Philosophical Counseling:

Understanding the Unique Self and Other through Dialogue

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Abstract: Many philosophical counselors seem to be counselors who use or point to philosophical texts or use abstract indeed logical or rational methods when working with a client. I want to introduce the idea of a counseling philosopher, who uses the client's own concrete experiences as the basis for philosophizing with the client about the nature of the client's dilemma - using 'the between' (Buber) as that special creative space where one employs the art of philosophizing to the unique situation. Otherwise, the particularity of that client gets subsumed under theory or methods, much like what has happened in psychology and which gave rise to Achenbach's criticisms of psychology/psychiatry. The dialogical of which Buber and Friedman speak is the give and take between client and counseling philosopher of understanding and expanding perceptions confirmed through the actual relationship. Philosophy as an art (and not a method) helps us restore the trust Buber talks about which allows us to engage the world directly and not through categories of thought grounded in psychological or philosophical texts and theories.

Over the years, I have been developing a theory of philosophical counseling and teaching. Even though both are distinct practices, both philosophical counseling and philosophical teaching deal with mindful learning and thinking.

The philosophical counseling movement started during the early nineteen eighties in Europe as well as the United States. It seemed to be a *Zeitgeist* phenomenon.[1] The time was ripe, and a number of people around the world, who had a strong interest in philosophy "suddenly" had the brain wave, why not apply philosophy to everyday life? Some present-day philosophical counselors recounted how they wanted to study philosophy precisely for its merits with respect to everyday life and how disappointed

[1] For a more extensive history, see Maria daVenza Tillmanns, Philosophical Counseling and Teaching: "Holding the Tension" in a Dualistic World, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Dissertation Services, 1998) Chapter 1, "The Philosophical Counseling Movement."

they were to find out that academic philosophy seemed to have stripped philosophy of its application to lived reality. Academic philosophy seemed to be just that, academic. Where did the philosophy of Socrates go, the philosophy of the market place? The idea behind the philosophical counseling movement was to take philosophy out of the ivory tower and let her live in the world of the everyday.

Philosophical counseling is somewhat more established in Europe and Israel than here in the US. Dr. Gerd Achenbach in Germany is said to have started what has become the movement of Philosophical Counseling around the early eighties. Shortly after, Adriaan Hoogendijk in the Netherlands picked it up. Hoogendijk received a lot of publicity across Europe. Achenbach's idea came out of the anti-psychiatry movement, the notion being that it is not enough to listen to people's stories for the sole purpose of discovering symptoms. By itself, this may be too narrow an approach, and fails to do justice to a person's story. In contrast, the philosophical counselors are interested in people's stories in order to get a better idea of the bigger picture. Perhaps, the bigger picture points to life dilemmas around values, loyalties, trust, etc.

Right now there are probably as many interpretations of what philosophical counseling is as there are philosophical counselors. On a scale of different counseling professions, one may think of psychotherapy as dealing predominantly with a person's psychological and emotive make-up, R.E.T. (Rational Emotive Therapy) as combining the rational and emotive, and philosophical counseling as focusing predominantly on the rational by concentrating on people's worldviews -- their conceptual understanding of the world (Schefczk).[2]

I, however, do not understand philosophical counseling to be mainly focused on the rational. For me philosophical counseling is grounded in the notion that life is

[2] Michael Schefczk, "Philosophical Counseling as a Critical Examination of Life-Directing Conceptions," in Essays on Philosophical Counseling, eds., Ran Lahav and Maria daVenza Tillmanns (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995) 78.

inherently problematic, and cannot be reduced to problems (whether psychological, emotional, or rational) which need to be solved and overcome in order to live life more or less successfully. I'm not ready to throw the baby out with the bath water, and discount everything other counseling professions have achieved in helping people, and relieving people's suffering. But life cannot ever be problem free, and was never meant to be. Life is inherently problematic and cannot be reduced to a set of problems which need to be solved. Life is not meant to be solved; it is meant to be lived! Philosophical counseling, for me therefore, approaches life as a whole and not as individual problems. Moreover, to look at philosophical counseling from a dialogical perspective (as understood by Martin Buber) means that it focuses on the interaction between people, rather than concentrating on what happens within a person (psychologically, emotionally or rationally) and trying to solve these personal issues.

