

Assessing the Promise of Philosophical Counseling: Questions and Challenges for an Emerging Profession

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ABSTRACT: When philosophers cultivate a professional interest in philosophical practice as a form of counseling therapy, the implicit bias of their practice is likely to emulate the "helping profession" model of client engagement. The effort seems noble enough, but emulating the model of the helping professions might actually be incommensurate with the philosopher's calling. The philosophical temperament emulates a less constraining but more aggressive model of intervention than we find operating in the professional domain of therapeutic counseling practices. While the philosophical temperament resolves to question and analyze its subject-matter without the encumbrances of social constraint or the promise of utility, it employs methods of philosophical questioning and analysis decidedly more agonistic than can be motivated under the auspices of the "helping profession" model of therapeutic intervention. The philosophical temperament is a *challenging* temperament, a probing, testing, exploring, engaging temperament whose only vested commitment is to *further inquiry*. After setting up this distinction between philosophical practice and the helping professions I pose some thoughts regarding the philosophical encounter within a counseling situation, with emphasis on the challenge of translating back and forth between the client's subject matter and the philosopher's frame of reference. In the course of negotiating these challenges, the philosophical temperament encounters two divergent paths we must learn to travel with equal facility: we must make room for *beneficial critique* in philosophical counseling while motivating effective critical perspective *within the client's own world-view*. The challenge is to see such a philosophical encounter as a place of translation, in which the counselor's philosophical temperament is exposed to the alterity of the client's domain of experience without losing its critical facility. In this way, the philosophical encounter is exercised in a movement *between* worlds, as an

interweaving dance of translation and innovation characteristic of a "place" of mutual engagement. The resulting tension in these dialogical encounters is a direct consequence of the philosophical intervention in a client's personal life. The philosopher's challenge is to negotiate carefully between two domains of translation (between the cognitive-emotive domain of lived-experience and the philosophical domain of conceptual thinking, reflective inquiry and critical analysis), and to establish connections between these domains to facilitate philosophical encounters *in a space of shared listening*.

Professional interest in philosophical practice as a form of counseling therapy has been emerging for more than twenty years. For twenty-five hundred years, philosophers have danced near the abyss of separation reflecting the distinction between theoretical and practical matters. Stoics and Epicureans counseled us long ago, and their words still counsel us today. When I think of Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, St. Augustine and Kierkegaard, Hume and Montaigne, Descartes and Spinoza, Nietzsche and Foucault, I marvel at their ability to impart to us the practical significance of their intellectual efforts. Even so, it would be misleading to suggest these thinkers had a professional interest in philosophical practice as a form of counseling therapy. As powerful as the metaphor might be, Nietzsche's "cultural physicians" were no more than a gleam in his eye, and hardly an example of his own philosophical practice in action.¹

We may marvel at how strongly these philosophical voices from the past resonate in the practical domain of our lives. But the fact remains, not one of these philosophers can be accused of trying to counsel anyone, though if we were to add Socrates to the list, we would be reminded at once of the suspicious attitude people in power have had toward philosophical questioning. If we sense the relevance of philosophical ideas in our

personal life, perhaps our ear is tuned to a compatible frequency of meaning, or our psyche is receptive and responsive to thoughts arising from our constructive engagement of text and experience. When as philosophers we take these ideas into the classroom and experience their impact on the lives of students, we begin to sense how philosophical analysis and questioning can be applied to “perform” a special kind of work.

Philosophical performativity influences the questions we attune ourselves to. It also influences how we think, love, suffer, and otherwise live in relation to these questions. Surely this is a key point of entry for understanding the emerging professional interest in philosophical counseling. But then, what sort of work is to be done by means of philosophical counseling? And what questions and challenges should we address in working to establish a professional standing for the practice of philosophical counseling?

