The Central Value of Philosophical Counseling

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ABSTRACT: The title of this paper is deliberately ambiguous. It could refer either to the central value that philosophical counseling has for philosophy in general, or else it could refer to something (such as personal autonomy, or personal well-being) that philosophical counselors believe to be of value, and that they are able to help their clients pursue. In fact, this paper will be addressing both of these topics in order to demonstrate the links that hold between them, and, in so doing, will attempt to further elucidate the nature of philosophical counseling itself.

Socrates as a Philosophical Counselor.

Contemporary philosophical counselors often trace their lineage back to Socrates, who through the elenchus attempted to draw out from his protagonists their views concerning such issues as the nature of justice, the nature of knowledge, or the correct political organization of a polis.[1] Unfortunately, Socrates' interlocutors frequently retired in frustration, having discovered through their conversation with him that they were not at all sure of the meanings of the concepts that they had previously believed they understood. Luckily, contemporary philosophical counselors do not focus on the potential for bafflement that philosophical discourse provides. Instead, they focus on the benefits that it may provide to those who engage their services. In this vein philosophical counseling is viewed as a Socratic drawing out of the knowledge that the client already

[1] See *The collected dialogues of Plato: Including the letters*, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (eds.) , Lane Cooper et al (tr.), with introduction and prefatory notes (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press 1963.)

possess, and that may be revealed through the careful questioning of a well-trained practitioner of the elenchic method.[2]

Yet viewing philosophical counseling in this light (where the counselor takes the place of Socrates, and the client of his interlocutor) may be misleading. This is because it appears to commit one to an implausible Platonic view of both the nature of knowledge and the process by which it may be acquired. If one is more careful, then, one will make no claims about the ability of philosophical counseling to reveal the client's knowledge of matters that are external to him, as Socrates enabled (for example) Meno's slave boy to (re)discover the principles of geometry. Instead, philosophical counseling may be better regarded as being a means to increase the client's self-knowledge; to help her clarify which of her values she really holds dear, which are in conflict, and which she may jettison after reflecting upon them carefully.[3] However, the difference between Socrates as a seeker after truth and the philosophical counselor as a professional who helps his or her client map out his or her own world-view in order to address particular problems that he or she is concerned with should not be overstated. This is because Socrates may be seen as being located on the "critical" end of Lahav's "critical/descriptive" spectrum, on which counselors who are critical of their client's worldviews may still be regarded as

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[2] The most famous example of this is, of course, Socrates' questioning of the slave boy in *Meno*, W. K. C. Guthrie (tr.) (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merril, 1971.)

[3] For excellent examples of this benefit of philosophical counseling see Will A.J.F. Gerbers, "Philosophical Practice, Pastoral Work, and Suicide Survivors", in Ran Lahav and Maria Da Venza Tillman (eds.) *Essays on Philosophical Counseling* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995): 153-158.

engaging in counseling.[4] Moreover, even though Socrates may engage in more criticism of his interlocutors' views than contemporary philosophical counselors do, he still treats their views as being central to the dialogue, and it is their responses to his questions that guide their conversation.

If the facilitation of self-examination is central to philosophical counseling, then the view that Socrates engaged in this practice is an apt one—and, indeed, is one that is almost universally shared by the theorists and practitioners of philosophical counseling. However, Socrates' role as an early counselor often seems to be invoked not to elucidate the nature of such counseling, but, instead, to endow this emerging profession with a measure of philosophical respectability. Phrases such as "philosophical counseling has a respectable pedigree dating back to Socrates…" and "Philosophical counseling may trace its origins back to the beginning of philosophy…" are scattered throughout both the academic literature on philosophical counseling and the promotional literature of the counselors themselves.[5] This is unfortunate, for two reasons. Firstly, such a superficial link to Socrates overlooks the advantages that may be gained with respect to understanding philosophical counseling through a close examination of Socrates' aims and methods. Secondly—and more importantly for this paper—by focusing solely on

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[4] Ran Lahav, "A Conceptual Framework for Philosophical Counseling: Worldview Interpretation", in Lahav and Tillmans (eds.) (1995): 19-23.

[5] The above quotations are from the webpage of the British Society of Consultant Philosophers (http://members.aol.com/timlebon/scp.htm March 12th, 2000), and Christian Tyler, "Socrates Joins the Board", *Financial Times*, June 1998, Weekend section, 4.

Socrates the advocates and practitioners of philosophical counseling overlook the ways in which philosophical counseling draws on (and is related to) mainstream philosophy.

