



THE PHILOSOPHER AS PERSONAL CONSULTANT

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V. What are philosophers good for?

I think of personal consulting, and much of what others call therapy, as like dancing with another person. Sometimes you lead, sometimes you follow, and sometimes the hardest part to learn is how to stay out of your partner's way. You must understand your partner's way of moving very well indeed if you are to follow it, move with it, and know what will embellish and accentuate and what will interrupt. The "dance" of personal consulting requires the kind of intellectual ability we should expect a well-trained philosopher to have, even if it also calls for traits and skills philosophers are not likely to have. Philosophers are specialists in understanding people who are notoriously hard to understand. What philosophers do is listen to, and think about other philosophers, and their job is to pit their minds against the minds of some of the greatest intellects our civilization has known, understand—

which is not the same thing as memorizing—what those thinkers did say, would say, avoided saying, assumed or presupposed, who influenced them and how, which ideas connect with which, and how it all fits together. They must be able to do this so well that they can take the part of any major philosopher, know that philosopher so well that they can become him or her “from the inside,” and convincingly present a given *weltanschauung* as absolutely right. Then they must be able to turn around and say exactly what’s wrong with it and why. This I advance as an a priori argument that any well-trained philosopher, other relevant traits being assumed, ought to make a good personal consultant.

Perhaps all academic disciplines breed a degree of self-criticism that goes with a sense of never knowing as much as one ought to know. But this is especially true in philosophy, which has historically been one of the most self-critical and introspective of disciplines. Indeed, the popular image of philosophers as not being good for much owes a great deal to philosopher’s criticisms of themselves, from Socrates on, and perhaps the world at large would not have had enough imagination to charge the discipline with being useless if the philosophers had not, themselves, intimidated as much. It is no wonder that philosophers are insecure, given the stature of the minds against which they must match wits, and given the complexity of the problems with which they deal. Granted, philosophers tend to be “out of touch with their feelings”—a drawback in a consultant which would be shared by representatives of other disciplines such as psychology or medicine—but they are very used to keeping themselves in focus, to bringing a question back to, “What do I make out of all this? How does what I’m trying to understand in this other person match with what makes sense to me?” (The first person is offensive to many academics.) Some philosophers may have managed not to lose their more affective sensitivities; for others, their introspective habits may be a natural bridge to regaining their feelings. Hoping for the best on that score, I would venture that the philosopher’s habits of self-criticism and ongoing evaluation of one’s own views are a decided asset in a personal consultant. Perhaps the posture of the confident physician is more “curative” in the realm of medicine, but in the larger enterprise of personal reflection and consulting, I think we best invite self-scrutiny in others by modeling this in our own conduct. Would you want a personal consultant (therapist) who exuded confidence? I wouldn’t.

Philosophers are in the habit of puzzling for what seems an eternity on the beauty of an esoteric argument like Zeno’s, which has it that

an arrow can never reach its target and that motion is, indeed, impossible. People from the empirical disciplines are more likely to shoot the arrow and say, “See!” Who would you rather talk to about the way you look at the world?

Philosophers are in the habit of really concentrating for a long time on a theme, which many would find boring and too hard to follow. They are in the habit of going back to the same passage again and again, each time seeing it in a new and deepened way. This is an important trait for a consultant, whose most urgent practical task will sometimes be, “How am I going to stay alive through this hour, and remain interested in the same old story?”

In contrast to the empirical disciplines, which tend to view the acquisition of knowledge in a linear or “building block” fashion, philosophers are used to treating little that is important as settled. The perspective of a great thinker is treated as eternal, and discussed in present-tense grammar: “Plato thinks...,” rather than “Plato thought...” I find it hard to imagine a philosopher being comfortable with the American Psychological Association’s mandated style of referring to works by their date of publication, and speaking in the past-tense success-verb grammar of what so-and-so “showed” or “demonstrated.” In philosophy, issues tend to remain present and open, and are thought about in a way, which leaves one as ready to advocate as to criticize. In empirical disciplines, such as psychology, claims are talked about in a way, which highlights their date, summarizes them, and treats them at a distance. (It is pathetic to hear psychologists speak about Freud as an interesting bit of history.) Here again, I urge that the philosopher’s training is appropriate for personal consulting.

Philosophers are familiar in depth with a large spectrum of the most fundamental schemas through which anyone has ever looked at anything. The chances of being able to follow, restate, anticipate, and “dance” with a client in personal consultation have got to be markedly improved by this training.

Philosophers are first and foremost theorists and they are good at thinking in terms of theory. Now theories can get in a consultant’s way, and it is not uncommon for psychotherapists to be blinded and inhibited by being wedded either to a theory about a given individual, or a more general theory about how one is supposed to be a therapist. Ideally, a theory helps you focus without giving you blind spots, and allows you to fit specifics without forcing them; it should augment the “dance” rather than constricting it. Philoso-

phers are familiar with logical positivism, which is pretty much the singular vision of psychologists, but do not tend to take it too seriously. They are professionals at shifting quickly from one theory to another and being able to work with many theories in a way, which makes sense of the details to which they are applied. Philosophers have an extraordinarily rich repertoire of theoretical perspectives at their disposal, and are especially adept at picking up new ones (such as may be offered by psychotherapists, or by clients or students) and seeing their implications or assumptions. This fosters being open-minded, and cultivates an ability to make some kind of sense out of what practically anyone says about anything. Other disciplines, by contrast, are often intellectually constipating.