The effort to motivate and establish a professional standing for philosophical counseling raises issues concerning boundaries, methods and goals, and marketing. The “boundary” issues concern both the scope and legitimacy of philosophical practice. But the boundaries of philosophical application cannot be resolved in philosophical terms alone. Philosophers aspiring to “practice” on the concerns, problems and questions of real human beings cannot ignore the well-established position of the “helping professions.” The influence of these professions clearly dominates the situation in which issues of scope and legitimacy emerge for philosophical counseling. Any contest over where to establish the boundaries of philosophical practice must be waged within a field of involvement already nuanced by the influence of these established regions of power. The public’s acceptance of “counseling” as a legitimate therapeutic practice is

¹ Nietzsche discusses the idea of “cultural physicians” and the need to produce them in his notebooks from the 1870’s. See especially *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche’s Notebooks of the Early*

orchestrated by the guardians of these regions of power. More to the point, the measure of professional legitimacy ordained within these regions of power is anchored by the protective instincts of professional investments having little or no relevance to philosophical analysis. From the standpoint of these investments, we will not find much regard for the application of philosophical analysis to the real-life issues, problems, and concerns of actual human beings. But as constraining as these negative biases might be, philosophers cannot step outside this sphere of influence. The biases of these established regions of power function as constraining forces within the domain of counseling practice. In striving to establish a professional scope and legitimacy for their counseling practices, philosophers cannot avoid engagement with these biases. But the engagements are productive when the outcome yields clarity regarding the scope of philosophical exercise and its application to people's lives.

Questions regarding the methods and goals of philosophical counseling arise in connection with efforts to establish norms of professional preparation, especially for philosophical facilitations of therapeutic dialogue. The "helping professions" focus on the diagnosis and treatment of dysfunctional lives. Their goal is to improve people by attending to and correcting dysfunctions in their personal psyches, emotions, beliefs, and behavior and their social practices and commitments. When as *counselors* we aspire to "help," "expand" or "improve" *people* -- that is, when the goal of our practice is to reorient clients to boundaries of social or rational normativity, to restore "normality" in their life, or to "liberate" them from the fetters of illogical or irrational constructs affecting their emotional and cognitive registers -- we must recognize that as *philosophers* we step into the field of *therapeutic counseling*. Philosophers should know

better than to step unwittingly into the domain of the helping professions. But does it make sense for philosophers to operate in this domain?

When philosophers cultivate a professional interest in philosophical practice as a form of counseling therapy, the implicit bias of their practice is likely to emulate the “helping profession” model of client engagement. The effort seems noble enough, but emulating the model of the helping professions might actually be incommensurate with the philosopher’s calling. Adopting the model of the helping professions marks a step into a contested domain of service (one conditioned by regions of practice already empowered to question or legitimate forays into the professional domain of counseling therapy). Given the constraints inherent in falling under a regulatory guardianship, it might behoove us to test an alternative model of philosophical practice, before we spring a trap from which we cannot extricate ourselves. I suggest this because I sense our autonomy as philosophers could be at stake. For what is the philosophical aspiration, if not a commitment to openness, to engaging in the freely reasoned movement of thought?

Philosophical openness would likely be compromised for practitioners who emulate the “helping” model of professional counseling. If nothing else, there would be pressures to regulate or certify such a practice. For certification to have any integrity, practitioners would surely need to defend the merit of their methods and approach. If we factor in a desire to become part of the “helping profession” economy, the merit of our approach must be demonstrated in terms of measurable outcomes reflecting the currency of social and personal utility. But can we presume *a priori* the utility of philosophical practice? Can we warrant *a priori* the philosophical merit of socially contingent constraints of regulation or certification?

To the philosopher in us, questions like these expose issues of professional integrity. *As philosophers*, how can we define our professional practice as a form of therapeutic counseling, if the consequent expectation is our conformity to certified principles and methods of philosophical inquiry and analysis, negotiated on the model of the helping professions? Then again, can we realistically expect to market ourselves *honestly and effectively* as personal counselors if our philosophical temperament shapes the methods and goals of our counseling practice? The philosophical temperament emulates a less constraining but more aggressive model of intervention than we find operating in the professional domain of therapeutic counseling practices. While the philosophical temperament resolves to question and analyze its subject-matter with neither encumbrances of social constraint nor expectations of utility, it also exercises methods of philosophical questioning and analysis decidedly more agonistic than anything we could motivate under the constraining influence of the “helping profession” model of “therapeutic” intervention.

It makes no difference whether our philosophical temperament resolves to embrace the will to truth or resolves to question even the value of this formidable resolve. The consequence in either case is a commitment to inquiry, openness to further analysis, and a willingness to tear down and begin anew. The philosophical resolve amplifies the possibilities for expanding our domain of thought to include transformative encounters with ideas, concepts and positions, rational questioning, analysis and counter-argument, and critical perspective on our rational and irrational tendencies. In this sense, the philosophical temperament is a *challenging* temperament, a probing, testing, exploring, engaging temperament whose only vested commitment is to *further inquiry*.

