



A PERSONAL VIEW

What can philosophy offer counselling and psychotherapy?

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ABSTRACT *The big questions about life and its meaning belong to, and must be explored within, our culture as a whole and not just to groups of medical or counselling specialists. Talking treatments would therefore benefit by drawing from broader and deeper intellectual and artistic traditions. Philosophers, for example, have considered questions about identity, meaning and purpose for millennia. Given that moral development has in no way kept pace with technological progress in the 20th century, we would be unwise to draw only from contemporary thinkers in making sense of our predicament. We cannot escape from philosophy: when people say that they do not know any philosophy, what is really meant is that they know only one philosophy, but they have no means of locating or assessing it. As a result, it structures everything they do and care about. It also prevents them from considering alternatives or placing immediate preoccupations into a larger perspective.*

Philosophers have a reputation (only sometimes deserved) for being incomprehensible, trivial, irrelevant and naïve. Yet the questions asked by philosophers are the same big questions we all ask from time to time: questions about how we make sense of our existence, how we are to understand, and achieve, 'happiness'. Who am I? What do I really know? Where am I going? Where should I go? We wonder whether trying too hard to be happy itself make us miserable. Perhaps happiness is a by-product of other activity? If we chase it, do we lose it?

At the turn of a millennium perhaps we are more than usually inclined to take stock and ask what our lives amount to, who we are beneath pretences, where we are going, and where we should be going.

For people in distress, questions like this can be charged with particular, practical urgency. Philosophers have been chewing on them for at least two-and-a-half-thousand years. Children occasionally nudge towards them, though their inherent curiosity can become papered over by the certificates needed to take them to the more serious life of employment, consumerism and social status.

The big philosophical questions about life and its meaning are not medical matters. They are not solely, or even primarily, psychological questions. They cannot be squeezed into the narrower therapy agendas of contemporary psychology.

So what is philosophy? Here is a simple answer: *it is what you end up doing if you keep on asking questions about the basis of previous answers.* We are all born philosophers; inquisitive children keep on asking why.

When I discovered, many years ago, that a few were actually allowed to go on and on asking fundamental (though sometimes awkward and inconvenient) questions in higher education and that this was called philosophy, I could not believe my good fortune. The psychology I studied with it was deeply disappointing in comparison. A great deal of contemporary psychology seemed alarmingly ignorant of social and cultural history. It made assumptions about identity, purpose and methodology without adequate consideration of the basis of these assumptions and alternatives. It begged too many questions. It presupposed a body of knowledge, skill and a capacity for objectivity that it did not possess. It *professed* to a range of professional services that, too often, it could not in fact provide.

Counselling: how old a profession?

How do our own struggles to stay sane, disciplined, determined, motivated and inspired compare with the efforts of our ancestors? How much history is worth unearthing? How far back shall we go? Does the counselling movement, which seems so young, have any history at all?

When people tell the story of counselling, they tend to begin their tale with Carl Rogers in the 1950s. Those who talk of psychotherapy more often start with Sigmund Freud from around 1900. More recently we have been offered 'counselling psychology', a term which appeared only a few years ago but is rapidly developing its own literature. My own view, previously expressed (Howard, 1996), is that talking treatments currently practise on inadequate foundations.

People were trying to make sense of their lives, and give and receive support, long before Rogers, Freud and other contemporaries. Is our current expertise really so great that we can afford to ignore these earlier efforts? Within the natural sciences, 20th century knowledge often makes earlier theorising obsolete. If our ancestors from 200, 500 or 2,000 years ago visited us, they would be overawed and overwhelmed by the scale of our technical competence and scientific understanding. We know so much more, now, about how bodies work and we can pamper, amuse and empower ourselves with gadgetry that our ancestors could not even have imagined.

Counselling: how much progress?

Our science and technology have undoubtedly advanced, and we now know far more about the technology of, say, bridge building, than our ancestors ever knew. Yet what about the building of the (metaphorical yet even more vital) 'bridges' between ourselves and other people? Would our great-(many) grandparents be so impressed and overawed with our moral sense? Our self-awareness? Our self-discipline? Our ability or willingness to co-operate, communicate, give and receive support? Here, we might admit, progress is far less spectacular, less obvious, altogether less likely to impress visitors from any time and place. We have missile technology rather than wooden clubs, but are we thereby less likely to kill each other?

