Socrates as a role model for counsellors

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Socrates (470–399 B.C.) kept on asking questions about the alleged knowledge of others. This is not always a recipe for popularity. He was proclaimed by the Oracle at Delphi to be the wisest person in the world. He was rightly sceptical both of this claim and of other belief in ‘oracles’. His wisdom lay in knowing how little he knew. He did nonetheless believe that knowledge was attainable, if only we were sufficiently sceptical, questioning and honest about our vast ignorance.

Why is it then that some people like to spend much of their time in my company? You have heard the reason, gentlemen; I have told you the whole truth. It is because they enjoy listening to the examination of those who believe themselves wise but are not; the experience is not devoid of entertainment.

(Plato, The Apology of Socrates, p.52)

Systematic questioning of the claims made by others to knowledge and wisdom became a way of life for Socrates. The ‘Socratic method’ did not depend on a particular theory or body of ideas that Socrates sought to sell to others. It was, rather, a disposition of mind wherein nothing was taken on trust, nothing was simply assumed just because others assumed that it was so. Socrates would question, question and question again, not in order to demolish everything and everyone around him, but in order to test their foundations, their connections, and their coherence.

Socrates, as he has come down to us, was awake, penetrating, restless, and curious. What needed no explaining to others required plenty of explanation once Socrates had dug out all those awkward questions that others had been too sleepy, slow or self-interested to notice. Such an energetic, probing mind can produce admirers who like to see the mighty fall and who like to have their eyes opened. Such scepticism can also make enemies. Not everyone, primarily, is a seeker-after-truth. Most of us, most of the time are seeking to make a living and secure a reputation. If truth and honesty help, then so much the better. Radical questioning may be less welcome if we have secured more power, status, income and advantage than we can actually justify. We may not then wish others to question our effectiveness, insight, or integrity. You can be as smart and as right as you like, but I may be less than pleased if this is at my expense. I will find it hard to be dispassionate when my very livelihood is threatened and the ground on which I stand starts to crumble away under the pressure of Socratic enquiry. We do not want the clothes and trappings by which we claim social status to be seen as illusory. We may not wish to follow the questions and arguments to wherever they may lead. We may, rather, seek to silence the questioner and the questions or, at the very least, attack and undermine the questioner’s own credibility, motivations and competence. It is not very surprising, then, that Socrates ultimately was tried and put to death. He was charged with corrupting young people and not believing in the gods of the city.
Perhaps this is still the knowledge that matters most today; knowing what to ask, and persisting with the questions without being fobbed off with shallow answers that presuppose too much. But the question then arises, at what stage is it time to stop asking questions? At what stage is it time to act, to choose, to decide, even though the answers available to us are anything but adequate? If we were to wait until we were entirely clear about the assumptions underlying all our assumptions; if we demanded full and complete knowledge, evidence and coherence before acting, then we would never act at all. The Latin root of the word ‘philosophy’ is ‘lover of knowledge and wisdom’. But a government would not be wise that taught everyone to do nothing but question and philosophise. Someone has to sweep the streets. Someone must plough the fields and carry out policies most of which might be less than capable of surviving the rigours of a Socratic enquiry. There is a time for questioning and a time for doing. Each, at best forms, informs and is informed by, the other.

During the trial of Socrates, as described in detail by Plato, (427-348 BC) there were many times when he could have preserved his life relatively easily if he had chosen to substitute tact, flattery and empathy for concern for truth:

My offence is that I have not kept silent upon the lessons I have learned from life; I have scorned what most men cherish—money-making and the administration of their property, military command and mob-leadership, and all the various political offices, cabals and backstairs intrigue.

(Plato, The Apology of Socrates, p. 56)

How far the Socrates we know is the same as the Socrates who actually existed remains uncertain. The only Socrates available to us is the one described to us by others, most of all by Plato himself, but also by Xenophon, another pupil, whose account is sometimes very different from that of Plato. The pupil Plato uses the character of Socrates as a mouthpiece for his own ideas as well as those of his master who himself left no written records. But the questioning and the powers of perception of Socrates, as presented by Plato, are as much a tonic now as they ever were. He is like a blast of fresh air, or cold water thrown over a slumbering intellect. His questioning spirit deserves to live on.

Questions can be awkward and inconvenient. Sometimes they are unanswerable. But Socrates had a knack of finding profoundly important questions rather than trivial, pedantic, irrelevant questions. This is what crucially distinguishes major from minor philosophers. The former get to the root of our efforts to make sense of our lives, the latter indulge in pedantry without much point or purpose. There are never too many people around with the Socratic spirit, courage and skill. A Socrates living now would be as invaluable and as inconvenient as he was in his own day.

Counsellors generally claim to avoid providing ready made ‘answers’ for clients. But they are surely in the business of assisting clients to ask the right questions? Such facilitation requires considerable knowledge and skill. Socrates is almost certainly a better role model for such activity than Sigmund Freud, Carl Rogers, or most other contemporary therapists.
Reference


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