Philosophy outside the academy: The role of philosophy in people-oriented professions and the prospects for philosophical counseling[1]

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Let me begin by providing the context for my idea of philosophical counseling. When I first encountered philosophy as an undergraduate at the University of Manitoba in the late Sixties, I was one of a multitude that fell in love with philosophy. Many of us who intended doing other things in life, pursuing careers outside the academic discipline of philosophy, nonetheless intended also to continue with philosophy, in one way or another, as an avocation. Some of us hoped to be able to continue philosophizing within the academic discipline, to make a career of it. Of course many departments doubled in size around that time in order to accommodate the increased baby-boomer enrollment, both current and projected. As we all know, this rosy outlook was shortlived. The financial crunch came and philosophers graduating in the Seventies faced drastically reduced career opportunities as academic philosophers.

Hoping but no longer expecting to find academic positions in philosophy, many of my contemporaries stuck it out anyway, just because philosophy was what they loved to do. For most, though, philosophy was just an interim thing, something that would have to be dropped or at least pushed to the background eventually, as they gave in to the overriding demands of the workaday world. But a hopeful few thought there might be alternatives....

To questions like "Philosophy may be fun, but what're you going to do with it?" there's the stock joking response, "Oh, I dunno, open up a little philosophy shop, or maybe join one of the big philosophy corporations." Some, while making such quips at their own expense, nonetheless thought the suggestion had merit, or at least the spirit of it, namely, that there was or could be a role—a payrole, that is—for philosophers outside academia.

This, then, is what "philosophical counseling" largely connotes to me, and I assume others like me, who had little or no expectation of academic careers: we would, if not actually hang up a shingle, at least bill ourselves as philosophers and do paid philosophizing outside the academy. I even recall seeing, back then, a classified newspaper ad offering help in solving philosophical problems.

But what exactly would we be doing in doing philosophy outside the academy? Although words like "advising," "counseling," "consulting," "guid-

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ing," and the like, come naturally to mind and seem appropriate in this regard, I don't think there was anything even close to a clear, agreed upon, properly philosophical conception of such activities. Certainly there was nothing that could properly be called, even wishfully, a philosophical counseling "movement," as there appears to have been in Germany and Holland.[2] At best, what there was was the occasional public relations gesture by philosophical hopefuls, in which outsiders' misconceptions about philosophy were dealt with (no, it's not like religion, not like psychology, etc.), or in which one averred that philosophers, given their training, were just as well or even better equipped to do certain jobs than graduates from other disciplines who had traditionally been hired for them (e.g. than English majors hired for editorial tasks). In this spirit of public relations, I remember it once being suggested that philosophy would get a much better reception in the workaday world if it were renamed "conceptual management and planning."

It was felt, then, (though how widely I cannot say) that philosophy could play some kind of advisory or counseling or consulting role in the workaday world; but these notions were very vague and murky. And they still are, in the circles in which I move. In fact, I think we've come full circle. Recently a young white male graduate student told me that while his prospects in teaching philosophy did not look very good, he thought that philosophical counseling might be an alternative for which his training would also prepare him. Of course he had no real idea of what philosophical counseling was all about; he had merely seen the ad for the First International Conference on Philosophical Counseling and that had triggered his wishful-thinking reflex. The phrase "philosophical counseling" is in the air once again.

Hope springs eternal. The sad fact is that the talk of philosophical counseling (or advising or consulting) back in my day was largely just that—talk. No one from my locale seems to have made a go of it. Could that have been because the idea was inherently problematic to begin with? But before I take on that sort of question, I want to talk about my stint as a welfare worker. That is, I will try to describe how this all too loose conception of a role for philosophy can be realized, for good or ill, in various so-called people-oriented jobs, for which the job of welfare worker can be regarded as all-encompassingly representative.

The welfare department in which I worked was undergoing a period of change when I joined it. This could readily be discerned from client profiles and case histories written up in the files. Many of these had been written up in fine-sounding psychologese, often with Freudian keywords thrown in, all very professional, and seemingly penetrating to the root problems, if taken at their word, but ultimately largely fiction. These reports were after all based on brief visits, a few office interviews, or sometimes just hearsay, and therefore could not help but consist mostly of armchair psychologizing, imaginatively cast in the preferred idiom of the social worker's training.

