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The Policeman Approach to Philosophical Counseling

How to do philosophical counseling is to a large extent a question of attitude. What can the counsellor permit himself to do towards his guest, what should he refrain from or even prohibit himself from doing, how should he describe the guest and the consultation situation in a metaphorical way – these kinds of questions will unavoidingly influence the counsellor in his practice, whether he is aware of it or not. Let us have a closer look, then, on the question of attitude, and on the possibilities and limitations connected to it.

First I will probe into the predominant attitude of the “beyond method” kind of counsellor, as it is modelled in the education by The Norwegian Society of Philosophical Counseling and in a recent textbook (Svare/Herrestad: *Filosofi for livet*) on how philosophical counseling is to be performed. I will label this attitude “the caring approach.” Then I will contrast this attitude with what I, maybe chockingly, will label “the policeman approach” to philosophical counseling. To my fellow students and my mentors it will come as no surprise that this “policeman approach” is propagated by our French colleague Oscar Brenifier, even if the label is my, and not his, invention. Oscar, however, put forward the good policeman metaphor during a philosophical counseling seminar here in Oslo this month, where he also conducted a session which demonstrated how such an attitude might be employed in an actual practice. This session will be dealt with in my paper, as an exemplifying step in my discussion.

The quest for a trusting atmosphere: The caring approach

In Norway, the predominant attitude of the philosophical counsellor is that of an attentive and empathetic conversation companion who is very intent on making his guest feel at home and at ease during the consultation. The counsellor makes a little welcome ceremony out of offering his guest tea or coffee, he stresses the equality between himself and his guest by furnishing his office with two equal armchairs grouped in some 120 degrees angle to avoid the 180 degrees connotation of confrontation, and he speaks and behaves in a gentle and sympathetic manner in order to create an atmosphere of trust and security. “Please feel free to tell me whatever you want,” is the message, and when the guest starts to talk, the counsellor eagerly lets her have the scene all by herself. Questions are mostly intended to encourage the guest to go on, or to elaborate on certain points, especially in the early stages of a consultation. “Can you tell me more about this?” is a frequently used and recommended question, accompanied by encouraging glances and nods, as the counsellor knows the value of keeping his mouth shut most of the time and thus create the space necessary for his guest to think aloud in his presence. Often this is enough, we are told, as the guest will come to a deeper understanding of herself just by talking in the presence of an attentive conversation partner who abstains from putting forward his own concerns and worries. In this incongruity lies a crucial difference between a counseling and a talk with a friend, as you cannot expect your friend to give you as much space for yourself as a counsellor will do.

Thus, the belief in the enlightening and clarifying power of thinking aloud in a philosophically trained person’s presence seems to be pivotal in the current “beyond method”-influenced way of counseling. Which presupposes the caring attitude of empathy and trust in order to make the guest feel at liberty to reveal her thoughts and worries. From time to

time the counselor might put forward a question that challenges the guest's way of thinking, or maybe a metaphor or an alternative standpoint which might open her eyes to (for her) new ways of seeing things. But this is done by way of improvising, and not by following some method, as every guest is a unique human being and every conversation is new and different from any previous conversation in the counsellor's office. Prudence and attentiveness is what the counselor should strive for, and not for some methodological skills that would be too mechanical for the delicate task of doing philosophical counseling.

As the notion of confrontation is to be avoided right from the start, the counselor tends to back off if the guest rejects this challenge and becomes ill at ease. Even if a "beyond method" counsellor is not prohibited from being insistent from time to time, he will generally refrain from being so. If his questions and challenges make the guest feel ill at ease, the counselor is likely to withdraw and try to restore the trusting atmosphere.

