Philosophical Counselling: an Introduction [i]   **Tim LeBon**

Philosophical counselling uses philosophical dialogue to help individuals reflect on their lives and deal with non-pathological "problems in living" such as relationship issues and career dilemmas. It may perhaps most accurately be classified as a branch of both applied philosophy and counselling; what distinguishes it from other branches of applied philosophy is that it involves philosophising about concrete personal issues; what separates it from other approaches of counselling is the extent to which it embraces both a philosophical attitude and philosophical methods and insights. This introduction is intended to provide a brief survey of the field including its history, aims, assumptions, methods, differences from other forms of counselling and a short case study.

1) History [1]

Philosophical counselling may be a recent development (Gerd Achenbach opened the first practice in 1981) but the idea that philosophy can help with living goes back at least as far as Socrates, who arguably practised a type of philosophical counselling in the Greek marketplace (LeBon, this volume). The practical application of philosophy through "spiritual exercises" continued in Greece and Rome through the Stoics and Epicurians, amongst others, who practised "philosophy as a way of life" (Hadot, 1995). The rise of Christianity saw a sharp decline in philosophy's influence in dealing with personal issues until relatively recently, when developments in the worlds of therapy and philosophy created a more conducive climate. Psychoanalysis established the non-medical treatment of personal predicaments as a socially established practice; Carl Rogers took this a stage further by eschewing the medical model altogether and popularised "counselling" as a safe place where people could work out their own solutions to problems. Such therapists as Carl Jung had long recognised the philosophical nature of many of their patients' problems[2], so at a time when academic philosophers were showing an increased interest in areas of applied philosophy (such as debates about population and euthanasia) it was perhaps inevitable that philosophers would return to their Socratic roots and become directly involved in helping individuals to think about their lives.

Achenbach's pioneering work in Germany was soon followed by practitioners like Ad Hoogendijk, Ida Jongsma, Will Heutz and Dries Boele in Holland and Shlomit Schuster in Israel. National organisations soon sprouted up, but it was more than ten years before practical philosophers from all over the world came together in the First International Conference in Canada in 1994, co-organised by Ran Lahav and Lou Marinoff, both of whom were to go on to play large parts in popularising philosophical counselling in the English-speaking world. Since then there have been regular international conferences (Holland 1996, United States 1997, Germany 1998 and United Kingdom 1999), which have brought together the rising number of practitioners from increasingly wide areas of the world.

A key moment for the English-speaking world came in 1995 with the appearance of the first collected set of papers in English on philosophical counselling published as "*Essays on Philosophical Counselling*" (edited by Ran Lahav and Maria van Tillmans). There has followed a steady increase in papers dealing with philosophical counselling in such journals as the *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* (edited by Elliot Cohen, himself an influential figure in the early history of philosophical counselling in America).

In the United Kingdom, Karin Murris founded the Society of Consultant Philosophers (SCP) in 1996, and from the start drew together the disciplines of philosophical counselling, philosophy with children and socratic dialogue, initially with the help of her Dutch colleagues in the VFP. Although philosophically-inspired approaches to counselling such as existential counselling had previously flourished it was not until the inception of the SCP that the UK had its own organisation, journal (*Practical Philosophy*) and training programme for philosophical counsellors.

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[1] See the articles by Jongsma (1995), Raabe (1999) and Schuster (1997a) for further information on the history of philosophical counselling

[2] Jung said "about a third of my cases are not suffering from any clinically definable neurosis but from the senselessness and aimlessness of their lives" (Jung, 1983)

2)Aims and scope of Philosophical Counselling

The philosophical counselling literature reveals four main, overlapping, categories of non-pathological "problems in living" which are within the domain of philosophical counselling
- Decision-making dilemmas, including career choices and ethical dilemmas (Boele, 1995, Marinoff, 1995, Lahav, 1993)
- Relationship problems (Cohen,1995, Lahav, 1998)
- Emotional issues, including depression, anxiety and the lack of self-confidence (Cohen,1995, Schuster, 1997b, 1998, Mijuskovic, 1995, Lahav, 1995)
- Difficulties regarding meaning and/or direction and in life (Lahav,1993, Mijuskovic, 1995)