To be sure, such reports were regarded as somewhat quaint or old-fashioned, but *not* because they were regarded as especially wrongheaded; rather, because the welfare department no longer regarded itself as in the line of business that such detailed diagnostic and prognostic reports were germane to. Now the department's professed job was to process welfare applicants quickly, provide "emergency" relief, and pass the case (i.e. the financial liability) on as quickly as possible to other programs, agencies, or jurisdictions. In short, the welfare department had devolved to a band-aid agency that tended to accept, at least by what was *implicit* in administrative procedures or residual attitudes, that welfare recipients generally have some sort of defect,[3] while pleading lack of resources to do anything about it. So the shift from the old-style client-assessments was more a matter of expediency than a renunciation of their validity. Why bother with in-depth analyses if there aren't the resources to make use of them? At any rate, serious skill-demanding counseling was now being done by more specialized or at least better funded social-service agencies. Given increased case-loads and changed priorities in the welfare department, there was little room for protracted counseling of any sort, let alone counseling that might be deemed philosophical.

How then did my philosophical background fit in? I like to regard this in terms of the internalization of skills. Think of how one might learn to swim or dance. First one makes carefully deliberated strokes in the water or steps on the dance floor. Then there's a point at which the procedures become automated and deliberation just gets in the way. (Someone who still needs to say "left foot, right foot, one-two-three" under his breath hasn't properly learned to dance.)

Well, after years of philosophical training, one develops certain philosophical sensitivities that needn't always involve self-conscious philosophical deliberation in their exercise. Philosophically trained individuals have increased sensitivity to fallacies, evidential weakness, or bad faith; they become better detectors of hypocrisy, cynicism, and rationalization; they are more discerning as to what's possible or plausible. These are, of course, tendencies that are not confined to philosophers, but philosophical training (by and large, though not necessarily or exclusively) is particularly apt for fostering such sensitivities (or shall we say "philosophical reflexes"?). So I can say on reflection that, although I did not do much capital-P Philosophizing (i.e. philosophizing that was self-conscious and articulated in the traditional philosophical manner, never mind dealing with traditional philosophical problems), much of my day-to-day on-the-job judgement was philosophically informed. I had a "take" on situations that came up on the job that had its roots in my philosophical training. Let me catalog a few of the situations that can be regarded as paradigmatic of the utility of philosophy in a welfare department setting:

1 Dealing with the person who has a philosophy

The most obvious kind of situation in which philosophy can be relevant is one in which people just come right out and say "my philosophy of such-and-such is thus-and-so." But even when people do not actually use this form of words, what they say may often be properly treated as being in this spirit. Of course the phrase "a philosophy" requires comment. One of the popular senses of this phrase is that of a fixed body or system of beliefs which one subscribes to, of the sort that is sometimes called a creed or doctrine. This is not how philosophers, at least in the Western tradition, typically regard their discipline; they would relegate philosophy in this sense to some other field, such as history of ideas or religious studies. Another popular sense in which one might be said to have a philosophy is having a certain kind of principled or reasoned approach or outlook, or subscribing to certain general precepts that guide judgement or action. This notion is closer to the kind of thing philosophers consider to be "their thing."

Whether either of these is "real philosophy," or whether one is more of "the real thing" than the other, is beside the point. For, regardless of their inherent status, the beliefs and principles involved do have both mundane and philosophical implications, and the fact that they have been presented, or can be readily construed, as constituting a philosophy allows that they are open to questioning of the sort that philosophers engage in, and issues of coherence and justification become significant.

Persuading, accommodating, reinforcing, compromising with individuals who see their decisions and actions (or whose decisions and actions can be seen) as governed by a philosophy (aka a rationale), can be greatly facilitated for someone with the skills to address the philosophical commitments in these individuals' own terms. Showing an administrator that his judgements, properly construed, on a certain matter don't square with the principles he professes or has implicitly implemented elsewhere, is one example. Persuading an irate taxpayer that certain forms of welfare he rejects "on principle" are neither undeserved nor contrary to his self-interest, is another. And guiding the self-deprecating welfare recipient to a proper assessment of his abilities and responsibilities consonant with his personal or religious convictions is yet another.

