

# How Does Philosophical Counseling Work?

## Judgment and Interpretation

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**ABSTRACT:** Hume claims that judgment is the active device through which beliefs influence emotions. Without such a device, Hume reasons that beliefs and emotions would not interact at all, because beliefs are always about ideas while emotions are reactions to events in the world. Judgment is the link between the theoretical and the applied aspects of the human being, and is, if Hume is right, crucial for any system of philosophical counseling to be successful. No client would attempt to modify his or her beliefs, or reflect on the thoughts of philosophers, without some expectation of an emotional payoff. The counseling process hinges on a link between reason and the emotions, but what is the nature of this link? Since judgment is itself (if we are lucky) a primarily rational process, the question of the connection between reason and the emotions seems to be left unanswered. The purpose of this paper is to examine the link between reason and the emotions by taking judgment to be judgment of truth or falsity. Once a belief is deemed to be true by the client, an assessment is made as to how this truth will affect the client's well being. I argue that this is true even if the client is severely depressed or believes that he/she does not deserve good treatment or good fortune, or seems otherwise unconcerned with his/her well being. If the truth is judged to be a threat to the well being of the client, an emotional reaction ensues. Likewise, if the truth is judged to be a benefit to the client, an emotional reaction will occur. I argue further that even though different truths will be taken as either benefits or threats depending on the client, the ultimate interpretation of the true statement as either benefit or threat will automatically generate an emotional response. If this ontology is correct, then the philosophical counselor will take as his/her primary role 1) a practitioner of epistemology (determining when beliefs are justified and true) and 2) a trainer in interpretation (determining when beliefs are to be interpreted as blessings or threats.)

Most people I encounter in the world who have no philosophical training, and many who do, will reject the notion that one can reason one's way to feeling better in a time of crisis. Emotions are matters of the heart and not the mind, we cannot explain why we fall in love with one person but not with another, and some things are simply unable to be explained. At the risk of harkening back to straightforward enlightenment-style thinking in the age of deconstruction, I propose that matters of the

heart can be explained, that they can be explained in terms of beliefs, and that beliefs affect the emotions through our judgments of those beliefs as being first true or false, but second, beneficial or harmful.

This paper centers only on the relationship between beliefs and emotions. Current thought in Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) and Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) includes behavior (and the changing of behavior) as an essential component in the therapeutic process. Albert Ellis, creator of REBT, notes of people “. . . their cognizing influences their feeling and behaving, their feeling influences their thinking and behaving, and their behaving influences their thinking and feeling.”<sup>1</sup> I completely agree with this notion of the interconnection between behaviors, emotions and beliefs, and have drawn parallels between REBT-style therapies and various forms of philosophical counseling in a previous article.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this article is to provide a philosophical foundation for believing that two of these three essential aspects of counseling – beliefs and emotions – do indeed interact, thus grounding one aspect of the practice of philosophical counseling in general (and REBT style therapies as well.) At the end of the article I will return to the relevance of behavior, but for now I shall focus on the nature of the relationship between beliefs and emotions.

What is gained by the examination and confirmation of the connection and mutual influence between beliefs and emotions? Any practitioner who attempts to reveal a client’s beliefs to be unfounded in hopes that the client will ultimately change for the better relies on this connection between emotions and beliefs (and ultimately emotions, beliefs and behavior). Freud’s *Introduction to*

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Ellis. “Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy as an Internal Control Psychology.” Journal of Rational-Emotive and Cognitive-Behavior Therapy. Vol. 18 (1) Spring 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Sara Waller. “A Working Ontology for REBT, CBT and Philosophical Counseling.” Practical Philosophy: Journal for the Society of Consultant Philosophers. Vol. 4 (1) March 2001.

*Psychoanalysis*<sup>3</sup> is based on the notion that an understanding of the causes of one's emotional state will somehow mitigate, or give one control over that state. Cohen's position on the role of critical thinking in philosophical counseling also makes this assumption – philosophical distinctions and inferences, and the ability to think critically and logically will assist the client precisely because beliefs have the power to influence how one feels about a situation. Cohen recommends a philosophical approach for some problems, in part because “. . .the alleged dichotomy between emoting and believing is a false one. . . .This is an important starting point of philosophical counseling. It is also a point at which the relevance of critical thinking emerges.”<sup>4</sup> Showing the alleged dichotomy to be false is my project here.