In short we might say that *the guest is king*, even if it is not good latin to phrase it in this way. But it cannot be denied that the counsellor-guest relationship very easily gets a flavour of a servant-king relationship where the counsellor becomes complacent in a submissive way. Even if an attentive and empathetic attitude does not necessarily lead to complacency and submissiveness, the danger – or maybe temptation – of falling into this trap is imminent. Especially when you are a newcomer in the field of counseling, and not really sure of where to draw the borders between attentiveness and complacency, and between empathy and submissiveness. To become upright, and not pleasing, as a counsellor then becomes a major challenge. Which certainly is a question of personal judgement, far beyond method.

The vulnerability of the guest is often emphasized by counselors of the beyond method school, be it on an ontological lögstrupian or levinasian level, or on an antropological level more in tune with the notion of the very fragile child residing in every human being. This latter notion is quite widespread among different psychoterapists, so it is no wonder that it has influenced the young, aspiring trade of philosophical counseling. Fear of doing harm to the very fragile child inside the guest then governs the counselors conduct, both for ethical reasons and for the more pragmatcal belief that scaring off the fragile child-part in the guest will prevent her from speaking freely, and thus be counterproductive in the consultation situation. Then it is basically the fragile child-part that has to be addressed and befriended in order to create the much cherished trusting atmosphere. The guest has to feel very safe in your office; if not, she will not let go of her armour and let her soft underbelly come into the open, metaphorically speaking of course.

Interestingly enough the conception of a wicked world which necessitates a personal, mental armour if we are to survive, seems to be contained in the fragile child-part notion. Which reveals that the very "ethical" caring attitude towards a client or a guest presupposes a very pessimistic outlook upon the world we live in, as if it were a dark sea with ruthless predators that would eat us in one second if we had not developed a mental crabshell around our very soft self from early childhood on. To walk out in the open without wearing our crabshell would be an invitation to be devoured on the spot, so the psychoterapist or the philosophical counsellor has to communicate very strongly that "I will NOT eat you, I repeat: NOT eat you, if you put off your crabshell here in my office, so PLEASE do it, as I am NOT a predator fish myself, at least not during working hours."

What is important to realize, is that such a narration belongs to the counsellor himself, and not necessarily to the guest. It is a question of *the counsellor's* attitude towards his guest and to the world at large, and maybe not at all about the guest's narration on *her* life and the world at large. What if the guest does not envisage herself as a scared and frightened little being inside a crabshell, but struggles with difficulties of quite another kind, not at all within the narrative framework of the wicked world conception? Then the very "ethical" caring

attitude is exposed as a strong bias that incapacitates the counsellor from dealing with his guest's problems in a fruitful way.

To challenge this "ethical" caring attitude we might just observe how children actually behave in daily life, be it in kindergarden or in school or in the playground or wherever it is. Then we might indeed spot a timid child, an introvert child, and even an alarmingly depressed child, but such children tend to be exceptions, and not the rule. Most children have a quite robust way of dealing with other people, they are not at all behaving like fragile little things threatening to break at any moment. They address one another in very direct and not particularly considerate ways, both verbally and physically – that's what we find charming with children. "They are so *direct* in their behaviour!" people often say. "So *spontaneous*!"

It is not until children become adolescents that they start to worry about what others might say or think about themselves, and become protective and choosy in their speech and behaviour. Which is a quite normal behaviour during the difficult and painful transformation from childhood to adult life. Life isn't easy, as we all know, and we all get some bruises from it, in different ways. We all feel rejected from time to time, sometimes we feel really hurt and vulnerable, and sometimes we might experience some really heavy stuff. All this is normal, if not unavoidable, it is simply how it is to live. Feeling responsible for oneself and being pleased with mastering new situation, despite some initial pain and flaws, is also a part of life, and is in fact what we encourage children to do, especially when they are adolescents. That is what raising children is supposed to be about.