Among the intellectual assets for consulting which philosophers in general ought to have, one should mention the advantages of having in-depth familiarity with particular philosophers from the tradition. There are many major philosophical thinkers with theories philosophers know well, which are decidedly better thought-through than much of what one finds in the empirical sciences. I refer to philosophical positions which are broad in scope, open-textured enough that one can listen to another through this perspective without forcing an interpretation on what is heard, and which are rich enough in specific insight as to provide a treasure-house of feedback. I can readily imagine a consultant (or a therapist, if there is such a thing as therapy) whose perspective was adapted from Aristotle, or Spinoza, or Hume, or Marx, or Hegel, or Wittgenstein, or—especially—any of the existentialists like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre, working in a powerful and inviting way. This is important if (a) having some theoretical perspective which guides the way one “dances” is helpful, and (b) it is not as significant as is popularly supposed just which theoretical perspective one identifies with for one’s “effectiveness” in consulting.

I shall conclude this section with very brief remarks on talents for consulting which philosophers might have, depending on the specifics of their backgrounds; and shall comment critically on specific therapy modalities for which philosophical training might be appropriate.

Anyone who has done any personal consulting and yet cannot sense the value of psychoanalytic theory is, in my view, too dense to be interesting. I say this notwithstanding the flaws in psychoanalytic theory, which I believe, are massive. I do not propose that persons not thoroughly trained in psychoanalysis should (or even could) practice it. (I do believe that persons with advanced educa-

tion only in philosophy could be well qualified for admission to analytic training, and there are a growing number of “Research Psychoanalysts” who are licensed to train in and practice psychoanalysis after earning a doctoral degree in a discipline such as philosophy which is not traditionally preparation for a mental health field.) I suggest, only, that psychoanalytic theory remains singularly profound, and that any would-be consultants do well to become as familiar with it as they are able. Because of the wealth of philosophical literature by philosophers on psychoanalysis, it is not uncommon for philosophers to have familiarized themselves with psychoanalytic theory in some depth. The exposure one is liable to get in graduate study in psychology, particularly at a prestigious university (which often means an experimentally oriented university) is liable to be grossly hasty and superficial by comparison.

Consider also: Wouldn't a solid background in ethics be appropriate for the sort of “value clarification” which is coming into vogue? Struggling with values has always been an important dimension of therapeutic practice, yet is undertaken by persons who often do not have even a basic idea of how to think intelligently about ethical relativism, and who haven't the faintest idea of what the genetic fallacy is or whether it is, indeed, a fallacy. Wouldn't formal training in logic and critical thinking be the appropriate background for doing the consulting equivalent of Rational-Emotive Therapy, which seeks, with conspicuous absence of warmth and empathy, to challenge a client's illogical thinking and irrational beliefs? If consulting or therapy is the business of challenging a person's muddled thinking (syllogistic healing?), that's what philosophers do most. Wouldn't the appropriate background for what Glasser calls Reality Therapy be to study the American Pragmatist's vision of epistemology and metaphysics? How could anyone follow the theories of Jung who did not thoroughly understand Kant? Regarding those practitioners who adapt heavily from Zen and Taoism: wouldn't it help to come from a discipline where one studies these traditions? Wouldn't the application of a “self-actualization” perspective better come from people who have studied really solid thinkers on this score, like Aristotle and Hegel? Wouldn't a Radical Therapy best be pursued by someone who really knew Marx? Wouldn't a feminist perspective on therapy come better from those who had really studied feminism? Mightn't a Nietzschean scholar have as much of an insight-generating theoretical perspective as an Adlerian? And, if one could be found willing, shouldn't a Wittgensteinian scholar, used to contemplating primitive language games, quickly get the hang of Transactional Analysis?

Finally, philosophers who have studied existentialist philosophers have a monumental advantage as personal consultants, over the academic backgrounds of virtually everyone else. The existentialists who philosophers know best—Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre—provide well thought-out theories with profoundly specific applicability for the concerns of personal consulting. This is widely acknowledged by psychotherapists, as is the fact that the writings of these thinkers are obscure and practically inaccessible to the philosophically unsophisticated. With fairly few exceptions—such as Binswanger and Boss, who have made important adaptations of Heidegger’s work and Laing’s profound indebtedness to Sartre, and in Irvin Yalom’s work)—the therapeutic and consulting applications of existentialist philosophy have only begun to be mined. By and large, the adaptations made by psychologists have not vaguely approximated the sophistication to be found in the original sources and have been grossly lacking in comparable rigor. More commonly, what one gets from existentially oriented psychologists are the more banal and superficial themes, such as that it’s important to be authentic, everyone must make choices (this, likely as not, getting boiled down to a biological imperative that we need to actualize, and will or will not do so depending on the environmental contingencies), we all must face death, responsibility is scary, and meaning matters. If existentialism is as relevant to consulting as psychotherapists say (I think it is much more relevant than they have begun to fathom), then it stands to reason that the people to best mine its sources are the people trained to understand them. If a theory of applied existentialism is forthcoming it may best and most likely come from philosophers who are experienced in consulting practice.

