

On Getting Beyond Idle Talk – some Additional Reflections on Oscar Brenifier's Sessions

After having stated, in my paper *On Serious Games ...*, a fear that our enterprise may turn out to be nothing but a kind of pseudo-psychoteraphy lightly disguised as philosophical counseling, Helge Svare poses in his paper to Oscar and myself and his fellow philosophers a counter-question that challenges the widely held assumption that a conversation of a systematic kind dealing with human problems and predicaments is classified as psychological or as an example of psychotherapy. Why do we naively accept the claim that that this is their domain? he wonders, and reminds us that

People have had these kinds of conversations through the ages, long before psychology was invented, and long before the advent of the modern psychotherapist. They had them simply because they were important and because they needed them. And through most of our history, *the philosopher* was regarded as a qualified discussion partner in this kind of conversations.

Helge then points out that the widely shared naive belief that conversations dealing with personal problems is «an example of how our culture has been colonized by psychology». This was also a major point in my paper, where I tried to highlight how much «the psychological paradigm» (as I called it) has affected at least my own thinking on the limits and possibilities of philosophical counseling. I surely wanted to get loose from this paradigm by way of creating, or rather reshaping, a philosophical paradigm fit for what we would like to do. I therefore regard Helge's remarks as pulling in the same direction as my own concerns, proving (as I knew in beforehand) that we have a common goal: to establish a kind of philosophical counseling practice rooted in an old tradition, and not preying on psychology in any significant way. So far so well.

This, however, raises once more the question of, or rather fear of, idle talk mentioned in my paper. Even if my remark on «endless talk leading nowhere, apart from the other person's satisfaction of having been in the centre of my attention for hours, again and again» refers to my previous experiences as an amateur psychoterapist in everyday life, and not to my initial and rather meagre exercises in doing philosophical counseling, as Helge apparently believes, I nevertheless fear that I might encounter the same problem in my future practice as a counselor.

So the big question is: How to get beyond idle talk and make the conversation substantial in a philosophical way? It was at this point that the sessions of Oscar stroke me as a possible step towards something refreshingly philosophical that also might prove efficient in dealing with people wanting philosophical counseling.

Before I elaborate on this, I find it necessary to ferret out another prejudice of my own (in addition to those I spotted in my previous paper) concerning philosophy and fruitless talk, due to Helge's point that through most of our history, *the philosopher* was regarded as a qualified discussion partner in this kind of conversations. This is obviously true, but, one might ask, did these conversations really help people in a more than a superficial way? This does not follow from the fact that philosophers were regarded as qualified by their fellow citizens. Also physicians of the past were regarded as qualified in dealing with bodily diseases, even if they used methods that we now find non-productive if not plainly damaging, as e.g. the practice of bleeding by way of leeches to get rid of «bad blood». Much respected

doctors did this for centuries, believing themselves, and making their patients believe, that it improved the patient's condition. But if some quacksalver of to-day would propagate the healing effect of leeches and bleeding, partly by stating that this has been done throughout the ages, long before modern medicine was invented, this would not impress us at all. We would just laugh or shake our head, believing him to be nuts.

My prejudice, founded in my youth when I eagerly read Freud and other books on psychology, is then to equal the old philosophers with the old doctors who propagated methods that by now are proved inefficient, pointless and even harmful. Like modern medicine has rendered leeches and bleeding obsolete, Freud and modern psychology had supposedly rendered the philosopher obsolete as an expert on the human mind. Until the vast importance of irrational drives and wishes and «the unconscious» was detected, philosophers were as far off the mark as Hippocrates and Galen and lots of others had been on the somatic field, despite their enormous historical influence and good intentions. Because, I was lead to believe, nobody before Freud really understood what went on deep down in the human mind. (By the way, if you really want a good laugh at the naivité of this belief, and a good and entertaining example of how it once was conveyed to the big Hollywood audience, you should watch Alfred Hitchcock's movie *Spellbound* from 1945, and his later movie *Marnie*, too.)

This prejudice, which I think is quite widespread (not only due to Hitchcock), has of course been hailed by psychologists and psychiatrists themselves, wanting to be members of the scientific medical society and take part in its huge legitimacy and prestige. That makes it even more important to counter it, in order to gain the necessary self-confidence on behalf of philosophical counseling that Helge is propagating. Because, if we in the end do believe that psychology has rendered philosophy obsolete as a way of dealing with personal problems (I hardly think that I was the only one holding such a belief in my youth), we are in deep trouble. If we cannot even convince ourselves that this belief is false, how can we convince our future guests and society at large that our service is both relevant and efficient?

