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## On Serious Games and the possible Reshaping of a Philosophical Paradigm: Some Reflection on the Sessions of Oscar Brenifier

To play games, by way of exercises of thought, has not been at the center of attention of Norwegian philosophers wanting to engage in the new and rather undefined art of philosophical counseling. Instead, we are mainly focusing on the demands that our consulting guests might put forward, based on intellectual as well as emotional problems, thus covering a wide range of topics shared with psychotherapists. Rejecting only persons with obvious and severe mental disturbances, our guests are supposed to be anybody that just as well might consult a psychotherapist, but for some reason, clear or unclear to himself, chooses a philosopher instead.

To a large extent we are supposed to meet our guests in the same way as a psychotherapist would do: by carefully listening to what the guest tells us about his life and his problems, and by doing this in a sympathetic and empathic way, eagerly wanting to make the guest feel safe and at ease, thus creating a trusting atmosphere. The guest, and not the philosopher, is supposed to be in the front seat, so to speak, allowing the guest to change his topic or the direction of the conversation as he pleases, without risking much more than a mildly stated «Are you aware that you just changed the topic, and thus cutting of our discussion?», followed by a consenting «go ahead» if he does not regret it, but wants to move on in his new direction.

All the time, especially during the first visit, we have to identify the guest's «order» by listening carefully and gently asking questions that might reveal what really worries him. Then, with this «order» more or less clearly stated and the guest consenting to this, we might, if we are lucky, provide him with some philosophically based insights or related thoughts that may help him to see his problem in a new and refreshing way, liberating him from his narrow-minded way of perceiving his problem and its possible solutions. In most cases we envisage this as a «feel-good-experience» for both parties, even if we sometimes might encounter an unexpected emotional outburst, which we then must know how to cope with. These incidents are, however, supposed to be rare, and by no means due to any intended provocation staged by the philosopher.

Maybe this picture of the philosopher as «Mr. Nice» is a bit exaggerated, but I don't think that it is very far from the truth. True or false, I have myself embraced it as quite evident, but have at the same time felt somewhat uncomfortable about it, without knowing exactly where to locate the faulty spot. Might it be that the border between our (supposed-to-be) profession and a variety of cognitive, conversation-based kinds of psychotherapy are quite unclear? That my probing into the embryonic field of philosophical counseling has left me with too few landmarks to assure me of not ending up as a pseudo-psychotherapist lightly disguised as a philosopher trying to do something he is not really trained to cope with? Where is the link between my philosophical knowledge, acquired theoretically at the university, and the practical enterprise I am supposed to undertake? Does it in the end exist? Or is «philosophical counseling» nothing but a whim, full of good intentions that nevertheless will fail to create a new profession?

Enter Oscar Brenifier on the scene, who wants to play games instead of doing philosophy as we – or at least I – thought it could be done. Stating that «I am not interested

in the reasons why the guest wants to consult me», he rejects one of the assumed cornerstones of our practice right from the start (the identification of the guest's «order»), continuing with the demand that the guest must produce an idea that he finds important, without bothering if this idea is right or wrong, or reasonable or unreasonable, from the philosopher's point of view. If this last assumption may not be too hard to accept, we are shocked once more when Brenifier does not permit the guest to explain *why* he chose the idea he put forward, and certainly not to furnish it with a personal context. *What on earth is this frenchman doing?* asks the onlooking Mr. Nice (that's me) to himself. *How can he violate his guest's autonomy or whatever he does when he wants no word of context or further explanation?*

Just toying with an idea out of context, and with no regard to whether it is true or false, might not seem to be philosophical counseling at all. Even worse, it seems to violate the ethical demands of *seeing* and *embracing* the guest as a *unique person* that any up-to-date health-worker and psychoterapist embraces. And philosophical counselors, too, we suppose. Because, who would even dream of not bowing respectfully to Empathy, Ethics, Autonomy and Caring? Certainly not aspiring philosophical counselors in Norway.

Returning to Brenifier's sessions, Mr. Nice gets really worried when Brenifier even allows himself to interrupt his guest again and again, forcing this poor guy to play the philosopher's game that makes him more and more frustrated. I even get the impression that Brenifier, in the midst of the heated cloud of restraint and confusion he is creating, leads the guest astray by twisting his arguments and by doing some argumentation himself that makes the whole mess end up with some strange conclusions – or rather preliminary conclusions – that the guest is anything but happy with. This is far away from the feel-good-atmosphere I initially had waited for, where the guest was imagined to leave with a grateful grin on his face. Now he feels toyed with (I can see that) and not properly respected. In fact, he leaves even more frustrated than when he came.

