The Life Examined in Philosophical Counselling

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During his trial in Athens Socrates said that if he was not allowed to continue examining life then he did not wish to continue living. (Plato, 38a) This is often interpreted, I think incorrectly, to mean that Socrates believed that an unexamined life is always not worth living. My understanding is that Socrates was referring primarily to himself. He felt that for his own life to be worthwhile he needed to be allowed to continue examining it because he believed this is what the gods meant him to do. But why would his fellow citizens want to stop him from doing so? The answer lies in the fact that Socrates did not simply conduct a self-examination of his life. He encouraged and challenged others to help him. He believed that it was this examination of his particular life, and its connection to life in general, with someone else’s help (or even several others) that was the most conducive to making his life worth living. It was the involvement of other Athenians that got Socrates into trouble.

But why would Socrates be so adamant as to be willing to give up his own life if he was kept from examining his life with the help of others? And what is it about this cooperative examination of a life that makes it worth living? Clearly a simple examination of one’s own life won’t automatically make it worth living. In fact self-examination can make matters worse. It is fraught with so many hazards – such as self-deception, confusion, and what psychotherapists call repression and denial – that Freud discouraged his students from even attempting it (Freud, 1932).

Philosophical counselling is the sort of cooperative examination of a particular individual’s life and its connection to life in general of which Socrates was speaking. But the same question that existed for Socrates so long ago still exists today in relation to philosophical counselling: how does such an examination of a life make that life worth living?

On the day I was called to defend my doctoral dissertation I was asked by one of my examiners what evidence I could offer that would prove that philosophical counselling actually works in helping people to see their lives as worth living. I recall saying that philosophical counselling is similar to cognitive therapy, and that since cognitive therapy has been shown to be reasonably effective (Frank and Frank, 1993), the same would hold true for philosophical counselling. In fact Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT), developed by American psychotherapist Albert Ellis in the 1950s, is very philosophical in its approach, and outcome studies suggest that it leads to significant improvements in clients relative to initial assessment and control groups (O’Donohue and Vass, 1996). When the examiner surprised me by telling me that citing statistics for the effectiveness of a psychotherapeutic approach was not an acceptable defence of philosophical counselling the only reply I could think of was to say that I had counselled many clients who had continued to visit me on a regular basis, and that many of them had eventually told me they had found the counselling very helpful, that it made them feel better, that it helped them see issues in life, and life in general, from new perspectives, and that it was well worth the money they had spent because it had made life worth living once more. I admitted that this was not hard scientific or statistical evidence, but I argued that when individuals are willing to pay for something on a regular basis it is at least evidence that they believe it to be helpful. Of course the examiners and I both knew that the belief that something is helpful is not scientifically valid evidence that it is in fact actually helpful but I was awarded my doctorate none the less.

So-called scientific evidence that the examination of a life in therapy or counselling actually helps people improve their lives is to date still largely contradictory and less than convincing. This has led some writers to conclude that since the empirical data amassed to date has not yet conclusively proved the efficacy of any of the more than 400 types of therapy and counselling it may therefore not be concluded outright that any particular therapeutic factors are causally related to any improvements noted in, or reported by, counselling clients (Erwin, 1997). The logic in this argument reminds me of a scientific study that was done on mountaineers. Research was conducted to determine what effects a hot drink might have on a mountain climber who has been exposed to
bitterly cold alpine weather conditions. Body temperatures were measured both before and after a number of shivering climbers had consumed a hot drink, and it was found that there was no substantial change in their core body temperatures. It was therefore concluded that, since a hot drink does not raise a mountaineer’s core body temperature by any measurable amount, consuming a hot drink on a cold day does not do any good for cold mountain climbers. But when the climbers were asked which drink they preferred on a miserably frigid day, they unanimously said, ‘The hot one.’ When asked why they continued to prefer a hot drink over a cold one when they had seen the quantitative scientific evidence that it did not raise their core body temperature, they each responded by saying something like, ‘because it makes me feel better.’ There seems to be a belief among mountaineers that a hot drink helps them more than a cold drink in their attempts to reach the cold summits of icy mountains. The moral of this story is that this belief should count for something, despite the fact that those hot drinks have not been scientifically proven to have any measurable quantitative effect on their bodies.

