

# Taking an ethical stand

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What makes counselling 'philosophical' rather than 'psychological'? We have 'counselling psychologists'. What is, or could be, a 'counselling philosopher'?

A preamble to this case study may help: philosophers are not experts in individual 'pathology'. They do not classify clients according to whether or not they are abnormal, dysfunctional or ill. Clients with medical or psychological problems should not turn to a philosopher. Philosophers should not pretend to be qualified as psychologists or medical practitioners but should refer clients elsewhere when they have issues that are beyond the competence of a philosopher.

The primary attention of philosophers is not personal and psychological. They seek to help clients examine the roots of perception, thought and opinion and engage with important moral questions. They are not morally neutral about ethical issues yet they do not preach. Their role is very much that which used to be carried out by the priest, but with one big difference. Philosophers do not preach any particular Christian or other theology. They teach how to think rather than what to think. They offer a range of options rather than seeking converts. Philosophers, therefore, can help those with spiritual and ethical questions who do not feel at home with traditional or 'New Age' religion.

People have always been faced with important ethical, existential and spiritual questions. These questions are not primarily psychological, therefore there is no reason to believe that a psychologist or psychological counsellor is best placed to assist. A priest would certainly see such ethical, spiritual, philosophical questions as something they would wish to comment about. However, their 'answers' and the questions themselves would, inevitably, be examined through the prism of their own theology.<sup>1</sup> This is no longer satisfactory in a society that is not primarily Christian, where so many people wish to detach their spiritual needs from any one particular church.

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<sup>1</sup> There are interesting exceptions: the archbishop of Canterbury recently spoke on ethics in a way that seemed to me to owe far more to secular sociologists of the Frankfurt school than to any kind of Anglicanism. This is all very well, but perhaps the sources should have been acknowledged?

Philosophers recognise that a client's feelings may not necessarily be central to the problem. What matters most may be the client's intentions, core values, commitments, and the client's view of what is the *right* thing to do. The client may be seeking to consider what is morally right, over and above any particular opinion about it.

The client I have in mind must be heavily disguised in this account. The case, therefore, is described in somewhat general terms. The moral issues he raised were not merely personal and were certainly not merely 'academic'. His livelihood, his savings, his house, his reputation, the reputation of a large organisation which must for legal reasons remain unidentified, all these were, and still are, on the line. It was essential that he thought very carefully indeed about what was right, whether and how a moral stand could and should be taken.

He needed to consider in detail how far the law would be able to assist him in seeking justice. For this he needed, and is employing, a qualified barrister. The law, of course, is always supposed to be the means by which justice is achieved. But the law can be very costly indeed. If a single individual brings an ethical case against a large organisation then that organisation may be prepared to spend very large sums to defend its reputation and/or hide the truth about its unethical practice.

Its very survival may depend on defending its reputation. In these circumstances it might go to great lengths to defend itself. Its resources will greatly exceed that of the individual. It might well decide that any number of 'dirty tricks' were morally acceptable in order to protect a 'greater good'.

I empathised very much with my client since I have myself been through a similar, searing (and in my case successful) experience of bringing litigation against the clout of an entire organisation. But, unlike my case, my client was not a member of, or supported in any way by, a trade union or professional association. Costly legal expenses would have to be met entirely by him. There was (and is) a real risk that he might be bankrupted first if he took his case to law. The organisation in question could use procedural argument to greatly increase the cost of litigation. It could afford to spend much more than he could in order to protect its own interests. Sometimes legal dispute can be a contest of financial muscle, and

sophisticated delaying tactics, as much as a dispassionate examination of evidence.

Therefore he needed to consider very carefully indeed the likely risks, costs, benefits, and possible consequences.

In even the most corrupt organisation there are many 'good' people who seek to pay their mortgages, bring up their children, and be of use to others. To bring corporate dirty washing into the open may seriously damage these good people. No doubt many people associated with Enron thought that it might be best if investor confidence were maintained, that livelihoods be protected, and that the underlying truth be kept deeply hidden. If an organisation is financially or morally bankrupt might it be best to stay quiet in the hope that matters could, eventually, be resolved, in private?

Ethical issues can sometimes be looked upon as raw material for a debating society. Each side puts its case, marshals its arguments, and demonstrates intellectual prowess. It can become something of a game. No one is seriously concerned, or seriously worried because no one is seriously involved. One might listen to an ethical debate on the radio, or read an article like this. But in either case one's own direct interests, livelihoods, hopes and expectations for the future are not at risk.

In this case, emotions were not at the heart of the matter but I certainly needed to pay careful attention to the client's feelings, predictable as these were. Fear, rage, exhaustion; all these were understandable enough.

Over the ten counselling sessions so far I brought the client's attention to the following questions which, we both agreed, the client seemed to be struggling with. These questions, we both agreed, were of central importance, not just as abstract philosophical questions, but as specific and practical tactics for coping with this crisis.

How to acknowledge fear without being governed by it?  
How to harness anger, without being consumed by it, and without allowing it to feed off itself?

How to combat exhaustion in relation to a complex and demanding legal dispute that was going to drag on for months and quite probably years? How to focus on other matters in order to keep a balance in one's life? How to keep one's own sufferings, and risks of tragedy, in a larger perspective? How to explore the ethical issues at stake? How to assess risks, probabilities of success, financial, emotional and other costs to oneself and to others?