So why, then, should the "feeling really hurt and vulnerable" situation be singled out as *the* paradigmatic situation that a philosophical counselor should adjust to, in order to get a consultation off the ground? Why should the "I feel very very hurt" experiences in the guest's history back to infancy be of such a major concern, a priori? Why should such a concern be regarded as a big support, and not as a big insult? ("Stop treating my as a fussy child, can't you see that I'm a grown up who have managed to survive quite well, despite the problems I have come to discuss with you?") These are hard questions on the caring attitude, proving it to be quite biased in a quite unjustified way. It is even dubious that this kind of "ethical" attitude is particularly ethical after all.

Maybe the "ethical" counsellor will contend that he indeed has to take the worst possibilities into consideration a priori, as he never knows what his guest may have been exposed to in life. Maybe she proves to be a victim of some heinous deeds in her childhood or later on, and then it surely would have been right to approach her with the soft, caring attitude from the start. Even if this standpoint also might be contested, I will at the moment admit that people suffering from traumas due to severe negligence or misconduct from their parents or other "significant others" in their childhood might be dealt with in a different way than people with just "normal" childhood bruises. What this different way should be, does not necessarily coincide with the caring way of addressing people, and is a subject of its own, beyond the scope of this paper. Here it suffices to say that severely abused and traumatized persons probably are rare cases in a philosophical counsellor's office, as we primarily address people who do not consider themselves in need of psychological care, but who rather look for an alternative to the psychoterapist. Why should we then fear the worst a priori, and treat each guest as a traumatized victim until the opposite is proven? Isn't such an attitude much too cautious, to put it mildly, if not directly counterproductive? I think that it is, both to the guest and to ourselves as would be counsellors.

The quest for finding the truth: The policeman approach

Having been presented the caring approach as the only proper attitude of a philosophical counsellor, we might find the metaphor of the good policeman searching for truth to be quite

inappropriate as a description of our practice, if not totally irrelevant or even crazy. A policeman, even a good one, represents everything the caring counsellor seeks to avoid: confrontation, an unsettling atmosphere, an insistent inquiry where questions are asked on and on until some hidden and often disagreeable truth is found. Why should a counsellor embrace such an unappealing metaphor, and why should a guest agree to be treated as some suspect, and even pay good money for it? If the guest primarily needs sufficient space for thinking aloud in an attentive and sympathetic counsellor's presence, any persistent questioning in search of some truth would be unnecessary at best and damaging at worst. What could then be the rationale for suggesting a policeman approach to philosophical counseling?

To get any further on this point, we have to question exactly this basic presupposition that people tend to find out things by themselves only by thinking aloud in the trusting space offered to them by the counsellor. If this indeed is known to happen, as we from time to time may experience ourselves and with others, it is also the case that people just as well tend to shy away from their own thoughts, and especially from the *implications* of their own thoughts. As Oscar Brenifier repeatedly states, people are often afraid of their own words. People's unwillingness to stick to what they actually have stated, and to be confronted with their own words, is an amazing phenomenon that is revealed again and again in his sessions, even if this phenomenon is not described, and far less reflected upon, in our current textbook. Having experienced this phenomenon myself by being Oscar's guest several times, and having watched several of his sessions with other guests, I now believe that escaping one's own words and the implications of one's own thoughts is a very human tendency indeed, maybe even some aspect of the human condition.

This is not about the psychoanalyst's notion of repression, where a painful experience is repressed into unconsciousness, and where the patient resists its being brought back into the open; the guest's private life and biography is not the issue in Oscar's sessions. No, it is about general, philosophical ideas produced by the guest which are to be investigated in a purely philosophical way, until both the counsellor and the guest reveal their implications. It is about helping the guest to give birth to his own ideas and to investigate the viability of these "offsprings" in a very Socratic way, where "life" is supposed to be left out of the seemingly purely intellectual discussion, but where "life" keeps popping up, mostly as resistance and an urge to escape from this investigation of one's own ideas.