2 Conceptual Analysis

It goes without saying that a modern-day welfare department is a bureaucracy, and that bureaucracies thrive on rules and regulations. So there will always be programs or policy directives to interpret, to tease out the implications of complex or unanticipated contingencies, to check for internal and external consistency, to disambiguate, to recommend revision or replacement of, and so on. In all this, the critical skills of the philosopher, perhaps

especially one trained in the analytic tradition, broadly construed, are particularly advantageous.

3 Dealing with eccentricity

There is a story about a couple of philosophers engaged in a heated philosophical exchange who are overheard by a couple of ordinary folk, one of whom remarks to the other, "Those guys aren't crazy, they're just talking philosophy." Philosophers are widely regarded as eccentrics in their own right, and I would claim that the qualities that lead them to be so regarded can be put to good use in dealing with eccentrics of various stripes.

In a welfare department, one is likely to encounter clients who have ended up or remained on welfare because of their eccentricities. Whether or not such eccentricity is irrational or pathological, the bottom line is that many eccentrics don't "fit into society," in ways that have consequences for their personal and financial independence, and affect their ability to interact, to be given a fair hearing, and to be taken seriously. Some eccentricities are clearly psychiatric in nature and I don't want to suggest that philosophy can or should take those sorts of problems head on. But where philosophical training can be of use is in those cases where the eccentric individual comes with a conceptual framework or relatively consistent worldview. What I want to suggest is that a philosopher may be better able to intellectually empathize with such individuals, see things from their point of view, anticipate the appropriate inferences from their assumptions, and so on. In short, to partially enter their "form of life"[4] in a way that facilitates communication and social interaction in the context of welfare agency dealings. Admittedly such rapprochement may not be much more than "playing the game" in the interests of rather immediate "management" goals, but that is often the first step in bringing real help to bear.

4 Fostering collegiality

Just as a philosophical outlook can smooth interaction with eccentrics, it can also help facilitate a sense of common cause in the workplace. Often, in welfare (and other) bureaucracies there are sharp divisions between management, welfare workers, case aids, and clerical staff; in a word, these groups don't even sit together at lunch. But again, a little bit of empathy—respecting different emphases of job-function, recasting one's concerns in the others' terms of reference, accommodating their concerns—acknowledging and appreciating the other groups' forms of life, if you will—can go a long way toward ameliorating the tensions of territoriality and other barriers to cooperation in the workplace.

5) Social action

Finally, welfare workers are often reformers as well as employees. There is room for extramural social advocacy of various kinds, e.g. petitioning the administration on behalf of client groups, helping such groups formulate policies, prepare briefs, and, of course, solicit funds. All the sorts of skills and activities already mentioned would be relevant here: dealing with principled matters in a principled way, clearly expressing and arguing one's positions, empathizing with others so that their concerns and reactions can be correctly gauged, defusing animosity, and so on. For certain kinds of political activity, familiarity with traditional moral, social, and political philosophy is also without a doubt helpful in providing terms of reference, criteria of evaluation, and other devices for effectively packaging one's programs and proposals.

This sampling of situations encountered in the course of my experience as a welfare worker suffices, I think, to make the general case that a background in philosophy is good preparation for people-oriented or public-service positions, the corollary being that philosophers need much better PR in order to make this known to prospective employers. But as already indicated, there need not be anything particularly philosophical happening when philosophy is put to work in this way. Rather than involving philosophizing per se, it may for the most part just involve the relatively unselfconscious use of skills and sensitivities that philosophers generally happen to develop in the course of their schooling, perhaps more so than others generally do in theirs, but which do not seem proprietary to philosophy. So the question that remains is whether philosophy can be put to work in a way that is essentially, or at least distinctively, philosophical. Is there perhaps a robust notion of philosophical counseling that fills the bill?

To some extent this may just be a verbal question of where we choose to draw our lines of demarcation. However, I want to suggest that, in one significant sense, philosophical counseling is not autonomous, and hence is not an alternative occupation for philosophers straight out of school.