Whilst it might appear that ethical problems, for example, are a more natural candidate for philosophical counselling than depression, there is a strong argument that emotional problems often have a philosophical rather than physiological or psychological root and in these cases philosophical dialogue is more appropriate than medication or psychotherapy. (see *Plato not Prozac !* Marinoff, 1999). For example, some instances of depression may be better understood as meaning crises and hence best dealt with by philosophers (Segal, 1995). Whilst some counsellors point out the benefits of philosophical counselling in terms of problem resolution (Marinoff, 1998) others, such as Gerd Achenbach, stress that reflection is a worthwhile end in itself, regardless of other outcomes. Certainly there is also a powerful case for philosophical counselling presenting itself more positively as a path towards "the examined life" *as well as* a way of solving problems, or to put it another way, to emphasise that it serves educative as well as therapeutic ends.

3) Theoretical Assumptions

Surprisingly, the theoretical assumptions of philosophical counselling have seldom been made explicit. Whilst each practitioner undoubtedly has his or her own theoretical model, the following three assumptions concerning the nature of problems, people and philosophical dialogue are posited as presuppositions of philosophical counselling in general.

Assumption 1) Many "problems in living" have a latent philosophical component.
Philosophical counselling requires that the problems it deals with have a significant (if hidden) philosophical dimension, and are not merely factual or technical questions. For example, most career dilemmas can also be viewed as problems about what matters in life. Note that no assumption is being made here regarding the causation of problems.

Assumption 2) Most people are capable of fruitful philosophical dialogue
This assumption denies the elitist claim that only the few, possessing a philosophical aptitude and skills, can benefit from philosophy. Lou Marinoff sums up the philosophical counsellor's position nicely when he says "The truth about philosophy (and a well-guarded secret it is) is that most people can do it" (Marinoff, 1999). There is however some dispute over whether clients can be expected to pick up philosophical skills automatically or whether some element of teaching is required for lasting benefits to accrue (Raabe, 1998).

Assumption 3) Philosophical dialogue can help people
Philosophical counselling would be an ineffectual activity if it led merely to intellectual insight and made no difference to how people lived. Although it does not need to make the strong claim that "reason" *alone* is powerful, philosophical counselling does require that philosophical dialogue can make a significant difference to how people act.

Beyond these basic assumptions, philosophical counselling is a broad church in that it encompasses most conceivable philosophical positions, taking inspiration from continental philosophy (Segal, 1995), analytic philosophy (Lahav, 1995) and Eastern philosophy (Fleming, 1997). Neither can claims that it presupposes a post-modern or relativist position be substantiated (made by Scruton,

1997 and Shibles, 1998). Philosophical counselling involves "philosophical reflection, argumentation and analysis" (Lahav,1995), not merely approval of the client's existing views.[3]

4) The methods of Philosophical Counselling

If philosophical counselling is a hybrid of applied philosophy and counselling, it might be supposed that philosophical counselling would take methods from both philosophy and counselling. In this section we will consider whether this is actually the case.

a)The Philosophical Methods of Philosophical Counselling

In general, philosophical counsellors use similar methods to academic philosophers, except that they apply them to a client's narrative about a concrete issue in his or her life, rather than a written text or abstract problem. Lahav (1995) has influentially suggested that all philosophical counselling involves "worldview interpretation". By a "worldview" is meant someone's philosophy of life; worldview interpretation refers to the process of uncovering worldviews, reflecting on them, and applying them to the problem at hand. In order to do this perhaps the most important *philosophical* methods are conceptual analysis, critical thinking (Hoogendijk 1995), importing philosophical ideas into sessions (Lahav, 1998) , thought experiments and phenomenology.

1. Conceptual analysis
As in academic philosophy, conceptual analysis involves a careful investigation of language and usage including searching for definitions and drawing distinctions. In philosophical counselling, concepts central to both the problem itself and the client's worldview are subject to analysis. For example, Ran Lahav (1993) helped a client who was unable to choose between alternative directions in life by examining the concepts of choice and justification.

2. Critical thinking and the use of informal logic
Presuppositions of the client are examined and fallacies or inconsistencies detected in their thinking. Eliot Cohen, whose work is closely associated with related techniques, describes a client of his whose anxiety about buying a car was relieved once the supposition "All car dealers are slimeballs" had been exposed as an unjustified stereotype (Cohen, 1995). To the extent that one would anticipate clients to be rather more prone to these fallacies than academic philosophers, one would expect critical thinking to be relatively more important in philosophical counselling.

