

## PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONING IN NARRATIVE COUNSELING

### *Beyond psychologism in philosophical counseling*<sup>1</sup>

#### *Introduction to the Masterclass*

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*In this Masterclass, we will explore the possibility of avoiding psychologism in philosophical counseling. In this introductory paper, philosophical counseling is recognized as a post-Modern phenomenon. Specific is its ignorance of both the phenomenological and linguistic self-criticism of Modern philosophy, as achieved in the years 1900-1950, and the alternatives of the french neo-Nietzschean philosophers in the years 1950-1980.*

*Philosophical counseling had to pay this 'negligence' with longing for a new identity, which was found in an ambiguous relationship towards psychology and psychotherapy. It linked a denunciation of scientific psychology and therapy to a mimicry of the psychotherapeutic setting. And it linked a positivistic and personalistic problem-solving attitude to philosophical eclecticism.*

*To overcome this a-historic approach of philosophical counseling, we reap the rewards of phenomenological and linguistic self-reflection, and go on where neo-Nietzschean philosophers finished.*

*At last, we distinguish some alternative ways of setting up this Masterclass.*

Keywords: Modern philosophy, post-Modern philosophy, philosophical counseling, philosophical questioning, narrative counseling, psychologism.

#### **The crisis of Western philosophy**

Philosophical counseling, as developed in the 1980's en 1990's, is a post-Modern phenomenon. It came on in a time that Modern philosophy had lost one's way.

The explosive growth of physical and social sciences in the 19th and 20th centuries robbed philosophy of exclusive rights concerning ontology, epistemology, logic, and ethics. Statistically and empirically controlled drawing up and testing of hypotheses became the new acknowledged standard of true and applicable knowledge of reality ('ontology'). Epistemology and formal logic separated from the systems of Modern philosophy, and became, as research and legitimation of the foundations of science, part of scientific industry. Ethics became applied ethics in the contexts of medical and political practices.

Modern philosophy remained in crisis. Husserl and Wittgenstein draw the conclusions from this crisis; the first in the line of Western metaphysics, the second in the line of modern logic. In both cases, Modern philosophy's practice of speculative, generalizing and reductionist presumptions and universally valid knowledge lost its grounds. And in both cases, method, not theory, was the answer; phenomenology and language game analysis respectively. Heidegger continued Husserl's reflections, and so did, in his wake, Levinas and Derrida. Wittgenstein's critical investigations of Western philosophy found no followers; this kind of research watered down to formal linguistic analysis of all kinds of concepts.

In the years of post-War cultural and social upheavals, from the 1950's, french Nietzschean thinkers explored alternative ways out of the swamps and dead ends of Modern philosophy's crisis. Here, thinking the Identity of the Subject was criticized, and new ways of thinking the 'not identical', 'organic' body, interwoven into networks, were developed (Deleuze; Foucault).

After the creative period of these Nietzschean philosophers, about 1980, some Western students of philosophy looked for new ways to find a living as a philosopher. They ignored the dilemmatic social and cultural situation of Western philosophy, - i.e. *either* productive science oriented philosophy *or* marginalized metaphysics, - and pretended to be able to re-invent so-called 'Socratic dialogue' from scratch. The price that they had to pay for this frivolity was an ambiguous genuflection to psychology and psychotherapy. While presenting itself as the counterpart and proper alternative to psychology and psychotherapy, philosophical counseling copied their client setting and therapeutical targets. Only the practice of quoting philosophers from all Western and non-Western history reminded of the philosophical heritage. Doing so, these philosophical counselors contributed to the contemporary fashion of individualism and Self-development, including the use of pseudo-psychological categories and diagnoses.

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## Psychologism in philosophical counseling

Personalistic forms of psychology are rather popular in nowadays consumers' paradise. A human being is considered to be 'homo psychologicus', i.e., an individual with a 'unique', quasi independent inner life of enclosed emotions, feelings, thoughts, dreams. The pretension is, that the assumed inner life can be observed, analyzed, defined and changed. The condition of an individual's inner life can be measured as healthy (normal, desired) or sick (abnormal, undesirable). An undesirable condition can be cured, i.e., changed into a desired condition. The diagnosis and the treatment are based upon the supposition, that the inner life of all human beings can be measured and understood in general terms of universally valid theories, of which each individual is an occurrence.

Most philosophical counselors use that same process. The only difference is, that their analytic and methodical jargon is not entirely derived from psychology, but also from philosophy (like existentialism, heuristic philosophy, ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, or non-Western sources of 'sage wisdom'). Actually, it is mostly this additional philosophical jargon that legitimates the adjective 'philosophical'. And when they do not use psychological jargon, they still follow the process of individualization and isolation of the inner life. This might be just an aspect of the inner life, as, e.g., thinking thoughts.

