

## A view on, and a stall in, the market?

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In a consumer economy everyone seeks a place in the market; so why not offer a new product for a new millennium—'philosophical counselling'? Philosophical counsellors will encourage clients to explore practical philosophies as a means of coping with their lives. They will vary according to the philosophers and philosophies they most favour. Above all, though, the Oxford conference reaffirmed for me that philosophy should be more than just an adjective in front of particular niches in the counselling market. Philosophers of many kinds could offer worthwhile stalls in the marketplace, and it is high time that they did so and came down from their ivory towers. But above all, they should be providing a perspective on, rather than merely a place in, the market.

Philosophy, in one form or another, does not merely delimit particular kinds of counselling; it underlies all of it. It is the means by which we take stock of any systematic and coherent activity. Therefore, at its heart, it is not just another version of counselling; it provides the foundation, floor and frame to all counselling.

We don't have philosophical mathematics or philosophical physics or art; we have philosophies of and for these activities. It could be the same with counselling. The big agenda involves philosophy of and philosophy for X, not philosophical X. Philosophy should, above all, help all counsellors do counselling better. Talking treatments are unavoidably philosophical just as they are inevitably psychological.

Of course, many counsellors resist this invitation to philosophise. They may say that they know no philosophy and need none of it. But whoever claims no philosophy in fact knows only one. They will have no means of locating or assessing it. It will underlie their thinking and practice, and, because so all encompassing, it will be invisible, like the air we breathe. Currently, we are all-embraced by a consumerist, instrumental view of existence. This so overwhelms us that it is hard to see any other way of constructing our lives, our options and ourselves.

Along comes 'philosophical counselling'. What is this? Is it a way of taking stock on, for example, our market economy? Can it help us see how personalities become defined as skill-deficient objects, commodities to be promoted, bought and sold? Will it help us 'upskill' ourselves? Will we thereby live the only sovereign existence on offer—as consumers, performers, promoters and purchasers of pre-packaged 'life-style' niches, as seen on TV?

Will philosophical counselling just be another new stall in the market place? Or will it provide higher, more sacred, vistas via which we can contemplate markets, mountainsides, and the other, larger, visions and agendas of possibility that have been the traditional concern of philosophy? Plato was in favour of the marketplace, when kept in its place. But he also warned what would happen if tradesmen came to rule the world. Now, at last, they do. One consequence is that, unless you identify yourself as a trades-person, ('philosophical counsellor, is it?')

no one knows who you are. Moreover, mere 'identification' will not be enough. You will have to promote yourself. If you are seeking a corner of the professional marketplace, you will have to accredit, grade and level yourself, and others. This, ideally, will not put you on the level with others; it will put you above them, though a 'mock-humble' chumminess may also go down well. Nor will it help if you are level with customers if you want to lever yourself into a strongly differentiated niche in the (highly competitive) carers' turf. You may have to profess to a skill long before you can be honestly confident that you can provide it. You may find that the Sophists are your role-model more than Socrates. 'You want a philosophy, squire? We have hundreds to choose from. Which do you prefer? Which will best fit your lifestyle and (imagined) identity?'

People often seek healers in order to escape from, recover from and cope with, the race to self-promotion that is global consumerism. But healers are themselves caught up in, and part of, this race. They are pressured to convince themselves that their own product is far more effective than their competitors' and that their own quality assurance programmes deliver more than amateur efforts and ordinary humanity. The evidence is, often, against them. But what place is there for truth and goodness when it gets in the way of self-interest and the competitive market?

Philosophers have tended to be seen as seekers after truth. This has generally provided them with little power or wealth even when their vision has been used to good effect by the powerful and wealthy. Philosophers tend to ask too many awkward questions to remain for long as heads of big institutions. To survive, these need to love power and protect themselves via the management of plausibility. For power brokers, what gets utilised is what 'works'. If it is also true and good, then so much the better. If not, then too bad for good. And who want to be too good to be true?

Machiavelli will be the role model here, though he himself was dangerously honest about his exhortation to dishonesty and thereby did not put his own philosophy into practice. No wonder he did less well than his more determined disciples. Not all clients will want the same. Shall we give Rousseau to the Romantics? Mill to the Liberals? Marx to the Radicals? Sartre to the café angst set? And so on? Or shall we continue to give Socrates pride of place? By the way, who accredited him? What was his certificated level of competence?

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