

# **Philosophical Counseling as Psychotherapy:**

## **An Eclectic Approach**

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**ABSTRACT:** Contrary to current belief among many philosophers, I attempt to show that philosophical counseling is a form of psychotherapy that is in need of structure and guidance in order for it to prosper as a viable approach to mental health treatment. Methodological approaches are examined including dialectical, solution-oriented, and long-term considerations that comprise the nature of meaning analysis and procedural inquiry. If philosophical counseling is to gain recognition among the helping professions, it will need to embrace a philo-psychological paradigm of theory and practice that emphasizes philosophical eclecticism.

Philosophical Counseling (PC) is a controversial discipline offering several competing approaches to philosophical self-investigation, guidance, intervention, and personal adjustment that address life concerns which have typically been treated by mental health professions. It is controversial in that it alleges to offer a unique and divergent alternative to the array of traditional existent psychotherapies, is largely based on theoretical propositions rather than on tested practice, has no defined training criteria, is (with qualifications) potentially ethically questionable in some contexts, and apart from a

few case studies confined to individual experience, has no empirical support to justify its efficacy.

Throughout this article I will be primarily concerned with articulating the ground, scope, and limits to PC concentrating on providing an eclectic framework for theory and methodological practice. I will argue that if philosophical counseling is to acquire more unity and visibility as a helping profession, then it must embrace a philo-psychological paradigm that may be said to complement the diverse range of psychotherapies which enjoy professional recognition by the social and behavioral sciences.

### **Philosophical Counseling as Psychotherapy**

Many authors agree that philosophical counseling aims toward philosophical self-examination and understanding through the guidance of a professionally trained philosopher. Yet few can agree on the specific aims, purposes, or goals of PC, the content and focus of sessions, the domain of appropriate clientele, and what truly distinguishes PC from psychotherapy. To the philosopher, life is a question that needs to be asked and re-asked only to be continuously contemplated, generating meaning in the wake of authentic disclosedness and discovery. Guaranteeing that there may indeed be no suitable answer to life's mysteries, philosophical inquiry may at least (in principle) result in learning how to tolerate life's ambiguities, and even perhaps help clients resolve such ambiguities. Whether this distinguishes philosophical counseling from psychotherapy, however, remains an open question.

Gerd Achenbach, the modern founder of philosophical counseling in Europe, insists that a disciplinary boundary is drawn between PC and psychotherapy and the only similarity they share is that they are forms of "interaction."<sup>1</sup> He denies any unique therapeutic relationship between

counselor and client, negates “any pretension of ‘treating’” clients, views PC as philosophical dialogue or discourse that relegates psychological insights to “mere limited moments,” and rejects any specific goal setting, orienting principles, or theoretical presuppositions that inform and guide its practical application.<sup>2</sup>

Achenbach is attempting to stay faithful to the Socratic method, although he diverts it from the Socratic pursuit of truth. Instead, Achenbach subscribes to an open and indeterminate process of dialectical questioning. While this is fruitful in some contexts and does deserve our close inspection with regards to method, it nevertheless denies the psychological and psychodynamic configurations that underlie the nature of any interpersonal process. Achenbach apparently thinks that philosophical discourse stands on the periphery of psychological forces, when it is an uncontested empirical fact that philosophical activity is psychologically embodied. Philosophy does not exist in a vacuum: psychological processes infiltrate all cognitive activities and human relations, including philosophical rumination and the dynamics of the counselor-client dyad. In order to think and reason philosophically, basic psychological operations (such as attention, concentration, perception, imagination, memory, and affect regulation) help govern the nature of consciousness and further serve as the ground or psychic foundation which underlies higher modes of abstraction, comprehension, and reflective philosophical judgment.

Philosophy can never be divorced from psychology, for philosophy *is* psychological activity. Represented by many theoretical innovations from Aristotle to Hegel and Freud, reason is the exalted outgrowth of desire: reason, as well as ethical self-consciousness, is a developmental achievement that matures from the more primitive mental processes that constitute the nascent soul.<sup>3</sup> From Kant to Fichte and Hegel, intelligence is a systemic psychological organization that requires

the ability to differentiate and synthesize intuitions, representations, and concepts into a meaningful whole.<sup>4</sup> This is why, for example, Hegel places philosophy at the pinnacle of Spirit's self-articulated totality.<sup>5</sup> Thus philosophical judgment, axiology, and noetic development are the embodiment of psychological activity.

Not only is philosophy concerned with human psychology and the nature of what it means to be human, psychology becomes a penetrating philosophical question. Furthermore, in the interpersonal context of counseling, not only are psychological phenomena discussed, psychological processes are mobilized, imbued, and inextricably enacted in the therapeutic encounter itself. As such, philosophical counseling is a *philo-psychological process* that takes place between two or more people always under the influence of myriad conscious and unconscious mental forces, cognitive states, affective conditions, subjective and intersubjective perceptions, persuasions, suggestibility, interpretations, and distortions, and the explicit and cryptic expectations, hopes, fears, apprehensions, disappointments, confusion, and anxieties that saturate any helping dynamic.

Ran Lahav, on the other hand, views PC as an intervention that addresses current life-issues, personal problems, predicaments, and moral dilemmas with the goals of achieving some form of wisdom and/or ameliorating personal distress.<sup>6</sup> He believes this is best achieved through a "worldview interpretation" as a conceptual framework for practice,<sup>7</sup> but he "de-psychologizes" his specific approach despite the fact that he suggests elsewhere that philosophical counseling may perhaps be not that different from psychotherapy.<sup>8</sup> Lahav claims that since psychotherapy, and particularly psychoanalysis, is mainly concerned with uncovering underlying causal forces that explain conscious thoughts and behavior, the philosophical meanings associated with these events become "irrelevant" and are thus dismissed.<sup>9</sup> This is far from being the case in many forms of

psychotherapy including phenomenological and existential approaches, Daseinsanalysis, and Logotherapy where the search for meaning, ontological security, and philo-psychic holism are primary therapeutic aims despite the presence of unconscious causal attributions.<sup>10</sup> Lahav commits a theory-method confound: he assumes theory and method are the same. Psychotherapeutic techniques may conceivably be applied across multiple schools of thought regardless of one's theoretical orientation. Furthermore, a specific theoretical position that informs technique should not be confused with the general claim that philosophy stands independent of psychological critique. A preference for philosophical rather than psychological insight does nothing to advance his case that the pursuit of philosophical meaning excludes psychological reflection.