My interest focuses on Buber's notion of the dialogical, which implies acknowledging the other's otherness. Buber's notion of other is diametrically opposed to the post-modern notion of other. In post-modernism, otherness refers to that which has been exiled and excluded from same. It refers to that which is the denial of "I." For Buber, the other refers to that which is "not-I."[3] The difference lies in the fact that Buber's notion of the "not-I," is rooted in trust, whereas the post-modern notion of denial and exclusion is rooted in distrust. With the collapse, if you will, of modernity and its grand narratives of progress, distrust prevailed and the notion of “otherness” was contaminated (by distrust).

Hermeneutics, the art or science of interpretation, developed quite differently in Germany and the Netherlands. German hermeneutics originated in German Lutheran theology, which was focused on understanding fixed texts, essentially Bible texts through the experiencing subject. Luther was also known as one of the founders of modernity. In

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[3] Martin Buber, I and Thou, trans., Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958)

Holland, however, a different kind of hermeneutics developed, one that came out of the Socratic tradition. Roughly speaking, one could postulate that the German tradition led to the later concept that we need to overcome the notion of alienation caused by the limits of our contexts or "horizons" as so-called "fixed texts," in order to gain a deeper understanding of the world. The Dutch tradition, on the other hand, led to the concept of "becoming familiar" with a forever- changing world.[4] This approach seemed to imply that our contexts were not quite as fixed as the Germans imagined them to be. Since horizons are perpetually changing, we need not make our understanding of the world and other people conditional on overcoming them first.

The Western tradition stresses the need for overcoming alienation by way of trying to understand the other's context. In contrast, Buber emphasizes the need to enter into dialogue with the other, for in the process of engaging the other we can meet the other *in* his/her context. We need not try to understand the other's context *prior* to interacting with him/her. That would, in fact, be an act of distrust. Buber's idea flies in the face of much of psychology and sociology, which stress the importance of developing structures for understanding. Philosophy, on the other hand, engages the world directly and develops structures of understanding (which are themselves constantly subject to change) as a result of the engagement. One is quickly reminded how "in the beginning there was philosophy," and from that the sciences developed.

In this way, philosophical counseling is also in complete contrast to traditional counseling, where counselors will listen to their clients through relatively fixed structures of thought such as DSM IV, for instance. Philosophers are more interested in the whole story, as a story, as an eyewitness account of life. What does this person's account tell us about life? For the philosophical counselor, the emphasis is on life as lived as opposed to

[4] For more on the difference between the German and Dutch tradition of hermeneutics, see Maria daVenza Tillmanns, Philosophical Counseling and Teaching: "Holding the Tension" in a Dualistic World, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Dissertation Services, 1998) Chapter 1, "The Philosophical Counseling Movement."

the self. For Buber also, the emphasis is on engaging life directly, rather than trying to interpret life through categories of thought.

Buber's notion of the "not I" or “Thou” maintains the trust vis-à-vis the other's otherness. Trust serves the purpose of accepting the claim the other has on the “I,” and responding to that claim. While holding one's own ground, one can respond and "meet" the other. This notion of having a claim on each other is the basis for human interaction (which includes the limits and limitations of our contexts). Claim does not refer to a sense of demand, or expectation that one has to live up to. It refers to understanding and responding to our human-ness.[5]

What is important to realize is that this notion of claim is something that can only be understood implicitly. Take for instance the messages of oracles, and demi-gods such as Hermes, Eros, and Esu (the African Hermes) that are scrambled, and on the face of it incoherent. Their meaning lies beyond the merely rational. They can only be understood implicitly. More importantly, it depends on the receiver of the message to understand the implicit meaning and claim inherent in the message. It is dependent on the uniqueness of the listener how the message will be understood and interpreted. How the message is interpreted is dependent on the interaction between the message and the listener.

