

In Plato's Cave: Philosophical Counseling and Philosophers of Education

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According to Plato, the first practicing psychotherapist was none other than the “Gadfly of Athens”: Socrates. Plato notes that Socrates even coined the term “psychotherapy” (*psuchos therapeia*) which literally means “care for the soul.” While Socratic practice was aimed at curing the psychic maladies of the *polis*, Socratic attention was focused on the leading citizens of Athens who, Socrates discovered through *elenchus*, held confused, contradictory, error-filled beliefs and desires that could only lead to ruin.¹ Socratic irony aside, Plato’s cave allegory illustrates the ultimate liberation from human error, illusion, and confusion discovered through Socratic practice. And the midwife of such liberation is, of course, philosophy.

Some 2400 years later, there is a new movement within philosophy to reclaim this Socratic understanding of philosophy as midwife to psychic health: the philosophical counseling movement. First emerging in the 1980s in Germany and in the Netherlands, through the work of Gerd Achenbach and others, it has now ensconced itself in the United States and Canada and is attracting adherents from around the globe.² Indeed, a fair sign that philosophical counseling has made it to mainstream America is that during the summer of 1999 National Public Radio’s “Talk of the Nation” carried a segment highlighting the philosophical counseling movement and the utility of philosophy in everyday life. So while it may seem at first odd to see philosophers hanging out a shingle in the counseling business, the practitioners see it as their business to return philosophy to the old Socratic roots of caring for the soul, to restore the ancient purpose of philosophy in crafting a better life.³

The philosophical counseling movement’s call for philosophy’s return to its roots in the practical affairs of human life is congruent with the many philosophers of education in their conception of the discipline. In this conception, philosophy of education is practical philosophy, the use of philosophical thinking and philosophical traditions in furthering the education of our fellow human beings. Moreover, there is often no clear demarcation line between counseling and educating. If philosophers of education help teachers think through practical problems of classroom life or if their students come to them for advice with educational and philosophical puzzles of personal import and significance, it is difficult to deny that we, too, are in the counseling business. (And we would hope that philosophical clarity in solving theoretical and practical problems does become a matter of personal import to our colleagues and students!) Clearly, any philosopher of education who discerns that the most important issues for philosophy of education are those that bubble up from educational practice, just as Socrates’ concerns (many of them educational) were rooted in the life of the *polis*, is likely to find strong affinities with the current philosophical counseling movement. Indeed, given the practical bent of many philosophers of education, and given the difficulty in drawing

a hard line between counseling and educating, is a relation in the offing between philosophers of education and philosophical counselors?

In what follows, I wish to explore the conception of philosophical counseling put forward by current practitioners. In so doing, I want to probe their attitude toward traditional academic (especially analytic) philosophy as found in leading philosophy departments in North America and other English speaking countries. Second, I wish to explain and examine the reaction of philosophical counseling to other conceptions of counseling found within psychology, psychoanalysis, and psychiatry. Third, I wish to examine the conception of belief systems in relation to teaching and education as put forward by philosopher of education Thomas F. Green. Here, I shall suggest that counseling, teaching, and education become virtually indistinguishable. And finally, I shall comment upon the meaning of the philosophical counseling movement for philosophers of education.

AGAINST ACADEMIC PHILOSOPHY?

The philosophical counseling movement has developed, in part, as a reaction against academic philosophy as a technical discipline in this century (this could be true of both the analytic tradition and the more technical versions of phenomenology through Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger). Lou Marinoff's book, *Plato Not Prozac!* is representative of these philosophical "practitioners," and expresses ambivalence toward analytic philosophy. While he is a professor of philosophy at City College of New York, and admits that many philosophical practitioners also author specialized, technical writings for academic philosophers, he also accentuates the essential "sterility" of analytic philosophy for everyday life:

While it is essential for any field of study to expand its theoretical frontiers, academic philosophy has lately overemphasized the theory, to the detriment of practice. I am here to remind you that the living wisdom of philosophy, which is concerned with real life and how to live it, predates the institutionalization of philosophy as mental gymnastics having nothing to do with life.⁴