Wittgenstein is responsible for the metaphor that takes puzzlement about so-called philosophical problems to be a form of mental disorder and philosophy as the therapy that dissolves these problems by revealing how misunderstanding, largely about language, has led us astray. It is but a short step from this Wittgensteinian conception of philosophy to the idea that the philosopher can act as a counselor/therapist in helping people find their way through the entanglements of everyday personal problems, such as confusion, dissatisfaction, closed-mindedness, and lack of self-awareness. I think this step is a misstep, and I am skeptical of the suggestion that philosophical training, at least as we know it in the world of Anglo-American philosophy, confers any special counseling ability in the relevant sense. Sure, philosophers, like anyone else, can "give counsel." And like anyone else's, their counsel will be informed by their own experience, including their philosophical schooling (and espe-

cially so if a large part of their adult life has been their schooling). But just as cooking meals doesn't make one a cook in an important sense, so giving counsel doesn't make one a counselor. Nor does giving philosophically informed counsel make one a philosophical counselor.

Philosophical training is not like financial training. Other things being equal, those who have taken the relevant commerce or economics courses can provide financial counseling, e.g. helping people to manage an investment portfolio, capitalize a business, or stave off their creditors.

Philosophers too can help people with philosophical matters, e.g. discerning what Kant really meant, writing a term paper on the mind-body problem, or drafting a neo-Maoist manifesto. But, though it may not be (strictly speaking) incorrect to say that someone engaged in such tasks is doing philosophical counseling (instead of, say, tutoring), it would surely be misleading. How about when the help concerns not just abstract philosophical matters, but philosophical matters that address the counseled individual's personal concerns? Would that be philosophical "counseling" in a fitting sense? I think it depends on what the concerns are and where, precisely, the philosophical contribution lies.

Suppose, instead of writing a term paper on the mind-body problem, one were just interested in the question as it pertained to oneself; say one wished to learn the most plausible answer to the question, "Am I a Cartesian soul?" Would a philosopher who helped one address this personal question be a philosophical counselor on that account alone? Or is that sort of personal question still too impersonal as regards the goals of counseling? I would suggest here that, as far as philosophical counseling is concerned, the relevant personal problems cannot be merely philosophical problems one seeks answers to, even if those problems happen to be cast in a personalized idiom. In order for an appropriate notion of philosophical counseling to get a purchase, the philosophical problems must also hook up in some essential way with one's personal real-world problems, so that dealing with the former is seen as a means of dealing with the latter. To put it another way, the philosophical issue must "engage" one's personal life in such a way that how one deals with the issue has consequences for how one acts, perceives, and feels (or how one *should* act et seq.).

Engagement comes in degrees, of course. But I contend that, by and large, people trained in mainstream Anglo-American philosophy are not thereby rendered fit for philosophical counseling as a career alternative. Anglo-American philosophy is just not engaged enough in general for that sort of preparation.[5] Anglo-American philosophy, going by what's being published in the top dozen general philosophy journals, is largely detached from the particular everyday concerns of the ordinary individual. (The same is probably true of most continental philosophy too.)

Anyway, what I maintain is that there is a hiatus between what the typical philosopher has to offer in virtue of his philosophical training and the needs of the typical client in a counseling situation. And this hiatus is one that must be filled by special training and internship in therapeutic and communicational techniques and procedures—empirical and practical knowledge that is not philosophy and is certainly not part of present-day philosophy curricula.

"Who would have thought otherwise?" some might want to ask. Well, if we recall the historical context vis-a-vis which the idea of a philosophical career outside the academy arose for me and my contemporaries, I could say "plenty." There was an optimism in the air (it was the *Sixties*, after all) that with common sense, respect for people, and a bit of native ability, one could pursue one's philosophical interests and at the same time benefit others—just like that. The anti-establishmentarianism of the day decreed that if only you tapped your inner resources properly, the appropriate competences would somehow emerge a priori; current New Ageism seems to say much the same thing. But let all this pass. Another claim made for philosophical counseling is that the problems of the counseled are dealt with through *philosophical means*. So the issue is not only whether auxilliary empirical training is needed to develop counseling techniques and procedures, but also what is philosophical in the exercise of those techniques and procedures.

