forms of philosophical counselling into a single model. The first stage involves listening freely to the client, the second concerns philosophical discourse, the third involves strengthening the client’s autonomy, and the fourth is about finding a solution to the problems and strengthening preventative or active elements.

Feary (1999) is of the opinion that philosophical counselling is therapeutic. Not simply in the weak sense, where philosophical investigation into an individual’s personal life and their problems is always seen as being therapeutic, but also in a stronger sense, where there must be a specific goal of altering critical and moral thinking (*ibid.*, 2003). The author argues

that philosophical counselling is very beneficial to people because of its six competencies that reinforce the knowledge and ability to recognise and manage problems or illnesses that disrupt rational thinking and behaviour; that improve critical thinking; that develop social and communicative skills to at least a minimal degree; that enhance the ability to control, repair and correctly express emotions; that improve the ability to decide on a moral basis and the ability to play a role in creating an integrated personal identity.

P. von Morstein also sees philosophical counselling as being therapeutic since its goal is to revitalise and strengthen the client's personality; however, this is not done through diagnosis and treatment. Thus, for her it is also an alternative to psychotherapy. Philosophical counselling begins with questions that derive directly from the experiences of the client on a social or other level. It is based on the ancient viewpoint that emotional, moral and other problems are philosophical in nature. A discussion with a professional philosopher can therefore clarify a client's personal problems and direct him/her towards new aspects of his/her life.

Tuedio (1998) also considers philosophical counselling to be therapeutic. Its role is to reconstruct the natural flow of the life of a client. He argues that most of our ideas on life are assimilated over time and are strengthened through cultural and relational influences. Generally, they are incorrectly structured or insufficiently qualified, despite the fact that they dominate to such an extent that they influence not only our desires and self-respect, but also the general direction of our lives and limit the opportunities available to us. Dominant, but incorrectly (or pathologically) structured ideas have a tendency to influence our circumstances in life, but only rarely are they reflected upon or clarified. Seeing a philosophical counsellor and taking part in the dialogue is an important first step in beginning this process. Reflecting on the dominant abstract concepts and going beyond a doubtful interpretation means gaining a new perspective on the circumstances of our lives. Tuedio also suggests that a philosophical counsellor may deal with clients whose preferences are pathological.

Tukiainen has created a more conservative model which sees philosophical counselling in terms of strengthening virtues. These allow the individual to come to terms with existing and potential problems in life, which means that the distinction between philosophy and therapy is not so sharp. Simplistic perspectives in which philosophy either is or is not therapy are to be avoided. In some cases it is and in others it is not. There is no simple method of dividing up philosophical questions into those that can be of therapeutic value and those that cannot. Similarly, D. Boele considers philosophical counselling to be "partly therapeutic". This is mainly because it eliminates something that is negative; it uses philosophical means to clarify psychological barriers and mental unease.

By contrast the belief that philosophical counselling cannot be considered to be therapeutic is held by R. Lahav, B. Mjuskovic, E. Ruschmann, N. Pollastri and the founder of philosophical counselling himself G. Achenbach, who rejects the use of medical methodology in relation to philosophical counselling. He believes that philosophical counselling involves philosophising that occurs between a specialised consultant educated in philosophy and a visitor who is not a patient. On the basis of the discussion with the visitor, the consultant does not provide a diagnosis and the approach is empathetic. The logic behind all therapies consists in the fact that they all look for symptoms that should be treated. But

this logic does not apply to philosophical counselling, which emerged as an alternative to this. Schuster (1999) describes philosophical counselling as a “trans-therapeutic” activity, consisting of activities that are not therapeutic but may nonetheless lead to a healthy, mental well-being.

Contemplation or critical reasoning?

Achenbach talks of the “beyond-method”, which ensures that the counselling does not occur on the basis of a single method and that it takes place outside any single system. The counselling process which he describes is based on his own approach to philosophical experiences. He believes that this process should occur in the context of a sceptical attitude to “everything that can be considered to be true”, to all that is “established, clear, indisputable” so that interest is renewed in everything that had been refuted, dealt with and considered to be untrue (Achenbach 1995, 73). Marinoff (2002) suggests that in fact Achenbach does not provide any kind of method at all; his approach is based on spontaneity, which is why his clients find it attractive (Marinoff 2002, 89). Schuster (2004) disagrees, arguing that Achenbach’s method of conducting philosophical counselling is not without method. The key points that philosophical counselling is based around are: 1. Sincere communication between the philosophical practitioner (an academically trained philosopher) and the visitor or client on the basis of the “beyond method”. 2. The importance of dialogue, which enlivens perceptions of being 3. “Auslegen”—looking for explanations, which the expert uses to solve problems, but not on the basis of proffering his/her own interpretation, but by giving the visitor a new impulse to explain problems or her/himself. 4. An innovative element of the dialogue, the element of wonder in philosophical practice, which does not allow for fixed opinions, attitudes and standard or permanent solutions. The counsellor, according to Achenbach (1984) must stick to four principles. Firstly, he or she must understand that no two individuals are alike, and consequently he or she will have to adapt to the differing needs of each client. Secondly, the counsellor must attempt to understand his or her client and help the client to do the same. Thirdly, regardless of however attractive it may be, any desire to change the client must be resisted. And finally, the counsellor must strengthen the client’s outlook onto the future.