And I have to ask: Has he been helped at all by this rather rough kind of intellectual game? At that moment I would say: «Not very likely.»

In the paper Brenifier mails to his would-be guests in France (see my translation of that paper), he uses the words «game» and «exercise» in outlining the kind of practice just demonstrated. Such notions might imply that his counseling consists of more than games and exercises, but as long as we don't know that for sure, I will stick to his games, as we have witnessed them here in Oslo, and as they are more comprehensible explained in his paper. Obviously Brenifier's games are challenging our nice Norwegian way of doing things, and now I am asking myself if this challenge has more to it than perceived at first sight. Is there in fact something to be learned from it after all? In hindsight I think there is, and I will claim that Brenifier's challenge may even prove quite fruitful, enabling at least myself to rethink central aspects on what our profession might be.

Being inspired by Socrates and Plato, and even by Hegelian dialectics, and making this inspiration visible in his games, Brenifier's contribution to philosophical counseling should not be turned down lightly. Undeniably, he seems to be more in touch with the philosophical tradition than I ever have been, or have thought possible during my first efforts on counseling, even if he does not appear to be nice or bow to the virtues in the way we do. But was Socrates known to be nice, Norwegian style? Certainly not, judging from the Plato dialogues. Nevertheless he was well liked. (Characteristically, Norwegians tend to assume that Socrates, being well liked, also had to be really nice; thus imagining him as some pre-Christian Santa Claus that absurdly was put to death by his mean-spirited fellow citizens.)

If Socrates from time to time seems eager to please or solemnly polite, it usually is pure irony, or some sugar to sweeten the bitter pill he makes his interlocutor swallow. Maybe Socrates was violating the ethical guidelines of the modern philosophical counselor;

that might be an interesting discussion to undertake at some later moment. Here it is sufficient to point out that Socrates surely was discussing his interlocutor's propositions (usually definitions of some general term like «courage», «temperance» and «friendship») out of any personal context, and that he in a very shrewd way played intellectual games that left the interlocutor (usually some big-shot in society) just as confused and frustrated as recently was the case with Brenifier's guests. Rereading some of the early Plato dialogues, I once more realize that being subjected to Socrates' examinations was a rather disturbing and even painful experience that somewhat pulled the rug away from under one's feet, by making it clear that you didn't know what you thought you knew. The bystanders in Athens would surely have said, as a participant on a seminary-session held by Brenifier did, that: «It's interesting to watch, but I would rather not be the person you are investigating.»

But, we might ask, what is achieved by Socrates, apart from this somewhat negative practice of making you unsure of what you really know? To shake the self-confidence of some important fellow might be acceptable on the scene of the Athenian agora, where this fellow agrees on having his intellectual understanding and faculties examined by Socrates. But isn't the conversation in a counsellor's office another matter? Persons wanting to be our guests may not be self-confident at all; more likely they are unsure of themselves from the start, coping with some personal problem, maybe not knowing what to do next or which path to choose. The last thing these people need, we should think, is to be even more shaken than they already are by some philosopher's intellectual games, making their shortcomings even more blatant than they knew they were. Isn't it downright unethical to do this to persons who seek help and wisdom out of some state of distress? Here they come, vulnerable and hopeful, to be consoled and advised – and then they are lead into some game that they certainly not did expect, feeling interrupted and manipulated and their autonomy not respected. Can we expect people to pay good money for that?

A fear that a Socratic approach, even if proved justifiable, might be bad for business is, alas, entering my head. In a world where people have learned to look upon themselves as customers in most aspects of life, and certainly when dealing with professional people, we are lead to believe that «the customer is always right», and that his satisfaction of demands on a short term is something that cannot be ignored. If we are not exactly embracing an «eager to please»-attitude, we feel obliged to keep at least one eye at the customer's well-being, trying to avoid anything that might really displease him. This, we have come to believe, is part of respecting the other person's autonomy – which in turn is being ethical in the way we all are supposed to behave in order to be really «professional». Strangely, then, how commerce and ethics apparently have come to an understanding in professional life. Will this eventually make the grooming practice of man's closest relatives the ideal of every professional enterprise, my own included? In my darkest moments I fear this is so.