Here Marinoff wishes to reclaim the view that philosophy ("the love of wisdom") was originally and literally a way of life, rather than just an academic discipline to be pursued by specialists. He notes that in most academic fields pure (theoretical) branches of study are accompanied by "applied" branches (the example he uses is mathematics).⁵ In lamenting the academic neglect of practical philosophy, he understands philosophical counseling as an applied branch of philosophy.⁶

There is something wistful and poignant in these words, almost a plaint. I think he recognizes that philosophy — as a way of life — would be ignored and even disdained by leading departments of philosophy in the Anglo-American world, where technical innovation, conceptual insight, and painstaking argumentation is celebrated. Can the use of philosophy in the service of the good life find academic respectability today? Would Socrates in the agora of today — or on the internet! — find academic respectability?⁷

But perhaps Marinoff exaggerates the "uselessness" of academic philosophy; and perhaps he ignores the great body of philosophically respectable "practical" philosophy — especially in normative ethics, and political and social philosophy that have enjoyed a renaissance in today's post-logical empiricist academic world.

Here many “respectable” philosophers (and philosophers of education) have weighed in on a host of topics concerning how we should live. The analogy Marinoff draws between “pure” and “applied” mathematics and “pure” and not “applied” academic philosophy breaks down. “Applied” mathematics, in the service of solving problems in physics, engineering, and the social sciences, can be, and is, highly technical, and it certainly is not intended to resolve the problems of everyday living in the sense that Marinoff means. Just consider the achievements of John Rawls’s theory of justice, clearly a piece of “practical” philosophy no less than we find in Plato’s *Republic*.⁸ In answering the questions of how we should live in justice and dignity with each other, Rawls brings highly theoretical philosophical machinery and insights together with sophisticated, technical tools of “analytic” philosophy to the problems. Single-handedly, Rawls created an academic philosophical industry left for dead in the emotivist heydays of C.L. Stevenson, H. Weldon, and others.⁹

But here is the rub. No person untutored in the centuries of “technical” philosophical discussion on the question of justice — at least since Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and the Utilitarians — could possibly follow Rawls’s discussion and argument. And no person unfamiliar with the tools forged by analytic philosophy could fathom the why’s and wherefore’s of his employment of them. Though perhaps more accessible to a lay person than W.V.O. Quine, Hilary Putnam, Donald Davidson, Saul Kripke, or David Lewis in their more technical moments in “pure” philosophy, since “justice” at least is an ordinary language concept, Rawls remains impenetrable to those unschooled in such discussions. Indeed, nothing even follows directly from Rawls’s theory for our social arrangements, though no doubt it can be used to provide a moral critique of our society.

Though Marinoff is wrong in thinking that “institutionalized” philosophy cannot be practical and philosophically respectable at the same time, he has a point about its accessibility and immediate applicability to our lives in our circumstances. That is really what is bothering him about academic philosophy — whether pure or applied. He is hearkening back to a time when the possibility of philosophical conversation was common to all reasonably educated persons and was considered to be important to the comportment of social existence:

Philosophy is coming back into the light of day, where ordinary people can understand and apply it. Timeless insights into the human condition are accessible to you. We philosophical practitioners take them off the musty library shelf, dust them off, and put them into your hands. You can learn to use them. No experience necessary...The truth about philosophy (and a well-guarded secret it is) is that most people can do it. Philosophical inquiry does not even require a degreed or certified philosopher, just a willingness to approach the subject in philosophical terms. You do not have to go out and pay someone — though you might enjoy and learn from the process with a professional — because with a willing partner, or even on your own, you can do it in your own home, or at a coffee shop or shopping mall for that matter.¹⁰

Thus, philosophical practitioners are not so much against — and certainly need not be against — the academic study of pure and “applied” philosophy. But rather they are trying to rescue philosophy from the deadening hands of the professionals in the academy who have turned it into an arcane subject, while at the same time reserving the right to comment upon what is of philosophical respectability.

