Philosophical & Counter-Philosophical Practice

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The philosopher is not a citizen of any community of ideas.

That is what makes him into a philosopher.

Wittgenstein, Zettel

Introduction

You are perhaps wondering what is meant by the terms ‘philosophical practice’ and ‘philosophical counselling’. The term ‘philosophical practice’—or ‘philosophical praxis’—originates in the early eighties, with the work of the German philosopher, Gerd Achenbach. Fortunately, with the exception of one article, none of Achenbach’s writings have been translated into English. I say “fortunately” because this has helped the movement as a whole to avoid the pitfall of evolving into an intellectual cult—philosophical practice has no Freud, Adler or Jung; it has no orthodoxy. Philosophers make bad dogmatists—at least I like to think so—so very quickly philosophical practice has become a field as diverse as academic philosophy itself, with its own Platonists, Aristotelians, Stoics, Analytic philosophers, Hegelians, Existentialists and so on. Achenbach is one of the pioneers in the field but in the English speaking world, at present, the person perhaps most associated with the subject is Lou Marinoff, an American philosopher of science who got into philosophical practice, so I gather, while working at the University of British Columbia’s Centre for Applied Ethics, when members of the public started asking the staff to provide personal ethical counselling.

The basic idea behind the movement is simply that philosophers should act as consultants or facilitators to individuals, groups and businesses. Personal counselling, group facilitation and organisational consultancy are the three main categories of philosophical practice. The ‘professionalisation’ of philosophy, some have called it. The justification for this was the notion that philosophers could use, not simply their knowledge, but perhaps first and foremost their philosophical skills, to help others resolve their concrete life problems. Taking philosophy out of the ivory towered universities, as it were, and bringing it to into the lives of everyday people. This meant a change of direction. Instead of addressing the problems of the great historical thinkers in the pompous bourgeois language of academic philosophy, philosophers were challenged to adapt their skills to the problems which real people wanted answering, and to engage them in a genuinely co-operative dialogue, in a language that they could relate to and understand. As Ran Lahav, an Israeli professor of philosophy and an influential practitioner put it,

[…] philosophical counselling seeks to bring philosophy closer to everyday life. It holds that philosophical ideas are not disconnected from the individual’s concrete living moment, as they are commonly treated in academic philosophy.
Inevitably, the expression ‘philosophical counselling’ was coined to describe the situation where a philosopher acts as consultant to an individual client. With equal inevitability, this brought philosophical counselling into conflict with other professionals working in similar areas. The mental health field (so-called) is well known for odium medicum, the atmosphere of intolerance and resentment between individuals and organisations holding different theoretical perspectives. Psychoanalysts, it’s safe to say, bitch about each other … they also snipe at humanistic counsellors for being theoretically naïve and undertrained … humanistic counsellors are disgruntled by what they see as the unjustified snobbery of psychoanalysts and react with righteous opposition to what they label its mechanistic and dehumanising tendencies… psychologists, in the cognitive behavioural tradition, dismiss humanism as non-scientific, and psychoanalysis as a pseudoscience… and so on and so forth, you get the picture. Now philosophical counselling finds itself, while still a fledgling movement, barely a movement at all, drawn into the orbit of unseemly controversy surrounding these professions. In a recent article, for instance, an American philosophy professor and psychoanalyst called Michael Russell made the innocuous sounding claim that ‘it would be bizarre to believe that the philosophers doing personal consulting must wait upon the approving nod of psychologists’. To which he received an extraordinary reply from a clinical psychologist who complained that,

Russell’s polemical paper defending the thesis that philosophers are better suited to help people with their problems of living than psychologists [sic.] is a work of unnerving optimism. […] are philosophers likely to be able to identify patients [sic.] displaying a mild fluent aphasia, anosognosia, or other signs indicative of a stroke, and strokes with different loci at that?

