

Considering African philosophy as a way of life through the practice of philosophical counselling¹

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Abstract

Contributions of Pierre Hadot pertaining to the notion of philosophy as a way of life have had a profound and enduring influence upon philosophical counselling theory and practice. Various philosophical counsellors, such as Robert Walsh and Arto Tukiainen, have embraced this imperative by *living* their philosophical counselling practice. Nonetheless, a prevailing trend among these practitioners lies in their exclusive reliance upon either the ancient Greek philosophical tradition as expounded by Hadot, or in their adaptation of contemporary Western philosophies.

Regrettably, a conspicuous omission prevails with respect to the incorporation of contemporary African philosophies, notably their philosophical praxes as a way of life/living, within the discourse of contemporary philosophical counselling. The integration of African philosophies into the discourse of philosophical counselling literature holds significant promise, particularly concerning the potential to impact ways of living within a Southern African context.

Within the wider landscape of contemporary African philosophy, certain authors have already conceptualised ubuntu philosophy as a way of life/living. This talk, notwithstanding, undertakes to introduce two different African philosophies, namely, hermeneutic African philosophy and conversational philosophy. A novel interpretation of these philosophies will be advanced, positioning them as praxes for philosophical counselling. Emphasis is placed on an interpretative actualisation in response to lived experiences, contextualised within a conversational framework.

The implications for philosophical counselling are threefold: firstly, the disclosing of alternative ways of life/living and being/becoming, along with the creation of new concepts; secondly, a profound accentuation of the relational dimension in philosophical counselling, underscored by the notion of collaborative philosophising that emerges from the dynamic interaction between the philosophical counsellor and the counselee; thirdly, a reworked understanding of philosophical counselling that moves beyond methodological constraints while embracing the transformative potential of reflective, creative, and critical conversations.

¹ This paper was presented at the annual conference of the Philosophical Society of Southern Africa (PSSA) held at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS) on the 19th of January 2024.

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To comprehend philosophical counselling can prove challenging and somewhat fruitless at times, given the tendency of each philosophical counsellor asserting a distinct conceptualisation of their practice (Marinoff, 1999:37; Raabe, 2001:xix; Tillmanns, 2005:2; cf. Schuster, 2004:3). In attempting to mitigate this, and for the purposes of this talk, I want to conceptualise the practice of philosophical counselling as both a *dynamic hermeneutical happening*, and *collaborative philosophising*. I briefly explain these ideas.

Through a rather interesting transformation, various philosophical counsellors³ have re-conceptualised the Socratic midwife⁴ metaphor. Within this context, the counselee's latent ideas and concepts do not await birthing through the assistance of the philosophical counsellor. Instead, the very encounter between the philosophical counsellor and counselee catalyses the emergence of novel and latent ideas and concepts. In this reconceptualised metaphor, the encounter itself assumes the role of the midwife, emphasising the necessity of collaborative philosophising. Here, the philosophical counsellor does not merely impose philosophy onto the counselee's situation, nor does the counselee passively accept everything asserted by the philosophical counsellor.

The second notion, that of a dynamic hermeneutical happening, originates from the so-called founder of the philosophical counselling movement, Gerd Achenbach.⁵ In this framework, the philosophical counsellor engages in an "authentic listening" process, thereby opening herself to be touched by the counselee's situation, problems, or questions.⁶ The counselee is provided with a "fresh impulse" of her situation, situated within a philosophical framework. Importantly, the counselee's situation is not made to conform to a predefined theory or method. Instead, the counselee's unique situation⁷ is engaged with on an individual basis. Every counselee requires a different approach, philosophy, or method.⁸

³ E.g., Raabe (2001:143), Marinoff (2002:81), and Allen (2002:5, 11-12).

⁴ Schuster (1999:37) and Lahav (1993:244; 1996b:260; 2001a:8), amongst others, conceptualises the philosophical counsellor as a type of Socratic midwife.