The 20th century saw more scientific progress, *and* more human bestiality, than any previous generation of (in)humanity. Our technology astounds, and we are in many ways smarter and more knowledgeable. But it is not so certain that we are more wise, compassionate or sensitive. Neither can we confidently believe that we are more co-operative, communicative, supportive and constructive with each other. The 20th century was undoubtedly a triumph of technical progress, but was it such a star performer in terms of ethical and spiritual development? I am not so sure. Certainly the 20th century will be remembered as one which, thanks to technology, allowed for the indiscriminate slaughter of record numbers of civilians on a scale that would leave our 'barbaric' ancestors breathless with terror!

Consequently, I believe there is a wide range of thinkers, far removed from here and now, who still have a great deal to offer on the subjects of identity, co-operation, meaning, love and wisdom.

How do we help and hinder one another? It is a big enough question, and people have been considering it for generations. It seems rather unwise to imagine that all the interesting answers are confined to the last 100 years.

Counselling and history

History matters insofar as what people once said, did, and cared about is relevant to what we are doing and worrying about now. Events may not repeat, but underlying principles of sanity and folly, truth and lies, love and indifference may not change so much. Hopefully we do not live in the past; but much of the past may live on in us whether we realise it or not. Not all the past is past and gone. It is alive, present, active and shaping the future right now. It can provide angles, ideas and insights about both an actual present and possible futures.

History is part of our story; part of the way in which we make sense of where we are. It helps us envision a future. Counsellors know this in relation to individual clients, and encourage them to explore those parts of their own past that are not past and gone at all. The counselling movement, equally, can take stock of itself and sharpen its practice by becoming more aware of its own historical influences.

Listening and learning

It has sometimes been claimed that counsellors and care workers do not have to be 'learned', or bother with philosophy or history or culture or models of the self or value systems. Why? Because the counsellor merely listens, facilitates, enables the client to discover for themselves their own values, priorities, direction, esteem, identity and reasons for living.

This notion that the counsellor is just a pair of ears and a warm heart is a dangerous illusion that has much more currency than it deserves. Heidegger (1978), among others, has made an extraordinarily powerful case to show that 'just listening' is quite impossible in principle as well as in practice. Counsellors have not challenged or refuted Heidegger's argument because, of course, they are generally quite unaware of it. This naivety and ignorance is simply not acceptable among people

who claim to be providing a professional analysis of how to heal and understand others via talking and listening. Our ears are in fact a part of our brain and we hear nothing with them unless we already have some hardware and software between them. In other words, it is impossible in principle to just listen. Listening is a creative act that cannot take place without utilising the ideas, experiences and values that matter to us. Our verbal and non-verbal responses, likewise, can never just be driven by the client, but, most crucially, are formed by our own constructions, values, priorities, ideas and history. This cannot but be influential. To imagine that I enable but do not influence is to show an alarming degree of ignorance and naivety about the nature of human interaction. In any case, even when counsellors seek to avoid providing answers, they must surely be in the business of assisting clients to ask the right *questions*. Such facilitation requires considerable knowledge and skill. Socrates may well be a better role model for such activity than Sigmund Freud, Carl Rogers, or any other contemporary therapist.

Foundations of counselling

Philosophy underpins therapy as a means to healing, identity, direction and meaning. It deserves more attention. For that matter, many others have much to offer on the subjects of healing and meaning: poets, painters, essayists, novelists, players and composers. Healing and purpose are far too large and important to be the property of just one group of professionals or care specialists, be they doctors, psychologists, counsellors or whoever. We are the beneficiaries of a long tradition within Western philosophy. Its story is exciting, coherent and relevant. Philosophy, to repeat, is what you end up doing if you do not take the first, second or third answer as the ‘final’ answer.

Who am I? What do I really know? Where am I going? Where should I go? These, like most interesting, important and fundamental questions, do not have ‘final’ answers, but this does not make any one explanation as good as any other. Our existence would be trite and dull if it could be finally ‘explained’.

Making progress in philosophy

In philosophy, there is no easy consensus, nor a definitive *lack* of agreement. There is no straightforward progress, nor a failure to make headway. Important insights are forgotten and rediscovered. The work of ancient Greece was lost to the West for a thousand years. ‘Infidel’ Muslims preserved it. Let us remember that when Islam is caricatured as being *against* the humanist tradition.

Progress *is* made in philosophy, but it tends to demolish the simple explanation we thought we had. Our progress raises new questions and doubts. This is unwelcome if you prefer comfortable certainties to challenging inquiry.

Everyone is an amateur psychologist in that we all try, more or less often, to understand and predict the behaviour of other people. Likewise, everyone is an amateur philosopher in that we all ask, occasionally or regularly, why we are here, how to make sense of what we do, who we are, what is important and where we are

heading. Folk wisdom often draws on the work of professionals, without knowing who, when or why. Some of Freud's ideas have seeped into the mainstream. Some of the terminology of contemporary counselling is doing the same. Cartesianism seems to structure many people's thinking, though few have heard of Descartes.