To which I can only reply with the question: ‘Does the implied prohibition extend to other professionals providing similar services… to pastoral counsellors, careers guidance counsellors, workshop facilitators, student-centred educators etc. etc.?’ Apart from the fact that to the best of my knowledge most jobbing psychotherapists and counsellors wouldn’t know a mild fluent aphasia from a wart on the nose (and wouldn’t feel they needed to), it’s my suspicion that the analogy with psychotherapy and all the positivistic pseudo-medical baggage that that term entails has done more harm to philosophical practice than anything else. It’s true that philosophical counselling is a bit like psychotherapy but it’s also a lot like two people talking philosophically about everyday problems -do you need vetting by a shrink before you’re allowed to do that? Perhaps a better analogy is with progressive education, do you need to have your head examined for ‘mild fluent aphasia’, or some other bugbear, before you join a group of students engaged in student-centred philosophy discussions? (I might ask whether you should ‘have your bumps felt’ before being exposed to a salesman, but for fear that that example could be turned against me.) Back in the real world: the chances that ‘problems of living’, presented by ordinary people to a counsellor (‘philosophical’ or otherwise), are actually hitherto unnoticed symptoms of serious stroke damage are presumably minuscule. The percentage of referrals made to medical professionals every year by counsellors working outside of a medical setting, is I would imagine
also minuscule. Speaking from personal experience: I have several ‘problems of living’ every week in which I might benefit from philosophical reflection but I have never, to the best of my knowledge, suffered from anosognosia or any other form of brain disease.

Curiously, whereas Russell contrasts philosophical counselling with ‘psychotherapy’, his critic deftly identifies psychotherapy as such with (clinical-) psychology. Worse, its prospective clientele (‘people with problems of living’) are, in a rhetorical sleight-of-hand, medicalised as ‘patients’. Contrary to the self-confidence of this strategy, it’s well-known that the mental-health field in general has been suffering a crisis in its self-understanding for a long time and that ‘medical-psychology’ is not the only paradigm for interpreting psychotherapy. In fact very few practising psychotherapists or counsellors are trained as ‘psychologists’, at least in this narrow sense of the word. Consequently, psychotherapists sometimes claim that philosophers misconstrue their own practice as ‘psychology’ when it is in fact already a ‘philosophical’ quest for meaning and insight itself. One can only wonder, then, why most psychotherapists and counsellors don’t actually study philosophy or engage in open academic debate with philosophers, why their courses are predominantly based in psychology and psychiatry departments, and why they are encouraged to study DSM rather than Descartes. For my own part, I think that the idea that many psychotherapists have of themselves as philosophical practitioners is wishful romanticism grounded in a fundamental misconception of the practice and ethos of philosophy, something I will have cause to return to shortly.

In any case, the distinction between the practices of philosophy and of psychotherapy is obscured by the historical fact that there have been, inevitably, attempts to model philosophical practice on particular forms of psychotherapeutic practice. A number of psychotherapists were already employing approaches which they insisted were fundamentally philosophical. For instance, an American psychoanalyst and philosopher of science called Albert Ellis developed a form of psychotherapy in the 1950s called Rational-Emotive Therapy which was intended to be a fundamentally philosophical practice; it aimed at eliciting irrational beliefs from clients and exposing the fallacies in their reasoning using relatively informal disputation. (RET never became a major therapy, but it’s the method favoured by Windy Dryden a well-known British writer on psychotherapy.) Recently an American philosopher and psychotherapist called Elliot Cohen has developed a form of RET which is much more explicitly philosophical, and which seems to have become part of the philosophical counselling movement. He uses syllogistic logic as a framework for resolving clients irrational beliefs, an approach which has become known as ‘logic based RET’.

Likewise, there were numerous attempts, beginning in the forties, to develop a form of existential psychotherapy. For example, the eminent Zurich psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger, one of Freud’s right hand men and a colleague of Carl Jung, developed an approach to psychotherapy called Dasein-analysis which was based on his reading of Heidegger. Closer to home, Charles Rycroft and Peter Lomas, and of course Ronnie Laing, attempted to combine bits of Sartrean existentialism with psychoanalysis. In London there are Masters degrees in a form of ‘existential therapy’ established by another well-known therapist: Emmy van Deurzen. The course was, I gather, originally based in Regent’s college in London, which is now home to one of two organisations representing philosophical practice in Britain. In
a recent talk, Prof. van Deurzen, described existential therapy as a ‘philosophical practice’ and compared it to the practice of the ancient Greek philosophers. There seems to be a potential overlap, then, between existential psychotherapy and existentialism in philosophical practice.

