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DISCUSSION ARTICLE

Using Analytic Philosophy in Philosophical Counselling

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ABSTRACT *In the past decade, philosophers have started to use philosophical methods of counselling for everyday problems and predicaments, such as decision-making, inter-personal conflicts, occupational dissatisfaction, search for meaning, etc. This paper shows, on the basis of two case studies, how philosophical counselling can utilise analytic methods commonly used in academic philosophy, such as conceptual analysis. The paper also discusses the difference between philosophical counselling and psychological therapy.*

In the past decade, philosophers have started applying philosophy to what has traditionally been regarded as the psychologist's speciality: counselling for personal problems and predicaments. The philosophical counsellor is a philosopher who receives clients, usually for one or more weekly hours, and discusses with them their problems and predicaments. The topics of philosophical counselling include midlife crises, internal conflicts and decision-making, problems with inter-personal relationships, difficulties at work and in the family, occupational dissatisfaction, feelings of meaninglessness, and even anxiety and depression.

The philosophical counselling profession was founded by the German philosopher Gerd Achenbach at the beginning of the eighties. It has then spread throughout Germany and Holland, where there now exist two professional organisations of about 100 members each, and two professional journals: *Agora* (in German) and *Filosofische Praktijk* (in Dutch). Philosophical counsellors are also starting to appear in other countries such as Austria, Israel, and South Africa. I myself have been practising philosophical counselling for some time (in Israel), although I am mainly a university professor.

Several books have been published on philosophical counselling in German and in Dutch, but unfortunately there is almost no English literature on the topic [1]. It is probably for this reason that the new profession has not yet made a significant impact on the English-speaking world. Since I believe that it has the potential of profoundly re-shaping the boundaries of philosophy, I hope that this paper will help to acquaint English-speaking philosophers with this new field.

The Counsellee's Worldview

It is difficult to define philosophical counselling, just as it is difficult to define psychological therapy. It constitutes a family of approaches rather than a unitary method. To the extent that it is possible to generalise, however, philosophical counselling can be said to aim at helping the counsellee to examine critically and re-organise his or her personal world (or

those aspects of that world pertaining to the problem at hand). Unlike many standard psychological approaches, it focuses not on the psychological processes and mechanisms (emotional, cognitive, behavioural, etc.) which presumably underlie the predicament, but on the predicament's content: its structure, meaning, and implications. In other words, philosophical counselling treats the counsellee's experiences, thoughts, preferences, emotions, etc., not as elements in a mental or behavioural mechanism, but rather as expressing a *worldview*, that is, a conception of the world: of what is honourable or important in life, of one's capacities and duties, of what others expect of one, etc. For example, a feeling of shame may express a conception of oneself and of certain normative standards of behaviour; a hope may express a view on the desirable goals in life; and a feeling of anger towards others may reflect a view on how people deserve to be treated and on the nature of interpersonal relations.

Since much of a person's worldview is normally expressed only implicitly, in an unarticulated manner, the role of the philosophical counsellor is to help expose it and examine it critically. The assumption is that a better understanding of your worldview, i.e., of the way you conceive of yourself and your environment, is likely to open for you new ways of relating to yourself and your world. In order to do all this, the philosophical counsellor does not offer ready-made theories about the mind, about life, morality, and the like. It is the counsellees' responsibility to interpret and determine their world, and the philosophical counsellor cannot do that for them. What the counsellor offers is not theories, but rather skills and methodological tools of analysing, questioning, detecting hidden assumptions, describing, making distinctions, and drawing connections. These tools can help counsellees to examine their worldviews critically and revise them.

An uninformed philosopher might suppose that philosophical counselling would be based mainly on those Continental philosophies that deal with existential issues, in particular Existentialism. What other sort of philosophy can possibly be of any use in addressing the everyday problems of the average person? But in fact, as I realised through my own experience as well as through communication with other philosophical counsellors, this is not the case. Philosophical counselling often involves methods and ideas from so-called analytic philosophy, that is, the standard main-stream philosophy practised in the USA and Britain.

To a professional Anglo-American philosopher this might appear to be a rather surprising claim. The technical discussions that are found in contemporary philosophical journals hardly seem relevant for everyday problems. And of course, I am not claiming to have discussed with my clients hot philosophical puzzles at the level of complexity and sophistication found in professional journals. Nevertheless, I (and my colleagues) often use analytic methods of the standard philosophical sort. These are never too intricate, but this does not mean that philosophical counselling is less intellectually demanding than academic philosophising. When such analyses are performed in the course of a counselling session, they require a whole new field of skills that are not required in academic philosophy. They require quick thinking; perceptive intuition into human life; the ability to see a definite structure in an amorphic, vague, and ambiguous picture; intellectual flexibility to adjust to quickly accumulating and changing information; and communication skills. Often I feel that conducting a counselling session is much more challenging than giving a philosophical lecture to a professional audience.