Philosophy, then, is relevant within the training of anyone seeking to provide support to others via talking and listening. Philosophy is already there within such training but, more often than not, it is not recognised. For example, cognitive-behavioural therapy imports huge quantities of Stoic teaching. Humanistic therapy incorporates Rousseau on a considerable scale. Existential approaches utilise Sartre but not enough (I have argued elsewhere) of Heidegger, or Nietzsche, or Kierkegaard.

Anyone who is talking or listening in order to help somebody take stock of their predicament cannot avoid doing so within a framework of values and constructs of self and society. Assumptions are made about what is important, who we are and where we ought to be going. These assumptions are all strongly influenced by the previous work of philosophers. Philosophy thereby provides the foundations on which the practice of human attention stands, the roof beneath which it shelters, the walls within which it is contained and the windows through which it looks out on the wider world.

The best philosophy is like a conversation that takes place down the centuries. Conversations may meander and get stuck. They may sometimes repeat. But you cannot simply put each contribution in any order whatsoever, unless each speaker is listening only to themselves and ignoring everyone else. Then, of course, it is not a real conversation at all. As in all conversations, it is not the case that everyone can make an equal, and an important, contribution.

The influence of philosophy

If we do not look systematically at the underpinning philosophies available to us, then one or other of these will seep in on us, and determine the way we think, and do not think, about the practice of care and attention. For example, in a consumerist society, market values can creep up on the way some counsellors think about people. They talk of building 'skills portfolios', developing confidence and self-esteem as though we were objects and products to be trained, groomed and promoted. Consumer values and the competitive marketplace also underlie the 'marketing' of counselling, counselling psychology and psychotherapy, as each tries to protect its market share by promoting product differentiation. Market competition also underlies the current fetish to 'process', 'register' and 'accredit' healers. It leads almost everyone to blindly assume, despite all the contrary evidence, that human interaction and our struggles to make sense of existence can be 'serviced' via a production line of training and supervision through 'levels' of competence and skill. Both Marxist and existential ideas would provide useful antidotes to this contemporary all-embracing delusion.

It is impossible to think and see independently of philosophy. The philosophy we adopt provides the building blocks, and the underlying organisation, to the very

manner in which we perceive and reflect. However, the larger and more all-embracing a philosophy becomes the more difficult it is to detect. When it gains hegemony in a society it can become completely invisible. It then provides the only way in which we can think about our world and ourselves.

Consequently, when people say that they do not know any philosophy, what is really meant is that they know only *one* philosophy, but they have no means of locating or assessing it. As a result, it structures everything they do and care about. It also prevents them from considering alternatives or placing immediate preoccupations into a larger perspective.

Philosophical foundations may provide the rock on which we build our ideas and values, or the sand into which they sag and sink. The philosopher's vision may open, and/or close, our view of possibilities. The philosopher's faith may provide us with a base for trite optimism, indulgent despair, tempered realism and humility, impatient hedonism, firm faith, persistence, cold superiority, co-operative support and inquiry.

Any philosophy that encourages us to wallow in our own private experience, our latent (or blatant) anxiety, our pessimism concerning the difficulties of understanding and relating to ourselves and to others, is not likely to be of much use to us. If such pessimism has a future, it will be because we allow ourselves to slip into doubt, despondency and disillusion. Then, perhaps, some vision of a humanist agenda, in all its complexities, uncertainties and underlying faith and hope, will have to be rediscovered yet again.

The future of philosophy in counselling and psychotherapy

A (reclaimed and renovated) understanding of classical liberal humanism, I am convinced, would provide a more healing and empowering vision of possibility than post-modern introversion and narcissism. At its best, such a humanist agenda could incorporate rather than reject a romantic spirit. At their worst, our humanist traditions have disintegrated into a disenchanting, lifeless individual and amoral consumerism. We need to enliven our social and spiritual awareness, and this can be done without dogma, superstition or vague and shallow sentiment. Therefore, future 'Big Names' in philosophy will be so, I believe, precisely because they get serious about, and make a significant contribution towards, the task of putting the spirit and romance back into a renewed faith in humanity.

Philosophy already provides the ground on which counselling stands, or through which it may subside. Therefore, if counselling is to strengthen its foundations, it needs to examine where it currently locates itself, intellectually, ethically and culturally; and consider how it got there. It may, thereby, see more clearly how it could better position, defend and promote itself with integrity within a new century.

