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Absolutism and Relativism: Practical Implications for Philosophical Counseling

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the contrast of two traditions within philosophy, the absolutist and relativists positions in relation to psychological counseling. It is argued that the problems presented to philosophical counseling in working out a suitable method cannot be divorced from the larger debates within philosophy. The techniques and assumptions of these two traditions will lead counselors and clients in very different directions and provide very different answers to the kinds of questions engaged.

I. Introduction

In an article published in 1995, Louis Marinoff outlines what he considers to be the proper relationship between counselors and counsees engaged in a discussion of ethics.¹ Marinoff states, "the counselor should refrain from imparting or imposing substantive moral views" in the discussion of a counselee's moral and ethical problems. The counselor must retain a "hands-off" approach, and resist any temptation to assert his

¹ Marinoff, Louis. "On the Emergence of Ethical Counseling: Considerations and Two Case Studies" in Lahav and Tillmanns 1995.

or her opinion to the counselee. Only in this way can the “dignity, autonomy, and responsibility” of the counselee be maintained. This relationship must be maintained even if the counselee requests such advice.

Marinoff’s prescription is driven by the most noble of intentions. He asserts that counselors should maintain a professional stance, resisting the role of authority figures dispensing moral instruction. To this end, the counselors must be able to assist the counsees in seeing new ways of thinking about their problems, highlighting the consistencies and inconsistencies among beliefs, values, and potential outcomes of action. In the role of facilitator, the counselor must maintain his or her neutrality by adopting what Marinoff calls “meta-ethical relativism” towards the various moral belief systems.

However, there is a problem with such an approach. Meta-ethical relativism is a philosophical position. Assuming that the context in a counseling setting is one in which there is dialogue between the counselor and the client, it is also likely to assume that there will be a learning process taking place within the exchange. While a case can be made for the “desirability” of clients adopting ethical relativism, philosophical counseling at a minimum needs to be self-conscious of the implications of such a stance.

There can be no neutral stance in philosophical counseling. Contrary to the views of Ran Lahav,² and others, philosophic counseling is an intervention. It has no neutral ground on which to stand in the processes of birthing new ideas. Empowering a worldview is a political stance in that it seeks to enact a particular mode of life, a complete form of being that is internally consistent. The very nature of the process will result in

² Lahav, Ran. “A Conceptual Framework for Philosophical Counseling: Worldview Interpretation,” in Lahav and Tillmanns 1995.

the views being reproduced and disseminated in the culture. To put it another way, there is no technique of discourse that can be separated from its content, as the technique is essential to the generation of the ideas and principles that make up that content.

This paper will represent the contrast of two traditions within philosophy, the absolutist and relativists positions. It will be argued that the problems presented to philosophical counseling in working out a suitable method cannot be divorced from the larger debates within philosophy. The techniques and assumptions of these two traditions will lead counselors and clients in very different directions and provide very different answers to the kinds of questions engaged. Not only is there is no technique by which an “objective” answer to philosophical question can be reached, but there is no discussion that can be generated outside of the various schools of philosophy. This implies that there is no technique by which a counselor can remain totally neutral. Given this condition the best outcome will result from the complete honesty between the counselor and the client with regard to the assumptions engaged. This will generate trust between the counselor and the client and enhance the chance for meaningful outcomes to be achieved.

II. Socrates and the Origins of Absolutism

It is natural that a practice in its infancy would go back to its roots in order to formulate its position and carve out its place in the world. Such is the case with the philosophical counseling. In addition to representing the origins of Western philosophy, the value of the Greeks for philosophical counseling is represented in a conception of life as an integrated process, with philosophy as its guide. As Martha Nussbaum describes in

The Therapy of Desire, for the Greeks philosophy was about healing the soul. This could only be done if philosophy contains within it the content of a fully integrated way of life.

This seems, in part, the impetus for the interest in Socrates within the emerging practice of philosophical counseling. The Socratic method is mentioned as a central component of the approach offered by the British Society of Consultant Philosophers, and name of Socrates appears repeatedly in discussions on philosophical counseling. The general perspective on the value of Socrates is expressed by Ran Lahav and Maria da Venza Tillmanns. In the Introduction to the 1995 volume entitled Essays on Philosophical Counseling the editors assert that the “modern approach to philosophical counseling bears a striking similarity to ... Socrates. Socrates, who was engaged in relentless philosophical inquiries without claiming to have their solution, believed that a life worth living is one that examines itself critically and rationally... In what could have been written today, Socrates...describes the philosopher as a midwife who helps other people give birth to their own ideas...”³ This statement reflects an attitude common among some practitioners of philosophical counseling. Socrates is viewed as representing an ideal model because he helped others express their ideas.