Lahav continues to defend his thesis by insisting that what differentiates philosophical from psychological self-investigation is that the philosopher is concerned with the philosophical implications and meanings of life events while the psychologist focuses on hidden unconscious causal processes. Is this to say that underlying psychological processes have nothing to do with philosophical beliefs, intellectual operations, rational argumentation, and propositional dispositions and attitudes? On the contrary, one's philosophical worldview is greatly molded, defended, and bolstered by psychological variables such as personal desirability, identification with, and attachment to a specific philosophy that radically informs and reinforces rational and philosophical justifications. There are psychological correlates behind any philosophical position. As a result, one's philosophy becomes an intricate part of one's identity and personality. While Lahav may not deny this, he does insist that PC is distinguished from psychology based on its philosophical focus. This is precisely the case: PC is philosophically informed, but it does not necessarily require the negation of psychological reflection. The point that is left unsaid is the degree to which the

philosophical counselor emphasizes philosophical self-investigation over psychological introspection. By avoiding and failing to discuss how psychological processes inform and fortify worldview interpretations, Lahav philosophically limits what it means to have a view of oneself in the world.

The term ‘philosophical counseling’ is a misnomer. While it is true that clients seek professional consultation from a philosopher, they rarely give prescriptive advice, and if they do it is formally given within a framework that demands ongoing philosophic reflection, integration, and work. If the philosophical counselor structures his or her practice merely as a consultant giving advice, guidance, and/or instruction in philosophical thinking and reasoning, then we may say this is no more than providing a philosophical tutorial or a logic lesson, thus it is educational.<sup>11</sup> Because PC is characterized by the practice of receiving clients for a fee who seek out philosophical expertise in aiding with life’s questions and difficulties with the expectation of achieving some form of self-awareness and help, PC is an insight oriented therapy, assuming that the pursuit of wisdom is a valued ideal. In fact, it was Plato who was the first psyche-analyst:<sup>12</sup> How is wisdom possible without an analysis of the soul?<sup>13</sup> If one of the aims of philosophical counseling is to aid clients in living their lives more philosophically, then insight into all facets of reality—including psychic reality—is a desired goal. Furthermore, PC is a *process*, and if it claims to possess efficacy or provide any real benefit to clients, then it is by definition therapeutic.

There can be no doubt that PC is a form of psychotherapy and philosophical counselors should not delude themselves any longer into thinking that they stand outside of therapeutic counsel. Philosophical counseling is psychotherapy because it (i) constitutes a professional relationship whereby a recognized expert is consulted to render services, (ii) receives clients for a fee, (iii) aims

toward personal growth, adjustment, autonomy, wellness, increased mental health, or self-insight, (iv) professes treatment efficacy, (v) is pedagogical, preparatory, and constructive, and (vi) models generalizable skills that can be applied to everyday life. While a legitimate case may be made that not all forms of philosophical practice are psychotherapy,<sup>14</sup> for our purposes, if the general aim of philosophical counseling is ameliorative, corrective, and/or transformative like those aims mentioned above, then one underlying focus is on the process of self-development through healing (*therapeia*), even if such transformative work evokes conflict and painful inner states. Psychotherapy traditionally deals with pain and recovery, conflict and resolution, meaning and doubt, and this is precisely what most philosophical counselors encounter in their actual individual work with clients whether they intend so or not. After all, most people who actively seek out philosophical counseling are doing so because they want help.

The minute one agrees to a consultation or takes on a client as a counselor, one is already engaged in a therapeutic relationship. As such, PC is a professional relationship marked by concern and conscientious care. The minute one answers the phone or returns a call, the therapy has begun. When one assumes the professional identity of counselor, one assumes the professional responsibility for providing a standard and quality of care to those who seek out one's services. There are no pretensions of equality in a professional relationship: the client is there because he or she lacks skills and insight that the philosopher claims to possess. Insofar as PC professes to provide clients with an avenue for self-exploration into the nature and meaning of their personal being, philosophical counseling is a therapeutic endeavor. It is therefore a form of mental health treatment although it is not presently recognized as such. Being committed to providing clients with a viable outlook toward living that promotes increased self-understanding, wellness, and mental

development, PC constitutes an alternative or complementary approach to contemporary forms of psychological treatment. In order not to elude recognition as a helping profession, philosophical counseling needs to embrace a philo-psychological paradigm as a new form of psychotherapy.

### **Constructing a Theoretical Framework: The Need for Philosophical Eclecticism**

What does philosophical counseling truly have to offer that is any different from the deluge of psychotherapies that already inundate the market? Does it truly have something novel and beneficial to contribute to the field of mental health? With the plethora of different intervention strategies that heavily draw on philosophical doctrines and principles which inform the structure, focus, course, and method of treatment—including cognitive therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, rational-emotive therapy, existential and phenomenological therapy, humanistic and client-centered therapy, gestalt psychology, Daseinsanalysis, Jungian and Lacanian analysis, and Logotherapy—is philosophical counseling reinventing the wheel? Many philosophical counselors draw the line between a psychological analysis of clients' lives (e.g., examining the precipitating events, antecedents, cue-responsiveness, causes, and mental conflicts that affect adjustment and behavior) and a conceptual analysis of clients' worldviews, belief systems, propositional attitudes, and rational justifications underlying the philosophical assumptions about their sense of self and the world. But are the two views that radically different, and can they overlap? To what degree does a person's psychology truly stand independent of their philosophy? If genuine differences do exist, they are likely to manifest in the specific theoretical orientations and applied methodologies adapted by each practitioner.