Unsurprisingly, the Hasidic philosopher Martin Buber seems to be another inspiration for philosophical counselling; in Israel there are many practitioners. In the sixties Buber and other ‘existentialists’, were adopted as intellectual patrons by the Human Potential movement—Gestalt therapy in particular—which tried to ground psychotherapy practice in a loosely philosophical humanism and take it out of the hands of the medical profession and into the burgeoning field of ‘personal development’. So, you get various kinds of humanistic psychotherapists and counsellors who identify what they’re doing with the work of Buber and other ‘existentialists’.

Which leads naturally to Client-Centred counselling, perhaps one of the most pervasive approaches to humanistic counselling. Its founder Carl Rogers was also an influential educationalist and the chapter on Student-Centred teaching in his principal text includes a transcript from a group of students who are applying a non-directive dialogical approach to the discussion of Book I in Aristotle’s Ethica Nicomachea. The question of human nature and of ‘happiness’ in the Peripatetic Philosophy are investigated within the context of a genuinely constructive and personalised philosophical dialogue, something facilitated by the instructor’s possession of Rogers’ ‘Core Conditions’: congruence, unconditional positive-regard and empathic understanding. This fortuitous fact (the choice of text), along with the practical and minimally theoretical nature of Rogers’ approach, make his writings an obvious inspiration for philosophical practitioners.

More importantly however, many philosophical counsellors have sought to find dialogical methods native to philosophy itself. To a large extent this has involved rehabilitating the disputational methods of the ancient philosophers, especially (of course) Socrates who has become an icon of the movement. However, there have also been attempts to derive inspiration from Aristotle (as I’ve mentioned) and Stoicism. With regard to more modern philosophy, there also seems to be some interest among philosophical practitioners in, e.g., Hegel, Buber, Heidegger, Sartre and Wittgenstein. As yet, conspicuous by its absence, is any informed discussion of post-modernism, Critical Theory or Structuralism (or for that matter philosophical Marxism or Psychoanalysis).

So you see, as I have said, philosophical practice is a fledgling movement with considerable potential, infinite potential. Perhaps I’ve failed to give you a concise definition; let me try: philosophical practice, like ‘applied ethics’ is a species of the genus ‘applied philosophy’. (Incidentally, you might not be aware of this but ‘applied ethics’ is a fairly recent development itself, academic courses in it didn’t start appearing until the mid-sixties; nowadays we take it for granted but forty years ago someone like Peter Singer wouldn’t have been considered a ‘serious’ philosopher.) Applied philosophy, I suppose, is doing philosophy in a different context, with more practical aims, or with a more everyday subject. In philosophical practice the concrete issues at stake are also personal issues for at least one of the participants; ‘life-problems’. It aims to facilitate genuine dialogue using philosophical skills and in a manner informed and inspired by academic philosophy. Here the lacuna in my definition makes its presence felt: if
philosophical counselling is indeed a doing of philosophy, an applied philosophy, what manner of creature then is ‘philosophy’? G. E. Moore notoriously answered that question by gesturing toward the bookcase in his Cambridge study: “It’s what all these books are about.” It’s what philosophers do—a perfectly sagacious answer.

A report on the *Fourth International Conference on Philosophical Practice*, held in Germany last August, states that ‘there seemed to be almost as many views of philosophical practice flying around as there were people present’. It continues,

[...] some put forward a particular line, while others sought to make sense of the variety of existing approaches. What emerged from at least one discussion was that the nature of philosophy itself is a serious bone of contention. This being so, substantial differences of opinion as to what philosophical counsellors are seeking to offer can scarcely be wondered at. To some, these differences suggested richness and flexibility, to others chaos and incoherence.

Philosophical practice is indeed a chaos. It is, however, an infinitely fertile chaos. The indefinable quality of philosophical counselling is the indefinable quality, the recalcitrance to definition, of philosophy. Which leads me into the critical phase of my wee talk: I’m concerned that the practice of philosophy might be reduced to a determinate methodological practice. Philosophers certainly use definable critical methods, and adopt specific theoretical assumptions—I don’t seek to deny that—but they don’t identify the practice of philosophy as such with the simple application of theoretical models, how could they? Philosophy that takes its own assumptions for granted—ceases to critically challenge, and thereby to go beyond itself—is no longer philosophy, it’s dogma, ideology—a dead twig, not a living vine.