The Socratic method discussed by Lahav, Tillmanns, and others, is associated by Socrates with what he called the “dialectic.” But the dialectic to Socrates did not mean an open inquiry into all possibilities, but a methodology that would bring the individual to an understanding of fixed and eternal “truths.” The goal of the dialectic is to always move discourse toward the unity of “being” and “knowing” in the realm of the forms.⁴

³ Lahav and Tillmanns 1995. “Introduction” pp. xi-xii

⁴ Plato. The Republic. lines 530-534

When the mind has an understanding of the forms, it is able to order the world according to the pure form of being.⁵

Therefore, to Socrates the method of the dialectic cannot be separated from the “doctrine of the forms.” Discussed in Book Seven of the Republic and in the Parmenides the doctrine of the forms provides both an epistemological underpinning for the Socratic method and an ontological claim about “being” in the world. The dialectic is a process of questioning, but towards an integrated understanding of “truth” and “being.”

Socrates’ theology of “being” would be little more than an interesting story except for the fact that it inspired a transcendentalist tradition in Western philosophy. Plato’s transcendentalism inspired elements of Augustine’s thought. In the modern period, Descartes and Kant also were engaged in developing a transcendentalist logic for their philosophic systems. Within this tradition, sense experience is judged to be either inconsequential to the real purpose of human life (Augustine) or only the stimulus to the mind in its uncovering of transcendental truth (Descartes and Kant). Each of these systems, in their own way, diminished the role of experience and human judgments about those experiences in daily life.

From this perspective, the apparatus of experience, the human body, cannot be the source of knowledge. Knowledge is treated as reflecting a project of defining eternal being, whether treated as “forms,” “things in themselves,” or “universal reason.” Such knowledge can only come from reason, transcendently conceived, as it separates from the “shadows” of sense experience.

Discounting experience as the source of knowledge engages a number of implications for social life that would likely pose problems for some aspects of

⁵ Plato. *The Republic*. lines 523-524

philosophical counseling. Following the lead of Socrates, this tradition defines “knowledge” as pertaining to that which is stable and unchanging. This includes knowledge of human beings. The subject is treated as a complete and stable object, to which an identity is assigned. “Being” cannot be assigned to that which undergoes change.

This issue has significant implications for the discussion of morals and ethics. In Socrates, medieval theology, and in modern transcendentalist philosophies (ie. Kant) it is asserted that moral and ethical principles are to be divorced from experience. To use experience inductively, to draw ethical conclusions from experience, would leave us in a situation in which ethics was a subjective preference rather than an eternal truth. Thus, ethical norms would be a reflection of historical forces and subjective interests. Ethics would be less certain. There would be no firm foundation on which to build ethical life.

In a counseling setting, however, what happens when a client has a problem that is directly related to the process of social and historical change? Three areas likely to be part of any problem that brings a client to a counselor are; sex, family, and work. Are these static or governed by change? Faced with issues of sexual mores, gender roles, and homosexuality does the counselor address the issues as part of the changing context and increased individuation, or is difference denounced as morally corrupt deviance, as it challenges the traditional notions of normalcy? What are the moral and ethical issues involved in the structure of the family? Is family structure a moral issue or a personal choice? Is the nuclear family the only acceptable form of family life? In the area of employment, what expectation should an employee have on the job? What responsibilities does an employee have to an employer and vice versa?

In all of these cases, the absolutist tradition looks to static concepts, to foundational support, in formulating a response to the client. Looking outside of history and experience will lead to a set of suggestions that reject creativity, adaptability, and change in favor of conformity to existing and well-worn principles. In a counseling setting, however, there is always the question of what is in the best interest of the client, especially if the client's experience is not to be the source of resolution.

III. The Philosophers of Change: Sophism, Materialism, and Postmodernism

Also with origins in ancient Greece is a tradition that is decidedly different in its approach to knowledge, human subjectivity, and ethics. This tradition is “anti-foundationalist” in its assumptions, rejecting the idea that defining a fixed character of “being” represents the central mission of philosophy. As such, it has a more open and relativistic approach to knowledge, ethics, and the social practices of life.

