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Conversation or interrogation: two different approaches to philosophical counseling

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Among the different schools of philosophical counseling, one major difference may be briefly described as the conversational style versus the interrogative style. While most counselors seem to perform some conversational style of counseling, heavily based on the client’s narration, some dissident counselors abandon this seemingly obvious approach and rely instead of an interrogative style of counseling where narration is not allowed to play any significant part.

As we in both cases speak of philosophical counseling, we might assume that both the mentioned styles of counseling aim at some similar goals: First, to find out what is really bothering the client – which may very well be something quite different from the problem she initially puts forward, which may turn out to be a decoy problem. That is a common experience for both kind of practitioners. Second, we might assume that both approaches aim at exploring the topic that is bothering the client in order to enlarge her understanding of it, and then be able to cope with it in a way more fruitful to herself.

I do not add a third aim that especially pragmatically oriented counselors might have mentioned, namely to help the client to solve her problem. Even if a pragmatically oriented practitioner indulges in a conversational way of counseling, it is not necessarily so that a conversational way of counseling amounts to solving the problem in question. In the United states this may to some extent be the case, but in Norway it is certainly not so, even if it is not prohibited to think in problem-solving terms. It is an option that in some instances might be judged appropriate, but not what the practitioner mainly should strive at. Lots of problems cannot be solved in a pragmatical way, and even when this might be the case, the temptation to think in practical, commonsensical manners should be resisted, at least until one has explored the philosophical significance of the problem in question.

When it comes to the interrogation style of counseling, pragmatical solutions are certainly ruled out. Then the counselor might ask “If you need an economical advise, why do you go and see a philosopher?”. If the client is not up to the challenge of exploring the philosophical aspects of her economical problems, or to reveal another question which is the real reason for seeing the practitioner, there is nothing more for the counselor to do. Sorry, wrong adress.

Granted that laying bare the client’s real problem and exploring this problem is the main enterprise both to the conversational and the interrogative kind of counselor, while pragmatical solutions are not, we might suppose that these two kinds of counselors are aiming at the same thing. If so, they provide two different paths to this same goal, and which one to choose will then be a question of: Which one is most efficient? And: Which one is the most considerate from an ethical point of view? And: Which one suits the individual counselor best, that is: Is it basically a question of personal taste and propensities?

The question of the counselor's motivation is, I think, a pivotal point in this respect. Why do we put up our practice? What is our main purpose for doing so? This may vary to a considerable extent. Some practitioners have "the pursuit of happiness" as their main concern guiding their counseling, while others have "the good life," or "solving the problem," or "empowering the other to cope better with her life" (as I do), or "making the person conscious of how she thinks and acts" as their main concern.

And further on: how patient or impatient are we when it comes to the client's telling stories of her life? A practitioner who quickly becomes uneasy or bored with this kind of narration will surely allow less for this than a practitioner who finds such narration bearable, or even interesting. This also constitutes the practitioner's propensities towards a conversational versus interrogative style of counseling.

Thus, it is very hard, and not too productive, to say in general what counseling style is the better or worse one. While, on the other hand, the question of a better or worse performance can be assessed, but only when we consider the premises of the actual consultation.

To look further into the two mentioned styles of counseling, I start with the conversational style, which is predominant in Norway, and in Germany as well, where the sources of inspirations reside. I choose to label this "hermeneutical," even if the champions of this style, at least its pioneers, are reluctant to do so. But that is mainly because they are reluctant to be pinned down to a fixed position altogether.

Anyway, in what I call the hermeneutical approach, the counselor indulges to a large extent in a kind of active listening to what the client has to say, and permits himself to give interpretations of the client's narration, in order to reveal what her story really is about. The counselor has to be patient, as it supposedly takes some time until what the story is about, can be clear to both parties.

How this is to be achieved, apart from pointing to some general principles of the hermeneutical process and of observation, is not quite clear. The counselor has to rely on himself, on his inspiration, maybe gut feeling, and his knowledge of philosophical stances. This, then, becomes a question of personal judgement, of seeing the problem and the person who owns the problem in a specific context which surely must not be overlooked.

Finally, but very important, is the ethical demand of recognizing the client in an existential manner, by showing due respect to her as a person being present in the consulting room, and not just look at the problem in isolation, as just another instance of a typical problem of human ways of thinking. If so, you do not see the person, but reduce her to one out of many instances, which is not to acknowledge and respect her as the person she actually is.

Some influential counselors of this kind are also opposed to, or at least very suspicious of, the notion of *method*. Their way of counseling is supposed to be "beyond method," as any kind of method is likely to introduce some procedures that will have an alienating effect on the interaction between counselor and client.

It becomes, then, a question whether philosophical counseling can be taught, or not. If so, in which way? And if not so, what does then enable a person to be a philosophical counselor?