In this paper I would like to show how analytic methods can be used in philosophical counselling. I should emphasise that the paper is not intended to supply an overview on the

nature of philosophical counselling, but to examine only some of its aspects, namely, its more analytic methods. Many other methods, approaches, and issues will not be discussed here.

When talking about 'analytic' methods, I mean very roughly those methods used in contemporary mainstream Anglo-American philosophy, such as concept-analysis, arguments and counter-arguments. I will not undertake the ambitious task of defining this family of loosely-related methods, and will assume an intuitive understanding of at least its central members. My aim is to point to the affinity between some central elements in academic philosophy and philosophical counselling, and not to define their nature. I will start by describing two short case studies in which analytic tools were employed.

Case Study 1: The Concept of Choice

A woman in her thirties, an 'eternal student' and an amateur artist, complained of being tortured by her inability to decide which career to pursue. She said that for many years she had been following simultaneously three different paths, unable to decide between them, and hence to fully devote herself to any one of them. Now, being as old as she was, she had to make a decision. A psychologist might have tried to investigate the psychological mechanisms underlying her difficulty, perhaps in terms of childhood traumas, unconscious fears, or conflicting psychological forces. As a philosophical counsellor I focused rather on the *content* of her conception of herself and her problem.

Already at the outset I noticed her tendency to describe her predicament using expressions like 'I don't know what I really want' and 'I don't know what I ought to do.' I pointed out to her that these expressions suggested the following picture. It was as though there was an already given truth concerning what she should do — an internal desire or an objective ought-to-do. And her problem was epistemic: to come to know what that hidden truth was. According to this picture, her problem was not that of *creating* a truth, i.e., of *making* a decision, but rather that of *finding* a ready-made one.

Of course, not everyone who uses these expressions actually conceives of the situation this way. One may use such expressions in a metaphorical sense, as a manner of speaking, without intending their literal meaning. I therefore asked her to elaborate on the experiences and thoughts she had been having with respect to her predicament, and to describe several examples. Through questions and answers we managed to paint a picture, so to speak, of her attitude to her decision problem. It then became clear that she did in fact conceive of herself in the way implied by the expressions she had used: she was waiting for some criterion — an internal or external truth — to tell her what to do. And as much as she waited, no such truth was revealed to her.

I do not mean to say that she thought this way in an explicit way. Nor do I mean that she thought this way 'unconsciously.' The point is that the content of her worldview — as expressed in her thoughts, experiences, hopes, disappointments, plans, etc. — had an overall structure of 'I am waiting for some truth to tell me what to do.' My role as a philosophical counsellor was to help examine her worldview as though it was a theory about herself and her decision-problem. Just as a philosopher examines a scientific or philosophical theory, I focused not on the psychological mechanisms which had brought about her 'theory', but on the 'theory' itself: its internal structure, meaning, and implications, including features which the 'theoretician' herself could not articulate.

Although the process thus far already involved general analytic skills, the next stage was particularly related to analytic philosophy. After her attitude to her decision problem became clear, we examined the concepts of choice and justification. And here we found that her search for an already given truth, for a ready-made criterion that could tell what she ought to do, was hopeless. She reached the conclusion (which has already been pointed out by many philosophers) that any choice must eventually be based on a logically unjustified preference. Why shall I choose X? Because X can lead to Y. But why should I choose Y? Because Y can lead to Z; and so on. Any chain of such reasons must start somewhere, at a point which is, logically speaking, arbitrary and unjustified. The problem was that she had avoided committing herself to any initial preference. Had she decided that she wanted to be rich, or famous, or creative, the choice between alternatives would have turned out to be a merely technical problem. But she wanted a solution without committing herself to any decision.

This was the central insight around which the rest of our counselling sessions centred. The next question I raised was whether she wanted and could make a logically arbitrary commitment concerning her preference, or whether she preferred to remain in her undecided situation. I pointed out to her that she could not have both. One cannot avoid making a logically arbitrary decision *and* receive a justified answer as to what to choose.