The question why the urge to resist and to escape from an investigation of our own words and ideas is such a very human thing to do, could be worthy of a philosophical dissertation. Here I will just consider it as a fact of life, which implies that the truth, or implications, of our own ideas are not at all clear to us from the start, very often because this truth reveals something about ourselves that we would rather not admit. We may feel betrayed or exposed by our own words and ideas in a way that counters our much cherished narration of ourselves and our life and of the world as such, where we usually put ourselves in a favourable light and play the part of the hero-hero or the victim-hero. This is probably why it may be painful to think things through in a philosophical way, at least in the short run. Hopefully the guest will benefit from this painful experience later on, when the new insights have been digested and are integrated in his global way of thinking, but this is another matter.

Focusing on our all too human propensity to defend our narration of ourselves and to resist what might force us to revise our narration, it becomes clear why a persistent policeman approach might be relevant in philosophical counseling. If you really want to help your guest to discover his own ideas and to think them through, you cannot allow him to escape when things get a little unpleasant. Then you cannot be "nice" by way of backing off, in order to restore the agreeable atmosphere which might have been established earlier on in the consultation. If you then permit the guest to speak freely, by allowing him to elaborate some point or by digressing, the guest happily will escape just like a fish getting off the hook.

This I have experienced myself in some student sessions where I tried to act as a counsellor, Oscar style. At first it went nicely; the guest produced a question for our discussion, I made him conceptualize key words in the question, but as soon as I encountered the other's resistence, typically as a request to elaborate or digress, I could not really bring myself to deny this and granted his wish. Then the sessions became muddled and very un-Oscar-like, where the guest put forward more or less fragmented ideas and opinions, and where I succumbed to the role of the listener, feeling quite miserable as we had not really found out anything new or discerned any interesting implications of the initial question and the other ideas flying in the air. The guest surely felt pleased to have retained the steering wheel for the last half the conversation, despite the general confusion on the philosophical level. And despite his not really knowing if the seance had helped him to clarify things in any way.

A lack of mastery of Oscar's method may of course account for much of this unsatisfying result. Not really knowing what to do next, what smart move I should have made, refrained me from being as persistent as I had planned to be. But this is not the whole story. Also the question of attitude seems to have been of great importance, as I, apart from my not finding the next smart move, *did not permit myself* to conduct the session in a persistent way. I backed off also because I tried to be "Oscar light", allowing for the caring attitude to reemerge as a kind of compromise. This, I later realized, is like trying to be a little bit pregnant. This is also why I now make a dichotomy between "the caring approach" and "the policeman approach," as I don't find it possible to unite these two approaches, at least not at the same time in a counseling session.

This is not to say that a counsellor cannot possibly find a way to *alter* between these two approaches: by for instance being caring in one part of the session and policeman-persistent in another part of it. That might be a question of personal style and propensities. Being Oscar's guest in Paris, both I and Oscar found it useful to reflect upon what the investigation had revealed, and we talked freely about that for an hour or so afterwards. Then Oscar put the policeman approach away, even if he never became caring, which was fine with me. He was just himself, with a friendly, straight-forward attitude where he related to me as a responsible, grown up person in no need of attentive care, despite the rather bumpy course of our current session. Both then and in hindsight I am totally happy with his not putting on a very very caring attitude and asking me "How do you *feel* now?". That would have been odd indeed.

The reason why Oscar will not include listening to people's tales about their private life in his sessions, is, as he revealed as a public secret after his foyer session at the Copenhagen Bildung conference, that he finds such talk boring. (His official reason: "I'm no psychologist, so I cannot deal with private and emotional problems.") This is of course no philosophical argument, just a statement of personal propensity. Listening to people's story of their life is simply not his cup of tea. If other philosophers like to indulge in the "cultivated conversation" style of counseling, he will not launch any crusade against them, even if he does not find such conversations very philosophical or very helpful. He will rather *do philosophy* together with his guest, by way of investigating their ideas, instead of merely exchange opinions and ideas, which is not doing philosophy as he sees it.