The separation between beliefs and emotions certainly goes back further than Hume, as Plato casts the emotions as a horse to be controlled by reason in the Phaedrus, and Aristotle layers the self with emotions a hair above a nutritive self and well below the rational faculties. The classic, if overly simplified Stoic view is that emotional outbursts are to be controlled by reason; held in, but the emotions themselves are not affected by thought. If we are to listen to many voices in the tradition, we are to reign in or somehow stultify emotions, but we do not change them. A horse is a horse, and the emotions are the emotions, wild beasts that are controlled for our own best interests, or the best interests of others. This view is the view that Nietzsche later attacks, claiming that all this controlling of the emotions reflects a sickness in ourselves, that the truly healthy do not need to be reigned in or controlled, that reason has become a tyrant rather than an assistive function.<sup>5</sup> But even in Nietzsche's reaction to the received doctrine, we find a dichotomy between emotion and reason. Nietzsche simply says reason is not the

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<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud. An Introduction to Psychoanalysis. NY: Pocket Books 1975.

<sup>4</sup> Eliot Cohen “Philosophical Counseling: Some Roles of Critical Thinking.” In Essays on Philosophical Counseling. Ran Lahav and Maria Da Venza Tillmanns, Eds., NY: University Press of America, 1995.

force that should be ruling. But something is ruled, controlled, pushed out. We do not see a mutual influence, infusion, or cooperation between reason and the emotions.

Hume spells out the dichotomy most clearly, and so I begin with Hume. “ . . . reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will . . . it can never oppose passion in the direction of the will.”<sup>6</sup> Hume is actually disputing some of the claims listed above with this dichotomy, for he is driving the wedge between reason and the emotions so deeply that reason cannot even control the emotions. They are two different *kinds* of things so completely that we have a reason-emotion problem just as substance dualists have a mind-body problem. Hume argues that since the mind governs the realm of ideas, and ideas only affect other ideas, then the mind and its contents cannot affect emotions. Further, ideas, as they correspond or fail to correspond to reality, can be considered true or false, but since emotions are non-representational, they cannot be considered true and false, and so are simply not the same kinds of things as ideas. Thank goodness for judgment, the pineal gland.

Before I continue with Hume, I would like to mention that my view is also going to echo Spinoza’s view to some extent. Spinoza suggests in the Ethics that when we come to an understanding of the causes of our emotions, the emotions themselves become less troubling. “If we form a clear and distinct idea of the emotion . . . the more an emotion is known to us, the more it is within our control.”<sup>7</sup> Spinoza casts the emotions as highly influenced by reason and understanding, and with this belief he goes on to claim that it is in our interests as humans to refine our self knowledge and thereby live happier

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<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. Twilight of the Idols section 9. Reprinted in The Portable Nietzsche Trans. Walter Kaufmann, NY: Viking Press, 1986. p477.

<sup>6</sup> David Hume. A Treatise of Human Nature Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980. Book II, Section III, p. 413.

<sup>7</sup> Baruch Spinoza. The Ethics and Selected Letters Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1982. Chapter V, proposition 3, p. 206.

lives. Emotions and ideas are both physical, or, at least the same substance (in the same way that God and nature are one), and so we have no troubles explaining the interaction between the two. But ultimately Spinoza's reduction ends us in a sort of determinism, be it physicalistic or theophanistic, and we end with no choice in the governing of our lives. Spinoza has a nice beginning model for the philosophical counselor, but if one is really deterministic then it is hard to take the counseling process very seriously.

I am hoping that Humean judgment is going to buy us Spinoza's clear and distinct ideas of emotions. I take these clear and distinct ideas to include the causes of the emotions as well as a basic phenomenological description of what they are like.