Part of the copied process, is the consultation setting. The place is the consultation room; the scene is that of two talking persons sitting in chairs and facing each other. The client's words are the world of diagnosis and treatment. Here, psychology or philosophy is the treatment of the client's text. (Non-verbal language is treated as understandable text as well.) All happens in the client's head; his emotions, feelings, desires, inclinations, etc., are present as the client's words.

The mind is taken as a kind of box that exists on itself, and that can be approached, diagnosed and treated on itself in the consulting room. When the client is to do some homework, then this homework is also 'head-work', 'mind work', in the mind box.

So, the client's mind is isolated from the mind's bodily and situational contexts. And situational context is social, cultural, economic and political context, at a macro as well as a micro level. At best, there is some talk about the context, but then this is merely text about context, in the client's mind box. Here, therapeutic practice is mind practice.

By doing so, philosophical counseling ignores the 20th century philosophical critics of individual Identity and abstracted Mind.

## Philosophical dialogue on existential situations

So, when we want to develop a style of philosophical counseling that acknowledges the critical insights of 20th century philosophy (both from phenomenology, linguistic analysis, and the french 'difference'-thinking), we have to avoid the pitfalls of psychologism and to change our attitude, intentions and methods.

Here, I use the expression 'existential experiences and situations', meaning those experiences that affect a person's orientation in life, and intervene into his or her way of handling life's challenges and crises. In an existential situation, you are overwhelmed by such an experience; the world, at least your world, as you experience it, is no longer the world you used to live in.

### Things to avoid in philosophical dialogues:

- Focussing on psychological phenomena like emotion, feeling, and 'psychological problem' (depression etc), or on mental phenomena like 'spirit', 'thoughts', 'logic', etc.
- Looking for the guest's 'proper Self', 'proper Desires', 'proper I', 'best competences', 'virtues', etc.
- Sticking in words, definitions, concepts, thus isolating the guest's thinking from his/her living contexts outside the consulting room.
- Understanding the interpretation of the guest's story as the counselor's competency.

### Things to do in philosophical dialogues:

- Observe emotions, feelings and 'psychological problems' as existential experiences, i.e., as 'non-identical', situational phenomena which are relations in social networks.
- Distinguish between the 'abstract' narrative situation of the philosophical dialogue, and the 'concrete' real situations of the guest's every day life (De Haas 2011; Lindseth 2010).
- Ask for the guest's own real situations, where his/her existential experiences occur.
- Encourage the guest to describe his/her emotions, feelings, doubts, phantasies, etc., in terms of his/her situations, i.e. relations, circumstances, social networks, 'micro-politics'.
- Support your guest to relate freely to his/her experiences of and involvement in his/her situations (here, 'free' means free from judgement, opinions, objectives).

- Draw the guest's attention to his/her responsibilities in the situations he or she describes.

### Structure of the dialogue:

1. The subject of the dialogue is the guest (client, customer).
2. The object of the dialogue are the guest's existential experiences and situations.
3. The philosopher's role is to support the guest's efforts to clear his/her mind towards his/her situated existential experiences and responsibilities.
4. The difference between narrative situation and existential situation refers the dialogue to the guest's daily life situations 'out there'.
5. Considered from our consciousness, experience is our link with reality. Considered from our presence in the world, experience expresses and constitutes the way we are present in the world. In narrative situations like philosophical dialogues, describing and exploring experiences is the way to relate to our real life situations.
6. The guest's real situations to philosophize, are his/her daily life situations where he or she experiences wondering, questioning, puzzling, troubling etc.

### A question is philosophical, when it supports the partner in dialogue to ...

- describe his/her experiences in the situations at stake;
- be aware of the thinking knots in his/her story;
- unknot these thinking knots;
- be aware of his/her responsibilities in those situations;
- to take those responsibilities.

### Technique:

- Phenomenological *epoché* and reduction, by asking open and disenchanting questions;
- Language game analysis.

### Alternative ways of setting up this Masterclass

There are some alternative ways to set up the Masterclass.

- *A real counseling session by a participant/counselor and with a participant/guest.* Two participants, being the counselor and his or her guest, have a philosophical dialogue. The guest's subject is a real existential issue in his or her life. In the meantime, the masterclass-teacher comments on the dialogue process.
- *A real counseling session by the masterclass-teacher and a participant.* The participant's issue is a real existential issue in his or her life. In the meantime, the masterclass-teacher clarifies the dialogue process.
- *A demonstration of how a philosophical dialogue goes on; on stage by the masterclass-teacher.* This poor option is available, when nobody presents himself to participate actively in the masterclass.

Which way we will choose, depends on the competencies and involvement of the participants in the Masterclass.

### References

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