Book Review

Philosophical Praxis: Origin, Relations, and Legacy,

by Gerd B. Achenbach (Translated by Michael Picard).

Lexington Books, 210 pages, ISBN: 978-1-7936-5113-6, £81.00 (Hardback)

There has been a significant resurgence in the interest of practical philosophy and its contribution to the lives of the public, particularly with the growing popularity of the contemporary philosophical counselling/praxis movement. This renewed interest is partly driven by and stems from a growing recognition, both within and beyond academia, of the value and insight that *philosophy* can offer. In the South African context, philosophical counselling/praxis have gained renewed momentum, exemplified by the establishment of the first Logic-Based Therapy centre in 2024 and the revival of a discussion group, originally active until the early 2000s, which now meets regularly to explore the viability of philosophical counselling/praxis in contemporary settings.

It is against this backdrop of growing interest that the first English translation of Gerd Achenbach's seminal work, *Philosophical Praxis: Origin, Relations, and Legacy*, allows the often misunderstood author to finally "have his say on his own terms" (Picard, 2024:xi). Even forty years after establishing his practice, Achenbach (2024) still maintains that philosophical counselling/praxis retains its unique potential to emerge not just as a way of life (following the likes of Pierre Hadot), but also as a distinct and "proper profession". However, one might rightly wonder how urgent and pressing this original call is after forty years. But Achenbach (2024:xviii) still maintains, as so many have attributed to him, that philosophical counselling/praxis is not an alternative form of therapy, but an alternative to therapy or what he notes as "therapy-culture".

Unlike other therapeutic and counselling approaches, philosophical counselling/praxis has evolved much like a Deleuzean and Guattarian rhizome – characterised by its decentralised growth without a singular or coherent trajectory. The development of these diverse and sometimes antithetical approaches within philosophical counselling/praxis can be attributed to the absence of translations of Achenbach's (1984) seminal work, *Philosophische Praxis*, which originally sparked the growth in philosophical counselling/praxis as a distinct movement. This point was already recognised in the late 1990s by Donald Robertson (1998:6), who viewed the

lack of available translations positively, arguing that "this has helped the movement as a whole to avoid the pitfall of evolving into an intellectual cult – philosophical practice has no Freud, Adler or Jung: it has no orthodoxy."

It is in this context of radical theoretical openness that philosophical counsellors/practitioners, such as Ran Lahav, Lou Marinoff, Shlomit Schuster, Peter Raabe, Lydia Amir, and Elliot Cohen, developed their own practices with radically divergent goals, outcomes, and methods. One might think of contemporary philosophical counselling/praxis on a continuum with Achenbach and similar approaches being on one end of the spectrum (few if any definite goals, using a variety of methods eclectically), and those like Cohen on the other end (definite goals/outcomes and with recognised/repeatable methods). Richard Sivil and Julia Clare's (2018) taxonomy of the field of philosophical counselling/praxis provides similar insights. Ardent adherents of Achenbach, particularly Schuster (2004), however, are extremely critical of practitioners such as Marinoff and others who departed from the characteristically sceptical Achenbachian approach. Meanwhile certain interpretations, notably Raabe's (2001:167), characterise the Achenbachian "beyond-method" method as "antirealist" and "post-modern" in orientation. However, this latter reading appears to misconstrue Achenbach's stance, especially when taking the English translation reviewed here seriously. Far from advocating an "anything goes" approach or embracing relativism, so often wrongly attributed to Achenbach, the position that emerges from this book is a critical argument that resists methodological reduction and a sophisticated engagement with the history of western philosophy, emerging from, inter alia, Michel de Montaigne, Baruch Spinoza, Søren Kierkegaard, and Arthur Schopenhauer. Achenbach's scepticism toward rigid methodology stems not from "post-modern" or anti-realist positions, but from historical and philosophically rooted positions that transcends methodological rigidity. Achenbach (2024:2), for example, early on dispels this by noting that, "[t]o speak correctly, philosophy works not *with*, but at best *upon* methods. Obedience to method is the pride of the sciences, not the point of philosophy." His resistance to rigid definition stems not from methodological nihilism but from a deep appreciation of philosophy's historical character as an exploratory rather than prescriptive enterprise. It dares the philosophical counsellor/practitioner, and their visitor, to think differently, alternatively, otherwise.

With this English translation, enriched by the author's explanations and additional material, the English-speaking world might thus gain closer access to Achenbach's original vision and ideas for philosophical counselling/praxis (Picard, 2024). The timing is particularly significant,

coinciding with renewed momentum in both philosophical counselling/praxis and philosophy as a way of life, allowing new generations of philosophical counsellors/practitioners to shape their practices in unique ways alongside the help of Achenbach (and the myriad of other approaches). This creates fertile hermeneutic ground for substantive future developments that might stem and grow from the work. Additionally, as the translator Michael Picard (2024:xv) suggests, this work may challenge prevailing interpretations of Achenbach's thoughts, making what he calls a "sizable and somewhat uncomfortable splash". This work should thus not be seen as a hearkening back to the past or the originary moments of philosophical counselling/praxis, but as a "*Fortleben*" or continued existence and creative renewal in the present.