Philosophical Counseling and Mainstream Philosophy

At first sight, philosophical counseling appears to be divorced from the mainstream of academic philosophy. Philosophical counselors "hang out their shingles" and solicit clients; academic philosophers are (typically) in the ivory tower, only making occasional forays out into the public eye through the medium of late-night PBS specials or through interviews in intellectual magazines. Philosophical counselors are engaged in helping particular individuals (their clients), whereas academic philosophers do not focus on the particular problems of individual persons but upon more abstract difficulties. Furthermore—and perhaps most galling of all to philosophical counselors—academic philosophers often seem to view philosophical counseling as not being "real" philosophy at all, but more perhaps a species of social work, or an unsophisticated variant of psychotherapy.

It is, perhaps, to combat these misconceptions of the relationship between academic philosophy and philosophical counseling that philosophical counselors are so fond of invoking the shade of Socrates in order to draw themselves more into the mainstream fold. While this is a laudable aim, it overlooks many other ways in which philosophical counseling is already engaged in the practice of mainstream philosophy; ways that demonstrate that the supposed divide between academic philosophy and philosophical counseling is illusory.

The essence of philosophical counseling is the engagement of the client in Socratic dialogue to enable her to come to understand her own world-view, and through

this to address difficulties that she may encounter in her life.[6] However, believing that this model of philosophical counseling will lend itself only to an analogy with the methods of Socrates and is divorced from other methods of the philosophical mainstream is to take an impoverished view of the practice. Philosophical counseling draws on many more of the techniques of mainstream academic philosophy than this analogy gives it credit for.

An obvious example of this lies in the potential for philosophical counselors to use the casuistical method in order to facilitate the client's recognition and development of her own world-view.[7] Clients are often concerned with whether or not a certain course of action is morally acceptable. For example, a client may approach a counselor in order to inquire whether or not she should procure an abortion. Given that it is not a counselor's responsibility to provide "right answers" to such questions, but rather to help the client come to understand what she believes the right thing to do is, the counselor may decide to address this issue casuistically. She would then outline to the client a set of scenarios in which similar moral dilemmas are faced, and ask her what she believes the right choice to be in those cases—and why she believes this. For example, the counselor may begin by asking the client why she believes killing to be wrong. If the client responds that killing causes pain, then the counselor may proceed by asking her whether killing someone painlessly in his sleep is wrong. If the client believes that it is, then clearly she does not believe that the wrongness of killing lies solely in the pain that it

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[6] For a discussion of this see Gerbers (1995)

[7] An excellent example of this is offered by Jason Kawall, "An Introductory Exercise in Articulating Values" *APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy*, Fall 1999, Vol. 99, No. 1.

may cause to the victim. Eventually, the counselor may elucidate from the client that she believes that killing is wrong because it takes away from the killed entity the potential for a certain kind of life. With this in hand, the counselor may then more directly address the client's own beliefs concerning the morality of abortion.[8] Alternatively, the counselor may elucidate from the client that she believes that it is wrong only to kill an entity that possesses certain kinds of capacities at the moment of its death. Again, this information may be used by the counselor to help the client reflect more acutely upon her own views concerning the morality of abortion.[9]

Of course, in both of these cases a counselor must be careful not to use either the casuistical method nor the *elenchus* in such a way as to "lead" her client into making the decision that the counselor believes to be correct. However, the idea of casuistry was not introduced into this discussion in order to provide practical guidelines for philosophical counselors. Rather, it was introduced in order to demonstrate that the practice of philosophical counseling utilizes methods that are also at the heart of the practice of academic philosophy, in order to show that the two are perhaps more closely related than is often thought. That the casuistical method is of value to both philosophical counselors and academic philosophers leads to a second similarity between them; that they both aim

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[8] This is the approach of Don Marquis, "Why Abortion is Immoral", in Thomas Mappes and Jane S. Zembaty, (eds.) *Social Ethics: Morality and Social Policy* (New York: McGraw Hill Publishing Co., 1992): 27-32.