Similarly, there seems to be some justification in saying that since many people believe counselling has helped them to regain the lost feeling that life is worth living, this belief should count for something.1 In other words, counselling should not be summarily dismissed simply because it has not been scientifically proven, with quantitative data, to be the sole causal factor in improving a client’s feelings about life. Perhaps the problem lies not with counselling itself but with the sophisticated difficulties involved in any attempt to clearly define and quantitatively measure cause and effect relationships in the social sciences. Philosophical counselling has never been promoted as being the single factor which will ‘conquer the mountain’ of a client’s problems. Just like a hot drink is seen by climbers as contributing to their own efforts, counselling has only ever been presented as contributive to the client’s own efforts.

In philosophical counselling, as in other therapeutic approaches, the questions which are much more interesting than whether or not it works in making life meaningful are questions about how and why so many people find it beneficial. While philosophical counsellors do not see their clients as needing a cure, in psychoanalysis, according to professors of psychotherapy, Helmut Thomä and Horst Kächele,

the cure results from the fact that the analyst communicates his impressions – including the affective interactional processes (transference and countertransference) – to the patient according to the rules of the art, i.e., in the form of interpretations. This dyad-specific communication of knowledge in treatment stimulates the patient to further reflection about his experiences and especially about his unconscious motivations. A circumscribed form of reflection by the patient is called insight. A consequence of the insight process itself is that new material can be brought to the surface, which in turn means a growth in knowledge, enabling the patient to attain new insights conducive to cure (Thomä and Kächele, 1994, 358).

Although reflection and insight by the patient or client are important aspects of almost every form of counselling, analysis, and therapy, philosophical counselling is not psychoanalysis. The philosophical counsellor does not attempt a ‘cure’ by making conscious so-called ‘unconscious motivations’, or by bringing ‘new material’ to the surface from that unconscious by means of an analysis of random thoughts produced in ‘free associations’. It is important to note that while the foundational theory guiding all forms of psychotherapy rests on supposed insights into the concealed unconscious,2 many philosophical counsellors hold that what often passes for the unconscious may be better described as an individual’s accumulated socially transmitted and personally generated beliefs, assumptions, values, and norms which influence but don’t determine his thinking and actions, and whose influence he fails to notice, not because he has hidden them from himself, but because they have been ignored, forgotten, or neglected. Yet, even given this substantially different description of mental functioning, philosophical counselling is not completely dissimilar from the many forms of cognitive therapy.3 Psychotherapist Albert Ellis argues that if a

1 Erwin notes that ‘Studies of consumer satisfaction with psychotherapy that were done in the early 1980’s did, in fact, find a high level of satisfaction. More recently, a poll of 4000 readers of Consumer Reports (1995) found that most were highly satisfied with their psychotherapy.’ (Erwin, 1997, 143).

2 As professor of psychiatry, Serge Lebovici put it in his essay titled ‘France’, ‘What distinguishes psychoanalysis is that it would disappear if the hypothesis of the unconscious were to be abandoned.’ (Lebovici, 1999, 40).

3 For a detailed discussion of the similarities and differences between philosophical counselling and other forms of counselling, therapy, and analysis please see my book Philosophical Counselling: Theory and Practice (Praeger, 2001) or chapter 2 in my book Issues in Philosophical Counselling (Praeger,
client’s emotional upset stems directly from events that occurred in the past which can never ‘unoccur’ then it seems logical to assume the client will necessarily always remain disturbed. Yet, as his many years of helping disturbed individuals with REBT has shown him, clients can and do get over past, seemingly unchangeable life events. The question is, how and why? Ellis maintains that individuals undo the influence of earlier life events by means of a guided examination of those events which modifies the ways the individual thinks, feels, and acts about them. He holds that there is an interaction which occurs in counsellings both between client and counsellor and within the client. Ellis claims that this interactionism is central to any discussion of how counselling works.

Interactionism implies that cognitions, emotions, and behaviours significantly overlap and interact with and affect each other. Therefore if we change any of these processes we tend to modify the other two. Also, biological and environmental factors reciprocally interact. In this kind of interactionism, thought, feeling, and action continually influence each other and are never completely disparate (Ellis and Yeager, 1989, 92, 139).

But Ellis is one of only a few psychotherapists who hold that cognitive restructuring or re-thinking of past events is all that is necessary to effect a ‘cure’. Most believe that their patients’ release of pent-up emotions in the presence of a trusted therapist is the primary cause of a cure. This may involve acting out distressing past events (abreaction), or relating to the therapist as though the therapist were somehow responsible for those events (transference). But since philosophical counselling is not psychotherapy the question remains, what is it that makes philosophical counselling effective? What needs to happen during the examination of a life in philosophical counselling for that life to be found worth living?