⁵ Here, I rely on Schlomit Schuster's (1992:587; 1999:38) and Raabe's (2000:16; 2001:133) exposition of Achenbach's work. Most of his work is still not translated into English.

⁶ One might here think about Gadamer's (1980:5) sentiment that the "text" "presents" itself as wanting to be "read" and understood.

⁷ Schuster (1999:35-39) refers to the counselee's situation as "unique". This, however, might be problematic when considering some of her influences like Ronald David Laing and Thomas Szasz, prominent anti-psychiatry proponents.

⁸ Tukiainen (2010:52; 2012:112), for example, maintains that every new counselee presents or introduces the philosophical counsellor to a novel issue or situation to address.

Combining these two ideas, the counselee is potentially afforded a genuine philosophical encounter. The philosophical counsellor authentically addresses the counselee's problem, placing it within a philosophical framework and using it as a starting point for collaborative philosophising (Lahav, 1995:5; Louw, 2021b:19). I maintain that this idea of philosophical counselling is intricately linked to a way of living, a whole-time occupation, and a pursuit that the philosophical counsellor cannot help but do (Walsh, 2005:505; Fatić, 2013:1243; Tukiainen, 2012:128). The philosophical counsellor Robert Walsh (2005:505), for example, states that, "[t]o enter into my life at all is to enter into my philosophical counseling practice." The notion of philosophy as a way of life, promoted by the likes of Pierre Hadot, undergoes radicalisation in a philosophical counselling framework as the philosophical counsellor utilises all that philosophy has to offer.⁹ This process concurrently breathes novel, practical, and transformative life into what can be considered academic and abstract-theoretical philosophy (Fatić, 2013:1243-1244).

Nevertheless, a conspicuous omission prevails within the philosophical counselling discourse with respect to the incorporation and introduction of different philosophical traditions, especially African philosophy. In the wider landscape of philosophy, Ubuntu philosophy is a recognised philosophy as a way of life,¹⁰ which has recently been introduced into the philosophical counselling discourse by Richard Sivil.¹¹ In this regard, what might be termed the *African philosophical counselling discourse* is slowly growing. However, as of date, Ubuntu philosophy is the only African philosophy that has been considered in the philosophical counselling discourse. As a response, I want to introduce two additional African philosophical approaches to this growing literature. Here, I want to consider the hermeneutic African philosophy of Tsenay Serequeberhan and the conversational African philosophy of Jonathan Chimakonam as worthy philosophies as a way of life. Contrary to other attempts, I refrain from providing a pre-made or generic schema of what might qualify as a philosophy as a way of life.¹² Instead, my approach involves already recognising Serequeberhan's radical

⁹ See Shlomit Schuster (1995:101), Peter Raabe (2001:214), Fatić and Zagorac (2016:1421), and Fatić (2013:1243, 1250-1251).

¹⁰ In the wider literature, Ubuntu philosophy has been conceptualised as a philosophy as a way of life. See, e.g., Shanyanana & Waghid (2016:106-113), Mnyaka & Motlhabi (2005:215) and Bhengu (1996:ix).

¹¹ Sivil (2024:138-139) considers Ubuntu philosophy as a philosophical way of living for philosophical counselling, while Pilpel and Gindi (2019:72-76) considers Ubuntu philosophy as a philosophical approach.

¹² Sivil (2019:32-33; 2024:136), for example, does provide at length a schema for what can be considered as a philosophy as a way of life. Incidentally, his own schema excludes the likes of Socratic philosophy as a way of life, which is considered by Hadot (1995:157, 265, 269; 2004:29, 40, 55) and others (e.g., Ure and Sharpe, 2021:27; Cooper, 2007:21) as the quintessential example of philosophy as a way of life.

hermeneutics and Chimakonam's conversational philosophy as inherently practical philosophies in their own right and on their own terms. These philosophical approaches can subsequently be *transcreated*¹³ (or translated) into the discourse of philosophical counselling. I begin by exploring the radical hermeneutics of Serequeberhan.