Recognizing that few “ordinary people” will master the intricacies of the subject as taught in the academy, they nonetheless wish to restore philosophy to its formerly high and rightful place in the conversation of everyday life.¹¹

RECLAIMING *PSUCHOS THERAPEIA* FROM THE PSYCHOTHERAPISTS

As for Diseases of the Mind, against them Philosophy
is provided of Remedies; being, in that respect, justly
accounted the Medicine of the Mind.

—Epicurus¹²

If philosophy has been rendered impotent by professional philosophers in commenting upon the conduct of life, philosophical practitioners believe that the offspring psychologists and psychoanalysts have usurped its role in providing several thousand years of insightful commentary on the human condition and replaced its observations with the dubious scientific pretensions of clinical psychology and the reified mental “diseases” of the psychiatrists (who now take Epicurus’ metaphor literally). While philosophical practitioners wish to viagrafy philosophy, they also wish to take back the streets from the psychotherapists (who have turned many school classrooms into encounter sessions or medicated Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder zones). Clinicians, they suggest, want to take us and our problems in living on a trip down “memory lane” (we are what we are because of what happened and was done to us) and psychiatrists reify our problems and our responses to them into a mental/brain disorder that can be medically “treated,” although too often with little lasting effect. Rather than spending the time and money in remembering (recovering? inventing?) the causes of our current problems and inadequate self, or viewing the world through a medicated haze, turning to philosophy may be a much better choice.

Why not, ask philosophical practitioners, treat persons as rational agents potentially in charge of their own lives (no matter what their past), take a person’s problem at face value, help them clarify it, reason with the aid of philosophical tradition and insight through to possible solutions, and help them find the personal courage to act?¹³ This is something that might be done — especially given the philosopher’s specialty in disentangling possible confusions and failing to mark appropriate distinctions — in a few discussion sessions.¹⁴ Clearly, this is different than classic psychoanalytic treatment that might last years and require a ton of money. If general dread of the future is causing a paralysis of the present, might not reading and discussing Søren Kierkegaard be more liberating than a regimen of valium or prozac? Even if not, might it be better to be a Kierkegaard understanding this dread than a medicated patient passively dependent upon the next psychiatric prescription?¹⁵ And might it be better to be aided by a philosophical counselor, steeped in tried philosophical comment on the human condition, than to be treated by the trendy “new age” psychologies that sport an even more dubious theoretical basis than those taught in the academy?

These are all questions that the philosophical counseling movement can put to “mainstream” and upstart “new age” psychotherapy. What should prevent philosophers, like the sophists of old, from hanging out their shingles? While the new-agers have no justified basis to complain (even while many of them have been qualified

by the health insurance companies), established psychotherapy will argue that philosophers are in no business to make clinical judgments of psychological disorders which may lie at the root of a person's inability to cope. In short, philosophers lack scientific respectability. True enough. But philosophical counselors, or anyone else imbued with a critical spirit, can raise the ante. Which of psychology's generalizations have been shown to hold up to repeated falsifying tests such as Boyle's law in chemistry? To any fairly disinterested and objective inquirer, the answer, so far, is none. In dealing with human conduct, psychology can only point to its imperial clothes in the academy (which, at least, have been enough to fool the insurance industry!). This is not to dispute that there have been many wise and insightful psychologists such as Erik Erikson or, more recently, Jerome Bruner. The question remains, however, whether they have been living off of a, *sui generis*, tradition in psychology. Quite apart from the philosophical counseling movement, I think not. If I am not mistaken, it is an interesting issue of from where their intellectual resources come. I think I have an inkling, one that should not displease the philosophical counseling movement.