3. Importing philosophical ideas into sessions
Philosophical ideas can be introduced into sessions with the intention of enlarging the perspective of the client and, possibly, pointing them towards texts they might wish to consider reading. For example, Shlomit Schuster (1997b) describes how she helped a man come to terms with the death of his wife by introducing Spinoza's ethics and the view of the wise person as "not occupying himself with death but with life."[4]

4. Thought experiments
One particularly fruitful philosophical method used in philosophical counselling is the "thought experiment", which Sorenson defines as "any experiment which does not need to be actually executed to be effective" (Sorenson,1992). In philosophical counselling thought experiments serve two main purposes - to discover what someone really thinks (their worldview), and to test it out. An example of the former use is what Ad Hoogendijk calls "utopian thinking" (Hoogendijk, 1995). He asks clients to complete a "life design" which asks them to design their life in five or ten year intervals until they are

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[3] Although some philosophical counsellors might not be beyond reproach regarding relativism - see Jopling (1996) for an interesting discussion.

[4] See Lahav (1998) and du Plock (1999) for differing opinions on the value of importing philosophical ideas into sessions

eighty, describing their ideal relationships, location and activities. Thought experiments can also be used to test clients' ideas - for example if someone says that happiness is their main ideal they could be asked to consider Nozick's experience machine which gives them happiness but little else - which may lead them to reconsider their view. (Nozick, 1974)

5. Phenomenology
Derived from the philosophy of Husserl, phenomenology can be defined as "a philosophy arguing that events and objects are to be understood in terms of our immediate experience of them as they appear to us" (Feltham & Dryden, 1993). Phenomenology has been extremely influential in Rogerian and existential forms of counselling, where close attention is paid to the client's subjective experience and meanings. In philosophical counselling phenomenological enquiry can likewise be used to uncover the client's worldview and way of being-in-the-world, as well as helping clarify the personal meanings of important concepts. For example, someone who wanted to increase the amount of meaning in there life could usefully be asked to think of and describe a moment in their life when there was meaning, to help identify their criteria for meaning.

The above list is far from exhaustive; indeed the whole of philosophy serves as a resource for the philosophical counsellor. Not all philosophical counsellors are as explicit as Hoogendijk, Cohen and Lahav about their methodology; Achenbach has famously called his own way of working a "method-beyond-method". This is most plausibly interpreted not as a rejection of any of the above methods so much as a desire to emphasise other, non-methodological, aspects of philosophising (see section 4, below)

b) Non-philosophical skills and knowledge required in philosophical counselling
The question of which non-philosophical skills and knowledge are required by the philosophical counsellor is one of the most contentious in philosophical counselling. Those who believe that philosophical skills are not sufficient argue that philosophical counsellors need to be able to select appropriate clients, create a therapeutic relationship, and be skilled at all aspects of communication, including the non-verbal. Paden suggests that philosophical counsellors should have sufficient knowledge of psycho-pathology to be aware when to refer on cases unsuitable for philosophical counselling (Paden, 1998). He also argues that, "the counsellor must use .. techniques to create a therapeutic relationship within which philosophical analysis can proceed" and suggests that the creation of a Rogerian, supportive environment would be beneficial. Finally Anette Prins (1997) has suggested that philosophical counsellors might benefit from "communication training" which is part of routine training not just for counsellors but for managers, interviewers etc so that they would be aware of various levels of listening, ways of observing (including body language) and types of questions. Others point to the unique client base and goals of philosophical counselling, and emphasise that it is an alternative to, not a form of, therapy. (Schuster, 1997a). On a similar note Achenbach proposes that the relationship between philosophical counselling and psychotherapy is one of one of competition rather than co-operation (Achenbach, 1995). He agrees with Schuster that there is no need for philosophical counsellors to receive training in (non-philosophical) counselling, and suggests that in its place they need a good general knowledge, including psychology (Schuster,1997a). A promising way out of this impasse is to note that the dispute is partly philosophical, concerning the nature of philosophical counselling, and partly empirical, regarding the outcome of using (or not using) various skills or knowledge from other disciplines. Perhaps both camps would be satisfied if philosophical counselling training included each trainee giving an account of their selection criteria, how they establish a working relationship and how and why they use, or do not use, communications skills, basing this not only on their theoretical model of philosophical counselling but also empirical material drawn from their own casework.