In ancient Greece this position was represented in a tradition known as sophism. One of the leading proponents of sophism was Protagoras, a contemporary of Socrates. Protagoras maintained a position in sharp contrast to Socrates on the issues of sense experience, knowledge, and artistic expression.

To the Sophist “man is the measure of all things.”⁶ Consequently, what human being's sense constitutes the limit of their understanding. Contrary to Socrates, truth is contained in appearances, as the limit to what can be called knowledge. Experience is a subjective phenomenon from which different perceptions and, ultimately, different conclusions might result. Without the foundation provided by the “forms,” the Sophist leave open the possibility of multiple truths and a human understanding of a world that

has a variety of interpretations. The world is a place of aesthetic judgment, not rigid doctrine and “laws of nature.”

As a human enterprise, the measure of a written statute or practice can only be the culture or condition in which it arises. Claims to truth are relative to context. As the sophist, Thrasymachus, points out in the Republic, all claims to “justice” can only be measured against the prevailing political system in which acts occurs.⁷

History is treated as an interpretive story of human existence, requiring constant reinterpretation. It is a story that must be constantly reassessed and retold as the conditions of life, new technologies, and new circumstances arise. Engaging a story of human life is a creative act. Protagoras emphasized this point by suggesting that many of the Sophists are engaged in various forms of artistic endeavors.

Without a realm of “forms,” social life is characterized by what Socrates refers to in the Phaedrus as rhetoric.⁸ Rhetoric, as Socrates describes it, is the shifting of ground, with the design of misleading people. But rhetoric, as the art of persuasion, is all that remains as a human task when references to the transcendent are denied. Rhetoric is precisely what the Sophist teach, as it is the social responsibility of those with intellectual prowess to be engaged in promoting and directing the most utilitarian forms of social life. However, with the coming of Christianity and its strong affinity to transcendentalism, sophism retreats as a public philosophy.

After the Middle Ages, the role of experience begins to make a return in Western philosophy. Sir Francis Bacon stressed inductive logic as a means to create knowledge

⁶ see “Theaetetus” in Hamilton and Cairns. 1989.

⁷ Plato. “The Republic” lines 338-339

⁸ Plato. Phaedrus. In Hamilton and Cairns. 1989. lines 261a-b

from the world from raw sensation.⁹ Empiricism, culminating in David Hume, emphasized the significance of sensation for all claims to truth in the world.¹⁰ However, it is with Nineteenth Century materialism that the production of knowledge is linked directly to experience within a process of historical change.

Materialism embraces the idea expressed by Heraclitus in saying that reality is change.¹¹ However, the notion of “change” within materialism is multifaceted. Change refers to the fact that the material of the world transforms, comes in and out of existence, and is subject to constant mutation. Change also refers to the social and historical conditions in which individuals find themselves. Technology, communications, science, and environmental conditions all constitute a context in which human beings live their lives. Change, within materialist doctrine, also refers to the conditions in which human consciousness is shaped. Consciousness is a reflection of the real concrete activities of human beings.¹² What we think, is shaped by what we do. Therefore, change is also the character of human subjects, as their understanding of themselves and the world is transformed by the experiences they have as part of the historical process.

In the Twentieth Century the poststructuralists have developed the idea of materialism into a theory of knowledge that contextualizes the generation of “truth” in the world, severing the links between the process of discourse and the capturing of the world’s essential “being.” The poststructuralists reject the idea that knowledge reflects a transcendental “forms,” or absolute being. To paraphrase Nietzsche, “truth” represents a

⁹ Bacon. “The Great Instauration” in Burt. 1939.

¹⁰ Hume. “An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding” in Flew 1962.

¹¹ See Engels “Socialism, Utopian and Scientific” Tucker 1978. p. 694.

¹² See Marx. “The German Ideology” in Tucker 1978.

host of metaphors and anthropomorphisms that we use to describe the world.¹³ Truth is the name we give to our mental creations that have helped us survive. Contextually derived, our truths are subject to constant contextual pressures for change. As context also has a political component, the poststructuralists draw significant attention to the role of power in shaping what human beings believe about the world. The ability to control what enters the domain of discourse is the ability to shape how individuals view themselves and their relations within society.¹⁴

The political context for the generation of philosophical discourse has produced sentiments in the poststructuralists that echo, in a modified fashion, some of the claims of the claims of Nineteenth Century materialism. Michel Foucault's well-known criticism of the "normalizing" tendencies of psychiatry speaks to the nexus of knowledge and power in which human beings find themselves. From this perspective, the subject is constructed by the external social, technological, and political contexts in which they live. Institutions, as the locus of power, shape human beings in a way that conforms with institutional necessity, not in a way that reflects a conception of the "natural form" of human life. Capitalism, as one of those institutions, also represents a way in which sets of norms and expectations are generated within social life. Capitalism shapes our consciousness through desire, production, and repression. This matter is discussed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in a work entitled Anti-Oedipus. The altering our self-understanding by technology and communications is reflected in Jean Baudrillard's "The Ecstasy of Communications."¹⁵

¹³ Nietzsche "On Truth and Lies in a Non-moral Sense" in Schacht 1993. P. 49.