At first she was rather scared by the realisation that her only way of solving her decision-problem was to commit herself to a preference not backed by reason. After some discussion, however, she realised that the situation was not as scary as it might have seemed — because if there was no objective truth as to what she should choose, then there was also no possibility of erring. The concept of mistake depends on the concept of truth. Eventually she said that she would rather make the inevitably arbitrary choice than remain in her undecided state.

At this point the initial problem had changed from the question of what she 'should' do to the question of which choice could be most fulfilling for her. We then continued to discuss how she viewed her life and her past experiences of self-fulfilment versus dissatisfaction, trying to clarify the meaning that various kinds of activities and situations could have for her. Our meetings ended after we had clarified the potentials of her various alternatives. Altogether, the counselling took six one-hour sessions.

This case study shows how analytic tools of the sort that can be found in main-stream analytic philosophy may serve a central role in addressing a personal problem. It suggests that analyses of situations, experiences, worldviews, and concepts, can have an important function in philosophical counselling.

Case Study 2: The Concept of Self

A 35 year old man, a technical counsellor, complained of being 'closed up inside himself.' He had difficulties in 'opening up' to other people, and this resulted in distancing himself from others and in tensions with his wife. Here again, an ordinary psychologist would probably try to investigate the psychological factors responsible for his problem, but as a philosophical counsellor I tried to investigate the content of his worldview in relation to his predicament.

The idea of being 'closed up' is of course a metaphor. As I indicated to him, it suggested an internal space inside one which is blocked by some kind of door from the external space. I therefore started by investigating what lay behind this metaphor.

It turned out that it was particularly when deliberating that he felt he was isolating himself from the outside: when having to make a decision, for example, or when investigating new ideas. At those times he secluded himself mentally, hardly communicated, and said nothing about his thoughts even to his wife until the issue was settled. This process could take anywhere from a few hours to several weeks. It irritated his wife and friends, and made them feel that they were excluded from a significant part of him. I asked him what he experienced when he did open himself up on such occasions, or what he would have experienced had he opened up. We went over several examples and learned that he felt, or feared he might feel, being 'swept away' by external pressures. He was concerned that other people's views and expectations would influence him and distort his true thoughts and feelings.

The task now was to organise these findings into a unified picture that would depict his conception of the relationships between himself, his 'block', and others. At first I suggested to him the following picture. It was as though the name of the game was trying to be in control, and he felt that opening up at crucial moments would amount to losing control over himself and succumbing to the control of others. However, this picture did not withstand further scrutiny, because he explained that he was worried not only about others' intervention but also about his own. At times of deliberation he was also worried that his *own* pre-conceptions and prejudices might 'sweep him away' and distort his true thoughts. For this reason, when something was on his mind he was very careful not to impose any deliberate thought or calculated consideration on his spontaneous inner flow. He blocked any potential alien intervention, whether from within or from without, and let things inside him crystallise by themselves at their own pace.

The new picture that emerged was that of, what might be called, an inner oracle. He conceived of himself as having an inner source of truth; not a divine or metaphysical truth — he was not a megalomaniac, but a reasonable person. He wanted to be true to himself, and he felt he was being true to himself only when he let things inside him crystallise spontaneously. Indeed, he said that he rarely had misgivings over past decisions. In this qualified sense he had an oracle inside himself, and when the oracle spoke all others had to be quiet. This was not so much an explicit theory he was holding but rather an interpretation of the structure of his experiences that we developed in retrospect. Notice that it is not an interpretation of psychological proceses and mechanisms, but an analysis of the content of his conception of himself and his environment.

At this point, after the picture had been (tentatively) laid down, we started examining it critically. Our focus was on the concept of the self. I pointed out to the man that the picture implied a division inside himself. On the one hand there was the internal source of truth — presumably unconscious spontaneous processes. On the other hand there were his more conscious, calculated and deliberate thoughts and actions. By wishing to protect the spontaneous crystallisation of unconscious processes he was making the assumption that they expressed his real self, while more calculated and deliberate thoughts were mere alien interference. But, I asked him, how did he know that only the former was his real self, and not the latter, or both? What is it that makes a mental event 'really' his or not 'really' his?

The man responded that this was how he experienced himself: that his personal truth lay hidden underneath the layer of conscious and deliberate thoughts. I told him that even if his experiences told him so, the question still remained if they were veridical. Experiences can be mistaken. A discussion then developed on the issue: what criterion did he have to determine that his inner voice expressed his 'true' self and not only one partial aspect of his 'true' self, or his 'untrue' self, or a mere illusion? Furthermore, in addition to the epistemic

issue, there was also the question of whether his picture made sense: who was this deliberate calculating agent if not himself? Where in all this dualistic picture was he?