While I do believe there is no genuine ontological independence between psychological and

philosophical activity—the former making the latter possible, it becomes important not to reduce philosophical inquiry to psychological analysis. However, philosophical analysis need not exclude psychological material especially when it becomes germane to one’s philosophical world-design. A parallelism or complementarity can exist between each discipline: we need not assume that philosophical self-investigation would collapse into a psychological treatment paradigm simply because we allow psychology to be a valid area of philosophical self-interest. Respect for diversity in perspective only adds to philosophical awareness.

It becomes important, however, to introduce a conceptual distinction (*ordo cognoscendi*) versus an actual distinction (*ordo essendi*) between philosophical and psychological practice. While philosophical activity is psychologically embodied, it is distinct in terms of its form in which it appears. This conceptual distinction defines one’s theoretical orientation which in turn guides applied methodology, and thus has practical implications with respect to how philosophical counseling is to be carried out. Neither collapsing philosophical inquiry to psychological processes nor eliminating the possible examination of psychological forces that inform philosophical beliefs and attitudes, philosophical counseling is free to expand its frontiers as a novel form of psychotherapy.

For anyone who has had any training in applied psychology, one learns immediately that there are many different theoretical positions that underlie each school of thought. This in turn informs the particular therapeutic method espoused by each sub-discipline. Take for example psychoanalysis: the unquestioned propositional belief in the nature and dynamic activity of the unconscious informs the method of free association, which in turn influences the analyst’s therapeutic stance. The same is true for philosophy: one’s particular philosophical approach is as diverse and variegated as the

history of philosophy itself—from the ancient’s pursuit of wisdom, to the theosophic tenets of medieval thought, to modern philosophies of consciousness and the will, to the epistemological and linguistic turn focusing on language, truth, and certainty—each theoretical school guides our view of reality and the world around us. In reality, however, philosophers, like psychologists, gravitate toward many different schools of thought, borrowing and redefining concepts, outlooks, and procedures from multiple perspectives, incorporating and re-appropriating them into their own personal worldviews and ways of being. Thus you rarely find a philosopher who is a purist in every sense of the term. Philosophy is a way of being, and like personal identity, it is a diverse process of becoming. Philosophers are drawn to certain philosophies over others, not only because of intense study and philosophical rumination over the rational superiority of each approach, but because certain philosophies coalesce with their personal ways of being. To genuinely live one’s life philosophically is to revere the pursuit of wisdom, truth, and authenticity that comprise the contemplative life. But philosophy is not merely a theoretical or abstract discipline: to live philosophically is to say what you mean and to mean what you say, and this means to live one’s life according to the values you espouse.

A worldview approach to PC has many decisive advantages because it is potentially open to many facets of one’s intellectual, emotional, social, and psychological life. Yet there are other counselors who restrict the domain of philosophical counseling to a rational enterprise. Eite Veening believes that philosophical counseling should only apply toward cognitive events such as one’s thoughts and belief systems, while emotional factors affecting personal adjustment should be reserved for psychological treatment.<sup>15</sup> Many practitioners disagree and see emotions as a legitimate focus of investigation because they comprise a person’s sense of self and inform one’s philosophical

orientation. There has generally been a preference for problem-oriented approaches among many philosophical counselors that focus on specific life issues, i.e. family conflicts, work related difficulties, relationship problems, meaning crises, as well as person-centered approaches that lean more toward holism.<sup>16</sup>

Whether philosophical counselors focus on conceptual, meaningful, rational, cognitive, behavioral, emotional, relational, problem-focused, social, cultural, feminist, or holistic concerns, they import and operate on certain explicit and/or implicit theoretical assumptions that guide their treatment strategies and techniques based on an intelligible principle of value. Even approaches that advocate nihilism assume a fundamental theoretical orienting principle, namely, the question, denial, or destruction of all value. In exploring the underlying philosophical principles that overtly and tacitly guide clients' lives, determining whether they are meaningful, well formulated, fulfilling, defensible, or in need of change, philosophical counseling is the product of work and struggle, not something where wisdom flows facilely from a full vessel into an empty cup.<sup>17</sup> The tendency toward diversity underlying the theory and practice of philosophical counseling highlights a breadth of competing approaches and shows that philosophical counseling already embraces and will continue to embrace philosophical eclecticism. The growing trend toward theoretical diversity mirrors the marbled field of psychotherapy which has been long identified as an eclectic embodiment. This ensures that PC must not only be compatible with psychology, but that it must welcome eclecticism in order to prosper as a new field committed to client mental health, wellness, and philosophic refinement.

Philosophical eclecticism not only characterizes the terrain of philosophical counseling today, but it also has decisive advantages over treating a multitude of client populations that may be

otherwise only suited for certain forms of philosophical interventions if any at all. With a variety of viable orientations, certain questionably suited clients that would typically go unseen or managed inappropriately may benefit from the plurality of possible strategies that are tailored to fit their unique characteristics. Eclecticism ensures that clients are most effectively and successfully treated by flexible approaches that are amenable to their particular intellectual and cognitive capacities, learning styles, character types, psychic disturbances, temperaments, frustration tolerance levels, coping skills, and individual needs and conflicts. Eclecticism has a pragmatic value insofar as clients are optimally treated by informed strategies that work best with their unique troubles, demands, capacities, and psychic constitutions. This form of professionalism also establishes an ethical standard of appropriate and responsible client care. Because a plurality of theoretical assumptions underlie and inform the goals and range of philosophical interventions, the question of method becomes especially significant when establishing: (i) which philosophical assumptions will be stressed in counseling and why, (ii) the exact procedure on how they will be communicated and carried out, (iii) the purpose, justification, structure, intention, delivery, and process of the therapeutic encounter, (iv) the parameters of appropriate intervening techniques, (v) when assessing specific interactions, and (vi) when determining the selection criterion of clientele.