I have dealt with the problems of the "beyond method" stance in a paper which was published in the journal *Philosophical practice* (in vol 1, no 3, November 2005), where I particularly interpreted the stance of the Norwegian pioneer of philosophical counseling, Anders Lindseth. There I argued that we do have to employ some kind of methods in our counseling, and that we should be careful to say what we mean by "method," as this surely cannot mean method in some algorithmical way, in the manner that "You do A, then B,

then C etc.,” as a cooking recipe, until the final goal is achieved, without much consideration to the person or context in question. I also pointed out that the “beyond method” approach of the pioneering philosophical counselors of the 1980’s, with Gerd Achenbach as the prominent spokesman, was mainly developed as an opposition to the professional health care apparatus in medicine, psychiatry and psychology, where the patient tended to be turned into an object to be dealt with in a certain way. The pioneering counselors found it both unethical and counterproductive “to do something with the person” in terms of therapy, especially when the eagerness “to do something with the person” preceeded a proper understanding of what the person’s problem really amounted to. Maybe, I contended, such a criticism was justified regarding the health care apparatus, but not necessarily when it is directed at fellow philosophical counselors who seek to develop some tricks of the trade, or some kind of toolbox that might be employed at certain moments to bring the consultation in a fruitful direction.

In Norway we have established an education of philosophical counselors, and because of the heavy impact of the “beyond method” stance, we have struggled with the seemingly contradictory enterprise of educating ourselves into some kind of practice that is not supposed to have a method and maybe cannot be taught. We anyway felt convinced that we did aspire to a trade, to a new profession, that could be taught, if we only realized how.

Recently one of the principal persons of the Norwegian education of philosophical counselors, Helge Svare, has come up with a stance that goes against the “beyond method” concept, but still focuses on the conversational way of counseling, as we in Norway have developed this far. Svare does this in a paper recently published in the journal *Philosophical practice* (in July 2006), where his topic is “How do we best educate philosophical counselors?”. Since Svare could not be present at this conference, I will briefly present some of his main points.

As the “beyond method” approach has authenticity as a major concept, Svare critically addresses what he labels “the ideology of the authentic conversation.” In this ideology “the ultimate aim for the counselor should be to establish a conversation characterized by authenticity. And as authenticity has its sole origin in the individual, it follows that it cannot be taught and, consequently, neither can philosophical counseling.” This attitude is deemed to arise spontaneously, or not at all.

The problem with this stance, according to Svare, is the vagueness of the concept of authenticity. It is also blind to the significance of culture, and to the cultural practices through which we live our lives. Svare also contends, as a further exploration of what I say in my paper on Anders Lindseth, that it is not necessarily inauthentic to employ methods. This only becomes inauthentic when rules are followed mechanically, as bureaucrats may do, or students who have not yet learned to master their craft. But to be in a practice when you have learned your craft, implies to be authentic when you relate to what you are doing in an individual, flexible, and creative manner. Then you develop a context-sensitivity, where you, rather than being controlled by a method, master it and becomes in control of it. Rather than letting the method restrain his creativity, the counselor’s creativity makes use of it, and even develops it.

Then it is not inappropriate, but advantageous, and even necessary, to have access to a wide variety of methods, as well as an ability to use them with good judgement. Thus, Svare, like myself, is in favour of a well equipped toolbox of methodologically based moves.

In the Norwegian education of philosophical counselors we emphasize that the counselor must seek to help the client to explore the topic for herself. The counselor takes part in this exploration by employing several methodological moves, among them by

putting forward ideas and experiences of his own, which is called “sharing.” To be able to do this, one must above all learn to be a skilled communicator. This is not a matter of course, as we all know from our everyday experience with people we encounter. Some of these people might think that they are good at communicating, even if they are not, and then they are quasi-authentic in a self-deceptive way. Again we see that the concept authentic, and quasi-authentic, poses problems because of its vagueness. I will not, however, pursue this point further here.

Instead I will speak of my encounter with the other way of philosophical counseling, the interrogative style, which was quite shocking to us Norwegians a few years ago. To us, this stance represents the radical otherness, something that we had never conceived of, despite our familiarity with Plato’s dialogues, where Socrates is indeed interrogative in a dialectical way that does not aim at practical solutions. This Socrates-influenced style was presented to us by Oscar Brenifier during an Oslo visit of his, and it shocked us by clearly and unabashfully violating the guidelines of conversational skills and context-sensitivity. Context is irrelevant, Brenifier proclaimed when the client – a fellow student of mine who made a try in the role as the client – demanded to produce it to highlight his initial question. We could not believe our ears, and the demonstration session broke down.

At the same time I found it revealing, and highly inspiring, that Brenifier so clearly demonstrated that the conversational style is not the only game in town. Now there were two approaches that opposed one another, almost like a thesis and an antithesis. If this eventually results in a synthesis, it remains to see, and I will not, at least not here, presume that it does.

Quite contrary to the hermeneutical approach we were familiar to, the interrogative style of Brenifier quickly does away with narration. In line with Socrates, the client is asked to put forward a general question that contains what is bothering her, and then the counselor poses questions in an interrogative manner which leaves context out and keeps the discussion on a pure conceptual level. As this is unfamiliar to most people, especially those who are not well versed in philosophy, they feel put in an awkward situation. If I had not witnessed some actual sessions performed by Brenifier, and also had tried some sessions with him myself, I hardly would have believed that this approach could lead to anything productive.