However, the entire industry of those who would counsel others into better lives must meet a further hurdle. Alasdair MacIntyre, in his book *After Virtue*, claims that societies can be understood in terms of which "characters" morally legitimate a mode of social existence.¹⁶ Characters, he explains, are different from social roles in that they partially define a culture and are its moral and metaphysical representatives.¹⁷ They exemplify a model of and norm for social intercourse and relations in a way that roles do not. Thus, the Public School Headmaster is a character in Victorian England, while a farmer or dustman is not.

Now what MacIntyre finds striking about the current age and our society is its embrace of the philosophical doctrine of emotivism in meta-ethics which reduces matters of morality to personal preference.¹⁸ But with this reduction comes "the obliteration of any genuine distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations."¹⁹ Genuine moral relations entail, in the Kantian formula, treating someone as an end and never as a means alone. It is to offer them good reasons for believing or acting in one way rather than another, but then to leave it to them to evaluate those reasons: "It is to be unwilling to influence another except by reasons which that other he or she judges to be good. By contrast, to treat someone else as a means is to seek to make him or her an instrument of my purposes by adducing whatever influences or considerations will in fact be effective in this or that occasion."²⁰ But if emotivism is true, then the distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations is wholly illusory, since there can be no independent appeal to reason nor can there be rational discussion about ends themselves, only about the effectiveness of the means.²¹ Consequently, all social relations are overtly or covertly manipulative.

MacIntyre takes three characters of our current age as the embodiment of our emotivist society: the rich aesthete (playboy), the corporate manager, and the therapist. Each of these characters shares, as he puts it, the emotivist view of the distinction between rational and non-rational discourse. Thus, since there can be no

rational discussion of the ends, “The therapist [like the playboy and manager] also treats ends as given, as outside his scope; his concern is with technique, with effectiveness in transforming neurotic symptoms into directed energy, maladjusted individuals into well-adjusted ones.”²² Thus, the relation between therapist and client is essentially one of manipulation. And in so far as our culture has witnessed Phillip Rieff’s “triumph of the therapeutic,” (a triumph that has clearly invaded education, for one), “truth [and morality] has been displaced as a value and replaced by psychological effectiveness.”²³

Perhaps this is what I find to be disquieting about the idea of philosophers entering the counseling business. Professional counseling is built upon a therapeutic ideal of manipulative relations that displaces truth and morality only to replace them with the central value of psychological adjustment. How could philosophers, whose central ideals are truth, rationality, and rational persuasion, enter the current realm of the therapeutic and remain true to their calling? Is this a classic example of Sartrean bad faith?

The answer, I think, lies in suggestions made by the philosophical counseling movement, but it has not been well-articulated in that literature. While philosophical practitioners have taken aim at various brands of psychotherapy, this really has not gotten to the deeper point that they should be making. For it is not unusual to find purveyors of the various counseling therapies taking potshots at their rivals, while trumpeting the psychic benefits of their own flavor. In this way, philosophical practitioners, except for their emphasis upon the benefits of philosophy, just appear to be one more therapeutic contender. Rather the point that they should be making is that they are providing a qualitatively different idea and ideal of psychotherapy: the ancient one that goes back to the notion of *psuchos therapeia*.

It is not that philosophy will make you happier than the other brands of psychotherapy. It is instead that in philosophical dialogue, whether over world-views or your emotional turmoil-of-the-moment, a clearer, more realistic, understanding of your circumstances, your reactions to them, and a clearer, less confused picture of the (sometimes tragic) choices you are confronted with give you a freedom that you would otherwise not know. That is the Socratic meaning of *psuchos therapeia*, of the examined life: in the pursuit of truth, we are set free. It is a demand that we have the courage to follow the argument wherever it may lead, no matter how many cherished beliefs we may have to surrender. It seeks not the comfort of medication nor the psychological “adjustment” of our behavior and attitudes. There may be no happy outcome. But it may result in our leading a less illusion-ridden, error-prone yet better existence.