Sadly, a great deal of contemporary philosophy is abstruse, introverted, pedantic, or all three. Little of the available literature makes any explicit effort to relate philosophical ideas to the concerns of counsellors or their clients. Marinoff (1999) is a recent exception. It is highly accessible and practical but verges, I fear, on the simplistic. It also makes claims for practical accredited 'philosophical counsellors'

that go way beyond the more usual critical and sceptical mind-set of most philosophers. Tarnas (1996) is well worth considering, though its task is not to relate philosophy directly to counselling. Howard (2000) takes a 33-chapter journey from Pythagoras to post-modernism, offering philosophers and philosophies that seem of most practical relevance to counsellors and clients.

Philosophy has spent too many years locked in an academic ivory tower. It has become too cut off from other disciplines and from the practical questions and concerns of ordinary people trying to make sense of their lives. Yet at its best, from early Greek philosophy onwards, it has always been concerned with the search for *ataraxia*, a freedom from, or ability to cope with, conflict. Likewise the 'well lived' life, or *eudamonia*, has been of perennial interest to practical philosophers as it must be for any committed and reflective human being.

Existential approaches to psychotherapy, unlike so many others, have sought to connect to some of the philosophical roots available to the healing process. For example, van Deurzen's writings provide a practical, and accessible, introduction to these traditions (Deurzen, 1998; Deurzen-Smith, 1988, 1997). Yalom (1989) likewise moves into a broader agenda concerning the nature of healing, but existentialist approaches are exceptional in their efforts to link philosophy to psychotherapy. Inevitably, it is not their brief to address approaches to philosophy from outside the existentialist tradition.

Most recently philosophy shows signs of returning, in however small a way, as a more fashionable and practical component of contemporary culture. It has become a more popular choice for undergraduates, philosophical debate is being included as an agenda item in cultural 'cafés', and its interconnections with psychotherapy are attracting more interest. For example, see Mace (1999), which is highly readable in parts, but its varied chapters seem to me rather disjointed and uneven in quality. Also of interest is Erwin (1997), though I find this somewhat dense and impenetrable.

Philosophical counselling explicitly relates the healing process to philosophical ideas, and this movement has spread to the UK after work by Achenbach and others in Germany and elsewhere (see contact addresses listed below). Whether (somewhat unworldly and introverted?) philosophers can themselves provide individual role models of courage, wisdom and grace is another matter. Their ideas may often be more valuable than their own lived practice, but that, of course, has always been the case with (fallible) human beings.

Philosophy, at its best, informs, underpins, guides and constrains all practice, in therapy as elsewhere. Words and theories that do not point to action and commitment become drained of meaning. Conversely, actions divorced from theory lack wisdom or perspective. Philosophy, then, is a foundation and framework to all therapy. It is a noun supporting all counselling, not an adjective describing some of it. All counselling is philosophical in that all its schools are informed by, and should be explicit about, an underlying philosophy. 'Philosophical counselling' (so-called) is no more philosophical, intrinsically and essentially, than any other kind of counselling. However, those who call themselves 'philosophical counsellors' do make a point of highlighting their use of philosophy within counselling and psychotherapy, and this, I believe, is to be welcomed.

Organisations explicit in their practice of philosophy to counselling

United Kingdom

Society of Consultant Philosophers
The Old School Centre, Newport
Pembs SA42 0TS

Anglo-American Society for Philosophical Practice (AASPP)
School of Psychotherapy & Counselling
Regent's College
Inner Circle, Regent's Park
London NW1 4NS

USA

American Society for Philosophy, Counseling and Psychotherapy (ASPCP)
37 Parker Drive
Morris Plains, NJ 07950
Website: <http://www.aspcp.org>

American Philosophical Practitioners Association (APPA)
The City College of New York
137th Street at Convent Avenue
New York, NY 10031
Website: <http://www.appa.edu>

Canada

Canadian Society for Philosophical Practice
473 Besserer Street
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6C2

Germany

International Society for Philosophical Practice
Hermann-Loens-Str. 56c
D-51469 Bergisch Gladbach

Netherlands

Dutch Society for Philosophical Practice (VFP)
E. Schilderinkstraat 80
7002 JH Doetinchem

Norway

Norwegian Society for Philosophical Practice
Cappelens vei 19c
1162 Oslo
Website: <http://home.c2i.net/aholt/e-nsfp.htm>

Israel

Israel Society for Philosophical Inquiry
Horkania 23, Apt. 2
Jerusalem 93305
Website: <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/5914>

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