The case studies presented in the philosophical counselling literature, and the experiences of my own practice, indicate that there are at least five elements inherent in any ‘successful’ examination of a life in a philosophical counselling relationship: the client’s recognition that there is a problem, trusting an other, emotional release, insight, and the discovery of alternatives.

1. Recognition

‘Constructivism’ is a theory of learning and change that seems appropriate to philosophical counselling. It says that a person will continue to act according to past behaviour, think according to past beliefs, and cling to past values so long as those behaviours, beliefs, and values work in maintaining the desired lifestyle. Learning and change only occur when those behaviours, beliefs, and values are deemed no longer viable by that person. One of my clients who had experienced the loss of a number of significant people in his life to fatal illnesses felt helpless and ineffective in his attempt to live a happy life. It seemed every time a friendship deepened the friend died from some terrible disease. He came to philosophical counselling because he believed his approach to making and keeping friends was no longer working. He was so despondent he admitted to having had suicidal thoughts. But in philosophical counselling he came to recognize that he had only actually lost a few close friends, and that he had pushed the rest away from him for fear of having to suffer their loss as well. He also came to see that the individuals he chose to be his friends were invariably people who made him feel needed because they were already suffering from various chronic illnesses. He came to understand that while he believed he was having a negative effect on others the truth was quite the opposite: the others he brought into his life were having a negative effect on him. Philosophical counselling helped this person learn a new way of seeing, and helped him to change his old ways of acting which seemed to have been making his life not worth living.

2. Trusting an other

The examination of a life is best done with the help of an other person who is willing to act as an impartial but empathetic observer, someone who will listen non-judgementally and is willing to offer suggestions and advice. Philosophical counsellors are trained to be not only empathetic but professionally competent in the examination of both an individual’s personal life and life in general. The counsellor’s warmth, genuineness, care, and connection with the client, stemming from similar values and goals, builds trust, mutual respect, and positive feelings. It can create in the client the feeling – and legitimately so – that she is not alone in her battle with life’s suffering and uncertainty against a

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*For a good discussion of constructivism see Constructivism and Education (Larochelle, Bednarz, and Garrison, 1998).*
background of a hostile world, or within the foreground of a dysfunctional family situation. It can lead to significant relief from depression. I have had clients say to me, ‘It’s nice to know there’s someone on my side; someone who I can trust.’

Trust within a counselling relationship can strengthen the client’s expectations of help and of hope. The client knows the trained professional counsellor has at her disposal a wealth of information, abilities, and resources the client lacks. The client feels hope that the care being received includes an active attempt on the part of the care-giver to alleviate the pain of his suffering, and not simply to administer palliative comfort. Furthermore, the counsellor’s reassurance that she is on the client’s side, and is a concerned partner in a therapeutic alliance, creates hope that this team work may eventually be successful. Hope is also generated by the client’s recognition of the possibility that difficult life experiences are merely indicators of a period of transition rather than inescapably permanent. The expectation of help and the hope for relief in future are intrinsic catalytic therapeutic elements which can motivate the client to maximize his own efforts at self-transformation. Another important aspect of trust is the fact that philosophical counselling allows the individual who has been defined by family and friends as ‘the strong one’ to admit to weaknesses, to unload the burden of being the one who is always ready and able to help others, and to accept help from someone else without the risk of appearing weak and incompetent. It also allows the one who has been defined as ‘the weak one’ to gather strength and self-confidence in a supportive environment.

And the counsellor’s role in the examination of a difficult life does not end at the office door. Most counsellors make themselves available as a confidential resource the client may call upon at any time. This brings the client relief from a life of isolation and alienation.