And in philosophical dialogue, we have the very model of non-manipulative relations — a vital contrast with the therapeutic models in clinical psychology and psychiatry. Though one philosophical discussant may be more knowledgeable than another, it is the (relatively) independent standards of rationality that govern the outcome of the inquiry, not the sheer influence of one person by another.²⁴ It is to treat others as ends, for whom reasons, not persons, are the source of persuasion.²⁵ Philosophical counseling’s aim is not “therapeutic” in the contemporary sense, but

an activity of teaching in the educational enterprise.²⁶

THE ACTIVITIES OF TEACHING AND PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELING

Marinoff's book contains an interesting sort of grievous error. He quotes affirmatively a certain Thomas Green as follows: "Nobody holds a belief in total independence of all other beliefs. Beliefs always occur in sets or groups. They take their place always in belief systems, never in isolation."²⁷ Marinoff attributes this quote to the nineteenth century British philosopher Thomas H. Green. Anyone familiar with this quote will know that the correct attribution is not to T.H. Green, but rather to the contemporary American philosopher of education, Thomas F. Green in his *The Activities of Teaching*.²⁸

Indeed, the philosopher of education Green gives a superlative account of belief systems that provides a model for any philosophical counselor and grist for the mill. In summarizing his view that for philosophy of education it is more important to attend to how we hold a belief rather than what we believe, Green states:

We may, therefore, identify three dimensions of belief systems [a constructive metaphor]. First, there is the quasi-logical relation between beliefs. They are primary or derivative. Secondly, there are relations between beliefs having to do with their spatial order or psychological strength [how firmly we hold them impervious to evidence]. They are central or peripheral. But there is a third dimension. Beliefs are held in clusters, as it were, more or less in isolation from other clusters and protected from any relationship with other sets of beliefs [even though, objectively speaking, they may conflict with one another]. Each of these characteristics of belief systems has to do with the content of our beliefs, but with the way we hold them.²⁹

Green proceeds to give an account of evidential beliefs, evidential believers, and non-evidential believers (the close-minded): the difference between a person who holds a belief because it is supported by the evidence and one who may accept the evidence because it supports a belief he already holds.³⁰

Finally, in viewing teaching as an activity aimed at the modification of belief systems, Green points to the role of "enabling beliefs" — especially a "due regard for the truth" which is "simply that beliefs can and should be rationally examined" — that we should hold in passionate conviction. Such beliefs "enable us to hold all other beliefs so that they are open to challenge, examination, and change in the light of further evidence and fresh reasons."³¹ Teaching in this sense, as the rational, non-manipulative modification of belief systems, is far more concerned with how a person holds beliefs than with what they believe: "It is an activity [unlike indoctrination] aimed at the formation of belief systems in which evidential beliefs are proportionately maximized and core beliefs [psychologically central beliefs] are minimized."

And this is exactly the credo of the philosophical counseling movement: the unexamined life is not worth living. The *psuchos therapeia* of Socrates and the philosophical counseling movement are one. But, for our purposes, what this helps establish is that the philosophical counseling movement is a thoroughly educational mission and, as such, is conceptually a branch of the philosophy of education.

PHILOSOPHERS OF EDUCATION AND PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELING

What I have attempted to show here is that the philosophical counseling movement is grounded in the ancient idea of *psuchos therapeia*. It rejects the contemporary idea of therapy in psychology and psychiatry, a notion having to do with eliminating neuroses and psychoses, causing personal adjustments, or treating “mental illnesses,” and has much to do with enabling persons to become evidential believers. It is an educational mission, not a psychological one.

With this understanding, philosophers of education should see philosophical counselors as kindred spirits. Indeed, as we seek to foster in our students an evidential style of belief, we are acting as philosophical counselors. Perhaps, because of our professional sensibilities concerning the conduct of education, we may even be better equipped to enact the role of philosophical counselor in the personal domain than many philosophers who have little studied education.

Alien to philosophers of education is the idea that we might charge a fee for expertise like the sophists of old. (How did Socrates provision Xiantippe?) While the ethical questions of profiting from expertise have long been addressed by private practice professionals in all areas, this will be new to us. Philosophy of education, tied in the past century to the academy, will have to face this in the new. Though I have no quick answers, I have no doubt that our shingles would withstand the higher winds of good questions.