To summarise Serequeberhan's philosophical project, I conceptualise it as presenting an approach aimed at grappling with the complexities of the post-colonial present or the neo-colonial situation. Serequeberhan argues that this lived present is experienced by the previously colonised as a gap or in-between-ness of the state of being colonised and the present unrealised liberation. This feeling arises due to the ways of living and daily existence of those under the yoke of neo-colonialism still being heavily influenced by the former colonisers (Serequeberhan, 1994:8; 2000:2; 2009:44). Quoting Fanon, Serequeberhan (1994:9) advocates for the necessity of "turn[ing] over a new leaf" and "work[ing] out new concepts" through the dismantling, de-structuring, and theoretical-cultural¹⁴ resistance of the neo-colonial situation.

In interpreting Serequeberhan's philosophy as inherently practical rather than purely theoretical, I emphasise three pivotal aspects within his work. These aspects encompass (i) the indigenisation and appropriation of texts or ideas originating from different lifeworlds, (ii) the process of sifting and sieving or a cultural filtration and fertilisation, and (iii) the concept of returning to the source. I term my reading of Serequeberhan's praxis as an *interpretative actualisation*. This concept somewhat aligns with the philosophical counselling notion of a hermeneutical happening in that both emphasise the dynamic and concretised interpretation of the present situation. However, some noteworthy differences might lead to potential improvements of this philosophical counselling concept.

At the start of *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, Serequeberhan's magnum opus, his intentions are to organically appropriate and indigenise the existentially aware position of Western hermeneutical philosophers, especially the likes of Martin Heidegger (Serequeberhan, 1994:2-4). This moment is incredibly important as it begins to highlight that ideas have provenance,¹⁵ that is to say they have a life of their own, and that they get functionally shaped in and by the place where they are employed (Serequeberhan, 1998:14; 2000:17). Ideas and

¹³ Transcreation is a form of translation that allows for linguistic/literal translation, cultural adaptation/appropriation, and creative interpretations and (re-) creation as the philosopher sees fit (see, e.g., Díaz-Millón & Olvera-Lobo, 2023:347).

¹⁴ Ibuot (2011:219) uses the phrase "cultural resistance".

¹⁵ Bruce Janz (2015:481) uses this terminology, albeit in a different context.

philosophies are not rigid and unchanging. Instead, they are perceived as pliable, malleable, akin to clay. The dynamic disposition of the philosopher who lives their philosophy is emphasised, while the passive adoption of ideas is actively problematised.

However, all ideas and philosophies are not equally beneficial to retain. Through a process of sifting and sieving or a cultural filtration and fertilisation, Serequeberhan¹⁶ maintains the imperative of scrutinising both the past and residues of coloniality, while concurrently fertilising the present and future. In the context of Serequeberhan's philosophical project, anything that might hinder the liberation process will be discarded. The past is revered, yet its value is critically evaluated. Serequeberhan contends that the "real hard work" of decolonising the mind only happens after decolonisation. This might take the form of an archival¹⁷ and archaeological or inventory¹⁸ process through which indigenous ways of living, suppressed and destroyed by colonialism, are disclosed, unveiled, and allowed to flourish. Here again a dynamic and active disposition is advocated, particularly when scrutinising the past and philosophical approaches originating from different lifeworlds, thus avoiding returning to a source locked up in the past or using philosophical approaches and ideas in a rigid manner.

This then speaks of Serequeberhan's use of Cabral's idea of a "return to the source". "Return" here might instantiate the archival or inventory process when the African philosopher, so to speak, "returns" to their indigenous past. However, Serequeberhan highlights that the "source" to which the African philosopher returns is not a type of *arche* hidden in the past to which they cannot return. Instead, the source to which they return is a disposition, that is, they return to the "vigor, vitality (life), and ebullience of African existence", illustrated by the anti-colonial and liberation struggles (Serequeberhan, 1994:126).