Schuster (1999b) believes that Achenbach’s method of conducting philosophical practice has proved itself and that its basic ideas contain everything that is required for a responsible and professional approach. We might suggest that Schuster emphasises this because in addition to the philosophical counsellors who have opted for approaches close to Achenbach’s, he also has his share of critics, particularly amongst those who would like to have an exact method for conducting philosophical counselling. These theorists (Marinoff, Raabe and so forth) feel that this approach is deficient in methodology and argue that Achenbach has not elaborated his approach sufficiently. Schuster (1999a) stresses that the goal of philosophical counselling is not reflection, but the philosophising itself. She therefore considers philosophical counselling to be a conversation conducted by means of open questions and that there is no method which the counsellor should follow during the counselling process other than the strategy which stems from the “beyond-method”. The therapist interprets what the client says and how she or he behaves from the perspective of

pathology; thus the therapist is a specialist and the client becomes the subject. Despite this, the ideal philosophical counsellor becomes an empathetic friend and engages in conversation in such a way that he or she is able to help the client articulate his or goals, ideals and fears in life. Schuster makes reference to philosophers (e.g. Sartre) who emphasise freedom and authenticity. An authentic life is a Socratic life: it is a life in which there is sincere self-evaluation and a rational examination of goals. Philosophical counselling attempts to increase the independence of the visitor and to engage in the kind of conversation with the visitor that will allow him or her to achieve a greater degree of rational self-knowledge and responsible self-control.

While Achenbach and his followers emphasise that critical thinking is fundamental to the process of philosophical counselling, we may encounter the opposite approach as well. This approach rejects abstract thinking and dives into the waters of contemplation. Authors who favour this approach include, for instance, Lahav who enriched the concept of contemplative philosophy with his original ideas (Lahav 2005, 2006a). He rejects the approach adopted by the philosophical counsellors who use the Socratic paradigm, in which Socrates requires that our opinions should be clearly defined and therefore he encourages us to subject them to critical inquiry. In this perspective, Socrates states that it is necessary to clarify the concepts which we use, to clarify the hidden assumptions and provide convincing evidence that supports our opinions and theories. Since there is no certainty as to whether or not this really is the approach used by Socrates in ancient times, Lahav prefers to refer to this paradigm as a “vision of critical thinking in philosophical practice”. That means that the role of the counsellor is to help critically qualify the client’s view of the world, to reveal the client’s own hidden assumptions, to analyse the internal logic of his/her perspective and to improve it so that it becomes more acceptable to the client. In an ideal case, it would result in a better perspective on the world, based on a more coherent set of ideas, resting on a solid foundation of good reasoning and acceptable axiomatic assumptions. Conducting this kind of practice on the basis of Lahav’s convictions is not difficult since the main aim of the counsellor is to help the client to understand him/herself. This counselling is therefore based on a vision of self-understanding, which can be understood as part of wisdom. Lahav (2006) mentions how he was once sympathetic to this approach and attempted to develop it but some years ago he began to believe that it was not very useful and that it led to a dead end. This is because this approach is too analytical and critical: it analyses or breaks down worldviews into their components, but does not sufficiently help the client find different ways of understanding their own life. It does not inspire the client enough to transcend their current view of the world and develop it so that it leads to a new approach to life and to the transformation of the client. This is because the road to a new understanding of the self requires more than just critical analysis.

Lahav believes that the vision of critical thinking is problematic partly because it is based on an ill-conceived understanding of philosophy which was very popular in western philosophy. Lahav called it “the myth of abstract reasoning”. We need to leave behind this myth and approach philosophical thought via understanding and not impersonal logical agreement. A person’s philosophical thinking enables them to understand the world by means of their whole being: as a person with a distinct way of life and a life that relates to life with its own way of thinking, behaving and feeling; it is a particular way of being. Separating