This is also where phronesis (which in Ancient Greek means to understand, but also to decide) comes into play. Phronesis is needed to be able to implicitly understand the meaning and claim a certain message coming from the other may have. These messages have no single meaning that can be rationally understood by anyone. However, when Buber speaks of the trust needed to understand the human claim placed upon him (and which cannot be understood in a context of distrust), this trust is not something that can be taken for granted. Buber does not speak of blind trust. Trust is a hard-fought

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[5] For a more extensive discussion, see Maria daVenza Tillmanns, Philosophical Counseling and Teaching: “Holding the Tension” in a Dualistic World, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Dissertation Services, 1998) Chapter 2, “Buber’s and Friedman’s Philosophies on the Art of Relating.”

battle. It takes continuous effort to understand the other while holding one's own ground. This is also the basis for Buber's philosophical anthropology, which speaks to the human dynamic of distancing and relating in order to be able to enter into a unique relation with a unique other.

To distrust the other, however, also means to distrust the claim the other has on oneself. Distrust robs one of the distance, which is necessary for any true relating to take place. Distrust distrusts the gap between self and other and uses rationality as a means to bridge this gap. Rationally, one tries to make sense of the other, so that one can now safely trust him; I trust him, *because*…

Instead of struggling to establish trust, we appeal to rationality and reason to establish it for us. Trust is established on the basis of what is implicitly understood by two people. It's a "two-way" knowing.[6] One-sided knowing seeks determinacy through reason. But life will not let itself be reduced to what can be rationally understood. Reason and rationality are of great importance in our lives, but they cannot be used to bridge the gap or void of distrust.

This difference between Buber's notion of other and the post-modern notion is of great importance, especially as it affects fields like counseling and teaching. Counseling and teaching cannot exist without trust serving as the basis for counseling and teaching to occur in the first place. It is the trust to engage the other, without knowing him/her first on the basis of what we can know about him/her rationally.

In both counseling and teaching, it is important to be able to acknowledge the other as other, and to be able to "meet" the other while holding one's own ground (terms Buber uses to describe the dialogical). Yet, one can only do so when one can trust the other's otherness through an act of implicitly understanding his otherness. Otherness, in Buber's terms is not something we can know explicitly, a reason I believe, much of our

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[6] For more on one-way and two-way knowing, see Ilham Dilman, Love and Human Separateness (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

research in the fields of counseling and education has gone astray. The need to make explicit creates the need for categorizing people's behavior. It creates an I-It relation, and in the process otherness is sacrificed.

We cannot expect to develop the trust needed to understand the other by seeking through reason ever-new ways to overcome the alienation created by our fixed categories. We need to learn how to engage the other directly through trust, so that the other never has to get sacrificed. Out of our engagement, understanding will develop. Understanding cannot be achieved through developing ever more sophisticated categories of thought. Yet that's precisely what we are in fact doing when we categorize people in terms of gender, ethnicity, or language- and culture-based categories.[7] These categories are a fact of life, but they cannot be the basis for life.

In closing I want to address one more point, which truly intrigues me. During the time of Descartes (also a founder of modernity), mind and body got severed. It was Descartes who said, *cogito ergo sum* -- I think therefore I am. Descartes declared that while he was able to doubt the existence of everything around him (because some evil spirit could be deceiving him), one thing he could not doubt was the fact that he had to be able to think to be able to doubt. So the fact that he was able to think proved his existence. The body ceased to have any significant value for our existence.

It was during the Enlightenment that a lot of emphasis was placed on the power of the Ratio, reason. Instead of there being a relationship between mind and body (as during the time of Plato), mind was predominant, and dominated the way people thought about the world at the expense of the body. In relation to the mind, the flesh was considered bad, a temptation, and it got in the way of thinking about things clearly and coherently.

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[7] For more on the concept of ""neutral" classificatory schemes which produce all the "isms,"" see Cornel West, Prophecy Delivered (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982)

There was an over-emphasis on making knowledge something, which could be explained and verified through reason. Knowledge had to be made explicit.[8] Knowledge, which could not be made explicit, was not considered to have any value -- it wasn't considered knowledge. So things which were previously known through implicit understanding, could no longer be trusted as a source of knowledge. Distrust prevailed.

