Janet Staab On Philosophical Coaching as Engaged Pedagogy

Samuel Zinaich, Jr., Ph.D.

Samuel Zinaich, Jr. is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Purdue University Calumet in Hammond, IN. Professor Zinaich has published articles on John Locke's (1632-1704) moral theory, abortion, virtue theory, professional ethics, philosophical counseling, and he is co-editor of *Ethics for the Professions* from Wadsworth/Thomas Learning, 2003. His new book, *John Locke's Moral Revolution: from Nature Law to Moral Relativism*, was published by University Press of America in 2006. E-Mail Address: Zinaich@calumet.purdue.edu

Abstract: In this essay, I critically analyze Janet Staab's view of engaged pedagogy, as a basis for philosophical coaching. I argue that Staab's approach fails to address two major issues faced by counselors within a counseling context. First, Staab's position does not appreciate the need for an appropriate psychical distance between coach and client, one needed to understand the client's problems. Second, although Staab addresses the need to handle conflicts that may arise between coach and client, her viewpoint does not recognize the value of how it is possible to empower the client even if the choices and outlooks of the client clash with the coaches own values.

There are three parts to Staab's paper. The first part discusses counseling as a form of coaching. The second part discusses why philosophical coaching is preferable to philosophical counseling. The final part examines the nature of philosophical coaching as a form of engaged pedagogy. In this paper I will consider these three parts in turn. I will be quite brief in describing the first two; the third is the most controversial and the most important for our understanding of the nature of philosophical coaching. After summarizing Staab's views, I will consider three minor and two major objections.

Staab on Coaching

Staab identifies her approach to counseling as a form of *coaching* because of two reasons. The first reason is that the practice of coaching has a specific focus, one that identifies the concrete needs and goals of the client. Staab adds that without this focus, a philosophically trained counselor, seduced by his own philosophical tendency to generalize, may be tempted to look beyond what the client actually needs.

The second reason turns upon the average individuals understanding of philosophy. As she correctly points out, there is often a common misunderstanding about what philosophy is and what philosophers do. Employing the notion of coaching as a form of counseling side steps the obvious mistaken view of philosophy and, ultimately, will serve as a better foundation to establish the fiduciary relationship between counselor and client.

Philosophical Coaching v. Philosophical Counseling

Although there are many similarities between philosophical coaching and philosophical counseling, Staab raises some interesting problems with the approach of philosophical counseling, problems allegedly that philosophical coaching does not have. Staab raises three issues. The first issue is that philosophical counseling is too closely allied to the traditional methodologies of philosophy. This is problematic because although a philosopher is trained to use the method of philosophical analysis, graduate school does not prepare students for the practical context needed for counseling situations.

The other issue follows on the heal of the first problem. As with any established academic discipline, its members are wedded to the values of the discipline (including the jargon associated with those values). This applies no less to the philosopher who now practices as a philosophical counselor. The problem, as Staab puts it, is that the values philosophers' employ cannot be easily translated into a counseling context. As an example of this problem, Staab recounts one incident with a colleague. Apparantly, her colleague was unable to articulate to one of his students that a good philosophical method brackets emotion and personal stakes for the sake of clarity and rigor. Instead, he was only able to write: "You put too much of yourself into this paper."

The third issue concerns the tendency of philosophical counselors to be advocates of one single method of counseling. According to Staab, this is a drawback because of the real situation that no traditional method employed by a philosophical counselor will be effective. The example she employs is taken from her own experience. According to Staab, one of her clients was able to make a break through without benefiting from any one of the methods she employs in the counseling context. Instead, as Staab points out, she was more of catalyst or an excuse to think for her client. Ultimately, her client was able to make a break through because she was able "to tap into her areas of strength and connect them positively to an area of vulnerability."

Philosophical Coaching as Engage Pedagogy

The third part of Staab's paper is dedicated to describing her teaching model for coaching. It is called "engaged pedagogy." This term refers to a style of teaching in which the teacher and the students are active participants in the learning process. According to Staab, however, there are four preconditions that must be met before the counselor can benefit from this style of teaching.

The first precondition points to the requirements of the coach. Although a certain amount of academic preparation is needed, engaged pedagogy requires something else. It requires that, before the coach can empower her client, the coach must be committed to her own growth and self-actualization.

Reciprocity is the focus of the second precondition. According to engaged pedagogy, the coach cannot assume a traditional hierarchical learning process, one that models the learning process on the parental model of parent and child. Instead, engaged pedagogy emphases "a

mutual, non-hierarchical learning process," where the roles of the coach and client are "fluid and dynamic alternating between activity and receptivity."

Although the coach assumes a non-traditional role in the coach and client relationship, there are two qualifications. As I gather from Staab's essay, employing a midwife analogy, a coach must be able to tell when a physician's or psychologist's intervention is required. Also, the coach must also be able to understand important social structures that may impact the coach relationship, structures like gender, race, economic class, sexual orientation, religious, and political preference.

The third precondition of engaged pedagogy also challenges the traditional role of the teacher and counselor. Whereas the traditional role brings to mind the orderly rows of desks in a classroom setting or the image of a client recounting his relationship with his mother while laying upon a couch, engaged pedagogy designs coaching around the environment the client is most comfortable in. Staab's examples are as surprising as they are interesting. Coaching can take place in a counseling setting, but it can take place while walking with a client, on a treadmill, lifting weights, doing yoga or even dancing. Now that's dedication to the client!