Hume's judgment can be explained as follows. For Hume, just as numbers have no influence on the real world unless they are used in the description of real objects, so ideas remain abstract until they are judged to have a physical or emotive use. It is not the numbers that affect the stock market, but our use of them in money. It is not ideas that affect the emotions, but ideas as judged to be important in one way or another. For Hume, reason cannot bring us pain or pleasure, but can guide us toward one and away from the other once we have judged what we want or want to avoid. "Reason is and ought to be only the slave of the passions."<sup>8</sup>

But two terms are terribly bothersome in Hume's doctrine: *judgment* and *important*. 'Judgment' is worrisome for the following reason: It must be something that is not (or not completely) rational and something that is not (or not completely) emotional, because it serves to bridge the two. Though Hume says little about it, by his own examples (using numbers), 'judgment' must be an application process, through which one takes a universal rule or an abstract idea, and applies it to a

specific instance. So, we judge that numbers would be of use when ascertaining a quantity of apples, or we judge that there is indeed a maniac on the highway, or that a neighborhood is not safe (the last 2 resulting in a feeling of fear.) So, we need to have ideas and we need to have experiences waiting to be categorized under those ideas. Those with good judgment will categorize well, and those with bad judgment categorize poorly. This casting of judgment makes sense *prima facie*, because we say that small women who walk alone at night or small men who pick fights in bars have bad judgment, because they do not understand when they find themselves in an instance of ‘dangerous situation.’ But if judgment is merely an act of categorization, it becomes completely a mental act, and loses its ability to affect the emotions.

So judgment must be more than a simple act of categorization. Of course, once one categorizes a situation under a concept, the next step will be to determine whether that categorization is true or false (or, for the pragmatists, warranted or not-so-warranted.) So one classifies the delicious looking pie as fattening, and then checks the ingredients, perhaps to confirm the initial judgment, and perhaps to find that the pie is in fact fat-free. And here with this step in judgment we find the link between reason and the emotions. Judgments are judgments not only of truth and falsity, or of category placement, but also of relevance to oneself or one’s purposes. For, depending on one’s purposes, one’s emotions may soar upon finding the fat free pie, or fall flat, if that leads to the belief that the pie only looks good, but will taste lousy.

The link is a link between truths in the world and the affect of those truths on oneself or one’s interests. One’s emotions whirl around the thought of pie because one is interested in eating the pie (or, well, part of the pie), that is, because the pie is *important*, which is our second problem word.

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<sup>8</sup> Hume. Treatise. p. 415.

“Important” is problematic from the other side of the opposition between reasons and emotions – when something is important, that seems to be bound almost completely with the emotions and not with reason. It can be important to have a date for the prom, but this importance is not based on rational grounds. Most things of importance to us have rational significance only secondarily: We want raises because it would feel good to be praised with promotion or to have more money, we want security, love, adventure and the good life in general because it feels good; it would bring us happiness. While Aristotle recommends that we be rational in order to attain happiness, still, it seems that happiness is important on emotional grounds, and rationality again becomes the handmaiden in helping us achieve it.

So, our rational judgment becomes ultimately a judgment of importance or relevance to the judge, and through this, the effect on the emotions emerges. We categorize experiences under concepts, judge the categorization to be true or false, and also judge whether this categorization is relevant, or important to our interests. (We categorize a belief or event as important or unimportant.) The rational faculties begin to work with emotional subject matter, and work toward fulfilling desires. The emotions become the content manipulated by the structures of rationality. Modus Ponens and the other structures show their universality of use, for if the pie is fat free, then I can have some, and if the pie tastes good, then I want to eat some. The pie is fat free and it tastes good. Happiness ensues through the fulfillment of a desire.

