

***Philosophical Counselling and The Role of Philosophy* Janis Langdon**

"Shall I tell you what philosophy holds out to humanity? Counsel. One person is facing death, another is vexed by poverty...All mankind are stretching out their hands to you on every side. Lives that have been ruined, lives that are on the way to ruin are appealing for some help; it is to you that they look for hope and assistance." [Seneca in *Moral Letters to Lucilius*]

A talk about philosophical counselling recently started with the above quotation from Seneca. Philosophical counselling is not new. The idea that philosophy can actually play a practical and positive role in solving the problems of life has been with us for a long time. I was one of a group of post-graduate philosophers at Warwick University who had assembled at an advanced social theory seminar to listen to a talk about what is popularly, but mistakenly, seen as one of the latest fad therapies to reach England from America. I have tried in this report to highlight the main problems that the concept of philosophical counselling (PC) posed for a group who had assembled for an open-minded discussion on the subject.

We had been given the opportunity of reading something about the method and aims of philosophical counselling before the talk. However from the beginning it was clear that many were sceptical on the whole, regarding this latest therapy as the buzz word in self-indulgence for the well-heeled and bored. However the talk encouraged lively discussion on the pros and cons of PC. I had already attended one of the SCP's courses in Oxford and was interested to hear how a group of 'disinterested' philosophers who were new to the ideas behind PC would react. After all philosophers have few career opportunities outside of academe and PC would seem to link the philosophical with the practical in a way that should appeal to those who felt the 'ivory tower' life too narrow.

Is PC just another type of therapy or does it have its own integrity, methodology and aims? Because some of the audience had experience of psychology there was a general concern with the difference between conventional psychotherapeutic method and the philosophical approach. It was pointed out that philosophical counselling specifically was about encouraging a rational and enquiring approach to life that could "untie the knots in our thinking" [Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*]. It is not a removing of problems, or an investigation of the history of those problems, but a positive way forwards whatever the client's personal history or background. Thus the focus of a counselling session would not be, for example, on the childhood experiences of the client, but on the way the client thought and felt about his present problems. The emphasis was on philosophical method as a tool for clarifying thought and the use of philosophical concepts as a means of drawing out what the real problems were. It was pointed out that the counsellor's responses were 'parasitic' on the counsellee – as in Socratic dialogue. Indeed Socratic dialogue is a technique frequently used to help the counsellee clarify his/her own thought processes. The work is, therefore, essentially done by the counsellee, but the counsellor needs to ask the right questions focussing on reasons rather than causes. For example, he will not say "think you're saying this because..." but "why do you think you're saying this?" The emphasis is always on the counsellee coming to his own conclusions after reflection. The skill of the counsellor is in the ability to pick up on the philosophical concepts inherent in the way the problem is framed.

In this sense PC does have its own methodology and aims. However it is not mutually exclusive of other therapies. It was emphasised that it could play a supporting role within psychiatry, for example. Some types of depression could be treated medically but, as the depression started to lift, a philosophical approach might well be appropriate and the two approaches could be used in tandem. Similarly there would be no reason why psychotherapy should not be suggested if it was felt that past trauma was important enough to need more help than the counsellor was qualified to offer.

Just as a psychiatrist needs medical training, and a psychotherapist needs a psychology background, the philosophical counsellor needs to be secure in his philosophy. It was explained that one of the methods frequently used by counsellors is the introduction of an appropriate philosophical text used as a basis for exploration. This idea was greeted as highly controversial and members of the audience were interested to know exactly which philosophers might be used in a typical session, fearing a sort of 'pick and mix' philosophy. Because the idea of philosophical counselling is underpinned by the notion that the unexamined life is not worth living it has already gone some way towards a definition of philosophy as related to knowing how to live. There is, therefore, a tension between philosophy as a tool for living and philosophy as, for instance, a search for 'truth'. For example, although some philosophers in the audience were happy to accept the Aristotelian concept of the 'good life', they felt that the holism of the Aristotelian 'good life' left no room for, say, our separation of different categories of philosophy and/or psychology from ethics. (Whereupon a discussion upon the mind/body problem and Cartesian dualism ensued.) Psychology and philosophy, for Aristotle, were inextricably linked to ethics: a man cannot be happy and live in the wrong way; there **is** a relationship between thinking and behaving in the right way and *eudaimonia*. In other words, the general feeling of the audience was that the counsellor has 'to go one way properly' or not at all. A pick and mix of philosophers just would not do. If there really is an answer to problems of living, i.e. a way to flourish, then it is difficult for the committed Aristotelian counsellor not to point some way out of the conflict. This seems to set up a tension with using other philosophers such as Nietzsche and Kant.