The man said he wanted to think about these issues, now that he had new tools for understanding his predicament. Perhaps faithful to his 'true' self he had to make up his mind in a secluded and spontaneous manner. I made it clear that I was not trying to convince him one way or the other, but only raising questions to examine the assumption which he had been following. I told him that if after thinking about these questions he still identified his inner oracle with his real self and believed that it could suffer no external intervention, then communication with his wife and friends would likely continue to be disrupted. The best he could do would be to explain his situation to them. It was a choice he had to make between his oracle, communication with others, and attempting to experiment to see whether the two could live together.

At this point the counselling ended, after two one-hour sessions. Hence, I only managed to direct him towards a conceptual analysis of the self by raising relevant questions, but I did not go with him very far through the steps of such an analysis. I hope he thought about these questions, and reached enlightening conclusions about himself.

For the reader this may be an unsatisfying ending, but I find it instructive. The role of philosophical counselling is not to cure people, but rather to offer them tools for dealing with their predicament. The assumption is that a person is responsible for choosing his or her way of life, and the most a philosophical counsellor can do is help clarify the problem and open new ways of dealing with it. I believe that my counselling helped the man understand how he conceived of himself, see how this self-conception was related to his predicament, and sharpen the alternatives that were open for him.

Philosophy and Psychology in Philosophical Counselling

These are two examples of the use of analysis in philosophical counselling. The role of such analyses is not to dig out hidden psychological causes, but to understand the surface, so to speak, i.e., the landscape of the counsellee's worldview. In fact, philosophical counselling does not at all deal with causal psychological processes, whether psychodynamic, behavioural, or cognitive. The philosopher examines the counsellee's conception of himself and his world as if it were a theory and helps him discern in it a structure, inner connections, assumptions, implications, and applications. In that sense, this type of counselling is philosophical, being comparable to a philosophical analysis of theories. It is not psychological, if we take psychology to be the study of mental and behavioural causal processes and mechanisms.

More specifically, these two examples comprised at least four elements typical of an analytic philosophical investigation. First, an academic philosopher often analyses a given type of phenomenon (knowledge, causation, consciousness, etc.) by trying to find a common structure in its various instances. Similarly, the two case studies involved analysing conceptions of decision-making and of deliberation by finding a common structure in the counsellee's experiences, hopes, fears, etc. Second, as in traditional philosophy, the counselling uncovered hidden assumptions in 'theories' (worldviews): assumptions about the nature of choice and about the nature of the self and the 'true' self. Third, the two cases involved a critical examination of the coherence of a 'theory' (worldview): the coherence of the view that objective criteria can tell what one ought to do, and of the view that the self

resides in the domain of spontaneous unconscious mental processes. Fourth, the two case studies involved conceptual analyses: of choice and justification, of mistake, and of the self.

It can readily be seen that the use of these four elements can be generalised beyond the two case studies. First, philosophical counselling can help to analyse the structure of the counsellee's conception of morality, honour, family relations, relationships at work, emotions and motives, the meaning of life, etc. Second, it can uncover the counsellee's hidden assumptions about human motives in the case of inter-personal problems, about the nature and function of the family in the case of family frictions, about sex-differences and sex-roles in problems with one's spouse, about other people's expectations, about one's capacities, duties, self-worth, and so on. Third, philosophical counselling can examine the coherence of the counsellee's conception of virtually any subject-matter. And fourth, in many cases it may involve analyses of concepts: a conceptual analysis of responsibility in the context of decisions with moral implications; a conceptual analysis of friendship and commitment in the context of clarifying one's expectations in relationships with others; the concept of meaning in the context of a search for a meaningful vocation; the concept of self-respect in the context of coming to terms with one's place in society; various emotional concepts in the context of understanding one's experiences; as well as concepts of value, motivation, God, creativity, and so on.

This is not to say that the analysis of worldviews is all there is to philosophical counselling. Counselling may also require an examination of how well one's worldview corresponds to reality, phenomenological investigations, and even merely listening and giving positive feedback. In some cases there may be little or no room for worldview-analysis. Philosophical worldview-analysis constitutes an important tool for philosophical counselling, but not the only one.