5) What is philosophical about philosophical counselling ?

Since philosophical counselling shares both some practical features (e.g. typically weekly sessions, privacy, payment of a fee) and (arguably) some methods with other forms of counselling it is important to emphasise what it is that makes philosophical counselling philosophical. It is proposed

that the criteria for something being philosophical, be it a philosophical counselling session or a discussion are its *methods*, *subject-matter* and *the attitude of participants*. Philosophising involves all three elements - a philosophical attitude is necessary for it to be philosophising at all, the content matter ensures one is philosophising usefully (it isn't a purely factual or technical question), and the skilled use of appropriate methods helps one philosophise well.

(a) Philosophical Methods
We have already seen that philosophical counsellors employ the standard methods of philosophy like conceptual analysis and critical thinking in their work. The *variety* of methods used in philosophical counselling is *one* of the distinguishing characteristics between philosophical counselling and existential counselling and R.E.B.T (see section 5).The use of additional non-philosophical methods need not dilute the philosophical nature of philosophical counselling, particularly if Paden's suggestion that they are a necessary prerequisite of the effectiveness of philosophical methods is accepted (Paden, 1998).

(b) Engaging with philosophy as a subject matter during philosophical counselling
Philosophy considered as a body of ideas enters into counselling sessions through both considering the client's worldview and importing philosophical ideas into sessions. The philosophical nature of "worldviews" is made even stronger if one accepts Eckhart Ruschmann's claim that there is a direct correspondence between a worldview and each of the branches of philosophy e.g. ethics, metaphysics and the philosophy of mind. (Ruschmann, 1998).If a worldview consists of the sum of a person's views about the nature of the good life, whether we have free will, whether God exists and the other questions of philosophy, then considering worldviews will inevitable take the sessions into philosophical territory.

(c) The philosophical attitude of counsellor and client
The originator of philosophical counselling, Gerd Achenbach, stresses this aspect of philosophical counselling. "Philosophical counselling is the culture of questions, not of desired solutions and .. decisions". (Achenbach, 1987). As with the Cartesian method of doubt, everything is brought into question with the purpose of building more solid foundations; in philosophical counselling these are foundations for the client's life rather than knowledge *per se.* Robertson (1998) goes further and argues that the philosophical counsellor must match the client in entering into the philosophical spirit "Philosophical counselling must take a critical stance on everything, including itself." Practitioners like Lahav and Marinoff would probably want to balance this scepticism with pragmatism, reminding us that helping clients might well involve finding solutions too. However both pragmatists and sceptics alike would agree that the client's and counsellor's philosophical attitude is an integral part of philosophical counselling.

Some of the theoretical disagreements within philosophical counselling can best be understood as differences over which of these three faces of philosophy are emphasised - Achenbach stresses its questioning attitude, Cohen highlights methodology whilst Marinoff tends to place more weight on the subject matter of philosophy. It is likely that, at its best, philosophising, and philosophical counselling, involves a good measure of all three.

6) Differences between philosophical and psychological counselling

Philosophical counsellors do not diagnose clients as being mentally ill, nor do they have a normative standard of mental health, or inquire into childhood experiences in great depth, or try to apply the "medical model". Whilst these and similar differences have repeatedly been put forward as distinguishing differences between philosophical and psychological counselling (e.g. Mijuskovic, 1995), they separate philosophical counselling from clinical psychology, psychoanalysis and psychiatry more than they do from psychological counselling. Both Rogerian and existential counsellors share opposition to all the practices listed above with philosophical counsellors. The real difference between philosophical and other forms of counselling is actually more obvious;

philosophical counselling is more philosophical, and it is more philosophical in its methods, subject-matter and attitude as described above. It is its philosophical nature that distinguishes it from the more philosophical forms of therapy such as Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (R.E.B.T) and existential counselling.

a)Philosophical Counselling and R.E.B.T
R.E.B.T is "based on the view that human beings appear to have an innate tendency to think and act irrationally" (Walen, DiGiuseppem & Wessler,1980) and has a range of techniques aimed at correcting this tendency. R.E.B.T. is certainly philosophical in so far as it uses philosophical methods such as critical thinking, but, is arguably counter-philosophical in attitude by assuming that happiness and rationality are worthwhile ends, taking for granted a particular theory of mind-body interaction and the emotions and not allowing them to be challenged in therapy.(Robertson, 1998).