### **A Discourse on Method**

In *A Discourse on Method*, Descartes tells us: “My present design . . . is not to teach the method which each ought to follow for the right conduct of his reason, but solely to describe the way in which I have endeavoured to conduct my own.”<sup>18</sup> Often in the practice of psychotherapy, one’s particular treatment orientation and method of intervention is based on a myriad of factors including

adopting and modifying a particular approach or set of approaches that is suited to one's cognitive capacities, interpersonal skills, style, character, and personal preferences. This certainly applies to philosophical counseling as well: adopting a method is based on personal identification with a procedure that one finds appealing and effective. In the spirit of Descartes' comment, when adopting a method, one need not confine oneself to a single way of conducting philosophical counseling that all should follow, but rather merely to define and justify the approach or set of approaches one chooses to advocate and apply.

In searching for an appropriate method, we may do best by striving for an optimal state of conditions or standards that can be applied to any adopted procedure. Following the standard set by the field of psychology, a philosophical counseling method should in principle be subject to peer review, objective critique, replication, experimentation, and conform to reliable and valid procedures. In order to gain acceptance as a form of mental health intervention facilitating wellness, personal growth, and adjustment, philosophical counseling must aspire toward objective criteria of assessment and standardization. No matter what method philosophical counselors employ, it should ideally be (i) rationally and theoretically justified, (ii) internally coherent, (iii) sensitive to the efficacy of treatment outcome, (iv) subject to duplication, procedural experimentation, and empirical research, (v) open to verification, falsification, and modification, (vi) flexible with respect to content, context, and form, and (vii) generalizable as a training device.

Of course, certain aspects of the art of philosophical discourse in applied settings is dependent on many personal features of the counselor that cannot be mechanically repeated, formally taught, copied, or acquired without repeated experience and supervised training such as: (i) the timing, meter, punctuation, and tone of questions, clarifications, suggestions, interpretations,

challenges, and confrontations, (ii) what to listen for and why, (iii) when to be silent and when to speak, (iv) what, when, and how to say something that is therapeutically helpful, (v) the style and tact of delivery, (vi) types of appropriate and inappropriate disclosures, (vii) and the personal mannerisms, attitudes, demeanor, and empathic attunement that accompany good counseling.

### *I: The Dialectical Method*

If there has been any attempt to formalize a standard procedure for performing philosophical counseling, it has been through the use of dialectic. But the use of dialectic is opaque and has been subject to endless subjective interpretations and non-uniform practices. Engaging in dialectic may be no more than philosophical dialogue, interaction, or engagement. There are no clear cut rules or procedures in dialectical exchange; nevertheless, it remains the backbone of most therapeutic encounters.

In an attempt to adopt a more specific dialectical technique, some have turned to the Socratic approach as the paragon for philosophical counseling. In the context of psychotherapy, Overholser shows that the Socratic method entails three main elements: (1) systematic questioning, (2) inductive reasoning, (3) and universal definitions.<sup>19</sup> Through systematic questioning, philosophical critique becomes the initial aim of the counseling process. The process of critique may be clarifying, critical, or confrontational, asking clients to define and defend the parameters of their ideas and beliefs, assessing the strength and cogency of their inductive arguments, and relating their particular definitions to universal determinations. In examining the client's interpretations, meanings, relations, implications, and value judgments assigned to personal experience, the client's perspective is challenged, cross examined, and ultimately raked over the logical coals. Inconsistencies,

ambiguities, contradictions, and unexpected or secretly harbored thoughts, beliefs, and propositional attitudes are exposed and analyzed. Traditionally, this process is an enduring and never-ending query into the nature of the real that radically resists finalization. Depending on how the dialectic is employed will greatly impact the philosophical insights established.

In its benign appearance, dialectical interventions may be said to be part and parcel of any therapeutic encounter. Dialectical exchange takes place across all the disciplines of psychotherapy and can be readily seen as operative within the various domains of philosophy including logical, phenomenological, hermeneutical, analytical, and pragmatic approaches. As a generic procedure geared toward exposing clients to alternative perspectives and ways of conceiving truth, reality, and their lived experiences under the conviction that the process of self-examination will lead to higher forms of enlightenment, the dialectical method may be used as a primary orienting tool for philosophical counseling or may be used to complement existing methodological strategies.

The use of dialectical procedures that emulate the Socratic approach may also carry pernicious risks and consequences that negatively impact on the successful outcome of counseling. Thus the way dialectic is carried out will determine treatment efficacy. If it is used lightly and gently as an exploratory device to guide the client toward philosophic self-investigation, it may be constructive and propitious. But if it is used radically, it may be destructive, malicious, and ineffective. The critical use of cross-examination or *elenchus*—the systematic investigation and refutation of an idea by logical argument using a graded series of questions—may be ultimately abusive and psychologically destabilizing.<sup>20</sup> When using *elenchus* exploringly, one must be sensitive to the type, form, and content of the questioning as well as its timing and direction. If practiced like Socrates, however, *elenctic* dialogue leads to a moment of crisis when the interlocutor is

overwhelmed with confusion, discouragement, and shame.

The strict and disciplined use of Socratic dialectic in philosophical counseling can be very dangerous to the mental well being of the client which further borders on unethical professional conduct. In its insidious form, dialectical or *elenctic* interrogation may be experienced as an assault and molestation of the client's belief system and core sense of self. It may be perceived as a baneful weapon that judges, shames, and demoralizes clients, tearing down their adaptive defenses by exposing vulnerabilities and invalidating their personal values that eventually contaminate the therapeutic relationship. The dangers associated with this type of critique can apply to academic philosophy as well. We can easily see how the Socratic method as a counseling tool can be taken to extreme lengths when it is used to promote the destruction of one's core or cherished belief systems. Al-Shawi goes so far to instate nihilism as an essential aspect of the therapeutic process.<sup>21</sup> Instead of starting from the standpoint of acceptance, nihilistic critique systematically dismantles, nullifies, and extinguishes the client's worldview.