Quite different from the Socratic approach, but widely accepted as a way of dealing with personal distress, is the psychoanalyst's concept of free flow of association, where the client is allowed to speak as he pleases, thus revealing some hidden traumas from his childhood, partly by displaying his resistance to the in fact impossible demand of speaking really freely, without discriminating his themes as more or less important, and without censoring his thoughts in any way. Since Freud, this classical psychoanalytical situation has been paradigmatic for much thinking in the field of psychology, also among psychologists who differ from Freud's approach. The emphasis on «the unconscious», the pivotal importance of feelings and the abyss of «irrationality» in the human mind, of «neurotics» and «dysfunctional personalities» haunted by «their inner resistance» to grasp the awful truth deep down in the soul – all these notions have during the twentieth century pushed reason away from the center of the scene, relegating it to the irrelevant domain of «idle thoughts». One tendency that psychologists are warning against, is the client's urge to «intellectualize his problems», thus viewing his intellectual faculty a part of the mind's «resistance» to

reveal the feelings lying underneath – basic feeling of shame or guilt or fear, to name a few – that the client’s mind has stashed away to make life bearable, despite the symptoms of unhappiness and frustrations it produces. Feelings, not intellect, is what it is all about; feelings = depth, while intellect = superficiality. So don’t be fooled by people who think too much. Playing their game is rendering them a disservice, leaving them forever trapped in their unwillingness to understand what governs their outlook on life and way of behaviour.

Another part of this picture – which I will call «the psychological paradigm» – is the extreme amount of time a classical psychoanalysis demands. Seeing the analyst three–four times a week for several years is not unusual, and even if most contemporary psychologists have abandoned these ideals for much shorter and supposedly more efficient methods, the presupposition still remains that healing a person’s mind takes *a lot of time*, and that the client has to do *a lot of talk* until he gets in touch with what really bothers him. As Foucault has pointed out, Europeans have since long developed a strong belief in confession – of laying bare all our sins and «dirty» thoughts – that is pivotal to every Freudian-inspired psychological treatment. Our belief in the healing power of endless confessional talk has become so strong that it passes on undisputed, even if it originally (and centuries before Freud) was propagated by the catholic church, in order to classify and control human sexuality, and hopefully transform our sexual energy to better use. This controlling device of confession was then adopted by scientific societies and society at large, thus making the supposed healing power of confession not the only, and perhaps not the most important issue a stake. Much due to Freud, this controlling aspect of confession has escaped our attention by his famous and supposedly liberally-minded free flow of speech, proclaiming it (together with dreams) to be the royal route to the unconscious, and thereby to freedom from our inner prison created by our parents and ourselves.

Where is this rather long digression into psychology leading us? Well, I think it gives us a clue to why contemporary people, myself included, have come to have such a small faith in reason. We have been accustomed to view thinking out of a personal context as an idle, and at best a pure intellectual activity that may have a beauty of its own in the ivory towers of academical philosophy, but with no bearing on our personal lives. Philosophers are surely upholding a tradition that for centuries had its place in the sun, but by now has declined into an enterprise stripped of its pretensions of being scientific, and thus having a significance in social life. At the same time psychologists are boasting their scientific pretensions, making us believe even more that we cannot help people as much as psychologists can. If some cognitive therapist makes headlines in the papers or on tv, claiming to cure fright of snakes or of heights, or make people quit smoking after a small number of sessions, we are likely to think «wish it were true» without really believing it, because, as we keep insisting, our thinking faculty *is* superficial, and because healing of such deeply felt fears and habits are, as already mentioned, supposed to take *long time*. Rejecting the old Socratic conviction that *a man who knows what is right will do what is right* as too naïve, leaving out our deep-rooted modern knowledge of human irrationality, we are stuck within the psychological paradigm, lowering our ambitions to be doing some light-weight kind of counseling, much less profound in character than what psychologists can achieve.