One way of dealing with this prejudice is to point out that a century of trial and error has not enabled psychology and psychiatry to get results that in any way can be compared with the exactness of somatic medicine. If we scratch on psychology's and psychiatry's impressive surface, we soon find a world predominated by uncertain results and methods. The difficulty of agreeing on a proper diagnosis system is a prominent example of this, where the criterias have been changed and modified every ten years or so, e.g. making a lot of people schizophrenic one year who were not classified so previously, and vice versa. If we might grant psychiatry an exclusive capacity to deal with serious mental disorders caused by some defects in the brain or nervous system that have to be treated with chemotherapy and even surgery, we should not grant them a monopoly in dealing with mental problems at large. That goes even more for psychology, where, as is the case with philosophical counseling, medication is not an option.

Much more could be said about psychiatry's and psychology's dubious claim of having well-founded answers to most aspects of human mental problems. By way of this negatively founded strategy of spotting the shortcomings in these fields, proving them to have no more advanced theories of the causes of human distress than can be found in philosophy, and probably no better conversational methods than philosophers can offer, we are well on the track to gain our much-needed self-confidence as aspiring philosophical counselors. But, I will claim, this is not enough. We must also have a positively founded strategy in order to carve out an identity of our own, based on what philosophy can offer of tools and tricks of the trade in counseling people in its own way.

Tools and tricks of the trade? What kind of odious talk am I now indulging in? Have I forgotten that I am talking about philosophy, and not of some handicraft like carpentry or cooking? Well, not quite. But, if philosophy at large cannot be compared to some handicraft, is this also the case with philosophical counseling?

The answers to this last questions will surely vary, according to each practitioner's position in the quite unhomogenous field of philosophical counseling. Practitioners subscribing to Gerd Achenbachs «beyond method»-approach might be more inclined to answer «no» than practitioners positively searching for a method of philosophical counseling. I find myself to be more and more in favour of looking for such a method, and thus for some tools and tricks of the trade that can be employed at certain stages in the process of philosophical counseling. To me, the quest has become to find and cultivate the tools necessary to get beyond «idle talk» and start doing philosophical thinking together with my guests in some fruitful and (to the guests) liberating way. Encountering Oscar highlighted this quest, as I think that his sessions gave a glimpse of some possible tricks of the trade.

Since Oscar's visit I have found time to read Peter B. Raabe's book *Philosophical Counseling. Theory and Practice*, which I find very informative and wise in outlining what philosophical counseling might be. One of his interesting terms is «dialogical competence», and I suggest that finding out what dialogical competence really might be, should be a major issue in our further studies. I found Oscar to possess a large amount of dialogical competence, as Socrates too surely has, according to Plato's writings, even if I cannot give an exact definition of what that faculty is. Being a newcomer in this field, I can only say that «I know it when I see it». And that I surely want to learn more about it, be it from having sessions with practitioners of considerable dialogical competence or from close readings of the case stories of Raabe and others, and certainly of the Socratic dialogues.

Returning to Raabe, I find his own concept of doing philosophical practice (as outlined in his chapter 4) to bridge the assumed gap between my initial concept of philosophical practice as a guest-centered and to a large extent listening enterprise, and a practitioner-centered and direct approach represented by Oscar. According to Raabe, philosophical counseling should consist of four steps, namely:

- Stage 1: Free-floating conversation where the guest is allowed to speak freely of his problems, and where the practitioner mainly is listening.
- Stage 2: Immediate problem resolution, where the guest and practitioner concentrate on an immediate problem that has to be solved by way of philosophical dialogue.
- Stage 3: Teaching as an intentional act, where the practitioner provides the guest with thinking skills necessary to cope with similar problems now and in the future.
- Stage 4: Transcendence, where the guest is lead to discuss previous issues in a general way, transcending his immediate need of problem-solving.

Not all guests go all the way to stage 4, Raabe tells us; some are content with being listened to at stage 1, some quit after having solved their immediate problems at stage 2, while others want to learn thinking skills at stage 3 and maybe even indulge in real philosophizing at stage 4. These stages might also be intertwined, he says, by e.g. returning to stage 1 if a new problem emerges when dealing with another problem at stage 2, or even during the teaching session at stage 3.