[9] This is the approach of Mary Ann Warren, "On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion", in Thomas Mappes and Jane S. Zembaty (eds.) *Social Ethics: Morality and Social Policy* (New York: McGraw Hill Publishing Co. 1987): 14-21.

to increase their clients' self-awareness and critical thinking, where the clients of academic philosophers are understood to be their students. On this view, when an academic philosopher uses the Socratic method in her classroom in order to encourage her students to think more clearly, she is engaging in a form of philosophical counseling, in that she is encouraging her students to think more critically about their own world-views.[10]

An alternative way in which a philosophical counselor may help a client come to better understand her own worldview is through utilizing a contractarian approach to counseling—again, a technique for counseling drawn from the practice of mainstream philosophy. An excellent example of this approach is Kenn Cust's example of a school raffle.[11] The person who had the winning ticket had traded it with another prior to the draw. The organizer of the raffle was thus faced with the problem of who to award the prize to. Cust innovatively suggests that a contractarian approach would be of use in this situation. The organizer of the raffle should be asked by his philosophical counselor what rules he would have introduced for his raffle had he been aware that this situation might occur. In this way the counselor not only aids her client in making a decision based upon his own values, but also does so in such a way that his judgment is not clouded by the emotional distress caused by the immediate problem at hand.

In addition to this, Cust's use of the contractarian approach in philosophical counseling is also indicative of how this practice may interact with academic philosophy.

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[10] I thank John Zavodny for bringing this point to my attention.

[11] Kenneth Cust, in a paper given at the ASPCP meeting held in conjunction with the APA Central Division meeting in New Orleans, May 1999.

In using the contractarian method Cust's counselor would ask her client to make his decision on the basis of his own values and worldview. In order to enter into such a hypothetical contract, then, one would have to possess a fairly substantive motivational set with which to guide one's decisions. Drawing on the contractarian approach to philosophical counseling's recognition of this, one may develop an objection to the Rawlsian contractarian position that requires persons to make decisions from behind a veil of ignorance, devoid of all knowledge of their personal characteristics.[12] This highlights the second way in which philosophical counseling is of central value to the mainstream of academic philosophy: Through their use of standard philosophical methodology, philosophical counselors are able not only to help their clients address their personal problems, but they are also able to productively interact with the abstract problems addressed by mainstream philosophy.

The practice of philosophical counseling, then, is of central value to mainstream philosophy in two main ways; it shares its methodology, and, because of this, is able to contribute to academic discussions through offering substantive insights into current debates.

What Does Philosophical Counseling Aim to Achieve?

With this discussion of the ways in which philosophical counseling holds value for philosophy in general in hand, it is now time to turn to a discussion of the second way in which the title of this paper may be interpreted: What value does philosophical counseling pursue?

It is tempting to argue that the obvious primary value that a philosophical counselor pursues is that of personal autonomy, in particular, the enhancement of the

[12] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996): 24f, 305.

autonomy of the client. The reason for this is obvious. It is widely agreed by philosophers of action that in order to possess autonomy with respect to either her desires or her actions a person must have reflected upon the reasons that she has for desiring or acting in a particular way.[13] To the extent that philosophical counseling enables clients to reflect more effectively upon their desires and their reasons for action, it follows that philosophical counseling serves to enhance personal autonomy.

Yet although it is tempting to claim that the main value of philosophical counseling lies in its ability to enhance the personal autonomy of those persons who engage in it as clients (especially since personal autonomy is valued so highly in the Western societies in which philosophical counseling is becoming prevalent)[14] to do so would open the practice to charges of parochialism. This is because the claim that personal autonomy is of great value is itself open to such criticism. Feminists, for example, argue that autonomy is a peculiarly male value,[15] while communitarians argue

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[13] See, for example, Harry G. Frankfurt, "The Faintest Passion", *Proceedings and Addresses 0f the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 66, No.3 (1992a). Reprinted in Harry G. Frankfurt (ed.) *Necessity, Volition and Love* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995): 95-107. See also Gerald Dworkin, "Autonomy and Behavior Control", *Hastings Center Report* 6 (February 1976): 23-28.

[14] For a discussion of the geographic location of most philosophical counselors, see Lahav and Tillmanns (1995) "Introduction", lx-xxv, xii-xiv.

[15] For a discussion of this point see John Christman, "Feminism and Autonomy", in Dana E. Bushnell (ed.) *Nagging Questions: Feminist Ethics in Everyday Life* (Boston, MA: Rowman and Littlefield, Inc., 1995): 17-40.

that it is primarily a liberal value.[16] Indeed, some philosophical counselors are themselves suspicious of the claims made in favor of personal autonomy.[17]

However, it should be noted that one may continue to claim that the enhancement of personal autonomy is a central value of philosophical counseling *without* incurring charges of parochialism provided that one does not also claim that its enhancement through philosophical counseling is regarded as being *intrinisically* valuable. Instead, one may argue that the enhancement of a client's personal autonomy through philosophical counseling is of value insofar as this also serves to enhance her well being. And, if this is so, then to the extent that feminists and communitarians are led to regard philosophical counseling as being irrelevant to their concerns owing to its emphasis on personal autonomy, their objections may be seen to be unfounded.