So what can be done with this rather bleak position of ours? Can anything be done at all? I think it can, and that abandoning the psychological paradigm is crucial in getting further ahead. One way of doing this is to look back on our personal experiences as hobby-psychologists in everyday life, trying to listen to a spouse or a parent or a sibling or a friend in an attentive psychologist-like way, letting the other speak freely to get things off his or her chest. Each time I, at least, have hoped to make such a person reveal something to himself that puts his situation in a new light, and thus enables him to undergo some inner change. Which most often is not the case, as the person remains who he is, despite my long

and enduring efforts in the art of empathic listening and counseling. Maybe I have become too pessimistic in this respect, or have been less fortunate than others in my efforts, but I have anyway grown sick and tired of endless talk leading nowhere, apart from the other person's satisfaction of having been in the center of my attention for hours, again and again.

Lacking a professional training in this field may account for some of these meagre results, but not, I strongly suspect, for the the whole lot of it. Looking back on what is typical of such fruitless talks with persons who barely change, their intellectual dishonesty gets to my attention: the way their thinking has become quite undisciplined, either escaping obvious conclusions or jumping to conclusions, or not wanting to think things through (but only to a certain point, where they tend to get uncomfortable or even hostile), or throwing in arguments or other subjects that are irrelevant to the matter discussed, thus escaping into a convenient confusion, or refusing to recognize the force of an argumentation better than their own. All this to get away with their present state of mind, in order to preserve their status quo, like an unchangeable rock that once and for all has become their much cherished «identity». Surely they are unhappy or frustrated, and surely they want to get rid of all that. But by way of changing their «identity» in the slightest way? Forget it. «I am who I am», people like to claim, and «you have to accept me as I am». And a recent equivalent: «You have to respect my autonomy.» Well, who could object to that? Surely not a person who wants to be friendly and ethical and nice.

What also strikes me in hindsight, is how easily I have allowed my interlocutors to get away with such intellectual dishonesty, sometimes again and again, without even reproaching myself for letting this happen. Isn't this so because I tended to believe that: «What the heck, these are only intellectual thoughts, and not what really matters here. Only a clearer understanding of old sufferings may free him from his everlasting unhappiness or frustration, and surely no present quarrel on a specific proposition or point of view.»

In short, the psychological paradigm got the better of me. As usually is the case with paradigmatic thinking, I have taken it for granted, without questioning its accuracy or relevance. Being a paradigm it constitutes the framework of thinking within a specific field, like what might cause and remove the sufferings of the human mind. Here, at last, I have located the faulty spot that makes me uncomfortable about my business. I now realize that trying to do philosophical counseling within this psychological paradigm is like trying to play football in the woods; you may occasionally make some nice moves, but most of the time you will feel handicapped by all the trees and bumps, making it clear that you are in a place where you were not supposed to do what you are doing.

If not to claim the psychological paradigm to be false (that would be a too hasty move), I at least feel the urge to get out of the woods, in order to find a new and better suited field for our activity. For a start, I find it useful to ask a big what if-question or two: *What if a mentally liberating force were to be found in the presumed barren field of intellectual arguing, maybe just as much, or even more, as in identifying old traumas in the person's personal history?* And: *What if the quest for intellectual honesty proved to be a feasible and (compared with psychanalytic kinds of treatment) quite short road to personal liberation from unhappiness and frustrations?* Are we, students of philosophical counseling, even prepared to ask ourselves questions like that? Frankly, I'm not sure that we are, and that's thought-provoking in itself.

Here, I believe, is the real issue of Brenifier's philosophical games that so provoked us. And that caused lots of upheavals during his several settings, be they individual counseling, philosophic café and doing philosophy with classes in school. Since then I have come to ponder on this upheaval in a new way, finding it remarkable that they occurred every time, making it unlikely that they were mere accident, due to the interlocutor or school class in question. No, this upheaval seems to be the rule, and not the exception of the games Brenifier likes to play. What also is remarkable, is that such purely philosophical games are

capable of making so much uneasiness and emotions burst up on the surface, again and again, sometimes revealing disturbingly much of the strains and obstacles haunting the interlocutor's mind. In spite of deliberately leaving «life» out of the game, «life» kept popping up, disturbing and prolonging the presumably dull and straightforward process of producing a proposition and labouring on its content and implications, sometimes making this process impossible to fulfill.