How to put your energies into what can be achieved and come to terms with the limits of your own powers? How to put your trust in others on whom your own well being so vitally depends?

Philosophical counselling is of great assistance in relation to all these questions since the philosopher can draw upon a two thousand year legacy of serious engagement with questions concerning moral crisis, uncertainty, tragedy, courage and integrity. For example, never mind Freud's Oedipus Complex; make use of the lessons from Sophocles' Oedipus.

We all need, at times, to consider the nature and importance of courage, character, virtue and integrity. Can, and should, we try to make these a part of our identity and our life? If so, how? We will get little help from the aridity of contemporary secular individualism, hedonism and consumerism. We will not find much support for, or insight about, moral crisis if we rely on the shallow clichés and banal reassurances of so much contemporary psychobabble.

When under pressure we may turn for role models. Who has faced injustice yet come through without bitterness, with a larger insight? Shall our philosophy be that of 'I'm OK, you're OK' or something similar? Or will we, for example, look more deeply at what a range of thinkers have said about the place of tragedy in human existence?

Philosophers have offered insights on all these fundamental questions for centuries. We are spoilt for choice. Philosophy at its worst, for sure, consists of dead white men, talking heads and logic-chopping game players. But the best philosophers have sought to throw themselves with the utmost seriousness at ultimate questions of fundamental concern to us all.

In a crisis we have to examine what matters most to us. Like Kant, we have to ask *what can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope?*

What is central to our identity and to our sense of meaning and purpose? What is worth getting up for? What will we look back on as worthwhile when we come to the end of our days? What is left after the unavoidable trivialities, distractions, and manipulations of appearances? What survives and what really matters after all our efforts to remain plausible?

All these general questions arose in dialogue as we considered and explored the specific circumstances of the client's predicament and options. My client found it reassuring to hear that many philosophers concurred in

his own suspicion that suffering was not necessarily avoidable, that real damage could occur, that moral choices may require a 'least worst' option when this was all that might be available.

He explained that he had specifically sought philosophical counselling since he did not want to be told what to think, but neither did he accept the shallow views of identity and tragedy that he had experienced in previous counselling.

He had asked these questions with serious concern prior to engaging me as a counsellor. He had read one of my books and wanted to follow up with the questions I had raised there. He wanted to relate the generalities to the specifics of his own situation.

My client has decided that to take a moral stand in his legal battle is central to his own sense of identity. He considers that he must take a stand, here and now, in order to avoid a sense of hollowness, emptiness, pointlessness and fatal compromise of his own integrity.

The decision has to be his, and it is not an easy one. There can be no certainty about the outcome. There is a price to be paid by him and by others. This price is difficult to assess but it is considerable. I salute him in his decision without pushing him into one choice or another. I recognise that, in doing what he considers to be right, he reaffirms himself and his life and is able to look himself in the mirror without a sense of guilt or shame. The fear, the uncertainty, the regret about unavoidable suffering, to him and others, must remain.

And will this case end in a just outcome? That remains to be seen. I certainly hope that the truth will out and that the details of this case will be made available for public inspection and assessment. More decisions, more uncertainties, more costs and more pain lie ahead. But sometimes the very act of taking a moral stand is itself a central form of moral therapy.

*My client says I keep myself going by knowing that at least I am doing my best to do what is right. I think I have a duty to pursue this case. That is something that keeps me in one piece now, and I am sure it will be essential to me when I look back on the whole experience - no matter what happens. I have to take a stand on this. Their behaviour is an outrage and many others will suffer if nothing is done about it. My whole identity is at stake here. I have lost an income, I may have to borrow money, but I know that what I am doing is extremely important and worthwhile. That counts for me more than the money.*

An experience like this is, I would say, character building. This is a rather old fashioned term but it deserves

preservation, examination, and serious attention. Philosophical counsellors, more than other varieties, are best placed to recognise its importance.

Philosophers have a reputation of being overly cerebral - too much head and not enough heart. In fact client issues will evoke feelings in any counsellor, and these cannot be dealt with appropriately if counsellors are unaware of them. Being human, our feelings can be contrary and contradictory. In this case, for example, I could move from a strong wish to urge the client 'into battle' and then, seconds later, feel that he should back away and hide as soon as possible. In other words, as I empathised with the client I myself could feel quite a strong 'fight-flight' response. 'Go forward, take them on, your cause is just', 'No, back away, your cause may be just, but the costs and risks are too high.'

In fact, of course, the client had not hired me to provide advice and answers. My contrary reactions could be seen as a human enough response but I was there to assist the client to explore for himself his own understanding of his feelings, his values, his options and the likely consequences. The whole point was that the issues were complex. If they had been easy the client would not have sought to discuss the matter with a third party outsider. The decisions were his, not mine. My own emotional responses were of peripheral importance. I could not help the client if I became enmeshed in my own emotions. But neither could I be of much help if I pretended to myself that I did not have any emotional response.

And here is a large agenda that goes well beyond this particular case but which is of central importance within philosophical counselling. What is the role of emotion in philosophy and, more so, in philosophical counselling? We are not just 'talking heads'. 'Philo sophia' is about a love of wisdom and not of mere cleverness. This, surely, requires an integration of thought, feeling and action? And then there is that difficult word 'love'.

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