3. Emotional release

The examination of a life in philosophical counselling allows for the expression of various emotions in a safe and non-judgemental environment. This helps to reduce waking worrying and also enables the client to achieve a better night’s sleep because it diminishes stress and its attendant wakefulness and nightmares. This in turn leads to better appetite, a more cheerful disposition, and a better all round physical condition. Stress relief leads to a decrease in the feeling of helplessness and despair when life seems overwhelming. In my own clients I have seen stress relief manifest itself as a marked reduction in stuttering, fidgeting, facial ticks, searching for words, worrying about ‘what ifs’, anger, regret, guilt, fear, shame, frustration, sleeplessness, fatigue, and crying. Relief from stress has led many of my clients to once again celebrate life rather than merely enduring it. The relief of stress in philosophical counselling sets into motion an important phenomenon that may be called an internal therapeutic circle: stress relief allows for greater clarity of thinking which produces more stress relief which allows for greater clarity of thinking, and so on. And the improvement of the client’s disposition by means of philosophical counselling changes for the better his interactions with the individuals in the world around him, which in turn improves his disposition, and so on, in a second external therapeutic circle between the client and his world. While in psychoanalysis change is said to occur within the individual, or intrapsychically, and existential therapy maintains that change occurs ‘outside’ or ‘in-between,’ at the point of the person’s involvement with the world (Cohn, 1997), philosophical counselling sees change as originating both inside and outside the individual.

Philosophical counselling achieves what may be called a ‘philosophical disposition’. It leads to a welcoming of the inevitable, a calm acceptance of those things which can’t be changed such as inevitable life changes, separation, and death. It relieves the client’s fear of being at the mercy of either hostile hidden forces within himself or indifferent harmful forces acting on him from without. It helps the client understand that his fear of what may possibly occur can be alleviated by a rational consideration of its probability. It relieves the client’s concern that his problem is trivial, that his suffering and confusion is unique and that therefore abnormal, that his situation-specific problem is chronic, that nothing can be done about it, and that he will either have to suffer at the present level of distress for the rest of his life or end his life to find relief. The empathetic counsellor relieves the client’s fear of being less than perfect, and the despair of having to rely on someone else for help in solving what the client (and perhaps significant others) believed to be a ‘silly’ problem. And the very fact that philosophical counselling is a philosophical discussion rather than the clinical ‘treatment’ of a putative mental illness, and the fact that the counsellor is a philosopher rather than a clinical psychologist, psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, or psychotherapist, can substantially reduce the feelings of fear, shame, and guilt which keeps
A philosophical examination of life also helps alleviate one day that being a doctor and helping other people is an internal conviction. But if he comes to the conclusion that helping other people is what he really feels is the right thing to be doing with his life, then he has internalized his parents' values. In a sense internalization is finding not only intellectual justification but affective gratification from adopting what may have begun as an alien value or point of view.

When a client internalizes insights about life which have been arrived at in a philosophical counselling session he is engaged in the process of trusting those insights and accepting them as his own. Internalization comes from reflection and being not merely intellectually convinced but emotionally satisfied. It is the client getting ‘a sense of his own’ about the epistemic and axiological perspectives reached during the counselling process. Internalization ultimately includes the client’s ability to put both reasons and feelings into his own words and in accord with his own values, and a willingness to put the resultant insights into practical use in his own life. For example, a person may have made the life decision to study medicine and become a doctor because he has been convinced by his parents that he ought to be doing something with his life that helps other people. His studies are thereby the result of external influences, not internal conviction. But if he comes to the conclusion one day that being a doctor and helping other people is what he really feels is the right thing to be doing with his life then he has internalized his parents' values. In a sense internalization is finding not only intellectual justification but affective gratification from adopting what may have begun as an alien value or point of view.

A philosophical examination of life also helps alleviate feelings of frustration, anger, self-damnation, and blaming of others by helping the client come to understand the difference between blame – when an undesirable event occurs due to a lack of care or conscientiousness and responsibility – when an undesirable event occurs despite good intentions and best efforts. It helps the client to determine the appropriate level of feeling responsible for a negative life event, and perhaps accept complete responsibility for events for which she may have (rightly) refused to accept blame in the past. It also helps the client evaluate the validity of ‘pop’ psychology maxims, such as ‘you can’t blame the parents for everything’, and helps her avoid the trap of simply accepting the corporate/medical position that faulty brain chemistry is to blame for her suffering and confusion. Clarification of the feeling of responsibility also includes the client’s learning to clearly differentiate between endogenous or internally generated suffering and life’s exogenous or externally caused suffering (such as familial expectations, sociocultural restraints, religious fears and prohibitions, workplace demands, poverty, and so on).