We must seriously question the therapeutic efficacy, ethics, and practical ramifications of such a technique. In terms of therapeutic efficiency, it is simply ineffective and fruitless. When clients' belief systems and personal values are perceived to be attacked or dismissed, they will be more likely to react defensively thus leading to increased resistance, hostility, psychic conflict, negative transference, and overall bad therapeutic dynamics. This does nothing but to shut down the process rather than nurture it. We may also question the ethical implications of such a position. Not only is nihilistic critique an incompetent and irresponsible device, it is not in good standing with conscientious professional conduct. Would it be ethical to nihilistically question the existence of God with a client who is devoutly religious? While this issue is complex, one cannot philosophize

with a hammer without jeopardizing the psychic integrity of the client. Not only does the use of nihilistic dialectical techniques induce negativity in the therapeutic encounter, it may intensify pre-existing conflict, emotional pain, and inner confusion and chaos that may potentially lead to intrapsychic depletion, fragmentation, and debilitating anxiety. Clients who have a fragile sense of self or a damaged self-image may be especially vulnerable as well as those with personality disorders and neurotic constitutions prone to anxiety and depression. Finally, in terms of its pragmatic consequences, aggressive dialectical strategies do more to drive clients away from treatment rather than to foster and instill productive philosophical inquiry into the nature of their lives.

Another potential limitation to the dialectical method is its strong adherence to a rational and logical framework guiding counseling strategies. If rational, intellectual, or cognitive judgements become the sole focus of philosophical counseling, then other potentially valid areas of philosophical inquiry including the status of emotions and other psychological configurations may be sacrificed, minimized, or glossed over simply due to philosophic bias. This is a general criticism of many cognitively oriented approaches to psychotherapy that over-emphasize the client's capacity for rational insight. In their insistence on principally examining the rational foundations of a client's beliefs, attitudes, and cognitive capacities to solve problems and adjust to life demands, the therapist may inadvertently collude with the client's pathology through an intellectualized defense. Intellectualizing or rationalizing away a particular problem may do more to solidify a maladaptive defense system that is contributing to the client's difficulties than to expose the self-defeating, repetitive, and/or rigid pattern of his or her over-intellectualized attributions.

The dialectical method in itself does not have to be circumscribed by rational constraints in scope and content, and can be readily adapted to fit a variety of dynamic contexts. Not limited in

focus or content, the method of dialectical examination may be seen as an integral and continuous aspect of the counseling process. The key is in determining how and when to use dialectical interventions that are fluid enough to shift from a rational or logical analysis to anticipating, addressing, and focusing upon competing psychological processes and perspectives that fall within the client's experience of self and others. In order to be optimally effective, dialectical interventions must be flexible enough to account for the multiple parallel processes and inner organizations that concern the client's intrapsychic, interpersonal, and social world. A dialectical approach that exclusively centers on rational discourse is bound to be confining, myopic, and insufficient, thus alienating the client from philosophical holism.

## *II: Solution-Oriented and Open-Ended Approaches*

Depending upon the needs and capacities of each client, philosophical counselors may opt for problem-focused approaches that address specific issues posed by the client which are end, goal, or solution-oriented, or they may structure the counseling environment as an on-going open-ended pursuit of philosophical insight, analysis, and self-critique. The former approach models after many forms of brief and cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy that target specific problems or dilemmas and establish a defined set of tasks and goals that aim toward viable solutions. Open-ended approaches favor more long-term insight oriented therapy models where there is a continual self-examination and re-interpretation of one's being-in-the-world. This form of philosophical counseling places value on the life-time commitment to a meaningful engagement with life's questions and vicissitudes. While a client may not desire life-long therapy, the open-ended approach fosters fundamental skills and attitudes toward living one's life philosophically; hence philosophy becomes

a way of being.

In practice, solution-oriented and open-ended approaches may operate in isolation or in concert with one another. Brief interventions may deal with specific philosophical problems clients are struggling with such as their personal mortality or spirituality; yet examining particular questions and conundrums are often part of the long-term exploration of an open-ended philosophical analysis. The specificity of a given approach will largely depend upon the needs and conflicts of the client who, if in crisis, may press for immediate or short-term resolutions, while those who are inclined and generally interested in living a contemplative life, as well as those sufficiently capable of tolerating and managing ambiguity, will prefer a longer-term approach. This underscores the primacy of philosophical eclecticism and the responsibility to attend to the client's immediate needs and concerns. What may start out as a brief consultation around a particular problem may turn into an on-going philosophical self-investigation or vice versa. The philosophical counselor must be malleable with respect to orientation and approach, with the client's specific needs and difficulties taking priority over the counselor's personal preferences. When there is sufficient ambiguity or conflict between what the client perceives as his or her immediate needs and what the counselor perceives as the client's actual needs (which may not be immediate), then the counseling frame should be flexibly established to address the client's most pressing concerns within a longer term treatment plan.<sup>22</sup>

Whether problem-focused or long-term oriented, philosophical counseling strategies may conform to a variety of different theoretical positions including meaning or conceptually based orientations, cognitive-behavioral, rational-emotive, phenomenological-existential, psychodynamic, interpersonal or intersubjective, and systemic perspectives. While using any of these models, what

makes philosophical counseling philosophical is the way in which the counselor endeavors to structure the relationship and bring the client's associated material under the inspection of philosophic rigor. This may in all likelihood entail addressing an issue on multiple hermeneutic levels of qualitative analysis including examining the phenomenology of the lived experience.

### III: *Meaning Analysis*

As a way of being, philosophy may be said to be the pursuit of wisdom, truth, and meaning. Most philosophical counselors privilege the search for meaning as a primary philosophical goal. Indeed, philosophical counseling strives to uncover and analyze the various meanings and interpretations that clients assign to their lives, fleshing out implicit presuppositions, contradictions, inconsistencies, and cryptic patterns and processes that are associated with their worldviews. Thus the pursuit of meaning entails rigorous conceptual analysis in thought and action and bears direct relation to the implications for living a philosophical life.