I will address this question by briefly considering several representative writings on counseling (in English) that speak in one way or another of a connection between philosophy and counseling. None of these, I shall argue, gives us any particular reason for regarding the techniques and procedures employed as distinctively philosophical.

Gerald Corey, in his *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, actually has produced tables of the philosophies, key concepts, and respective goals of what he takes to be the leading contemporary approaches to counseling and therapy (he identifies eight, divided into three groups). These philosophies (etc.) consist of ideas of the nature of persons and aspects of the human condition that are relevant to therapy and the various therapeutic desiderata.[6] I won't elaborate because the point I wish to make is fairly basic. Insofar as these counseling approaches involve philosophy, it turns out its role is that of providing the underlying assumptions, rationale, and terms of reference[7]; philosophy thus serves to individuate, or at least differentiate, the various counseling practices. But the existence of an underlying philosophy does not make counseling philosophical any more than a philosophy of physics makes physics philosophical.

Missing from such discussions of philosophies is a crucial distinction made by Edith Weisskopf-Joelson in her article, "The Role of Philosophy in Five Kinds of Psychotherapeutic Systems." Like Corey, Weisskopf-Joelson catalogs various therapies and organizes them into groups, except that the philosophies she identifies underpin the groups instead of the individual

counseling approaches. The important difference, however, is her distinction between philosophies *as adopted by the therapist* and applied to the client[8] and philosophies *as adopted by the client*, whereby a philosophy's specific features become healing agents for the client (121).

Unless the client is himself philosophically schooled or at least adequately informed, it would seem that the counselor must play a didactic role in the client's adoption of a philosophy. So, in effect, the counselor must put on the hat of a tutor. This indeed is something that philosophical training can be training for. But teaching is not *eo ipso* counseling. Moreover the client must be taught an *appropriate* philosophy (or be led to select such from ones with which he is already familiar). But determining what's appropriate, what applies best to the client's situation, does not seem to be something that training in philosophy as we now know it especially suits one for.

In his contribution on "Philosophy and Counseling" in *Counseling: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Campbell Purton highlights the division in philosophy "between those approaches which set out to establish a body of knowledge about the world, and the approaches which probe, question, and draw out our confusions" (153), and he takes Wittgenstein as exemplar of the latter approach. Wittgenstein said that "philosophy unties the knots in our thinking" and he also regarded these knots as pathological symptoms of "intellectual disease," and the philosophical methods required for the untying as "therapies." Thus, *chez* Wittgenstein, to properly philosophize is already, metaphorically, to provide counsel or therapy to oneself or others. Presumably, then, if one expands the domain of "knots in our thinking" to include not just strictly philosophical puzzles but also the practical quandaries of everyday life, analogous methods will serve to untie these knots too, and these methods can justifiably be termed "philosophical counseling." (This is my rationalization of the label, not Purton's.)

Waxing somewhat more psychological, Purton talks of disturbances in our emotional life arising from distortions in our cognitive perceptions and the task of the counseling process as bringing about changes in one's habitual ways of seeing things, one's fixed patterns of perception. And arguably one of the points of philosophizing is to bring about such changes. So again, could not counseling that brings about such changes rightly be called "philosophical"? Unfortunately, Purton himself undermines that conclusion:

> The restructuring of perception is bound to involve periods of confusion and feelings of being adrift: the pieces of the puzzle have to be thrown in the air before they can come down in a new pattern. Appeals to logic and rationality are likely to be of limited value in this process, since logic works with categories and rules of inference which have already been laid down. In the restructuring of perception, new categories and rules are gestating, so that at this stage there is nothing for logic to get to grips with. (163)

So we see that, for Purton, the connection between philosophical methods and counseling remains at the level of broad guiding metaphor. (But then he doesn't claim the label "philosophical counselor" for himself either.) Put another way, the correspondence between counseling and philosophical method is merely functional. In each case, the initial state (knotted) and the desired outcome (untied) are, let's agree, analogous enough, but, in the case of counseling, the guiding metaphor only connects them with a black box. And it is plain that what Purton is willing to put into the black box can be the very antithesis of philosophical method. So, although Purton's view of counseling is in several senses very philosophically informed, overall it is not philosophical counseling in a sense that serves to distinguish it in the way we want.