On the question of attitude, I interpret Oscar's challenge to be like this: When you want to philosophically investigate your guest's ideas, you have to switch to the policeman approach *and stick to it*. Don't try to compromise, and don't get qualms about being persistent instead of caring, Norwegian style. Be aware of your attitude and *allow yourself* to be the good policeman in search of the truth, asking questions again and again until the truth finally is revealed.

The policeman approach at work: Oscar performing a session

During the seminar in Oslo, one of my fellow students agreed to be Oscar's guest during a demonstration session, which turned out to illustrate quite well, I believe, the policeman approach at work. As Oscar usually does, he asks his guest to prepare a question for the discussion, and my fellow student proposed:

Why be a good person in a world that is not just?

Oscar: Is the use of different adjectives (good and just) intentional?

Answer: Well ... Yes it is.

O: Okay. What word in the question is in need of clarification?

A: It must be "good".

O: So what is to be good?

A: It is to act in a way that does not hurt others.

O: So what you wonder about is: Why be a person who does not hurt others in a world that is not just? Is that okay?

A: Yes.

O: What does "just" mean?

A: Well ... Equality, and something else ...

O: And what is "something"?

A: It must be desert; to get what one deserves.

O: Now you have to choose the most important one of "equality" and "get what one deserves". Which one do you choose?

A: I choose "to get what one deserves".

O: So to put this in the question, it will be: Why be a person who does not hurt others in a world where one does not get what one deserves? Okay?

A: Okay.

O: Now, let's imagine that another person, let's say a woman called Birthe (isn't that a Danish name?) tell you the following: "Why be a person who does not hurt others in a world where one does not get what one deserves?" Why would Birthe say that?

A: She says it because ... well ... To get a better life for herself.

O: Where is "better life" in your question?

A: Nowhere ...

O: So let's stick to what's in the question, and ask what Birthe's motivation could be for her question. What do you think it could be?

A: To make the world just.

O: Is that person talking about making the world just?

A: I don't quite follow ...

O: Let me put it differently: Where is the problem which the initial question poses? Which consequences does it have for Birthe that the world is not just?

A: (a bit confused) Well ... that the world is not good ...

O: (a bit inquisitional) Is *that* the problem? That the world is not *good*?

A: Eh ... no, or rather: That she will not get something good when she acts good.

O: Now, what is it called: When you do something good, you get something good? If you should tell a person who did not understand this, for instance a child, what this means, what would you then tell this child?

A: That Birthe needs external motivations to do good actions.

O: Do we now see what is implied in the (initial) question?

A: I cannot see that this is implied in my question.

O: So this motivation you have given is not contained in the question?

A: No.

O: Not really?

A: No. I'm unsatisfied about this motivation. It appears to be rather childish ...

O: We'll try again, then. In order to analyze what is contained in the question, you must come up with a better explanation for why Birthe is asking the question. To explain: If a person asks if there is something to eat, our first expectation might be that he is hungry. But there could be other reasons for his saying so than he's being hungry, for instance a concern for the amount of food stored in the house, or whatever. So, returning to Birthe's question, what might be another reason for her asking it than the motivation you already have mentioned? You see my point?

A: Yes.

O: So what can you give as a better explanation?

A: Well ... Hm ... There might be a mismatch between her conceptions and how the world is.

O: And what is the way the world is?

A: It is unjust.

O: But we have already described what "unjust" is: it is not to get what one deserves.

A: Right.

O: So what could be a better explanation for Birthe's asking her question?

A: Well ... (A long pause)

O: If we don't get a better explanation, can we continue with the first one? Because we must ask ourselves: Have we understood the question?

A: I'm not totally happy with it, but OK ...

O: What are you unhappy with? The question or the explanation?

A: The explanation. Because it is childish.

O: Is this explanation, that you call childish, contained in the question? Or in our understanding of the question?

A: It has to be in our understanding of the question.

O: Nothing *has to be*. But it is possible that "the childish hypothesis of interpreting the question" is contained in the question? Would Birthe's asking this be out of this world? Or if it was your neighbour, would it then be out of the question?