¹⁴ See Derrida, 1984

¹⁵ Baudrillard in Foster, 1983

The transformation of subjectivity cannot be divorced from a redefinition of ethics and morals. The definition of subjectivity includes a set of expectations with regard to action. If the array of expected actions is altered by context, then the rationale for a new behavior, in the form of a new “code of ethics” will be required. Ethics and morals, as reflections of historical contingencies, will be relative to the needs of time and place.

In a counseling setting there is a clear distinction between what the alternatives of absolutism and relativism can produce. If the absolutists could be accused of creating a condition that was too static for the rapid pace of change in the Twenty First Century, the materialist tradition could be accused of producing a loss of grounding in the client. An overwhelming sense of anomie could result in more, rather than less, conflict and tension. The quality of change is also another issue. Not all change is good change and the quality of change cannot be ignored. Fads, peer pressure, and conforming to trends, can equally produce a condition with which the client is ultimately uncomfortable, if change is grasps for its own sake.

On issues of sex, family, and employment, the relativist view presents striking alternatives to the more static conception of subjectivity. If one accepts the view that mores, ethics, and practices are driven by historical conditions as experienced by the subject, then adapting to changes in context will be perceived as part of the natural processes of human existence. Within the relativistic context, there can be no static condition of the “normal” to which the individual must be conditioned. Birth control and abortion rights have altered the context for sexual relations in the Western world. From this perspective, the ethics of sex have changed as a result of the technology. The family,

as a unit for the reproduction of society, has undergone a change as images of “alternative lifestyles” disseminate through various forms of communications media. Work has also undergone a change, from the decline of labor unions to the increasing number of telecommuters in the information age.

The ethics of new practices are always a story to be told. A client’s search for a “sense of self” within this larger process of historical change is likely to be one of the ongoing issues within philosophical counseling. The choice for the individual involves either a retreat into more static concepts or a process of becoming more comfortable with change and incorporating change into a sense of personal identity.

IV. The Counselor’s Role

“Meta-ethical relativism” is a stance within the context of Western philosophy. How can the counselor’s role be defined in a way that not only takes into account this conflict in philosophy, but also confronts the other areas of tension within philosophy? To put this another way, what responsibility does the counselor have in confronting the perennial questions of philosophy in a setting in which someone is seeking assistance to a concrete problem? As stated above, there is no neutral ground on which to stand, as even framing the questions represents a “leading” of the client in one direction rather than another. (Something for which Socrates represents the quintessential example!) There is no escape from the personal biases and conceptual frameworks that a counselor will use in analyzing a particular circumstance.

There are three ways to address this problem. The first approach is to limit the role of the counselor to that of “midwife.” In this case the counselor assists the client in

articulating a questions and then offers the variety of solutions that the history of Western (and perhaps Non-Western) philosophy has to offer. In this model the counselor has the role of facilitating the client's understanding of the range of choice that such a question can generate. In this "smorgesborg" approach, the client can simply select a response with which he or she is most comfortable and which seems to best solve the immediate problem.

The attraction of this approach is that it comes as close to some ideal of neutrality as seems possible, given the limits of our abilities in that area. In this setting the client should have the freedom to express his or her ideas and come to a resolution with which they are comfortable. The counselor is in the relatively "safe" role of facilitator, avoiding taking a position that might challenge or push the client to alternative understandings of the conditions in question.

However, the supposed neutrality comes at a cost. In the role of "living encyclopedia" the counselor must also stay somewhat disengaged. This is likely to produce an effect in which real dialogue is sacrificed for the sake of maintaining an antiseptic separation between client and counselor. In that context a "real" and honest exchange cannot take place. This setting is likely not to produce dialogue, and it is likely not to be greatly beneficial to either the client or the counselor.¹⁶

The second option pushes the client by having the counselor take a position contrary to that of the client's position in the course of discussions. While not strictly a "dialectical" strategy, it may be that confronting an opposite position may lead a client to explore resolutions previously not considered. This can have the effect of pushing the

client to become more conscious of his or her own beliefs, as they find themselves continually forced to construct and articulate a reply to the challenges of the counselor. Obviously, this can be a rather confrontational strategy and can lead estrangement between the client and counselor if taken to an extreme.