A psychoanalyst might argue that philosophical analysis is useless in treating everyday problems, because philosophical issues are mere expressions of deeper psychological processes. To treat the philosophical facet is only to treat the symptoms, not the real causes. For example, it may be argued that in the second case study, the counsellee's oracle-worldview was only an external expression of deeper psychological difficulties in communicating with others. His idea of letting his inner self crystallise spontaneously might have been a mere rationalisation, a story which he made up retroactively in order to explain to himself why he was behaving the way he was. Similar criticisms may be raised by other approaches to psychological treatment. A behavioural therapist, for example, may argue that worldviews are mere expressions of behavioural processes.

Now, I am not denying that our predicaments are caused by various psychological processes that are often hidden from view. But in many cases these processes are not directly relevant to the treatment of the problem. After all, psychological processes underlie also the scientist's work, the artist's creation, and the philosopher's intellectual investigations. But this hardly means that the way to deal with scientific or aesthetic or philosophical problems is through psychology. I think that it is a safe assumption that people have some capacity to manage their lives in part on the basis of their worldviews. To the extent that they can change themselves, they can do so in terms of their conceptions of themselves and their world. It follows that dealing with their worldviews can have some influence over the way they lead their lives. Admittedly, there is a long road from philosophical understanding to changing one's behaviour, but the same applies to the road from any kind of verbal exchange, whether philosophical or psychological, to changes in behaviour.

Furthermore, in many cases psychological approaches do not really address the content of

the personal predicament at hand. People who come to a counsellor with, say, difficulties in personal relations, in decision-making, or in making their lives meaningful, often want to understand the content and meaning of their predicament. To focus on the causal processes and mechanisms which presumably underlie their problem is to fail to address their desire to understand their world. If I complain to a counsellor that I feel unfulfilled, then normally I am not concerned with psychological mechanisms in my head. I want to deal with my predicament through the understanding of its content and meaning. This is especially clear with respect to existential, ethical, and other normative issues which are very often raised in counselling and therapy. To treat such issues in factual terms, in terms of psychological processes and mechanisms, is to fail to address the counsellee's genuine concerns, and in fact to express disrespect for the counsellee as a thinking agent.

Of course, in many cases psychological approaches too (not to mention physiological) may be appropriate. In some pathological cases, or cases of physiological malfunction, there may even be no room for philosophising. But for the many counsellees who want to deal with their problems by making sense of their life, a psychological treatment cannot replace philosophical counselling.

One may reply that many psychologists already incorporate philosophical elements in their work anyway, especially in various cognitive approaches. And if so, why not let the psychologist do the philosophical counselling? The answer is that philosophical counselling requires skills that are developed in philosophy much more than in psychology. Philosophers are skilled in analysing conceptions of the world, in examining their coherence and logical implications, in uncovering their hidden assumptions, in conceptual analysis, as well as in phenomenological investigations. They can see several steps ahead in a chain of reasoning, and already know the conceptual map of many alternative views. Moreover, they are experienced in discussing existential and ethical issues for which the psychologist has no training whatsoever. Philosophers are the natural address for seeking philosophical help.

Some Open Issues

I have argued so far that analytic tools, of the type used in academic philosophy, are important elements within the framework of philosophical counselling. I have not discussed the nature of that framework as a whole, as well as ways of assessing its positive (or negative) influences on counsellees. The problem is that currently there are no systematic studies on the effects of philosophical counselling. However, such assessments are extremely problematic in the case of every type of therapy and counselling, philosophical or psychological. Relying on personal experience, anecdotal evidence, and intuitions, it seems to me that philosophical counselling can be helpful at least to certain types of people with certain types of (non-pathological) problems [2]. In any case, the issue is not whether a philosophical approach is better or worse than psychological treatment. Philosophical counselling should be seen not as a candidate for replacing psychological therapy, but rather as one important approach to the treatment of personal problems, living side by side with psychological and other approaches.

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NOTES

[1] The only article in English on the topic of which I am aware is S. C. SCHUSTER's 'Philosophical Counselling', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 8, 1991, pp. 219–223. See in German: G. B. ACHENBACH, *Philosophische Praxis* (Köln, Jürgen Dinter) 1987. In Dutch: A. HOOGENDIJK, *Spreekuur Bij Een Filosoof* (Utrecht, Ceen) 1988.

[2] I have no experience in treating pathological cases such as schizophrenia, nor do I know of any other counsellor who treats them in a purely philosophical way. I believe that such cases, in which psychological processes seem to hinder the patient's ability to make free and autonomous decisions, should not be treated without close co-operation with a psychologist, at least until more relevant knowledge is available. (Some philosophical practitioners are also qualified psychologists and psychiatrists, and hence may be qualified to treat pathologies.) More generally, the issue of the boundaries of the applicability of philosophical counselling awaits further studies.