In effect, every position harbors the seeds of its own overcoming. The philosophical temperament nurtures an environment in which these seeds sprout to life, but only when philosophical gestures carve out new and accessible angles on a person's experiences, beliefs, recollections or judgments (as when the questioning or analysis triggers awareness of repressed or suppressed premises, irrational constructs, destructive emotions and behavior, or facets of the cognitive-emotive background to a person's troublesome incontinent tendencies). While these can be productive encounters for someone open to transformation, we cannot so easily defend the worth or value of these experiences for those whose lives are at odds with the logical or rational implications of the inquiry. If the edict "*do no harm*" is to carry any weight with the philosophical temperament, it can only mean: *strive to make a person aware without making them defensive, discouraged or too confused to preserve a sense of wonder and openness to continued inquiry.*²

Philosophical Training for Professional Practice

As party to a complex, amorphous social contract, every emergent profession faces the challenge of legitimating the educational focus and development of the professional abilities of the individual practitioners. Philosophical counseling presents an interesting challenge in this regard. Philosophers often validate their professional ability by appeal to their education and scholarship and through philosophical interaction with

² Gerd Achenbach seeks to balance these tensions in his discussion of *Lebenskönnerschaft* by shifting onto philosophical practitioners the responsibility "to make his guest aware of the wrong, the confused and the misleading without discouraging him or forcing him to 'defend' himself or to save his honor." "But this much is certain: Philosophical Practice will have to answer the question of how *beneficial* criticism is possible, criticism that does not paralyze but strengthens confidence [in continued inquiry], that does not discourage but encourages [continued engagement with inquiry]." See his keynote address to the 6th International Conference on Philosophy in Practice, entitled "Philosophical Practice Opens Up the Trace to

professional peers. While the status of academic employment can confer additional validation, already we can sense a tension emerging in the effort to translate philosophical capacities into effective instructional practices. When the philosopher's attention moves beyond the domain of theoretical analysis and conceptual thinking to engage in the practical application of these skills in counseling sessions, the issues concerning legitimation become more complex. For the "profession" of philosophical counseling must address its responsibilities to the *counseling* profession without compromising its philosophical temperament.

In the abstract, this entails the philosopher's abilities will receive validation in terms of the demands and responsibilities of the role. For philosophical counselors, the challenge here might be to identify and cultivate the professional abilities required to sustain philosophical encounters as relevant to the life of their counsees. In this regard, Achenbach's admonition to promote confidence, not paralysis, deserves special emphasis. So too does his admonition to preserve the counselee's sense of wonder while imparting beneficial criticism. But more than this, philosophers need to be sensitive to the trappings of the "helping professions model" of counseling therapy.

In the domain of therapeutic counseling, the emphasis on "talking cures" and "fixing" people implicates a huge nest of contestable notions and priorities anchoring the operative measures of dysfunctionality and normativity. Therapeutic counseling is entranced by the tempting goals of "restoring normality" and "achieving authenticity." Philosophical counselors should be more cautious. For while it may be a worthy goal to produce a teachable moment in our client's life, there is a danger in assuming our clients

Lebenskonnenschaft," in *Philosophy in Society*, edited by Henning Herrestad, Anders Holt and Helge Svare (Oslo: Unipub Forlag, 2002), pp. 7-15.

are willing accomplices to our philosophical interventions. Is it really conceivable that philosophers could legitimize an *a priori* presumption against their client's *resistance* to philosophical intervention as a sure-fire sign of cognitive-emotive dysfunction?

Counseling encounters are likely to exhibit some degree of client resistance to a philosophical intervention. But can we also presume there is a philosophical norm for identifying dysfunctional aspects of the client's cognitive-emotive basis for resisting? The ambiguity in resistance is likely to remain challenging territory for the philosophical temperament. Philosophers who professionalize their counseling practice must be diligent in protecting the space in which clients can work on expressing the tones and nuances of whatever is at stake for them as a function of entering into this philosophical dialogue. In this regard, the ability to emphasize is *listening*. But above all, there needs to be a *co-accessible space of listening* -- co-accessible to both counselor and client.