But it does, by way of quickly identifying the client’s real problem or propensities, even if – or just because – she is brought up to a context-free realm of interpersonal reason. She has to produce concepts, even opposing concepts, and to relate to the rules of informal logics, which is hard and unfamiliar indeed. The counselor pushes her forward, and he does not indulge in “sharing” by way of offering his own ideas and experiences. That is a no-no, as the interrogative style demands a very ascetic approach on the counselor’s behalf. He must consider the client’s words as the only valid assets on the table, and restrain any urge to add ideas of his own into the exploration of the topic in question.

Similar to Socrates as this approach may be, it also differs from Socrates in a significant way by relying heavily on its being a game that the client is asked to play. You either play along, or you don’t, and if you don’t, the session breaks down. Part of the game is committing yourself to concepts and propositions you come up with as the ball is played in your direction, figuratively speaking; you are urged to react spontaneously, if not automatically, as you still have to think. This may be labelled a free association technique on the conceptual level, which indeed reveals your propensities, much to your own surprise. Here we may speak of a feature that has more in common with psychoanalysis than with Socrates, even if we are not dealing with psychology as psychologists do. This

may be a harsh experience that many people will not be up to, and which therefore limits the potential number of clients suitable to such a kind of practice.

Another drawback with such a session is that the client is likely to be so confused afterwards that she barely remember what was said, and exactly when and why she got confused. Recalling a non-narrative dialogue is much harder than remembering a narration and a context-based argumentation, so one solution may be to tape the sessions and thus give the client the opportunity to listen to it afterwards. (Brenifier has started doing this, but he has the impression that clients are not too keen on listening to such a tape afterwards.)

The question of authenticity also comes up, as it requires not only considerable skills and routine, but also a personally integrated way of conducting the interrogation, in order to make the unbearable bearable. If you as a counselor does not do this in a way that comes natural to you, and which also “sugars the pill” the client has to swallow by being brought into an awkward position that may border on the unbearable, the session will break down. Then the client may be so frustrated, or even enraged, that she will leave the office. Or she will not get the point of what happens, and judge the game useless.

Thus, this seemingly pure methodologically oriented way of counseling, where personality at first glance might be deemed irrelevant, is very personal-oriented after all. While, on the other hand, the seemingly very personal-oriented conversational style of counseling is not that much personal-oriented, as it is a more universal and manageable approach to most counselors of different personal propensities. This is a paradox that I have experienced in my own practice, and that we should bear in mind. To internalize the interrogative style of counseling at least demands so much training and mental consolidation to what you are supposed to do that most counselors would have to work very hard on it to make it their second nature.

There are, however, some valuable moves and approaches to philosophical counseling that the interrogative style provides as tricks of the trade, even if you choose not to be a hardcore interrogative kind of counselor, but find yourself to be of a more eclectic kind, as I do. Especially valuable is, I think, the way such an approach can stop the incessant flow of speech that some clients succumb to. People are often trapped within their own speech, they are so full of themselves that they cannot hear what they are saying, and then a hermeneutical approach may not be very productive. The client may feel pleased at the moment as she is allowed to speak freely, but afterwards she might be frustrated as nothing really happened during the consultation. If the counselor is able to stop her flow of speech, and make her look at what she in fact has said, instead of incessantly running away to what she wants to say next, he produces something, namely a distance to her own words, which allows her to look at them from an outside perspective that is unfamiliar to her, and for that reason is very revealing.

Maybe the word “eclectic” is not very appropriate in this respect, as it tends to make us think of a person who only takes what he likes from different stances, and disregards what he does not like, which might be a too easily achieved and a rather shaky position. Being a primarily conversational kind of practitioner myself, I might rather phrase it in the way that I use the interrogative style as *interventions* during my consultations whenever I consider this a good move. I always ask myself “What does this person need?” when a client enters my office, and then such an intervention might be the very thing. Being an intervention only, it sticks out as an event in the consultation that can be reflected upon afterwards, which has proved to be quite fruitful.

Another important aspect of the interrogative approach is that it emphasizes the intersubjectivity of reason in a way that a hermeneutical approach may not do, or at least not to such extent. As philosophical counselors seek to point out the general in the

particular, by discerning the philosophical aspects in the client's particular narration, this must be a pivotal concern for the practitioner, regardless of his approach or methodological stance. As opposed to psychologists, who tend to say "Stop speaking generally, start speaking about your private life," philosophical counselors say "Stop speaking about your private life, and start speaking generally."

If we believe this approach to be fruitful to the client – and would we be philosophical counselors if we did not think just that? – the dissident and seemingly heretical interrogative approach has something to offer the mainstream conversational approach that should not be missed. This is especially so when most of us tend to agree upon the necessity of method and some toolbox in order to further develop philosophical counseling into a trade that indeed can be taught.