Naturally this was the cue for a lively discussion of specific philosophers and what they might have to offer in terms of how to live well. Not all philosophers knew how to live, no matter how concerned they were with the notion of 'truth'. Few philosophers of 'truth' could themselves be seen as 'normal' or role models for those in trouble. Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Kant were all seen as being solitary, sad and with social problems – it was suggested that people might not actually like to pay for encouragement to such a way of life. Also Nietzsche and Aristotle tell different stories: somebody living 'on the edge' might not appreciate the bourgeois quality of temperance. On this point it seemed to be generally conceded that Seneca, Aristotle, Mill and Hume might have more to offer in a 'good life' sense. However this is merely to restate the problem that seemed to be inherent: the choice of what philosophy to use is crucial if 'pick and mix' is to be avoided. The speaker made the case for the use of Kant as an entrée into dialogue with someone whose problem was related to notions of duty and principle. It had been suggested that the categorical imperative might well increase the knots in a counsellee's thinking. She argued that the wise counsellor could turn this to advantage: conflict cannot be resolved by a Kantian cut and dried appeal to duty and there is always the need to question and reflect. It struck me that this illustrated the usefulness of the method: the process just is one of questioning and reflecting and there can be no hard and fast rules.

As a result of the different philosophical positions, no general agreement about the usefulness of philosophy as a therapy was reached. It was suggested that some types of problems might be helped more easily than other types. Similarly, it was felt that not all cases would be suitable and this was something to do with how problems were conceptualised. Potential counselees would be subject to 'natural selection' - any potential client thinking of attending a session would already see his problem in a certain way - that is, conceptually. Most people do not see their problems conceptually in the beginning. They do not say 'my life lacks meaning', they say 'my job sucks'. (I would recommend Schopenhauer for this one - since his philosophy is said to stem from the boring day job he had as a young man.) They may have already been to the doctor, and could be on a course of anti-depressants. Only those with a philosophical bent might be tempted to seek help from philosophy and this possibly presupposes a certain level of education. It was suggested that the method was possibly too sophisticated for the average working-class teenager and pseudo-intellectual, although the speaker pointed out that, in fact, PC was apparently being used to good effect amongst the residents of Welsh mining villages, as well as in cities. It was, she felt, a question of adapting the style of speech and approach to the circumstances of the counsellee. The dilemma appeared to be, from the group's point of view, that philosophical counselling is limited to the intelligentsia or the self-indulgent Hollywood set, suffering from boredom. In this case both the method and philosophy per se stand to lose their integrity and this seemed to be one of the audience's greatest concerns.

This concern was reflected in the comment that the professional entry standards for PC should be higher than just a first degree in philosophy and relevant counselling training. The same thought, expressed in a different way, was the idea that the counsellor really does need to be secure in his or her familiarity with and employment of philosophical tools and that real commitment is of the utmost importance. There was therefore concern about the ethics of the practice of payment.

Of course there were no answers, but I think reflecting upon the contributions of philosophers who were mainly sceptical (although they rejected Scruton's negative view as, in itself, philosophically unsound) was of immense value. For me, the most important idea was the necessity of directly confronting the tension between philosophy as a healing therapy, on the one hand, and philosophy as a search for truth, on the other. As a therapy it is to do with living well and notions of the good life cannot be left out: philosophy and psychology in this respect are one and the same thing. As a search for truth, it does not have to concern itself with how to live well, and the separation of philosophy into various disciplines, both analytic and Continental, attest to its changed function. If philosophical counselling is to do with helping a client to live well by examining his life, then it will surely do well to address the tensions within philosophy itself.

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