The final precondition concerns taking into account what the client wants from a coaching session. As Staab points out, in general, clients do not want therapy. Instead, most, if not all, clients want something more meaningful from a coaching session. They want a session that contains information that is healing and information that addresses "the connections between what they are learning and their overal life experiences."

Objections to Staab's Essay

I will begin with the minor concerns I have with Staab's paper. My first minor concern is with Staab's assessment of philosophical counseling. First, I think Staab correctly points out that

a degree from a traditional graduate school in philosophy does not prepare someone for a counseling context. Unfortunately, I do not understand why this makes philosophical coaching look better than philosophical counseling? Certainly, any (traditionally trained) philosopher who expresses an interest in philosophical counseling or philosophical coaching must understand that there is a practical aspect that may not be present in classroom or lecture setting.

Next, Staab maintains that the philosopher who practices philosophical counseling is also at a disadvantage because the philosophical counselor must use, as she calls them, philosophical culture values that cannot easily translate into a counseling context. This is an interesting problem, but I think there is an ambiguity involve. On the one hand, Staab could mean that the concepts that philosophers learn cannot or perhaps do not lend themselves to be easily translatable into terms for a counseling context. If this is what she means, then Staab has raised an important problem because it would mean that philosophical counseling is an unsuitable method for a counseling context. But there is another interpretation. What she could mean is that philosopher's in general cannot translate the terms of their trade into concepts understandable to a non-academic audience. If this is what she means (and I think this is Staab's position), then this is not a problem with philosophy or philosophical counseling, but with the philosopher. But notice that this point does not disqualify philosophical counseling. Instead, it disqualifies only those individuals who are unable to translate difficult philosophical concepts into concepts usable in a counseling context.

The last minor concern I have for Staab's critique of philosophical counseling is the tendency for philosophical counselors to privilege one counseling method over other competing methods. Staab makes two recommendations. First, it is important not to limit oneself to just one method because if we do, we may not be able to meet the needs of our client. We must be

able to match up a psychological method that fits to the client. Second, by not limiting ourselves to one position, we leave open the possibility of the example Staab describes, the example where the client, in a sense, cures herself.

I have two concerns. The first one I take from Ran Lahav.[1] He points out the very serious issue of using a psychological method that one is not trained to use. I take his point to be correct. Unfortunately, Staab recommends such an approach and by implication, her position leads to the conclusion that there are no serious issues associated with using a method with no formal training. The other problem is that Staab argues that by leaving ourselves open to use any method, we leave open the possibility of the client healing herself. I don't think that is a virtue of such a position because even if a philosophical counselor limits herself to only one method, the possibility is still open that the client may end up curing herself.

I will now turn to the major concerns I have for Staab's paper. I have two. My focus is on the last part of her paper, and specifically her discussion about reciprocity as the second precondition of engaged pedagogy. Staab's recommends that a mutual, non-hierarchical learning process is needed for an engaged pedagogy. However, I think the following problem emerges. On a non-engaged model, one where the coach is sitting on the sidelines listening to the client, the coach or counselor can maintain an appropriate psychical distance. This is not a distance that puts the counselor out of gear with the practical needs of the client. Rather, it allows the counselor to maintain an impersonal relationship with his client. Now I should not be taken to mean the impersonal character of science, where the scientist excludes the personal factor to guarantee the validity of his results. Instead, it is more like a relationship that has been filtered.

[1] Ran Lahav, "A Conceptual Framework for Philosophical Counseling: Worldview Interpretation." In Ran Lahav and Maria da Venza Tillmanns (eds.), *Essay on Philosophical Counseling* (Lanham, New York and London: University of Press of America, Inc., 1995).

That is, it is relationship in which the counselor can remain disinterested and yet benevolent at the same time.

But, now, here's the problem with engaged pedagogy: it disables the filter and lets in whatever information will come in, whether that information is appropriate or not. Thus, it fails to maintain the suitable distance that is needed to understand the client's problem. But even more than that, engaged pedagogy risks losing the perspective needed to tell when the intervention of a medical or mental health clinician is the best course of action, a risk too plain to be blinked at.

Here's my final objection. To Staab's credit, the importance of handling conflicts between the coach and client is discussed. In fact, as Staab makes clear, conflicts between the coach and client must be addressed as soon as they arise. Otherwise, the relationship will sink beyond hope of salvage. Although on this issue she is splendidly right, I still have the following problem. I am left with the impression that all that is needed to solve the conflict is to avoid becoming blind in favor of our own experience. But even if this is true, we are still left with a conflict and no recommendation of how to resolve the conflict. Additionally, what is also needed is an analysis of what kinds of conflicts that can arise in a counseling context, and how it is possible to empower the client even if the problem conflicts with the coaches own choices or outlooks.[2] In addition to all of this, what is needed is a discussion about whether the basic values of the client, like the clients first order choices and attitudes, are fair game to challenge. Joseph

[2] For an excellent discussion of this point, see Joseph Kupfer and Luann Klatt, "Client Empowerment and Counselor Integrity." In John Rowan and Samuel Zinaich (eds.), *Ethics for the Professions* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2003).

Kupfer and Luann Klatt make a powerful argument that the basic values of the client, values used to make first order decisions, is strictly off limits.[3]

In conclusion, Staabe brings forwards some very practical ideas and concerns for a counseling context. Throughout her paper she underscores the importance of the client and the client's needs. Having said that, my thoughts are that engaged pedagogy, as a basis for philosophical coaching, raises more problems than it solves, and as result, must be viewed with a very suspicious and cautious eye.

[3] Ibid, 312-314.