A: (embarrassed) All right, I see that it is a stupid question.

O: No no, let's probe further into this. If this other person – Birthe or your neighbour – does not get what she deserves, will she then hurt others?

A: Well ... It is possible.

O: So we have to look for a condition: What would she need in order not to hurt others?

A: To make the world just.

O: Which is: To make her get what she deserves.

A: Well ... It's possible ...

O: Oh, come on. Commit yourself! Say: *This* is my answer!

A: Okay, this is my answer.

O: Well, then ...! Now, what would you answer your neighbour, asking her question for the reasons we have assumed?

A: Answering my neighbour ...?

O: Right. What would you answer her?

A: My answer to my neighbour would be: You should be a good person in order to be able to look yourself in the mirror in the morning.

O: To look yourself in the mirror in the morning – is that something you do only when shaving?

A: No. It is about conscience. About having a clear conscience.

O: I don't know what a clear conscience is. Could you tell me what it is?

- A: It is that the person inside yourself is a good person. It is to know that you have not done anything wrong.
- O: Let's look further for the motivations of that person. Could you qualify it by using one word only?
- A: It must be ... reward.
- O: So *both persons* are looking for a reward, then! Both the person who looks for an external motivation and the person who looks himself in the mirror and has a clear conscience?
- A: Well, maybe not in the second case.
- O: But if you didn't see it in the second case, why did you say it then?
- A: I ... well, I think I made a mistake ... So if I might have another try at ...
- O: (interrupting) No, let's stick to what you have said. Which is "reward".
- A: (interrupting) But if I might try to ...
- O: (interrupting) No no.
- A: No?
- O: (smiling) Are you assuming what you say, or are you escaping a little bit?
- A: Well ...
- O: Let's try to stick with what you did say. If both persons are looking for a reward, how can that be? Is it not the same reward? Are there two kinds of rewards? What might be the difference?
- A: Well, the first reward is of an external kind, while the other is of an internal kind.
- O: Is there one reward that you find more appropriate than the other?
- A: The second one.
- O: Why?
- A: It is better in a moral way. It is a motivation for doing good actions without any external reward.
- O: Is this a proof, or are you just repeating what you already have said?
- A: Well, maybe repeating ...
- O: So find a proof why the second one is more appropriate.
- A: The first one is more fragile than the second one.
- O: What is opposite to fragile?
- A: Well ... Long lasting.
- O: What is the opposite of long lasting?
- A: Let's see ... (thinking) ... maybe ... ephemeral.
- O: What is more opposed to long lasting: ephemeral or fragile?
- A: Ephemeral ... Or maybe "hard" is a better opposite to fragile ...
- O: (smiling) Do you want to see the horrific consequences, or not?
- A: Well ... Yes ...
- O: Do I believe you?
- A: No. (They smile both)
- O: Let's find the criteria: How do we know that something is long lasting?
- A: I don't quite follow ...
- O: Let me put it this way: How can we measure that something is long lasting?
- A: (getting really confused) Measure ...?
- O: Yes. If I should measure how long this table is, what do I use?
- A: What do you use ...?
- O: Yes, what kind of instrument do I use?
- A: Instrument ...?
- O: Yes. I will measure this table, to see how long it is from here to there. What kind of instrument do I use to do the measuring?
- A: A yardstick?
- O: Good! So by way of which instrument can I measure that something is long lasting?

A: (too confused to find an answer) ...?

O: (explaining in a very pedagogical manner) I use a yardstick to measure length, and to measure that something is long lasting, I use a ...?

A: Watch?

O: A watch! And what do we measure with a watch?

A: Time?

O: Yes, time! That was a hard one, wasn't it?

A: (smiles, being quite embarrassed) Yes.