Lahav views the main task of philosophical counseling to be the promotion of philosophical skills that examine the meaning and implications of a client's sense of self in the world which ultimately hinges on a conceptual analysis of the content under question. For Lahav, conceptual analysis is the *sine qua non* of philosophical counseling. While this may be an integral aspect to meaning analysis, he initially limits the domain and depth of philosophical meaning to the *concept alone* at the expense of other possible experiences that constitute meaning for the individual.

[O]ne is likely to find among psychologists a tendency to deal with *feelings* of worthlessness instead of the *concept* of worthlessness, and with the *experience* of freedom rather than the *concept* of freedom; to turn the philosophical issue of what is a meaningful life into the psychological issue of processes underlying feelings of meaningfulness; or to replace a philosophical reflection on the issue of one's moral

obligations with techniques of giving vent to guilt and moral feelings.<sup>23</sup>

Lahav's bifurcation of feelings and personal experience from meaning pigeonholes philosophical counseling into an abstract and psychologically distant exercise that has no real concrete connection to the client's life. While a critique of concepts is valid and necessary in certain contexts, initially focusing on, let us say, the general concept of marriage rather than on a client's personal distress about her marriage, would only problematize the client's real concerns and alienate her from helpful discussion. Here, there is a danger that PC can get bogged down in abstractions, inept conceptual formulas, and therapeutically meaningless distractions that either overlook the client's psychic reality or facilitate an intellectualized defense that seriously neglects the client due to inattentiveness to her personal experience and pain. The contentious nature of my claim is that worldviews are inextricably linked to non-rational processes which can potentially become a significant and legitimate loci of philosophical self-critique.

For example, I once received a middle-aged client who was struggling with life-cycle issues around change, personal identity, and suffering. While the notion of redefining his life and identity were important conceptual matters we explored, he initially realized that he did not really want to relinquish certain aspects of his attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral patterns even though they were admittedly irrational and self-destructive. Through our philosophical framing of his resistance to change his illogical behavior, he came to the conclusion that he was holding onto his suffering because it was the only thing that provided him with meaning and familiarity. This philosophical work of engaging the non-rational led to conceptually, hence rationally, addressing the broader issues of identity in the face of loss and life transformation. In the end, he professed to have found meaning in the process of suffering only under the condition that it was no longer meaningful to suffer.

At some stage in the philosophical counseling process, a conceptual analysis will be a helpful and necessary aspect to the client's treatment; but it becomes a question of appropriate timing, emphasis, and tack which incorporates the wider experiential parameters that constitute the client's life. Conceptual analysis has to be sensitive to the overall meaning clients assign to their lives. Meaning analysis conforms to the broader philosophical context of psychic holism and thus takes into account psychological conflicts, existential crises, phenomenal descriptions, and the personal throes of lived experience. The value of holism is that it fosters comprehensive self-awareness, philosophical unification, and psychological adjustment. If the goal of philosophical counseling is to transcend mere pedagogical instruction and engender thoughtful self-reflection thus producing generalizable beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that can be directly applied to the client's life outside the consulting room, then a meaning analysis must show a commitment to philosophical holism that conforms to a client's overall worldview interpretation.

Viktor Frankl, the founder of Logotherapy, believes that "Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life."<sup>24</sup> Meaning is arcane, unique, and ultimately subjective which may only be achieved by each person alone. While the philosophical counselor serves as a catalyst for finding personal meaning, the acquisition of meaning is ultimately a developmental achievement that requires struggle, sacrifice, and suffering. The will to meaning is an existential quest into the nature of value inquiry, a drama of finding purpose and significance to one's life. Discovering and creating meaning becomes a solitary labor over the questions of existential anxiety, isolation, death, despair, freedom, responsibility, will, and philo-psychic insight. Therefore, meaning analysis is the ongoing process of becoming and fulfilling one's possibilities to be lived and relived.

Having established that philosophical worldviews are inseparable from the psychological

configurations that inform personal identity and personality formation, meaning analysis may be optimally practiced by embracing a philo-psychological paradigm that strives to integrate psychological experiences of self and world into a philosophical holism. Because philosophical counseling may be seen as an insight oriented psychotherapy conducted through a guided and systematic dialectical exchange that analyzes the philo-conceptual and psycho-philosophical meanings of a client's subjective lived experience, meaning analysis, or what might not be inappropriately called *philoanalysis*, must be open to exploring the psychodynamic processes that constitute philosophical beliefs and attitudes, personality or character structure, and the interpersonal and intersubjective pressures, perceptions, and tensions that permeate the counselor-client relationship.

Following the Delphic decree: "Know Thyself!," philosophical counseling must concede that any aspect of mental reality which goes unexamined remains blind to philosophic knowledge. In order for PC to be engaged in a process aimed toward philosophical self-consciousness, the counselor must be willing if not obligated to acknowledge and explore the psychodynamic forces that influence selfhood and the conceptual meanings that are attached to worldview interpretations. Philosophical counselors need to recognize all elements of personal existence, including how unconscious elements prefigure and overshadow conscious operations and influence how meaning is constructed and experienced. Unlike Lahav who deems unconscious factors irrelevant to philosophical insight,<sup>25</sup> consciousness is the manifestation of unconscious processes which lends structure to conscious thoughts, associations, judgments, and meaning, thus affecting personal identity, adjustment, and philosophic commitments.<sup>26</sup> Because anxiety, conflict, resistance, defensive operations, and transference are universal phenomena that manifest and affect the course

and progress of any therapeutic relationship, philosophical counseling would do better to acknowledge the multiple over-determined parallel psychic processes that constitute the reality of the counseling encounter.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Throughout this article, I have attempted to demonstrate that philosophical counseling is an alternative form of psychotherapy which is differentiated by its philosophical rather than its psychological emphasis informing both theoretical and methodological considerations. Yet despite conceptual distinctions that inform procedural interventions, philosophical counseling is a psychologically embodied dynamic activity that would profit from a philo-psychological approach to theory and practice. By acknowledging the interface with established psychological paradigms, philosophical counseling could potentially move toward disciplinary unity, fortification, and structure, thus enabling its development as an autonomous and respected discipline within the field of mental health.