I slipped the word "overall" into the last sentence because, clearly, Purton's black box would contain philosophical methods sometimes. If we like, we can say that when the occasion calls for it and philosophical methods are employed, Purton's philosophy-inspired counseling does lapse into true philosophical counseling. But surely this can be said of any traditional counseling approach. Moreover, the "when the occasion calls for it" qualification involves a judgement call that is not a philosophical matter.

What in the world is going on in Germany and Holland then, with all this to-do about a "new" philosophical counseling movement? I haven't had access to the seminal writings of this movement,[9] but my guess is that, whatever the hype and grandiose claims about philosophical counseling might be, it all comes down to matters of emphasis, attitude, and division of labor. Philosophical methods and ideas have always been there in the practice of counseling of whatever traditional approach. But they have played a secondary role, largely unrecognized and therefore largely unacknowledged. So in response it is being urged that we become more self-conscious about these philosophical methods or ideas and cultivate them for the betterment of counseling. In addition, there seems to be the reasonable and refreshingly unpaternalistic attitude that most people (or at least significant numbers of them) are basically sane, free of psychological pathologies, and capable of engaging in and benefiting from reasoning. This shift in emphasis and attitude leads to the call for a division of labor: it is maintained that there is a place for a counseling approach that consists largely of the implementation of philosophical methods, alongside other methods. This is what I suspect is going on, and I applaud it.

What I am rejecting, basically, is the idea that philosophical training (as we know it) is training enough for philosophical counseling and that philosophical counselin,g *qua* its being philosophical, is adequate to the tasks of counseling. What I am urging instead is an "under-laborer" view of the implementation of philosophical methods and hence of philosophical counseling. Just as the counselor/therapist who occasionally employs philosophical methods within another counseling approach must have training and experience to

enable judgements of when these are appropriate, so too the counselor who primarily uses philosophical methods must recognize when these are inappropriate and resort to other methods or refer the client elsewhere. In other words, a philosophical counselor must have some psychological training beyond his training in the implementation of philosophical methods. And I would add that even the implementation of philosophical methods in counseling is a special skill that requires empirical training beyond typical philosophical training.

"The unexamined life is not worth living," said Socrates. Maybe so. But ignorance may still be bliss, and alienation may still be the plight of the aware. The desiderata of philosophy can diverge from the desiderata of counseling. The examined life may not be worth living either.

Endnotes

[1] A truncated version of this paper was read on July 10, 1994 at the First International Conference on Philosophical Counseling, Centre for Applied Ethics, University of British Columbia.

[2] On the emergence of the movement in Holland, see Ida Jongsma, "The Philosophical Counseling Movement in Holland: History and Open Questions".

[3] I don't mean to suggest that most of the personnel weren't by-and-large helpful, understanding, and sympathetic. However, from the institution's perspective, the client was always the one with the problem.

[4] For a philosophical deployment of this phrase, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, which is also the source for the other allusions to Wittgenstein that follow.

[5] I am prepared to allow that training and research programs in ethics may in some sense belie this generalization, though I do not think this undermines the conclusion I wish to draw about extra-philosophical training. At any rate, casuistry or ethical counseling is in a class by itself.

[6] In a similar spirit, if not with the same thoroughness and precision, Dugald S. Arbuckle, in *Counseling: Philosophy Theory, and Practice*, discusses what he calls the philosophical base of counseling, making reference to religious, scientific, and existential ideas of and about counseling.

[7] Thus the fact that so-called existential psychotherapies explicitly apply concepts directly appropriated from existential philosophy, does not in and of itself make those therapies philosophical, or at least not in the right sense. Existential psychotherapy is a product of the 1950s, whereas philosophical counseling is supposed to be a new (= early 1980s) movement.

[8] I have replaced Weisskopf-Joelson's term "patient" with the more neutral "client."

[9] At present, no monographs on philosophical counseling are available in English. Two works held to be seminal are G.B. Achenbach, *Philosophische Praxis* (Köln: Jürgen Dinter, 1987) and A. Hoogendijk, *Spreekuur bij een Filosoof* (Utrecht: Veen, 1988).

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