The dialogue did not get much further than this, due to time running out (I'm not trying to be funny at the guest's expense!) and because of a general state of fatigue and confusion in the guest. This was just like I experienced myself in Paris, where the sessions tended to ebb out in this way, rather than reaching a conclusive step where the initial question was fully answered.

Before continuing my discussion, I must add that Oscar conducted his interrogation with much good humour, thus making it less stern and unbearable than it may look like in the transcript. What also escapes the transcript is how embarrassed the guest appeared to be when condemning his own question as being "childish" or even "stupid" ("This is a harsh judgment on yourself!" Oscar pointed out afterwards) because of its implicit preoccupation with external rewards. The guest seemed to be particularly embarrassed when he could not find an alternative interpretation to his own "childish interpretation of Birthe's question," despite his dislike of this interpretation. Then there was tension and drama in the dialogue – as it also was when Oscar refused his guest to have a second try at finding another key word than "reward" to explain the "clear conscience" answer, even if the guest claimed that he made a mistake. (When we later on questioned Oscar about his rigidity at this point, Oscar explained that the guest did say "reward", even if "reward" was quite inappropriate as a key word to his own answer, and that this really revealed how much the notion of reward meant in the guest's way of thinking.)

As he usually does, Oscar asked his guest afterwards what he thought about the dialogue, and also the bystanders were invited to have a say on what we had witnessed. This discussion became rather muddled, as there was no unanimous opinion on what the dialogue had revealed. The guest himself tended to oppose Oscar's opinion that he had tried to escape his own question throughout most of the dialogue, and contended that the notion of reward was not as important to him as we might have thought, due to Oscar's way of questioning. Instead, he would rather have discussed other matters than external reward, but was not allowed to do so, due to Oscar's persistence. It tended, then, to be at least two different conceptions of what had been going on, and when Oscar asked for a vote on "Who thinks, and who thinks not, that the guest tried to escape his question?", most people voted that the guest indeed had tried to escape.

So what to make out of this? The truth cannot of course be determined by a majority vote, but the discrepancy between what the guest meant had happened and what Oscar and most of the bystanders meant had happened, at least poses a problem: How should the guest relate to his being outvoted on his own interpretation of what the dialogue had revealed about him? Should he insist that he still is right, because nobody but he can really know what he was up to? Should he dismiss Oscar's claim that he was escaping his own question as a misconception, due to Oscar's rigid method and too hasty conclusions? Should he think that the majority vote against him was the result of the bystander's being unduly influenced by Oscar's very clear-cut opinion on what the guest was doing? All this is possible, I am not ruling out an affirmative answer as unjustified or self-deceptive. It is up to the guest himself to ponder about this: Did the seance speak to him, or did it not speak to him? Did it make him see himself in a new way that might be helpful in his relating to himself, or was it much ado

about nothing that should be forgotten? The guest has to decide for himself, and this will be entirely his business, unless he chooses to see the counsellor once more.

Here we touch on the general question of what people are ready to see about themselves. There might be some disturbing traits about ourselves that we may not be able to face, even if they are pointed out to us. If so, we are likely to deny them, despite the evidence, probably out of self-protection. But at a later stage in life, we might be ready to admit the trait, and to realize how we have escaped this truth about ourself up till now. (I am not particularly referring to Oscar's guest in our example by saying this, predicting that he eventually will see the light; I am just stating a general point about a very human tendency of escaping unpleasant truths about oneself.)

This very human tendency in turn highlights the fact that a method, or procedure, of doing philosophical counseling will not guarantee a certain outcome, for instance a person's being able to see something about himself. Thus, a "failure" to make this happen will not prove the method or procedure to be "wrong" or inadequate, as the reason for this "failure" might just as well be the guest's unwillingness, or his being unable to realize at the moment, some aspects of his speech or behaviour or way of thinking. This only adds to the uncertainty of the philosophical counseling enterprise – and this basic uncertainty we have to acknowledge. (This, by the way, is no argument against employing methods or procedures in philosophical counseling – which is another issue, not to be discussed here.)