In order for philosophical counseling to advance in professional stature, it must be subject to ongoing critique and research: this is particularly important for ethical and training considerations.<sup>27</sup> I have attempted to partially outline the scope, parameters, and limits to dialectical strategies that comprise a method of meaning analysis emphasizing eclecticism and philosophical holism. While this is only one of many viable approaches, it calls for a directed framework to applied philosophical procedure. It becomes important for the field of philosophical counseling to be open to self-criticism and external review in order to refine and solidify its art. With systematic critique, revision, and experimentation, philosophical counseling may perhaps enjoy future recognition as a behavioral

science.

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## ENDNOTES

1. GERD B. ACHENBACH (1995) Philosophy, philosophical practice, and psychotherapy, in R. Lahav & M. V. Tillmanns (eds.) *Essays on Philosophical Counseling*. (Lanham, MD, University Press of America), p.63.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Freud's trinity of the id, ego, and superego is a fundamental and familiar pillar of psychoanalytic lore. Freud frequently refers to them as psychological "agencies," "provinces," "regions," "realms," "instances," "systems," and "powers." (*Standard Edition*, London, Hogarth Press, 1900, 5, p.537; 1932, 22, p.72; 1940, 23, p.146). Taken together, these agencies comprise the necessary features of personality as the ontological fabric of mind. It is important to note that these provinces or agencies are frequently interpreted as three (ontologically) distinct psychological agents, hence separate entities, when they are in fact epigenetic achievements that derive from the same monistic ontology. While Freud himself was ambiguous through much of his early writings with regards to psychic ontology, in his mature theory he is very clear that the ego—rationality, and the superego—ethical conscience, develops out of its natural immediacy. In *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, Freud (1926) states: "We were justified, I think, in dividing the ego from the id, for there are certain considerations which necessitate that step. On the other hand *the ego is identical with the id, and is merely a specially differentiated part of it*. If we think of this part by itself in contradistinction to the whole, or if a real split has occurred between the two, the weakness of the ego becomes apparent. But if the ego remains bound up with the id and indistinguishable from it, then it displays its strength. The same is true of the relation between the ego and the super-ego. In many situations the two are merged; and as a rule we can only distinguish one from the other when there is a tension or conflict between them. . . . [T]he ego is an *organization* and the id is not. *The ego is, indeed, the organized portion of the id.*" Cf. FREUD (1926) *Standard Edition*, J. Strachey (trans.) (London, Hogarth Press), 20, p.97, italics added.

4. For Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, imagination mediates between intuition and thought. Imagination is responsible for the higher synthetic activities of mind, connecting particulars to universals, and thus enabling rational judgment. Cf. KANT (1787/1965) *Critique of Pure Reason*, N.K. Smith (trans.), (New York, St. Martin's Press); Sec 3, A 115-130; Sec 2, § 16, B 132; FICHTE (1794/1982) *Science of Knowledge*, P. Heath & J. Lachs (trans. & eds.) (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press); I, 472, p. 45.; § 3: I, 115; I, 215-218; and HEGEL (1830/1978) *Philosophy of Spirit*, from the *Encyclopaedia*, in M.J. Petry (trans. & ed.), *Hegel's Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*, Vol.3: Phenomenology and Psychology, (Dordrecht, Holland, D. Reidel Publishing Company); §§ 455-460.

5. See HEGEL (1807/1977) *Phenomenology of Spirit*, A.V. Miller (trans.) (Oxford, Oxford University Press), (DD.) Absolute Knowing, VIII.

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6. RAN LAHAV (1996) What is philosophical in philosophical counselling?, *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 13 (3), p.1.

7. RAN LAHAV (1995) A conceptual framework for philosophical counseling: Worldview interpretation, in R. Lahav & M. V. Tillmanns (eds.) *Essays on Philosophical Counseling*. (Lanham, MD, University Press of America), pp.3-24.

8. RAN LAHAV (1994) Is philosophical counseling that different from psychotherapy?, *Zeitschrift für Philosophische Praxis*, 1, pp.32-36.

9. RAN LAHAV (1995) A conceptual framework for philosophical counseling: Worldview interpretation, op.cit., p. 6.

10. Throughout the evolving history of psychology, many therapeutic schools of thought have long embraced philosophical principles borrowed from phenomenologists and existential thinkers like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber. Psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, such as Medard Boss, Ludwig Binswanger, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, R.D. Laing, Rollo May, and Viktor Frankl have developed their own approaches to philosophical-psychoanalysis and therapy that draw heavily from the Continental tradition. Cf. LUDWIG BINSWANGER (1953) *Grundformen und Erkenntnis menschlichen Daseins* (Zürich, Max Niehans); (1963) *Being-in-the-World: Selected Papers of Ludwig Binswanger*, J. Needleman (ed.), (New York, Basic Books); MEDARD BOSS (1957) *Psychoanalyse un Daseinsanalytik*, (Bern, Hans Huber); VIKTOR FRANKL (1959) *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York, Washington Square Press); KARL JASPERS (1955) *Reason and Existenz* (New York, Noonday Press); R.D. LAING (1959) *The Divided Self* (London, Penguin Books); ROLLO MAY (1983) *The Discovery of Being* (New York, Norton); ROLLO MAY, ERNEST ANGEL, & HENRI F. ELLENBERGER (eds.) (1958) *Existence* (New York, Clarion/Simon and Schuster); RAYMOND J. McCALL (1983) *Phenomenological Psychology* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press); J.H. van den BERG (1972) *A Different Existence* (Pittsburg, Duquesne University Press); IRVIN D. YALOM (1980) *Existential Psychotherapy* (New York, Basic Books)

11. This is not to say that lessons in logic, like other forms of didactic psychotherapies, don't help people deal with their emotional problems. Cf. ELLIOT D. COHEN (1995) Philosophical Counseling: Some Roles of Critical Thinking, in R. Lahav & M.V. Tillmanns (eds.) *Essays on Philosophical Counseling*.