But there is a deeper way in which rationality and the emotions can intermix. Certain terms seem to indicate a blending of thought and emotion. ‘Interests’ is one. Are your own best interests rational or emotional? It is very hard to choose one to the exclusion of the other. If a client is concerned with pursuing his best interests in a personal relationship, or in financial matters, both rational and emotional elements are present. Parfit argues that one is not rational unless one is pursuing one’s

own best interests<sup>9</sup> (and Aristotle may be interpreted this way as well), but I am not arguing for egoism in counseling. My point is that there are certain concepts that can be simultaneously rational and emotional. 'Goals' is another such concept. One's goals may be sensible, temperate, well justified, non-contradictory, and hold a great deal of emotional importance. If one's goals or interests are thwarted, then it is expected that one become upset, at least to some extent. Indeed, any threats to one's well being or great occurrences of good fortune can be intertwined with emotional reactions. The emotional content of the words justifies their placement in the "if-then" structure. The two are not irrelevant, but causally linked. Notions of *goals* and *interests* undermine the Humean dichotomy between reason and the emotions. The categories of 'rational' and 'emotional,' while perhaps principled, are not mutually exclusive.

Now we need a counseling example. One comes to a philosophical counselor distressed about the end of a marriage. The inference the client is making is simple and obvious. He had a relationship, it is ending, the relationship was of value to him (it was in his interests) and now his interests are thwarted, or he is losing something of value. He is upset by this.

Since categorization is the first step in making a judgment, client and counselor will begin to think about the definition of "relationship" in general. Did the person have a real relationship with the spouse, or was the relationship pro forma? Let's say that after a few sessions our patient decides that actually he has not had a relationship with his wife for years, that they have been leading non-involved though perhaps parallel lives. The first phase of judgment has been examined and with interesting consequence: The person discovers that he did not have a relationship to end or grieve. If the client

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<sup>9</sup> Derek Parfit. "Personal Identity, Rationality, and Morality." In Self and Identity Daniel Kolak and Raymond Martin, Eds., NY: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1991. pp. 301-322.



comes to this conclusion, several emotional consequences may ensue, and they do ensue because the belief judged to be true or false is also judged to be relevant to the well being of the client. Imagine the surprise and bafflement of the client at discovering he has actually been single for many years. A client may walk in asking how he is to live without his wife, and walk out with a completely different set of emotions, simply because the underlying notion “I have been living in a meaningful relationship with my wife” has been decided to be false. The logical inference of the client can no longer be set up, and the client will be experiencing different emotions because of that difference in beliefs. To cast the point a Wittgensteinian way, the question “How can I live without my wife?” has been fundamentally reinterpreted, if not rendered meaningless.

But more emotional chain reactions may ensue. The client may become despondent at having been mistaken or misled for so long, or may be pleased at coming to realize that the past few years have been lived pleasantly and virtually alone, and with divorce comes the prospect of a new and more fulfilling relationship. Usually, the client will react with the former, more negative view, for at least a little while. The negatively reacting client has constructed another inference with negative emotions as consequences. For example “If I misinterpreted this situation for so long, then I must be crazy (and being crazy is an undesirable state, so I feel bad.)” Or “If I am just discovering this pseudo-relationship now, then I have wasted valuable years of my life (and wasting time is undesirable, so I feel bad.)” Or “If I was so misled the first time, then I may well be misled again and again, and have many unhappy relationships (and this is bad, so I feel bad.)” Always the inferences are judgments of threat to the well being of the client. We see another act of categorization in play: This state that I am in is a threat to me (and so I feel bad.)

One move a philosophical counselor can make at this point is to work with the client toward changing the interpretation or categorization of the state to one that is non-threatening. Being misled by a past relationship can give one experience to draw on when interpreting future relationships, giving the client confidence and high spirits. The attainment of wisdom in relationships certainly takes time, and so the client's past can be re-cast not as a waste of time but as a learning experience. And certainly if the client can learn from past experiences and is working toward a rational understanding of his life, then he need not take himself to be crazy. With this positive re-interpretation, the client can re-classify his state as a non-threatening one, and so move to a state of mind in which he is ready for personal freedom and new opportunities (and thereby feels happiness or some other positive emotion.)