1. Plato's *Gorgias* and *The Republic* are good sources for the use of *elenchus*. Generally speaking, I define *elenchus* as a style of argument by which a thesis put forward is shown to lead to a contradiction, shown to be incoherent, or shown to rest upon a conceptual confusion.

2. See, for example, Gerd Achenbach, *Philosophische Praxis* (Cologne, Germany: Jurgen Dinter, 1984); For some of the English language literature on philosophical counseling, see Elliot Cohen, *Philosophers at Work* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1989); Ran Lahav and Maria Tillmanns eds., *Essays on Philosophical Counseling* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995); Pierre Grimes, *Philosophical Midwifery* (Costa Mesa, CA: Hyparxis Press, 1998); and Lou Marinoff, *Plato Not Prozac!* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1999).

3. Although most philosophical counselors in practice have been trained in the Western tradition, many borrow from the Eastern traditions.

4. Marinoff, *Plato Not Prozac!* 8.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. To what extent does Socrates owe his academic reputation in philosophy today to being Plato's mouthpiece in the deeper epistemological and metaphysical Platonic dialogues?

8. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

9. Were they not the heirs of G.E. Moore's non-naturalism turned against itself in analytic philosophy?

10. Marinoff, *Plato Not Prozac!* 8-9, italics added.

11. Though philosophical counselors wish to make philosophy accessible to everyone, they are hagiographic in thinking that philosophy was ever seriously studied or practiced by many beyond the circle of well-educated, non-professionals. Perhaps the better point is that academic philosophy has become fairly inaccessible to even the well-educated.

12. As cited in Marinoff, *Plato Not Prozac!*, 3.

13. This roughly paraphrases the steps used by philosophical practitioners.

14. Is this that different from the Socratic *elenchus* ?

15. Note major changes in psychiatry. From the early days of Freud in which clinical analysis was paramount, Freud's medical model, as the deep (reductionist) basis of psychoanalysis, has assumed center-stage in contemporary psychiatry. Contemporary psychiatrists, especially in hospital settings, spend most of their time in medical prescription writing. The health insurance industry has been an important agent of such change.

16. Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 28.

17. *Ibid.*, 26-27.

18. See C.L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944).

19. McIntyre, *After Virtue*, 23.

20. *Ibid.*, 22-23.

21. *Ibid.*, 23.

22. *Ibid.*, 29.

23. Phillip Reiff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

24. Can postmodernists be philosophical counselors in this sense? In denying independent standards of rationality, they cannot. See Frederick S. Ellett and David P. Ericson, "In Defense of Public Reason," *Educational Theory* 47, no. 2 (1997). But since postmodernism slides into emotivism's embrace, they might make terrific therapists in the psychological sense.

25. The closest that anyone within the psychotherapy community has come to this position is Thomas Szasz in *The Myth of Mental Illness* (New York: Hoeber-Harper, 1961) and *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1965). In regarding the concept of mental illness, and the various psychotherapies based on it, as a massive Rylean "category mistake," he picks up on the various humanistic (read philosophical) strands in Freud, Adler, and Jung and notes that they, at least, resisted efforts to assimilate psychoanalysis to a medical psychiatry. Indeed, he credits Freud with the notion that clients are neither "patients" nor "sick" in any way, but rather that psychoanalysis is an educational enterprise! See Szasz, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 46-7. This reading would put the founder of modern psychotherapy squarely into the Socratic camp.

26. Marinoff, *Plato Not Prozac!* 194 and see also 279.

27. Thomas F. Green, *The Activities of Teaching* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 41. Marinoff's quote appears in Green's chapter "Teaching and the Formation of Beliefs."

28. *Ibid.*, 47-48.

29. *Ibid.*, 49.

30. *Ibid.*, 54.

31. *Ibid.*, 55.