What I find revealing, is that Raabe's stage 1 corresponds very well to my initial concept of philosophical counseling, as «the way we do it up here in Norway». The revealing point is that stage 1, necessary as it is, is not the whole picture, as I initially was inclined to believe. At some time, maybe already at the second session, the practitioner might find the guest ready to be lead into stage 2, attacking his problems more directly.

To do this, it is not enough to be a good and emphatic listener who also happens to know about philosophical stances and has some comforting quotations ready at hand; one

must also possess a certain minimum of dialogical competence that might be labelled tools and tricks of the trade. *The ability to ask the right question at the right moment* seems to me to be pivotal in this respect, just like a butcher must know where to put his knife into the slaughtered animal, in order to make the right slices of meat desired by his customers. (Doesn't Plato use this analogy of the butcher in discussing what we may call dialogical competence? I have some recollection that he does.) To lead the guest up to stage 3, the practitioner also has to know critical thinking skills like informal logics and be able to teach it in a manner relevant to the guest, and on stage 4 he really has to know about different philosophical stances. These are quite stern demands indeed.

Sticking to Raabe's model, the dialogical competence of Oscar and others will not be put into use until stage 2, and Oscar's «purely philosophical» games might not be played out until stage 3 and 4. Seeing it this way, we don't have to argue for or against «the Oscar approach», as if we have to choose between «our nice way» and «his crude way» of doing things. Such a discussion I find quite unfruitful and in fact unnecessary. Raabe's rather common sense-oriented model makes use of both approaches, which is a win-win-situation – but a situation where the demands on dialogical competence has to be highlighted. And has to be thoroughly taught to every student of philosophical counseling.

To put it shortly and crudely: If you do not possess dialogical competence to such a degree that you can make use of it during a session, you are simply not competent as a philosophical counselor. Exercises in listening abilities by way of repeating stage 1 over and over again in learning sessions among students, will not enable us to perform as philosophical counselors in the end. What we really have to concentrate on, is how to get past this free flow of talk and start to do a dialogical inquiry, which is not easy at all. I think that we have to indulge in case stories and game of roles based on such good examples, in order to acquire the skills necessary.

I envisage this as a kind of casuistic approach where we start collecting lots of examples of fragments containing efficient «turning points» in previous dialogues that might be useful in the future. The collection formula might be: «If the guest holds *this* thesis, the practitioner might ask *that* question, because this proved efficient in that instance» in lots of cases and variations. Like a jazz musician has to know and practice lots of tonal fragments in all keys to expand his repertory as an improviser, the philosophical counselor has to be equally virtuous in handling his arsenal of «the right question-fragments» to make good improvisations during sessions later on.

In addition to that, the would-be philosophical counselor must, as already mentioned, repeat and renew his often rusty and by far forgotten knowledge of logic and other fundamentals of critical thinking. Tools and tricks of the trade this will be, and by far a method of coping with personal problems that very well might dwarf the psychologist's and psychiatrist's conversational procedures. Mastering these tools and tricks of the trade should really give us the self-confidence needed to set up shop as philosophical counselors. It should also do away with our (or at least my own) fear of endless and idle talk leading nowhere, as we then will know how to change the gear, so to speak, of the sessions.

Having made Peter Raabe an intermediating hero of this paper, I would like to give him the last word (from *Philosophical Counseling*, p. 171), where he elaborates on this point, and also points out the main difference, as he sees it, between philosophical counseling and psychotherapy:

[Philosophical counseling] clearly implies that if certain cognitive skills and rational/moral competencies are taught to the client during the philosophical counseling process for future use, philosophical counseling can provide the means by which the client may not only be better able to deal with future problems as they arise, but *foresee, anticipate*, and thereby *avoid* problems or *prevent* problems from arising in the first place. It is by going beyond stage

2, immediate problem resolution, to stages 3 and 4, teaching and transcendence, as presented by the model, that philosophical counseling is rendered truly proactive or preventive because it is in these two stages that the specialized knowledge, abilities, and dispositions of the philosopher are conveyed to the client. Work in stages 3 and 4 enables the client come to a deeper understanding of *why* problems have arisen in the past, and it is this understanding that helps her to avoid problems in future.

I believe that any conception of philosophical counseling should have included within it the imperative that every philosophical counselor should work toward the creation of the kind of awareness and reasoning abilities in his client that will allow her to anticipate – and thereby prevent – contingent future problems. Not only will a strong proactive or preventive element make it far less likely that the client will find herself unwillingly confronted by unexpected and unwelcome problems, but the practice of philosophical counseling will thereby be more autonomy-enhancing than, and thereby more clearly differentiated from, psychotherapy.

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