If Brenifier had been a rude and mean-spirited person, all this upheaval would not be remarkable at all. The culprit would then have been Brenifier's own personality, and not the kind of philosophy he was doing. This, I will contend, is not the case. Despite Brenifier's somewhat authoritarian approach during his sessions (he never claimed to be democratic in doing philosophy), I found his conduct to be without malice (very important, he once pointed out to me) and with much good humour, making his inquiries more endurable than they elsewhere would have been (also important, he says). By way of this and his Socratic way of shrewdness in asking the right question or finding the right argument (much due to routine, I discovered by repeatedly watching his sessions), he managed to produce a realm of non-contextuality where everyone, high or low in society, are treated equally, thus being utter democratic in spite of his authoritarian ways – a paradoxical fact to reflect upon. Being lead into this realm's harsh and exposing light was not a pleasant experience to anyone, nor was it supposed to be pleasant. Therefore: Daring to meet this light is, after all, not just playing games in a barren and idle way, but playing serious games that might have a much bigger impact on your mind than previously imagined. That is, if the questions I asked above are not completely off the mark.

Maybe the fallacy of the psychological paradigm is its presupposition that «pure» context-free thinking is impersonal in the sense that it is of no consequence to our mental state of mind what we think or do not think on this level. If truth and salvation are only to be found in the density of personal context, the person's intellectual dishonesty or lack of discipline will be of minor importance, apart from being a symptom of what lies underneath, which is supposed to be the issue being investigated. Then we are not encouraged to even consider the possibility of ascribing personal distress to faulty thinking on the non-contextual level. Asking my what-if-questions is therefore to start thinking the other way around, or at least conceding that «pure» intellectual thinking might have an impact on persons life, and might even be a source of distress, in some cases even more than traumas of the past and the «neurotical» ways of dealing with them.

Is this really a far-fetched idea? What if intellectual dishonesty or lack of discipline in fact causes suffering in itself, because it is a shortcoming that makes it impossible to achieve a peace of mind, which was the goal of ancient practical philosophy, especially in the Hellenistic epoch? What if context-free thinking in fact *is* a personal matter, revealing much more of what we are than we would like to think of? Maybe this kind of thinking is just as personal as our personal context, and often is the source, and not the symptoms, of an uneasy state of mind? Surely everybody has a philosophy of life, whether they are aware of it or not, and are we supposed to believe that this personal philosophy has no bearing on feelings and the way one's personal history is interpreted? That is not very likely, as Aristotle and the Stoics have pointed out. But if so, is it less likely that the person's «pure way of thinking» has no significant impact on his (often hidden) philosophy of life? If we hold on to this line of thought, Brenifier's philosophical games may not prove futile at all.

*To lose yourself is to find yourself* is an old saying (e.g. in Buddhism) that Brenifier has adopted (so he told me). By seeing the possibility of taking a person out of his tiresome personal context and find out what then might happen to him, Brenifier employs this basic insight (probably also recognized by Socrates) in a way that proves it to be less paradoxical than at first sight. Realizing 1) the considerable impact «pure thinking» has on our daily lives, and 2) the liberating effect of releasing us from context, if only for half an hour's play

or exercise, Brenifier is bypassing the psychological paradigm (which, by the way, was unheard of at the time of Socrates). By making his guest lose what Brenifier labels his «empirical self», he enables the guest to find his «trancendental self», which gets obscured by the heated and noisy cloud of empirical context. And, as Brenifier's sessions clearly have indicated, encountering one's trancendental self is no impersonal matter. Finding oneself to think inconsistently, either because of faulty thinking or too much confusion in thought, might really hurt and trigger profound feelings of shame and frustration.

This observation corresponds to my experiences as a sympathetic listener and adviser previously mentioned: at those occasions where I managed to identify faulty logic or inconsistency in my interlocutor's reasoning, I was usually met with a fierce denial of this fact, mounting to angry and even hysterical outbursts. Clearly this indicates that a lot is at stake at this point, and that «pure reasoning» can be a very delicate and touchy matter indeed. Paradoxically as it might seem (for those trapped in the psychological paradigm), exposure of faulty or confused reasoning might be just as embarrassing to the person in question as spotting some traumatic event in his past, if not even more so.