12. See JONATHAN LEAR (1998) *Open Minded: Working out the Logic of the Soul* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press), p.9.

13. Although more robust and intricately defined, Freud's notion of the psyche mirrors the Platonic notion. Compare from Plato's *Republic*: "... in the soul whereby it reckons and reasons the rational, and that with which it loves, hungers, thirsts, and feels the flutter and titillation of other desires, the irrational and appetitive—companion of various repletions and pleasures" (4: 439d; also see *Laws*,

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ib. 9: 863b sq.; ib. 5:727c). Plato also ascribes to the soul the cause of moral qualities (*Laws*, 10: 896d), ends and virtues (*Republic*, ib. I: 353d sq.), and the influence of character (*Laws*, 10: 904c sq.), as well as mental sickness (*Gorgias*, 479b). But perhaps the best allusion to Plato's notion of the soul by Freud is his analogy of the ego and the id as a rider on horseback (*Standard Edition*, 19, 1923, p. 25. London, Hogarth Press), whereas Plato refers to the soul as a charioteer with a pair of steeds (*Phaedrus*, 246 sq.). Cf. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, E. Hamilton & H. Cairns (eds.) (1961) (Princeton, Princeton University Press).

14. I respect those philosophical practitioners who wish to differentiate their work from psychotherapists, and see good reason to do particularly when working with groups and corporations, children, and in addressing applied ethics and logic under pedagogical persuasion. For pragmatic reasons, I do not wish to engage the question of a consensual or unified definition of therapy, which may be in all likelihood doomed to a crass subjectivity. Rather, I wish to confine our discussion to the traditional notion of therapy in the context of helping, to which even educational objectives may apply.

15. EITE VEENING (1994) Metalogue in philosophical counseling, presented at the *First International Conference on Philosophical Counseling*. University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada, July 9, 1994.

16. Cf. ANETTE PRINS-BAKKER (1995) Philosophy in marriage counseling; WILL A.J.F. GERBERS (1995) Philosophical practice, pastoral work, and suicide survivors; BARBARA NORMAN (1995) Philosophical counseling: The arts of ecological relationship and interpretation; STEVEN SEGAL (1995) Meaning crisis: philosophical counseling and psychotherapy, in R. Lahav & M. V. Tillmanns (eds.) *Essays on Philosophical Counseling*. (Lanham, MD, University Press of America).

17. See Socrates comment in Plato's *Symposium*: "My dear Agathon . . . I only wish that wisdom were the kind of thing that flowed . . . from the vessel that was full to the one that was empty" (175d), op. cit.

18. RENÉ DESCARTES (1637/1994) *A Discourse on Method* (London, Everyman), p.4.

19. Cf. JAMES C. OVERHOLSER (1993) Elements of the Socratic method: I. Systematic questioning, *Psychotherapy*, 30(1), pp.67-74.

20. DAVID JOPLING addresses this point in Can wisdom be taught?, in J. Mills (ed.), *A Pedagogy of Becoming* (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, in press), p.37.

21. HAKAM H. AL-SHAWI (2000) A general framework for philosophical counseling, *Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, 5(2), p.7.

22. There are many possible exceptions to this general rule: (1) the counselor's approach may fall under a certain theoretical and/or methodological school that prevents him or her from adjusting to

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the client's preferences; (2) the counselor may be outside of his or her range of expertise to examine the client's expressed concern; (3) the problem area may not be deemed to be philosophically appropriate; (4) the client may not be suited for long-term work; or (5) the client may not be amenable to philosophical counseling at all.

23. RAN LAHAV (1995) A conceptual framework for philosophical counseling: Worldview interpretation, op. cit., p.14.

24. VIKTOR FRANKL (1959) *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York, Washington Square Press), p.121.

25. RAN LAHAV, A conceptual framework for philosophical counseling: Worldview interpretation, op. cit., p.8.

26. In the diverse field of psychoanalysis, there is such an extensive body of literature and clinical evidence to support this claim that its refutation would be awkward. For Freud's mature views on how psychic structure developmentally proceeds from unconscious activity and continues to operate on conscious processes, see *The Ego and the Id*, 1923, 19, pp.19-27; *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, 1932, 22, p.76; and *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis*, 1940, 23, pp.145-147, in the *Standard Edition* (London, Hogarth Press). Hegel also makes this claim through a logical deduction of the dialectic in the Anthropology section of the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* where he outlines the unconscious soul's epigenetic development into consciousness, §§ 388-412. See the *Philosophy of Spirit (Die Philosophie des Geistes)*, which is the third part of Hegel's *Enzyklopädia*, in M.J. Petry (ed.) (1978), *Hegel's Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*, Vol.1: Introductions; Vol.2: Anthropology; and Vol.3: Phenomenology and Psychology, (Dordrecht, Holland, D. Reidel Publishing Company).

27. See my recent article on this matter, "Ethical Considerations and Training Recommendations for Philosophical Counseling." *International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 1999, 13(2), 149-164.

Eclectic counselling An eclectic counsellor will use a range of different theories, methods and practices according to an individual client's needs. This is based on their belief that no particular theoretical approach works better than all others for a specific problem. Emotionally focused therapy Emotionally focused therapy is an approach for working with couples, families and individuals that helps to create and reinforce secure, resilient relationships.Â Psychodynamic psychotherapy The psychodynamic approach is derived from psychoanalysis, but focuses on immediate problems to try to provide a quicker solution. It stresses the importance of the unconscious and past experience in shaping current behaviour. 100 Philosophical Counseling as Psychotherapy Jon Mills. Chapter Eight. 112 Logic-Based Therapy and Its Virtues Elliot D. Cohen. Chapter Nine.Â 132 Philosophical Counseling: Understanding the Unique Self and Other through Dialogic Approach Maria daVenza Tillmanns. Chapter Eleven . 139 The Elucidation of Emotional Life: A Philosophical, Eclectic Approach to Psychotherapy Bryan T. Reuther. Part Three: Applied Issues in Philosophical Counseling. Chapter Twelve .