The notion of an interpretative actualisation is thus captured by these three movements, emphasising the dynamic and active praxis of continually "listening to" and being aware of the needs of the present, all the while revering the past and organically appropriating and indigenising relevant philosophical approaches. The hermeneutical happening, emphasised in philosophical counselling, lacks this contextual awareness and situatedness, sometimes endorsing a view from nowhere, a value neutrality, or an erroneous objectivity. The counselee's

¹⁶ See especially Serequeberhan (1994:5, 109; 2015:52-53; 2021:38).

¹⁷ Siseko Kumalo (2020; Black Archive Visual Podcast, 2023) launched the Black Archive project, which might be what Serequeberhan had in mind here.

¹⁸ Serequeberhan (1994:23; 2000:55; 2010:36) reading, inter alia, Cabral, highlights the idea of an inventory or intellectual stock taking process.

contextual and situated background is often forgotten, with philosophical counsellors using philosophy in a very decontextualised manner. Serequeberhan's philosophy potentially improves upon this perceived shortcoming by emphasising a disposition that requires a keen sense of contextual awareness.

I now turn to the conversational philosophy of Chimakonam. According to Chimakonam (2015:464; 2018:139-140), conversational thinking emerges from both the methodisation of a specific African understanding of relationship and the "post-debate disillusionment" in which focus returns to phenomenological issues, thus moving beyond meta-philosophical issues. Similar to Serequeberhan, focus is shifted to what can be called *philosophical place*, in which the cultural milieu and context fundamentally and functionally shape to what and how the philosopher responds (Chimakonam, 2015:463-464).

Conversational thinking, thus, endorses a praxis of continual and ongoing conversation, a concept I interpret as sustained through three pivotal ideas, namely, the methodisation of a specific understanding of relationship, arumaristics, and a creative struggle. I briefly discuss these three ideas considering conversational thinking as a disposition or way of life, emphasising what I referred to at the beginning of this talk as collaborative philosophising.

In a conversational framework, "conversation" takes on a nuanced meaning compared to its ordinary usage. For Chimakonam (2017b:15), "conversation" is used to highlight a specific relationship between two conversational partners, *nwa-nsa* and *nwa-nju*, characterised by a critical and sceptical dynamic (Chimakonam, 2015:469; 2017a:121).¹⁹ Conversation in this context transcends the informal exchange of ideas, and it differs from a dialogue where the interaction might conclude with a synthesis of opposing ideas. Relationship thus entails a ...

[...] wilful, creative and critical epistemic experience which two agents known as *nwa-nsa* and *nwa-nju* share with the intention to create new concepts and open up new vistas for thought (Chimakonam, 2017b:15).

These ideas are subsequently turned into a method that continually rejuvenates the conversation.

¹⁹ Chimakonam (2017b:17) sometimes likens these positions to thesis and anti-thesis. However, I refrain from using these labels to avoid evoking the idea of dialectical relationship.

The abovementioned relationship is undergirded by two further ideas, that of arumaristics and a creative struggle. Arumaristics is derived from the Igbo term or idea *arumarụ-ụka*, which can be translated as either “engaging in critical and creative conversation[s]” (Chimakonam, 2017a:120), or “engaging in a relationship of doubt” (Egbai & Chimakonam, 2019:181). In this dynamic, the two conversational partners enter a critical and sceptical relationship, perpetuating a continuous stifling of the conversation’s conclusion or termination (Chimakonam, 2017b:16). The resistance to conclude is based on the notion of a “creative struggle”. Following each critique by *nwa-nju*, *nwa-nsa* or the proponent is compelled to amend his or her position, creatively filling the identified gaps and shortcomings. However, as each position undergoes creative transformation, *nwa-nju* assumes the renewed responsibility of critiquing these novel positions (Chimakonam, 2018:149). Because of this continual refreshment, the conversation never truly ceases.