The third approach takes as its premise the impossibility of finding true “neutrality.” Therefore, such a strategy seeks to adjust the relationship between counselor and client in a way that opens up dialogue. In this context the counselor is free to express an opinion only after a “full disclosure” of the beliefs and biases held by the counselor. In this setting there is no surreptitious agenda. The “cards are put on the table” as a precondition for an open and honest dialogue. In such a context both parties have the opportunity to grow and change as part of the process. As many clients are likely to seek assistance to specific problems, they may benefit from the expression of alternative viewpoints that recast their problems in new ways. It also demonstrates respect for the client, as they are treated as a human being capable of engaging in the real exchange of ideas, rather than as an object to be kept at a distance.

Obviously, this does not mean that the counselor should not be sensitive to a range of possible solutions to a given problem. However, by encouraging an exchange of assumptions and premises at the outset the counselor and client have the best chance to engage in the kind of discussion that leads to personal growth. This approach will not be for all clients and counselors. Some counselors may find it difficult to expose themselves in the process of counseling. Some clients may simply want their own positions clarified

¹⁶ This assumes that in an open dialogue the distinction between counselor and client evaporates within a discussion of the ideas that each holds in approaching the issues under discussion. In that context, both counselors and clients may benefit and learn from the exchange.

or want their own ideas echoed back to them. However, for those seeking a real dialogue, philosophical counseling has the potential to provide a beneficial experience.

An experienced counselor is likely to employ all three of these techniques. Providing an array of possibilities is a good place to start. One has to assume that the clients are there to explore new ways of thinking. In that case, challenging the client to explore alternatives is necessary to that process. However, in all of those discussions the counselor should be very honest with the client in relating their own views and biases (often a very difficult task). The counselor can not lose sight of the fact that they are also building a relationship, and that can only be accomplished with an honest exchange of ideas.

V. Conclusion

Even as a new profession, philosophical counseling cannot escape the ancient debates of philosophy. How do we make claims to knowledge? What is the nature of human subjectivity? Are we products of will or conditions? Today, even the debate between Socrates and the sophists over the issue of payment for philosophical education has returned. Does taking payment turn philosophy into a commodity, implying tacit support of the institutions of capitalism and private accumulation? Answers to such questions will not rely on facts, but on assumptions.

So where does this take philosophical counseling in the future? It must be recognized that counseling activity does not imply a sterile relationship between counselors and clients. Both counselors and counsees have assumptions about the world. However, at its most basic level, counseling is an activity of exploration between

two people to solve a practical problem using an array of techniques and ideas. But, as the example of Socrates is perhaps most illustrative, technique cannot be separated from content because it assigns validity and significance to the concepts employed.

The tension between absolutism and relativism is only one such matter that will influence the context of discussions. Does the counselor, as Marinoff suggests, assume “free will” in order to make the counselee a morally responsible agent?¹⁷ Should the counselor assume wage labor is a form of “slavery” as a precondition to workplace problems? Is the body a locus of “sin” or is a life of sensual pleasure something to be enjoyed for its own sake? These are fundamental questions, and to suggest that a counselor will not let his or her beliefs filter through in the counseling process is as misguided as it is misdirected.

Ironically, I agree with Marinoff with regard to the likely outcome of philosophical counseling’s evolution. “Just as with psychological/psychiatric counseling, in which Freudian, Jungian, Adlerian, Reichian, Laingian, eclectic, and many other models may be applied, practical diversity can serve to enrich, rather than to impoverish, the experience of counselor and counselee alike.”¹⁸ I believe that this statement is not only true, but it is the key to the development of philosophical counseling’s future as a profession. Freudians, Jungians, as well as the other schools of psychological counseling, do not hide their biases. They revel in them. Clients seek out counselors, not in spite of their beliefs, but because of them. They are expected to bring those biases into the counselor/client relationship. Philosophical counseling should not be so lofty or myopic that it does not see both the desirability and the necessity of such a condition.

¹⁷ Marinoff p. 180.

¹⁸ Marinoff p. 181.

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