But for a confused and distressed individual who actually came to me for philosophical counselling, finding an answer to the question of how we know what is real was much more than merely an academic exercise. His participation in, and his sense of belonging to, the world we call ‘real’ depended on it. Philosophical counselling helped this person clarify his thinking and define reality in a way that lessened his sense of estrangement, reduced his fear of losing control, and made his life much more bearable.

The practice of philosophy in the form of philosophical counselling can have a profound effect, especially on the lives of distressed individuals who have been labelled ‘mentally ill.’ There is no precise definition of the term ‘mentally ill,’ but it is generally applied as a professional diagnosis to people whose behaviour, thinking, and emotions are deemed to be outside the realm of the acceptable social norm. There is no conclusive evidence that any of the hundreds of so-called ‘diagnosable’ mental illnesses are due to biological causes or chemical imbalances, or that any of them can be cured with psychoactive drugs. But given that many individuals who have been professionally diagnosed as being ‘mentally ill’ have been helped to overcome their diagnoses with philosophical counselling, it is fair to say that philosophical counselling is a practice of philosophy that can cure ‘mental illness’!

It might be argued that if an individual is cured with philosophy then the original diagnosis of mental illness must in fact have been a misdiagnosis. But, due to the number of diagnosed ‘mentally ill’ individuals who have been helped to overcome their ‘mental illnesses’ with philosophy, this argument throws into doubt the very diagnostic criteria it attempts to defend. Simply put, to practise philosophy as philosophical counselling can mean to cure ‘mental illness’!

I more to say on this topic in a forthcoming essay.

The ‘beyond within’

Gerald Rochelle

I often wonder what Practical Philosophy is - its nature, its purpose, its worth. How, I ask myself, can a subject which has its roots in the academic exist outside it and have value? I accept that academic philosophy is an academic pursuit, and that some academic philosophers engage in Practical Philosophy as an academic pursuit, and this can easily weaken the ‘practical’ side of the project. Practical Philosophy draws upon its academic heritage and history. Yet it engages in Philosophical Counselling, work with children, or business, or with those that are not professional philosophers, and its philosophical method and perspective clearly lend value to these things. Between these two poles philosophers can be found on ethics or standards committees, or in roles where critical and moral analysis is deemed important.

However, when I wonder about the value of Practical Philosophy to the individual, the matter is not so clear. Some philosophers take a philosophical view developed by others, they are, for example, Stoic or Epicurean, and use appropriate and established philosophical tenets to support their own attitude to life. And I am left wondering if this is a Practical Philosophy. In some respects it is - it seems eminently practical and singularly philosophical - but, as far as individuals discovering something practical which is philosophical or by philosophical means for themselves, it is not. It may be that this is just ‘practising philosophy’.

Philosophy has an inherent drawback - it provides a rational method for asking questions but it is not so clearly equipped for providing answers. Philosophy can draw valid conclusions and find flaws in argument, but it cannot tell us that something is, or is not, the case beyond that the conclusion is validly drawn, or that there are no flaws in the argument that led to it. This is one reason why philosophy is an excellent therapeutic tool. Faith, on the other hand, provides answers because it supports belief. Whether such belief is justified, that is whether it warrants being held, although of interest to the philosopher, is irrelevant to the faith-based believer. But I am unsatisfied by this polarisation. It is a mistake to assume there are only two alternatives: that either it is philosophical and held back by the constraints of critical questioning, or it is faith-based belief that leaves no room for scepticism? The world is not so black and white, not a mixture of the two, more a zone of freedom which comes from being neither. For me, there is a road to an alternate way of thinking for the individual that can be navigated by philosophy but not entrapped or overpowered by it, and which does not suffer the problems associated with accepting on the grounds of faith.

It may be that the only true worth of philosophy in a practical sense is that it is something we can ‘go through’, that is ‘go beyond’. Unless we can go through philosophy, we will always be stalked and dogged by philosophical questions - ‘what is the meaning of this?’; ‘what is the meaning of that?’; and so on. Having disposed of philosophy by going through it, we can see that which is ‘beyond philosophy’, and which is ‘within myself’. ‘Beyond’ in this sense is not related to ‘beyond’ which is some sort of absolute aim ‘beyond’ the everyday or commonly accepted, but, more simply, ‘beyond’ the trap of philosophical thinking.

Practical Philosophy, therefore, should be best engaged in the matter of working through philosophy in order to leave it behind. If we seek individual enlightenment or wisdom, our aim as Practical Philosophers should be to live ‘beyond’ philosophy and find ‘within’ what philosophy can so easily disguise, discredit or be so keen to do. The magic ingredient which is both ‘beyond and within’, and remains as yet undiscovered, is contained within the sense of realisation in the same way as it is contained in a revelation or an intuition. Realisation, revelation, and intuition are all had when what is the case is understood. For example, we live in a world which we believe to be unavoidably temporal. The realisation that time is unreal, and that it is nothing like what we think it is, in particular that it is not temporal, allows us the freedom to understand something which is ‘beyond (time) and within (a new non-temporal framework)’. It is ‘beyond’ the misperceived belief that time is real, and ‘within’ because the sense of realisation is known intuitively and via a moment of revelation. We may wonder if the sense of realisation must be attached to something as in
the case of time or whether realisation-in-itself can, in some peculiar way, allow us to experience the ‘beyond within’ without any further consideration. Would it be sufficient, for example, to say ‘I had a realisation this morning, and my life is changed because of it’, even though there was no object of that realisation? I think it is. The key is that ‘my life is changed’. To be available to change is the basis for realisation and it is realisation which allows us to see the light of the ‘beyond within’. And when we realise that which is ‘beyond within’, we realise that we have reached what is our potential and, at least for the moment, inhabit a world of knowledge or wisdom usually reserved for those with faith. This is Practical Philosophy of the highest value for the individual and integrates the very essence of its nature, purpose and worth.