Returning to the demonstration session, Oscar emphasizes that it is not the initial question – or the theme for discussion – that is most important. Even more important and interesting, he contends, is how the guest relates to himself, to his own way of thinking. This is why the "Did the guest try to escape, or not?" question played such a major part in the discussion afterwards. Oscar likes to use the game metaphor in describing his method; it is like a football game where the theme is the ball. Yes, there is a ball, he says, but as in football, it is the game, and not the ball itself, which is important. How you play; what you do when you receive the ball and have to make a move, in which direction you kick the ball and what propensities you then reveal – that is what mainly interests Oscar, and probably also the guest when the session reaches its final stage, when the focus now is much more on how you play than on the ball itself.

However, if the original question tends to be reduced to a pretext for discovering something else in this way, it does not become unimportant from a philosophical point of view. Having it exposed, as in our example, as a maybe childish preoccupation with external motivations for not hurting others or doing good in a general sense, is a quite considerable achievement from a philosophical point of view. Such an implication is not obvious from the start if you have not already looked into the question, and it surely is an interesting point to discover during a dialogue.

The implications of respecting the other's words

In detective stories, as in real life, the policeman states that "everything you say, can and will be used against you" when arresting a suspect. This saying is also contained in the policeman approach to philosophical counseling, as our example has shown. Most of us feel uneasy about the warning that our own words will be used against us, also when the investigation is not about some crime, but about our own way of thinking. Why we would rather not be confronted with our own words, even if this implies a respect for these very words, is, as I have already mentioned, a philosophical issue of its own.

Oscar contends that he indeed respects his guest's words, and that his way of counseling is founded on this respect. Where he also is very intent on making his guest respect his own words, instead of abandoning them right away for some other words of his own,

which in turn may be abandoned just as quickly, and so on. Please, slow down! he demonstrates, let's have a good look at your words before you choose to rephrase, and take the time to find a good reason why you are discontent with what you said before you change your words.

This is because words are very revealing; they often tell the truth about ourselves more than we would like them to do. In this respect our words betray us. So if we would like to find out more about who we are, instead of escaping ourselves by escaping our words, we have to stop the continuous flow of speech and *listen* to our words and *examine* them in a philosophically critical way. As this can be hard to do all by ourselves, the philosophical counsellor, good policeman style, may be very helpful.

Such a counsellor may also help people to structure and discipline their thinking, by way of making the guest have a critical look on his idea (in our example: by supposing that it was the invented lady Birthe, or the neighbour, who asked the initial question, whereon the guest has to interpret his own question as somebody else's, and to *answer* it in such an alienating context), or by making the guest deal with antinomies ("what is the opposite of long-lasting?"). Challenging the guest in this way also demands persistence, as such tasks may be difficult, especially for people without philosophical training. The guest may even find it painful and enduring, and not very funny. But why shouldn't he accept these philosophical exercises all the same, when he willingly accepts physical pain and endurance administered by the gym instructor? These exercises are given for similar reasons: the first ones to strengthen the thinking ability, the second ones to strengthen the physical ability.

Plato made such a comparison between philosophical and physical training, and wasn't he right in doing so? If we think he was, we may state that: As we all know that good physical shape cannot be obtained without some momentary sweat and pain and endurance, we should not be surprised that strengthening and structuring our thinking also demands its momentary sacrifices. A very caring gym instructor who anxiously asks the persons he supervises not to push themselves, no no, relax and have a nice cup of chocolate if you feel the least fatigue in your arms and legs; such an instructor will not get many satisfied customers in the end. Because the results will be far too poor. So wouldn't a very caring philosophical counsellor be equally misguided?

Finally some words about harshness: Oscar is often accused of being too harsh in his way of counseling. His policeman approach may account for much of this impression, but, as he contends, *it is by respecting the other's words that his method gets harsh*, paradoxically as it may seem.

Oslo, October 28., 2004