In the philosophical encounter of a counseling session, philosophers need to hear and respect what is said by their clients. Client input becomes the foundation of the philosophical encounter. To accomplish this, the philosophical counselor must be an opening to the world of the other. The philosophical temperament must expose itself to the alterity of the client's domain of experience. When the focus of the philosophical encounter is directed to concepts, the challenge for counselors is to find these concepts within the client's world. This means, of course, *not imposing them from without*. And all the while, counselors must remain in their own world, as well. In this regard, the philosophical encounter is exercised in the movement *between* worlds, as an interweaving dance of translation and innovation characteristic of the "place" of mutual engagement. We might say the philosophical encounter occurs in a *place of translation*.

There is a challenging aspect to the process of translating back and forth between the client's subject matter and the philosopher's frame of reference. The resulting tension in these dialogical encounters is a direct consequence of the philosophical intervention in a client's personal life. For philosophical counseling requires a back and forth movement between something distinctly one's own (e.g., the participant's lived-relation to the subject matter under discussion) and something decidedly more general in character (the intervening philosophical detachment from the emotive-cognitive context of the client's involvement in the subject). Given how philosophical detachment typically tends toward universalism and subtle forms of constraining normativity (if only through the self-privileging logic of the counselor's philosophical background and professional mode of discourse), the philosopher's challenge is to negotiate carefully between these two domains of translation (between the cognitive-emotive domain of lived-experience and the philosophical domain of conceptual thinking, reflective inquiry and critical analysis), and to establish connections between these domains to facilitate philosophical encounters *in a space of shared listening*.

In the course of negotiating these challenges, the philosophical temperament encounters two divergent paths it must learn to travel with equal facility. On the one hand, consistent with Achenbach's emphasis on the importance of beneficial criticism, we must make room for *critique* in philosophical counseling. But what sort of resistance is appropriate from the philosophical counselor? This is not simply an issue concerning how much critical distance to preserve in our role as philosopher/counselor. Just as challenging for us is the issue of how to motivate effective critical perspective within the client's own world-view. This is where excursions along a second path begin to pay

dividends for the philosophical encounter. Moving along this second path, the philosophical counselor forges a bond of empathy with the client, who must find a way forward in the face of human difficulties or challenges. To this end, philosophers operating as counselors may need to learn ways to motivate a type of philosophical encounter through which clients can become more *inspired* (and less overwhelmed or defeated) by the challenges they expose to philosophical regard.

To facilitate this type of interaction, philosophers must work at helping their clients *engage the present*. Michel Foucault's notion of an "ontology" of the present offers a possible model for how philosophical counselors might negotiate the challenge of drawing their clients out from under the spell of the interpretive bias of their experience of present events, that is, the fundamental beliefs, assumptions, and conceptual orientations reflected in projective forestructures of their experience.³ As Martin Heidegger has revealed in his thoughtful analysis of experiential forestructures in *Being and Time*,⁴ assumptions and expectations derive from the narrow parameters of our experience and throw us into a projective mode of experience in which past and future dominate the present. In effect, our sense of things (our being-toward them, or having them in advance of their arrival) generally dominates our perception of things. This happens because our focus of attention can live off the predictability inherent in the sense we carry forward from our past experiences. But in this way our focus of attention also becomes a mediating distortion or blindness. Heidegger has shown how we can be

³Michel Foucault introduces the notion of an "ontology of the present" in a short article on Kant's notion of "revolution" as a positive element in the social dynamic. See "Kant on Enlightenment and Revolution," Colin Gordon (tr.), in *Foucault's New Domain*, Mike Gane and Terry Johnson (eds.) (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 11-18.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translations by J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson (Harper & Row: 1962) and J. Stambaugh (SUNY: 1996), especially §§14-24.

extricated from this absorption when we experience breakdowns in the assumptions or expectations underlying our sense of reality. Helping a client engage the present is tantamount to producing disruptions in the schematic ways we foreshadow our experiences in everyday life. This area of work might provide the most demanding challenge of all for philosophical counselors, for at this point the challenge is to motivate a spirit of inquiry so open to the surprise of the present we expose ourselves to the possibility of our own overcoming.⁵

⁵ The theme of self-overcoming is found throughout the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. Clearly Nietzsche felt the philosopher faces the greatest challenge in this regard, but also the potential to engage this fate with the feet of a dancer.