There are two obvious objections to this view, both rooted in the final reconverging of beliefs and emotions with behaviors. The first is that the suicidally-behaving client may paradoxically see threats to his well-being as welcome. How, then can the counselor dissuade the inferences of the client, when threats to his well-being are preferred? I think we need to handle these cases by working further up the chain of inferences than "Death will be preferable to life, therefore death makes me feel good." We need to question how and why the client has categorized life as undesirable, or unhappiness producing. Very probably there is a large network of beliefs in play about the abilities, value, actions, and social desirability of the client leading to the client's notion and emotion that life is not enjoyable. Few people enjoy doing things at which they believe they do poorly, are not valued at, do inappropriately, or are undesirable. Anyone would want to escape such a situation. In short, the client has perceived an overwhelming threat in the world around him, and made an inference that the only escape is death. The task of counseling is to teach the client to escape the situation by re-thinking it rather than by destroying his body and life. We redefine past failures as accidents, learning experiences,

and perhaps as eventual successes or essential links in a chain of events to a better life. This leads the client to different and mood altering inferences. Practice in the world using the new beliefs is essential in the construction of a happier system of beliefs, because being in the world reinforces and refines behaviors stemming from the new beliefs.

Freud might be considered in strong disagreement with me here, claiming that there is a force of Thanatos within us, calling us to our deaths. Freud's death instinct impels us to our own unique and fitting deaths, and is outweighed by life-directed instincts when the death is not appropriate for the organism. But to be driven toward a singular unique and fitting death is to imply a narrative for each human life. This narrative in turn will be subject to rational constraints, for a unique and fitting death cannot be its opposite. Once the instincts are subject to direction and influenced by rationality, they are fertile ground for personal growth through counseling. In fact, Freud ultimately agrees. In the Pleasure Principle he states "the living organism struggles most energetically against events (dangers, in fact) which might help it to attain its life's end rapidly –by a kind of short circuit. Such behavior is, however, precisely what characterizes purely instinctual as contrasted with intelligent efforts."<sup>10</sup>

But if we really can lead a client away from suicide, a second objection arises. The role of the counselor can also be construed as one of training people to be panglossian rather than balanced or "realistic." It seems the philosophical counselor may be forfeiting the epistemic role (determining when beliefs are justified and true) by becoming a trainer in interpretation (determining when beliefs are to be interpreted as blessings or threats.) In other words we may become dishonest epistemologists, encouraging groundless optimistic interpretation. And what do we do with the suicidal client who actually is somewhat unpleasant to socialize with, or the woman who has been fired because she really is

incompetent? Do we simply tell them to re-interpret their experiences as due to the shortcomings of others, so the threat to the self is minimized and the emotions soar?

It strikes me that the counselor has dual responsibilities here. One is to not betray and cover over the world as the counselor may see it. If she believes that the client has behaved atrociously and thereby brought about his own disturbed state, then the counselor is under obligation to the best interests of the client to find some delicate way to expose this view. Counseling is not merely an exercise in justifying all the client's bad behaviors and shifting the blame onto surrounding parties in order to make the client feel good. Indeed, this practice could lead to the client experiencing more and more unhappiness in life, as her re-interpretations of the world become less and less tolerable to those in her surroundings. Further, we do not want to encourage complacency in a world that has real problems to be solved. We don't want to produce clients that think that every state of affairs is as good as every other, clients who have lost the ability for moral thought and moral action. I suggest adopting limits to the reinterpretation of past events. Certainly we can still label past client behaviors and thoughts as undesirable, unproductive, or self-destructive while still putting a positive spin on the client's possible future behaviors.

But the second responsibility of the counselor is to refrain from behaving as if his or her worldview is the ultimate truth. I end by claiming that, since we cannot answer the skeptic with certainty, we cannot completely condemn a panglossian system that works for the client. Have we made the client more delusional by reassuring her? We can only measure delusional states against a broad based cultural and social agreement of what the truth is. We can point out to the client that most people do not behave in certain ways, or that most people disagree with a certain view, and why that is so. We

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<sup>10</sup> Sigmund Freud. The Pleasure Principle NY: Pocket Books 1975. p. 47.

can point out probable undesirable consequences that follow from a certain way of interpreting reality, but we can't, as honest epistemologists, tell the client that her beliefs are false and should be changed on grounds of non-correspondence to reality.