Prior to demonstrating that personal autonomy is of primarily instrumental value in this way, it would be useful to distinguish between two different senses of "autonomy". Although both of these senses of "autonomy" reflect its etymology as 'self-rule" or "self-law", they reflect their etymological roots very differently. The first sense of "autonomy" is, of course, Kantian. Here, a person is autonomous to the extent that she deliberately conforms her actions to the universal dictates of the moral law.[18] In this

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[16] See, for example, Charles Taylor, "Atomism", in Akis Kontos (ed.), *Powers, possessions and freedoms: Essays in honour of C. B. McPherson* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979.)

[17] See Dries Boele, "Training of a Philosophical Counselor", in Lahav and Tillmanns (eds.) (1995); 35-47; esp. 45-46.

[18] Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, tr. Mary Gregor, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991): 381-382.

Kantian sense of autonomy a person is heteronomous (i.e., nonautonomnous) to the extent that she acts out of inclination or on the basis of her own desires. This is because these desires will not be an essential part of the person as a rational agent, but, instead, will be contingent upon her psychology and her upbringing. The second sense of "autonomy" is more Millian in character. Here, a person is autonomous with respect to her actions if it is she, and not a third party, who is in control of them. On this Millian sense of autonomy, unlike its Kantian counterpart, a person may be autonomous if she acts on her desires, provided that these desires have not been induced into her by a third party, through techniques such as hypnosis, deception, or manipulation.[19]

Given these two senses of "autonomy" it appears that the philosophical counselor is most concerned with enhancing autonomy in the second, Millian, sense of this concept. This is because philosophical counselors often try to aid persons in making decisions (or discoveries) about what it is that *they* really want to do, what *their* personal value-system or world-view really consists of. Since the approach of philosophical counselors thus focuses on the desires of the individual client in question in order to enhance her autonomy, it is not an approach that is aimed at enhancing autonomy in the Kantian sense of the term. This is because the Kantian sense of autonomy emphasizes not the desires of the individual, but, instead, an austere and universal rationality.

In enhancing her client's autonomy in the Millian sense of this concept, a philosophical counselor is attempting to facilitate her client's deciding which of her first-

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[19] For a discussion of this see J. S. Mill, *On Liberty* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co. 1978): 26-29, and Gerald Dworkin (1976).

order desires are most truly hers; which best reflect her own values, rather than those of others. Thus, if through philosophical counseling a woman comes to realize that on her own values her desire to enter law school is not as "unfeminine" as she has been brought up to believe, her autonomy will have been enhanced, for her life will now be more under her own control and less under the control of the social mores into which she has been socialized.[20] However, this is not to say that in this case the woman's philosophical counseling was successful solely because it enhanced this woman's autonomy. Rather, it seems more plausible to claim that the counseling was a success because it led to the woman's life going better now that she is able to see more clearly what career paths she wishes to pursue. The enhancement of a person's autonomy, then, need not be pursued for its own sake. Instead, philosophical counselors may pursue it because through its enhancement and subsequent exercise persons are more likely to enjoy a greater degree of personal well being. And, if this is so and the central value pursued by philosophical counselors is the well being of their clients, then it will be an attractive practice even to those who do not place a high value on personal autonomy per se.

Conclusion.

It was noted at the start of this paper that its title was ambiguous, and that it would address two central theses; a promissory note that has now been (at least partially) paid off. Firstly, some indication has been given of the value that philosophical counseling has for mainstream academic philosophy, a value that is often overlooked even by those interested in philosophical counseling, who frequently focus on its Socratic roots at the

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[20] This example is taken from Marilyn Friedman, "Autonomy and the Split-Level Self", *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XXIV, No. 1 (1986): 19-35, especially 25-26.

expense of its current relevance to contemporary mainstream academic philosophy. Secondly, it has been argued that even though philosophical counseling may serve to enhance the personal autonomy of the clients, this does not commit its advocates to claiming that personal autonomy is the central value pursued by this practice. Thus, philosophical counseling should be of interest even to those who are suspicious of the value of autonomy. Rather than being the "poor relation" to academic philosophy, then, philosophical counseling should be viewed as being wholly within the mainstream of the profession.