Now, mind you, this describes the history of European thought. Although many Jews lived throughout Europe, this was not their history. Likewise, when these Europeans came to the US, it reflected the thinking of white Europeans. And even though many Blacks lived in the US, this mode of thinking did not reflect their history.

For the Jews as well as for Blacks, a blatant severance between mind and body never took place. As a result, an over-emphasis on explicit knowing never evolved in their thinking in the way it did in Christian and white thinking. The distrust in implicit understanding as a form of knowledge never materialized in the thinking of minorities in the way it materialized in the thinking of the West.

For Buber, to know the other explicitly is to objectify the other. This describes the I-It relation. On the other hand, to acknowledge the other's otherness, is to implicitly understand the otherness. Otherness cannot be known explicitly. Otherness cannot be classified, categorized, etc., without sacrificing otherness in the process. For Buber, otherness can only be understood through the I-Thou relationship.

So here I suddenly see a connection between the notion of I-It and the notion of explicit knowing and the notion of I-Thou and that of implicit understanding. What brought this about was the underlying notion of trust -- trust towards what cannot be known objectively, and the notion of distrust and suspicion towards what cannot be known objectively.

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[8] Also see Sarah Michaels, “Sharing time”: Children’s narrative styles and differential access to literacy,” Language in Society 10 (1981): 423-443 on “topic centered” and “topic-associating” styles of discourse.

Trust solely based on what is proved to be true is not a true form of trust. Proof, in that case, becomes the basis for trust instead of a person's own commitment and decision to take it upon herself to trust, and to engage herself in building a trust relationship. But you cannot make trust conditional on categories of thought that have to deliver 'proof' for trust to occur.

Trust implies effort, attention, and mindfulness, as well as the skills of explicit knowing, skills of analytic thinking, of logical and precise thinking.

So to come back to Buber, we have to swing back and forth between the I-It and I-Thou. We need both the skills of what it means to know explicitly (I-It) and to understand implicitly (I-Thou). But in our western world, in which reason has dominated at the expense of non-reason, it is important to restore the element of trust implicit in any form of true thinking/learning, and to restore the trust towards otherness. It is also important to view the gap between self and other as the distance needed for relating, and not as a void, which needs to be bridged by reason, certainty, and other forms of explicit knowing.

Philosophy, as art (and not as ivory tower discipline), I believe, helps us to restore that trust Buber talks about, if anything by virtue of the fact that it engages the world directly, and not through preconceived categories of thought (which is also a part of ivory tower philosophy).

Philosophy and philosophical counseling start with everyday experiences that engender puzzlement, surprise, and wonder. Puzzlement, surprise and wonder speak to the person as a whole being and not just to her intellect. Philosophical counseling tries to bring back together mind and body which have been severed during the time of modernity.

Philosophical counseling seeks to find human responses to human dilemmas, to the human condition, dilemmas of life that claim a unique human response in a unique

human situation. One can only respond with one's whole person, one cannot respond with just the body or the mind.

Because of this severance, we tend to react to things either through our emotions or through our intellect. The question underlying philosophical counseling through dialogue is how to learn to respond to life with one's whole being while holding one's own ground. How do we engage the unknowns in life, the constantly changing situations, relationships and ways of living and understanding?

We think we live in the same world, but that's hardly true. We live in a multiverse in which we are so different from one another that it often seems a miracle that we can understand each other at all.

So much of communication depends on how we relate to the world and other people, yet the more we wire up to cell phones, beepers, palm held computers, and email, the less we seem able to communicate.

Philosophical counseling tries to set thought free, otherwise trapped in its own fabrications. Philosophical counseling questions taken-for-granted assumptions, presuppositions about life, beliefs and values, as uniquely our own, and as part of the world we live in and have become.

In this way philosophical counseling can come as a breath of fresh air, and can be very useful to people within the context of their home and work life. Philosophical counseling does not depend on any particular knowledge of philosophy per se. It does depend on the desire to be reflective, to become mindful of one's thoughts and actions and mindful of life in general. To live one's life as an answer is to accept one's life's circumstances. To live one's life as a question, that's at the bottom of philosophical counseling. To live one's life fully means to live one's life in response and not in reaction to life as we create and encounter it.