A particularly interesting idea that follows from this relationship, and which can be beneficial in a philosophical counselling framework, is what proponents of conversational philosophy call a “philosophical village”,²⁰ comprised of individuals identified as “public” or “citizen philosophers”.²¹ I liken this village with a philosophical counselling session, and public or citizen philosophers with philosophical counsellors. This notion holds particular significance considering the radicalisation of Hadot’s idea of practicing philosophy as a way of living. Conversationalism, therefore, can be practiced in a philosophical counselling session, allowing for the dynamic interchange between *nwa-nsa* and *nwa-nju* positions. An authentic encounter with the counselee’s problem(s) and question(s) can be guaranteed as the philosophical counsellor will collaboratively philosophise with the counselee, using her situation as a kind of stepping stone or point of departure for the session. The potential enhancement of the concept of collaborative philosophising becomes evident through conversational thinking, which emphasises the continuous scrutiny of one’s ideas under the critical and sceptical eye of the opponent.

Now that I considered both these praxes as worthy philosophical ways of living, I wish to conclude by briefly mentioning three potential benefits gained from understanding African philosophy as a way of life practiced through philosophical counselling.

²⁰ This term is introduced by Chimakonam (2018:135-136).

²¹ These terms are used by Chimakonam and Egbai (2016:111).

Firstly, when conversational thinking is employed between the philosophical counsellor and the counselee, alternative ways of living might be inspired through especially the creation of new concepts and ideas. Linked with Serequeberhan's notions of a cultural filtration and fertilisation, and the organic appropriation of philosophies emerging from different philosophical places, the counselee can potentially be exposed to more relevant ideas and concepts than those in a discussion where a philosophy is either decontextualised or applied without further philosophising, akin to the dispensing of medicine.²² A hermeneutical happening is positively transformed to an interpretative actualisation by focusing on utilising, appropriating, and developing relevant philosophical approaches and concepts to the counselee's present situation.

This leads to the second benefit, namely, the accentuation of the relational dimension of philosophising. As previously mentioned, there has been discussion in the philosophical counselling discourse regarding the significance of the encounter between the counselee and the philosophical counsellor. However, while emphasising the creative struggle between conversational partners, collaborative philosophising becomes even more crucial for philosophical counselling. The philosophical counsellor is as much shaped by the contributions of the counselee as she is shaped by the philosophies she uses in her practice. Through this interdependent relationship, the philosophical counsellor, like the nomad, shapes the places where she dwells, but she is also shaped by those very dwellings. Achenbach (1997:4), in a philosophical counselling context, notes that this type of knowledge is a kind that "is not only shaped by the one who knows, but which the other way round also shapes [one]. Thus, [this] *knowledge also change the one who knows.*" In an African philosophy context, Bruce Janz (2001:395), who explicitly links this idea with the nomad, states similarly that "this person reproduces the environment at the same time as he or she is produced by it." Through a joint creative struggle, or collaborative philosophising, the counselee and philosophical counsellor are both shaped by philosophy and the very encounter itself.

And the third benefit or implication for philosophical counselling is that African philosophy, especially linked with conversational thinking, somewhat transcends the discussion regarding the most appropriate method for the philosophical counsellor to adopt in their practice. According to Chimakonam (2017a:117), "method is everything" vis-à-vis the way in which

²² See Sivil (2009:207) for a more in-depth discussion regarding the problem of merely dispensing philosophical sound bites.

one philosophises. Employing conversationalism as a method in their practice, the philosophical counsellor does not have to worry whether one method is inherently superior or better suited than another. Instead, it becomes the duty of nwa-nju through collaborative philosophising to identify the shortcomings of nwa-nsa or the proponent's adoption of a particular method or philosophical approach. Through this process, more suitable approaches or methods can be engendered.

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