VI) Conclusions

Looking back over what I have written I find that I have not been sparing of polemics and rhetorical flourish. I suppose I have grown tired of seeing philosophy dismissed by people who are regularly engaged in doing philosophy without realizing it. A theory is a philosophical theory when its principle claims are predominantly justified by arguments based on the implications of concepts, rather than empirical data. Everyone does philosophy, frequently; not everyone knows what he or she is doing. The role of philosophy, and the relevance of philosophical training, has been pathetically under-rated. The contributions to an understanding of persons by the empirical disciplines, in their role as empirical disciplines (gathering data and advancing hypotheses strictly required to or-

ganize that data) have been vastly over-rated. The psychologists whose ideas have been really influential here—and I include the Freudians, the behaviorists, and the existential-humanistic practitioners—have been advancing theories, which were predominately philosophical in character.

Let me be more blunt. Psychology is shot through and through with conceptual muddles, which any decently trained philosopher could demonstrate, in short order, to an attentive listener, with any consecutive five pages of any psychologist's essay, picked at random. Under the guise of empirical research, psychologists are typically doing philosophy, and doing it badly. Psychology is founded on a causal perspective in its theories, in spite of the fact that in consulting practice one cannot talk about human actions in consistently causal terms. It is riddled with unclarity about the nature of explanation. It is lost in a sea of confusions about the status of mentalistic language. In short, psychology is founded on a whole way of thinking which consistently gets it into the kinds of troubles to which philosophers are sensitive. As long as theories about persons are going to be so heavily philosophical, philosophers should be playing a central rather than a peripheral role in developing theory of personal consultation.

There continues to be a desperate need for empirical research about what actually happens in a consulting relationship, and that is what psychologists are trained to do in the bulk of their academic studies. Yet the very tradition that is appropriate for conducting this research on personal consultation is inappropriate for consulting practice. For there the task is not to stand apart from one's clients and summarize the data about them, but to join with them in looking at the world as they do, and understanding what it's like to think as they do. Little in the formal academic training of psychologists equips them for this, which is, again, the sort of thing philosophers do.


This is in no way meant to deny the importance of the applied experience psychologists and psychotherapists have in doing personal consulting; they are the people who have mainly been doing it lately, and they are the people to learn from. I would like to see psychologists and philosophers work together as affiliates in the practice of personal consultation, and I am certain that both theory and practice would advance dramatically from this association. Responsible consultants will prepare themselves through extensive self-inquiry comparable to what they wish to offer to others, will have extensive supervised training and practice, and, within rea-

son, will have supplemented their academic backgrounds with relevant study. Whether philosophers will in fact be good consultants remains to be shown, so I would hope that philosophers who want to do personal consulting will seek out these supplements from professional psychotherapists, who at least have something of a proven track record.

I favor regulating who may represent themselves and their services to others with titles which serve to recommend them. Terms like “psychoanalyst,” “licensed counselor,” etc., imply a recommendation and sanction of training, and I approve of restrictions on their use. I think it would be a mistake to carry this copy-righting of nomenclature so far that it would be practically impossible for the unsanctified to find meaningful descriptive language with which to try to honestly represent what they think they do. Hence I think that words like “therapist,” “counselor,” “consultant,” ought to be left to anyone to use or abuse.

It will come as no surprise that I am opposed to regulating or licensing the sorts of communicative activities which personal consultation and insight-oriented psychotherapy have in common, for these are part of a larger human enterprise which ought to be open to all: talking about things which matter, listening, trying to understand, empathizing, advising, challenging, criticizing, interpreting, confronting, exchanging feelings and reactions, discussing dreams and fantasies and frustrations, imagining and reminiscing, supporting, considering options and choices. I do not think any person or group can rightfully prohibit any other person or group from doing these things, nor from proclaiming themselves to be talented at it by whatever criteria they like, nor from requesting payment for their time if they wish. There are, admittedly, dangers in not regulating these things, which can be done in ways, which are stupid, inept, or wicked. There are greater dangers in regulating such communications, and a more repugnant form of audacity.

So I think it would be bizarre to believe that the philosophers doing personal consulting—which is to say, doing an important form of philosophy—must wait upon the approving nod of psychologists. Neither is it realistic to expect a philosopher to be subjected to the whole program of psychological education popularly regarded as a prerequisite for beginning training as a consultant or as a “therapist.” This would be an extraordinarily trying thing for philosophers to do, requiring a kind of hasty thinking for which they have little aptitude, and for relatively little intellectual or practical compensation.

Thus the philosopher who longs to talk personally with people as people, but timidly awaits permission from the psychological professions, should be compared with what H. L. Mencken said of the democratic man: “He is an ox whose last proud, defiant gesture is to lick the butcher behind the ear...” 

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