b)Philosophical Counselling and Existential Counselling
Existential Counselling is "an approach to counselling informed by writers from the philosophical perspective of phenomenology and existentialism" [5]
(Feltham & Dryden, 1993). Like R.E.B.T it is philosophical in its method, in this case phenomenology, and it is also philosophical in terms of its presuppositions - namely those of existential philosophy (for example about the extent to which we have free will, and the desirability of authenticity). But there is a difference between basing counselling on philosophical rather than psychological theories and actually philosophising in sessions, which involves, as argued above, foregrounding the client's philosophy of life, and using a variety of philosophical methods with an awareness that they might not be beyond criticism themselves. [6]

To the extent that other forms of counselling are philosophical, it is likely that they could benefit from a philosophical treatment (e.g. Cohen's work in making R.E.B.T more sophisticated in its philosophical methodology (Cohen, 1995)). It would of however be fallacious to argue from the fact that philosophical counselling is more thoroughly philosophical than R.E.B.T or existential counselling to the claim that it is *better*; which would require much more evidence relating to the benefits of philosophical counselling than is currently available.

7) How philosophical counselling works in practice - A short case study

How the elements of philosophical counselling fit together in practice is best seen in the light of a case study. Lisa, aged 35, wanted philosophical counselling to help her think about a career change. Her current work was unsatisfactory because it was " a means to an end rather than a passion....It takes up so much of my time and I resent that".
Over a period of six e-mail counselling sessions a number of issues were tackled in parallel, including the nature of time, the good life, and the conceptual difference between a job and a career. In this brief description of the case I will focus on just one element our work, the nature of passion. Lisa had no problem being passionate about things, her problem was quite the reverse - there were too many things she was passionate about. It soon emerged that a major insight would be gained if she could decide which passions were "real" and which illusory. Philosophical reflection on this issue involved a detailed phenomenological enquiry into past examples of passions (real and illusory) in her life to try to detect the criteria for a passion being real. It transpired that "illusory" passions were those where the passion did not last. This appeared to be because the object of her passion did not have the features she imagined it might have. Relating this to her work issue, Lisa concluded that she should not only feel passionate about a potential job now; she would also need to be more aware of what features excited her, and to check whether the jobs really had these features. The next stage was to use

[5] Good introductions to existential therapy can be found in van-deurzen Smith(1988) , Strasser & Strasser(1997) and Cohn (1997). Spinelli (1997) contains a set of case studies.
[6] See Lahav(1998) and du Plock (1999) for a discussion of some of these issues

a combination of utopian thinking ("describe your ideal job") and a review of past jobs to determine the requirements of a job from *her* point of view -which, if met, would also be a list of necessary and sufficient conditions for her being and remaining passionate about her job. Finally, she ranked the jobs she was considering in terms of how they met these requirements, this last activity involving further information-gathering on her part. Following our sessions Lisa understood why her current job did not provide passion in her life, and felt more justified in making a switch. In her own words, philosophical counselling had provided "an avenue for me to sound out my thought processes."

This case illustrates a number of the features of philosophical counselling already described; some relevant aspects of her worldview (particularly her view of the good life) were reflected upon as were some key concepts (in this case that of a passion) with a view to helping her apply these to her problem (a career change). Whilst traditional careers counselling may have helped Lisa be aware of her aptitudes and opportunities, it may well have paid insufficient attention to her personal values and worldview and possibly even pre-determined the answer towards conventional paths.

Conclusion and future directions

From this brief introduction it is hoped that the progress and potential of philosophical counselling is apparent. In the space of under twenty years it has grown from nothing into a distinctive discipline offering people new ways of approaching personal issues and helping them philosophise usefully and well about their life. Future developments will inevitably conclude further debate about the training and certification of counsellors and the relationship between philosophical counselling and psychotherapy. Important as these issues are, my personal hope is that other theoretical and practical aspects of counselling are not ignored. In particular philosophical counselling would benefit from more attention being paid both to the theoretical assumptions of philosophical counselling, including those listed in section 3 above, and detailed consideration of what actually takes place in sessions, possibly through the publication of in-depth case studies. In this way both the benefits and limitations of philosophical counselling could be better understood so that the discipline can progress even further.

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[i] First published in *Thinking Through Dialogue: Essays on Philosophy in Practice*

Curnow.T (ed) 1999