reason from emotion and pretending that philosophy is directed only at pure reason is misleading. Philosophising should not be seen as a game of abstract ideas, but as a dialogue, which is aimed at our ability to understand from the depths. Philosophical counselling must be conducted in a personal, experiential, dynamic way—in short, in a contemplative way. Lahav (2005) states that in terms of counselling, we should allow philosophical thinking to speak without judging whether it is correct or incorrect, or whether it is objective or universal in meaning, since even those philosophical voices that are theoretically unacceptable often tell us important things. They can shed light on interesting problems, or give voice to parts of our personalities, or trigger important contemplations, or reveal different perspectives. The significance does not lie in whether it is true or whether it contains meanings that are close to us. People should accept the fact that several philosophical voices may resonate at once, even in cases where theoretically they contradict themselves. For instance, something with Kantian ethics might resonate inside me, whereas my other inner self might inspire utilitarianism. I do not have the strength to choose one over the other as “my” opinion; they can continue living together side by side as a pair. It is, however, important to allow access to the continued dynamic plurality of voices and not to seek a final explanation.

Many authors approach philosophical counselling as they would contemplation (for instance P. Grimes who we mentioned earlier heads in this direction). Marinoff (2002) is another author who describes the process of philosophising as one of contemplation. We should remind ourselves that his approach was based on three psychological stages, and two philosophical stages: contemplation and equilibrium. Contemplation is understood to be philosophising which has two phases: active and passive. The first of these is philosophy as it is taught in schools (that means ideas selected from the writings of the great philosophers), while the second is meditation associated with thinking in a calm state. Marinoff favours mediation which has its roots in the ancient Far East and quotes Chinese and Zen sages extensively, for instance Lao Tzu.

We tend to agree with those theorists who understand philosophical counselling in terms of a dialogue within critical thinking. These theorists often refer to Socrates in the sense that they are concerned with very precisely investigating the concepts and values that a person uses. Socrates’ questions help focus attention on thoughts or concepts as the constituent components of thinking. Counselling as critical thinking is also developed by theorists such as J. Delnoij, H. S. Chamberlain, R. Fisher, L. B. Amir, D. Boele, J. A. Tuedio, P. A. Fatione, and T. Curnow. Schuster mentions the fact that the attitudes behind philosophical counselling in relation to the client are in many ways connected to Buber’s interpretation of the relationship between “I” and “You” as a “meeting” and in Rogers’ approach to counselling. T. LeBon reminds us that C. R. Rogers lays out three basic conditions that should make counselling more effective: it should be an authentic, unconditional and empathetic approach. In this respect he analyses Socrates’ approach and comes to the conclusion that it does not even fulfil one of Rogers’ conditions; Socrates was concerned with the truth rather than the mental well-being of the client. In the end, he concludes his reflections by saying that good philosophical counselling is a successful marriage between Socrates’ rigour and Rogers’ humanity.

Conclusion

In relation to the first question we posed we might surmise that philosophical and psychological approaches to counselling complement one another within limits of their independence. Philosophy is not possible without expressing a view on mental phenomena and without taking them into account. On the other hand, each kind of psychology has an inherent philosophical framework for construing psychological problems. As these disciplines cannot do without one another, effective philosophical counselling cannot take place without at a least basic (implicit) psychological knowledge.

In connection with the second question we posed, the reason that some distance themselves from the opinion that philosophical counselling is “therapy” is also related to the fact that by emphasizing its therapeutic effect, the counsellor could be assigned greater responsibility. If it is therapy, the counsellor has much greater influence on the conceptual bases the client will accept and the client cannot be seen to have autonomy. However, philosophical counsellors emphasize the clients’ autonomy; this makes the clients fully responsible for what happens to them during sessions with the counsellor: this is inappropriate. On the other hand, we have to take into account the fact that the client does not come for counselling as a “pure” layperson but as an “amateur” at the very least. This kind of client has some philosophical knowledge which he or she can apply to the dialogue and which enables him or her to become autonomous to some extent.

The last question is formulated so as to capture contradictory approaches to practicing philosophical counselling. On the one hand, there is a tendency to see philosophical counselling as being contemplative in nature; on the other hand there is a tendency to act on the basis of critical thinking. In critical thinking, the client’s reactions provide the counsellor with information on how the philosophical content affects the client’s mind, feelings, and emotions as indicators of the benefit of the ongoing philosophising and its processing against the conceptual and emotional background of the client. During contemplation such an immediate exchange of information between the counsellor and client does not take place. This does not mean, however, that the client is more autonomous during contemplation compared to when techniques are used for critical thinking development. By contrast, it is primarily up to the counsellor which ideas she or he prepares and what content enters the clients’ consciousness and subconsciousness and influences their mental state. The client is thus manipulated by the counsellor’s choice much more so than is the case with critical thinking, where, on the basis of independent thinking the client either accepts or rejects individual aspects of philosophising with the counsellor or takes a reserved stand on some of the content.¹

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