At the same time, one might argue that this translation of twelve short essays (mostly lectures and seminars) on philosophical counselling/praxis lacks in a certain unique manner. Yet perhaps this may work to its advantage. After forty years, the debate around philosophical counselling/praxis has shifted significantly from the early years when many of these essays' ideas were first formulated. Nevertheless, the book reinforces several key interpretations of Achenbach's praxis: firstly, that philosophical counselling/praxis inherently resists definite descriptions and rigid definitions, a resistance which is intricately bound to understanding its practice as an alternative to therapy/therapy-culture and not as an alternative therapy; secondly, that successful counselling relies not so much on the particular method or philosophical knowledge base of the philosophical counsellor/practitioner, but rather on their very being/becoming-in-the-world; and finally, that philosophy that does not at least discomfort or disturb is not worthy of attention. These ideas weave throughout the twelve essays and constitute the main arguments that Achenbach makes.

The book's twelve chapters can be organised into three broad themes. Chapters 1-3 establish the nature and foundations of philosophical praxis, with short answers to the question of what its praxis entails in Achenbach's elusive style, a brief historical note on antecedents, which resist reduction to a single historical moment, manifesting instead through distinctive *moments* (essays); and its distinctive characteristic of *Lebenskönnerschaft* – a complex compound of Achenbach's own making that defies English translation (Picard, 2024). This concept emerges when philosophical dis-*ease* inspires in an individual the will to live differently, otherwise, or more *fully/well* (Achenbach, 2024). One might also link this idea to *phronesis* (dealt extensively by Micheal Weiss, 2018). The next three chapters address practical considerations, such as the dynamics of initiating a session and regarding the crucial insight, or ground rule,

of philosophical counselling/praxis, viz., that philosophical counselling/praxis primarily deals with the non-philosophical in its almost infinite permutations. The last six chapters predominantly deal with the philosophical counsellor/practitioner's disposition, attitude, or way of life, especially relating to the cultivation of virtues, the embodiment of one's practice (see also Walsh, 2005), and impact of philosophical counselling/praxis on philosophy, psychotherapy, and pastoral care.

This translation of Achenbach's (2024) work provides the English-speaking world with crucial insights into developing his original ideas and thoughts. This rings especially true for those who are interested in his early conceptualisation of philosophical praxis (beginning in the 1980s). As a standalone text, this work marks a crucial addition to the philosophical counselling/praxis discourse particularly regarding Achenbachian philosophical counselling/praxis and related approaches (in particular Schuster, 1999). However, the field of philosophical counselling/praxis has significantly changed and grown during the forty years in which this book remained in the original German. This creates an interesting tension regarding the significance of this book for the philosophical counselling/praxis discourse. It cannot serve as a handbook for philosophical counsellors/practitioners – this was not its intended goal, and more significantly, it does not engage with any of the work that emerged in the forty years since the movement's inception. While it may not directly "contribute" new ideas to this movement, this limitation naturally stems from its status as a "historical document" that inherently cannot address contemporary developments.

The significance of this translation, despite its forty-year delay, transcends its original historical context. While certain sections appear dated – the last two chapters, for example, address debates about philosophical counselling/praxis's distinction from pastoral care and psychotherapy that have since been extensively developed elsewhere (see Paden, 2013; Raabe, 2001; and Amir, 2005) – the work's enduring value lies in its creative and reconstructive potential. The text's rich conceptual soil, particularly the treatment of listening in philosophical counselling/praxis and the philosophical counsellor/practitioner's embodiment of their practice, offers fertile ground for development in different contexts from the original. This potential seems especially pertinent, timely, and relevant in South African contexts as the renewed and emerging interest in this field leans itself towards radically new unfoldment. While blindly following Achenbach's approach would contradict the work's sceptical (read: anti-dogmatic) foundations, engaging with these founding ideas alongside the substantial

literature of the past forty years opens new interpretative/hermeneutical possibilities and fresh perspectives on the movement's development, especially in the global South.

The approach proposed by Achenbach proves particularly compelling for philosophical counsellors/practitioners in South African contexts as it enables a radical thinking through possibilities for a practice that transcends conventional boundaries, with porous and fluid frameworks that (South) African philosophical counsellors/practitioners can adapt to the contours and complexities of speaking from here. Decolonial and African centred psychologist Kopano Ratele (2019) critiques the wholesale importation and uncritical adoption of theories written for and based upon western ways of being into (South) African contexts, noting how sense and meaning making (read: "worldviews") not encompassed by these theories are inevitably marginalised, muted, and excluded. The practice of philosophical counselling/praxis, particularly through the "Achenbachian model", offers a promising path forward in these contexts, especially regarding African philosophical schools of thought that align with the ideas found in this book – the hermeneutic and conversational school of philosophy in particular. This porous and fluid model eschews the prescription of a view but rather engages with multiple perspectives, functionally shaping and moulding them to resonate within diverse contexts. As Achenbach (2024:156) powerfully concludes, "where Philosophical Praxis actually succeeds, it is not a matter of philosophising about the concrete, but out of the concrete."

While the future of philosophical counselling/praxis in South African contexts is yet to fully unfold and solidly ground itself in the soils of especially African thought, this book makes a compelling contribution. The theoretical frameworks it offers are sufficiently fluid, lending itself to accommodate and engage with diverse philosophical traditions and perspectives, and will be an important resource to consult in conjunction with other similar works. The significance of its contribution is not only in its adaptable potential but in its ability to catalyse and facilitate the cultivation of new, alternative, and different forms of philosophical living that speak from and to South African realities.

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