Philosophical introspection, the examination of a life, is, to borrow from Michel Foucault, ‘a critical ontology of ourselves’ (Foucault, 1984, 34). Philosophical counselling helps the client to be introspective about how he or she feels about life, and learn not only which feelings are justified but how appropriate the existing feelings are within a given context. Introspection about feelings is especially effective in male clients who deny their feelings or have difficulty identifying exactly what sort of feelings they are in fact experiencing. Understanding feelings leads to the ability to have not only appropriate feelings but the pertinent degree of those feelings. Discussion of feelings leads to the ability to recognize the thoughts that caused inappropriate or unwarranted feelings, and aids in changing the thinking habits and patterns which brought them on. In both men and women introspection can also lead to a better understanding of their own lives in terms of their values, hopes, fears, and so on. This can improve the client’s ability to protect him or herself against emotional or intellectual assaults from others, and leaves him or her less vulnerable to emotional coercion and intellectual manipulation.

Philosophical counselling helps the client shift the locus of self-evaluation from outside to inside the self, and to shift the locus of power from other-centred to self-centred (in the positive sense of this term). It thereby helps the client achieve a feeling of greater control over life, greater freedom, self-reliance, and self-trust, both intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally. The counsellor’s provision of success-experiences for the client – such as, for example, helping the client conduct a satisfying examination of her own assumptions and values, and helping her come to her own insights – raises the client’s confidence in the counsellor and in the philosophical counselling process. It reduces her feeling of helplessness, confusion, and depression. It encourages the client to see herself as an effective human being rather than merely a ‘patient’ or ‘client’ under someone else’s care.

When a counsellor helps a client feel less victimized by the problems in life her sense of self-worth and her self-acceptance increases simultaneously. As psychologist Carl Rogers put it, ‘In successful therapy clients come to have real affection for themselves . . . a quiet pleasure in being one’s self’ (Rogers, 1961, 73, 87-103).
4. Insight

The ancient Stoics and Epicureans helped citizens who came to them for counsel to recognize that their existing desires, intuitions, and preferences are socially formed and therefore not very reliable guides to a good life (Nussbaum, 1994). Philosophical counselling helps the client investigate the epistemological stratagems he has adopted in life, that is, it helps him reflexively examine how he comes to justify what he believes, and what his cognitive stance actually is in his approach to justification. In other words counselling helps the client develop a normative epistemology, not only when evaluating his knowledge acquisition strategies but also when choosing the sociocultural standpoint in life from which he obtains knowledge. Counselling helps to reconcile the disparity felt by many clients between their a posteriori or empirical knowledge and their a priori intuitional or reasoned knowledge. It questions the reliability and acceptability of the various sources of conative states (the will, freedom, action), affective states (emotions, feelings, moods), and cognitive states (beliefs, certainties, conjectures), and reduces the persuasive power of the ubiquitous ‘they’ of peer pressure, authority figures, and public opinion. It invites a careful reconciliation of moral intuitions and personal metaethical justification with the sociocultural traditions and the demands of life. Furthermore philosophical counselling helps the client conduct an axiological reinterpretation, that is, it assists the client in realigning his values in relation to any newly discovered personal rights, and unaccustomed obligations and responsibilities.

A client once told me, ‘I’ve thought about these things we’re talking about many times, but nothing in my life really changed. My worries just kept worrying me. But I find that just saying things out loud really helps.’ Why is it that the act of discussing the various events in life out loud can be therapeutic? Perhaps it’s because when a client explains herself to an other she is able to better hear what she believes to be true. She may thereby hear the inconsistencies in her beliefs, the contradictions in her values, the generalizations in her discontents, the naivété of her life plans, and so on. The client’s self-worth and self-acceptance is enhanced by the mindful humility of the counsellor who presents alternative points of view or insights not as rigid dictates but only as so many possibilities. And the counsellor who acknowledges when he is wrong, showing his own humanity and fallibility, conveys to the client the message that her thoughts are worth while, and that her own imperfections are not pathologies. Explaining a decision out loud to the counsellor creates a tacit collusion between two active partners; there is a strength in numbers which helps to reinforce the client’s commitment to her newly discovered points of view. Perhaps most importantly, the counsellor’s respectful listening and authentic responses helps the client to realize she is not ‘crazy’.

Articulating the problems in one’s life requires sorting mental information into manageable fragments, communicating emotions, translating cognitions into words, and reassembling problems so that they may be viewed as a logical whole. This process can greatly clarify problems which previously made life seem a chaotic and incomprehensible jumble. The examination of a life by means of philosophical counselling promotes the correcting of past weaknesses and errors in beliefs, judgements, and actions. Martha Nussbaum’s comments about what she has called ‘medical philosophy’ are relevant to philosophical counselling. She writes,

The diseases [medical] philosophy brings to light are, above all, diseases of belief and judgement. But to bring such diseases to light . . . is a large step toward removing them. Recognition of error is intimately linked to the grasp of truth. Thus philosophical procedure tends in its very nature to make things better, given this diagnosis of the problem (Nussbaum, 1994, 488).