Rereading the early Socratic dialogues I sense this embarrassment in the interlocutor proven to be wrong in his reasoning, without my knowing anything of his empirical self, apart from his rank, some previous deeds and his closest relatives. Still I can identify with him, and the more I do so, the stronger this feeling of embarrassment grows. Surely the Socratic interrogation takes place on the level of trancendental self, where I, too, put myself in my reading. After having witnessed Brenifier's sessions, I more clearly sense the agony lying between the lines in Plato. Now I realize the amount of uneasiness that must have been present in Socrates' interlocutors – in their way of speaking, and surely in their body language, their hesitating pauses etc. Plato's writing understates this aspect of the dialogues, making them appear more smooth and «idle» than they probably were. These talks were serious games indeed, proving it to be utterly painful to think things through in the realm of «pure», trancendental self.

«Utterly painful» – these words might make us shy away from any Socratic enterprise. But, I then will ask, what is the alternative if we really want to help people? Might it not, in the long run, be even more painful not to think things through? Might the unhappy and frustrated person's unwillingness to change his ways to a large extent be rooted in his unwillingness not to think things through? If this is so, rising up to our trancendental self and sorting things out on this level will have no small significance on our empirical self. On this trancendental level there are no trees to hide behind, as there are on the empirical level, but just a plain field bathed in a clear, sharp light that surely is unpleasant. No wonder why people resist exposing themselves to this unmerciful light. No grooming service awaits us there, only a more or less painful treatment which might bruise our ego at that moment, but which later on might enable us to think in a less confused and more consistent way than before, thus enabling us to cope with our everyday problems in a better and more fruitful way.

If this is so, the games that Brenifier plays will after all be relevant in counseling people how to make life better for themselves. Then it will not be unethical to inflict some Socratic pain on people in distress, as this in turn will enable them to cope better with their problems. There is a word for that, and a quite fashionable word, too, among health workers of to-day. This word is *empowerment*, referring to the transformation of patients from a state of passive reception of care and treatment to a new state of being in charge, so to speak, of their own care and treatment, partly by managing daily tasks more on their own, and partly by seeking care and treatment in a more active and understanding way than before. Frustrating as this initially may be, patients undergoing this process of empowerment will gradually get an increased sense of being in command of their own life, instead of being made totally helpless and at the mercy of other people's whims and decisions. This, in turn,

increases their autonomy, which is a goal in itself. And, as we surely know, a very ethical goal indeed.

Seeing Brenifier's games as tools of empowerment, his authoritarian and interruptive ways may not be violating the guest's autonomy at all. They might instead increase it by improving his mental capabilities, just like training people's muscles might increase their physical capability, enabling them to manage more on their own. (We should bear in mind that the analogy between training of thought and training of the body is present in Plato.) Isn't this a task to be undertaken by a philosophical counselor? Surely it is, as we are the professional people most qualified to do this.

Another point to consider: Are we respecting our guest's autonomy in the best way by letting him stay in his empirical self and talk and talk for hours without getting anywhere? Or had we better, for professional ethical reasons, make such a guest play philosophical games that might shake him out of his nonproductive ways of thinking, and make way for the empowerment process? Surely I by now am inclined to embrace this last alternative.

After having proclaimed his lack of interest in personal context and in psychology at large, Brenifier added a statement that I find quite revealing: «The only thing that interests me, is how my interlocutor relates to himself.» This statement puts his initially shocking proclamations in a new light that proves them not to be violating his guest's autonomy after all. Not wanting to impose some truth on his guest, but just find out how this person relates to himself, and then point this out to him, is, I believe, very much respecting the other person's autonomy. Even more so if this kind of counseling in turn enhances the person's autonomy by way of empowerment. To do this by transcending the muddy waters of the person's context-ridden world of feelings and memories and hopes and disappointments and general confusion, is nothing short of a Copernican revolution to us trapped in the psychological paradigm. We might even say that this turning things around is a cornerstone in reshaping the paradigm of philosophy once created in antiquity. With some modifications, it is not unlikely that this ancient way of dealing with human distress may prove powerful and efficient beyond our wildest dreams. Even if it brings on several problems, like: How to cope with the necessity to displease our guests by subjecting them to a kind of mental surgery done completely without anaesthetics? And how to perform this kind of surgery? And how to integrate these serious games in our counseling at large? A lot of work has to be done until a philosophical paradigm fit for our modern world might emerge. But isn't this what we want to happen?

Oslo, April 15, 2004