There is a risk that philosophical counselling might fall into this trap. I’ve mentioned the use of syllogism in philosophical counselling; ‘logic-based RET’. A counsellor who sees his job as ‘training’ people in the application of syllogistic logic cannot afford to have his methodology undermined; what does he do if the client tells him he thinks the syllogism is anachronistic rubbish? Clearly it’s not in his professional interest to encourage clients to reflect critically on the methodological assumptions which he, as counsellor, depends upon. I suppose he must refer the client on, or (more likely) suppress his doubts with the soothing balm of rhetoric.

People always ask philosophical counsellors “what is your methodology?”, but if we identified our practice with a determinate methodology we would cease to be philosophers. I’ve already mentioned the popularity of the adjective ‘philosophical’ among psychotherapists, something which seems to be growing in reaction to their new competitors. There is a world of difference between the appropriation of philosophical theories by a discipline and its adoption of a genuinely philosophical practice. Psychotherapy, and for that matter counselling, cannot legitimately claim to be ‘philosophical’ simply because they have assimilated philosophical theories and deployed them within their own dialogical praxis, subordinate to their own aims. The principal aims of psychotherapeutic practice are traditionally other than the love of truth and wisdom, aims such as ‘cure’, ‘adaptation’, ‘individuation’, ‘genital maturity’ etc. (Incidentally, almost every discipline at some time incorporates philosophical concepts, does this make it—physics for example—a ‘philosophical’
pursuit?) Philosophy takes its ‘theory’ in a fundamentally different way from psychotherapy. It’s sufficient to remember that philosophical theory, in the universities, is taught primarily as an object of criticism not as a hand-me-down critical role for the philosopher as subject to occupy and enact—compare that to the ways in which psychotherapy is taught. Moreover, I suggest that a practice which appropriates philosophical concepts, and the name of ‘philosophy’ itself, using them in an unreflectively methodological way, is not merely pseudo-philosophical but is a fundamentally counter-philosophical practice.

It’s crucial, therefore, that in the dialogical practice of philosophy whatever principles are employed—whether derived from philosophy, psychotherapy or elsewhere—they are not concealed or protected from the client (or the practitioner for that matter) and their legitimacy, and implications, are an open question which the client is actively encouraged to consider and evaluate. As soon as the counsellor identifies his approach with a systematic procedure dialogical boundaries are implicitly established, and imposed on the client. Traditional psychotherapeutic interpretation is a one-way street, philosophy is, at least potentially, an interminable spiral of reflection. This is what is characteristic about philosophy, and this is what is distinctively philosophical about philosophical practice—it takes a critical stance on itself. Learning to reflect philosophically is categorically different from learning to employ a systematic model of reasoning, something which machines already do well enough for us.

Wittgenstein, who must rank as one of the Twentieth Century’s most influential metaphilosophers, suggested that the philosopher is like the little child who keeps asking “why?” to the irritation of his parents and teachers. Eventually he ‘learns’ when to keep his trap shut, ‘learns’ where the limits are to be drawn to inquiry—Nietzsche tells a similar story; this kid must have gotten around! In philosophy this prohibition is something that must then be unlearned, the implicit limits to reflection have to be vigorously rooted out and challenged. If philosophical practice draws a line before this ‘why?’, by systematically encouraging the counsellee to assume a set procedure for critical reflection and thereby smuggling presuppositions back into the inquiry, it betrays the spirit of philosophy and degenerates to the level of a methodological psychotherapy like logic-based RET. To the level—dare I say it—of an indoctrination, and hence, ultimately, of an ideological rationalisation. The philosopher, let’s remember, cannot be citizen to any community of ideas—which is not to say that he’s an ‘anarchist’ either, of course!

As Achenbach reputedly says, philosophical practice is not such and such a ‘method’ because it is and must remain, like philosophy itself, a ‘method-beyond-method’.

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