Although ‘truth’ is very rarely the goal in counselling, thoughtful discussion in any counselling partnership helps the client discover reasons why life is sometimes full of upset and confusion. For example a client of mine wondered why it was that she felt an irrational surge of anger whenever someone spoke on a cellular telephone near her. Our discussion led her to see that she believed telephone conversations to be a very private activity. When someone spoke on a cell phone within range of her hearing she felt as though she was being forced to listen in on their personal conversation. The anger came from feeling manipulated by the cell phone user into an immoral activity – the invasion of someone else’s privacy. This insight into her anger helped her to understand its source and thereby feel less victimized by what seemed to be the irrationality of her own emotions. Philosophical counselling does not merely attempt to remove symptoms (the focus of behaviour therapies), it helps the client to understand the meaning of life’s suffering within its existential context. Existentialist therapist Hans W. Cohn says a symptom is a phenomenon which needs to be interpreted hermeneutically rather than analytically. He gives the...
example of a client suffering from compulsive hand washing. The time the client loses in repeatedly washing his hands is an important theme for therapeutic exploration, ‘but it is only one aspect of the total situation, and the disappearance of this symptom would leave many questions unconsidered’ (Cohn, 1997, 120). Not knowing the meaning of the symptoms, why they have arisen in the first place, can leave the client feeling powerless to stop the seemingly random occurrences in life. Similarly the symptoms of depression and anxiety may be dealt with simply by means of prescription medication. But this would leave the antecedent precipitates of these symptoms, and their threat to the client, unaffected and still in place. Medication is notorious for removing symptoms and leaving a troublesome life intact.

A series of counselling sessions can help a client develop a more coherent and satisfying conceptual life framework or worldview. Counselling rarely leads to an absolute consistency among the many conative, cognitive, and affective elements in life, but then this is not a necessity in order for an individual to lead a fulfilling life. A clarification of the client’s worldview enables her to achieve a better match between her beliefs and actions, between her desires and responsibilities, between her means and goals, and so on. It is often a retrospective view from actions to beliefs – the client examines the beliefs behind her actions and is thereby able to either accept or reject those beliefs and alter future actions accordingly. At other times it is an introspective view – the client compares her intellectual reasoning with the urgings of her emotions and intuitions to see if there is an acceptable correlation between them. A clarified worldview helps the client avoid what Jean-Paul Sartre calls ‘bad faith’ (Sartre, 1997) and to achieve what Martin Heidegger calls a life lived ‘authentically’ (Heidegger, 1996).

5. Discovering alternatives

The examination of life by means of philosophical counselling creates in the client a sense of personal strength, an awareness of the power of her own thinking and feelings, and freedom from the coercive power of external influences of authority which demand blind obedience. It develops the ability to live life in a state of self-government, autonomy, and the freedom of connection. But this autonomy does not demand isolation; it allows for a level of interdependence among lives in which the interests and wills of individuals overlap and complement each other. The examination of life in philosophical counselling helps the client understand that a range of human ways of being, a great variety of ways to live life, are possible and acceptable.
One of my clients was concerned over her love of books and learning, afraid that if she ‘indulged’ too much it would make her seem unusual because no one in her family was particularly ‘high-brow’. But the philosophical examination of what she valued in life in relation to the rest of her family helped her to discover how she could live a life of intellectual autonomy which, though contrary to her family’s behaviour, did not contravene her family’s values of ‘making something of your life’.

So in order for the examination of a life that seems not worth living to result in a positive outcome it requires, first of all, a recognition by the individual that problems are arising due to present beliefs, assumptions, and values, and due to current strategies employed in the way life is being lived. It then requires that individual to trust someone, such as a philosophical counsellor, to act as an objective but empathetic observer who is willing to listen and to advise without being judgemental. Such an examination of life by means of philosophical counselling can bring much needed emotional relief from such feelings as self-blame, regret, guilt, shame, and fear which are the result of painful life experiences and regrettable past decisions. The subsequent insights gained about the past, and the discovery of alternatives to current approaches to life, can make the examined life a life that is much more than merely tolerable; it can make life once again worth living.

References


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