

# Philosophical Practice: A Method and Three Cases

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We need only grant that there can be advances in philosophical understanding, in the sense of philosophers coming to see more clearly what their problems are, why certain seemingly promising solutions will not suffice, and how such problems are affected by new developments... (John Passmore, 1967, p. 229)

In this paper I present three cases from my philosophical practice, that exemplify the method I am using in my counselling and the goals I try to reach in the discussions I conduct with counselees. The paper begins, therefore, with a presentation of the method I am implementing and the goals I am pursuing. Three cases follow each with an assessment of my relative success or failure in achieving these goals.

## A Method

When one asks whether philosophy progresses, one possible answer is the one quoted above as the motto of the paper. When I thought of a method for philosophical counselling, I wanted a way that would parallel the progress of philosophy, if only in order to have a 'feeling of progress'. As the main goal of philosophical counselling, in my view, is to dissipate confusion (granted that false clarity or erroneous evidence also counts as confusion) I wanted a method that would incorporate side stones in an elegant way. I felt that elegance was needed for the following reason: I was seeing myself more as a tutor in philosophy than anything else, whether I was teaching philosophy to big classes or counselling on a private basis. When done on a private basis, however, I thought that tutoring should be less didactical but not less clear in its outcomes than teaching big audiences. Elegance was needed, thus, in order to follow the argument, so to speak, without a blackboard.

The method I found is the method I use in many things I write and read (seminar papers, for example). First, one formulates the problem at hand

in a question, preferably one with multiple answers. Second, one presents the *alternative answers* to the question. Third, one assesses each answer *critically*. One is ready, then, to formulate a second question, which has usually some connection (logical or other) to the first one. And so on.<sup>1</sup>

The questions and alternative answers determine very clearly what we are doing at each moment of the counselling, and allow the counselee to evaluate what we have done till now. Though the client can leave the counselling sessions at any time, the method of questions and alternative answers allow for easily detectable exits, usually accompanied by a feeling of satisfaction because one recognises what has been *achieved*.

How does one advance from one question to the other? Sometimes the relationship is logical, one question presupposing an answer to the previous one (Belnap and Steel, 1976). As an example, take the question: does God exist? The question: how do we know that God exists? presupposes a positive answer to it. The second question has alternative answers (a. through revelation; b. through mystical experience; c. by logical proofs; d. other...) which open the discussion. In that sense the second question is 'better' than the first one, which, having only two answers based mostly on each other's criticism, is very narrow.

Sometimes the relationship between the two questions is not logical. There can be a leap, for example, from an epistemological question to an

<sup>1</sup> When I was writing my Ph.D., I learned a somewhat similar method from my adviser, Prof. Joseph Agassi, one of Karl Popper's followers. The difference between what is presented here and Joseph Agassi's methodology is that he adds the further demand that the answers should be *controversial*. When I asked for a reference, however, he told me that he did not publish anything about this method.

ethical one (in the general sense of ethics, that is, regarding values, the quality of life, etc.). Most counselees' principal interest lies, in my experience, in the ethical and the personal. In the example above, to recall, the second question was: how do we know that God exists? After critically assessing the various answers, a possible third question may be: how does the existence of God affect the quality of life? The alternative answers could be the following:

- a. it does not;
- b. it makes for an excellent life;
- c. life loses all meaning without it;
- d. other, etc.

Sometimes the relationship between the two questions is not logical, nor is it relating the epistemological with the ethical; it emphasises, rather, the relationship of the abstract with the personal. After being asked 'does God exist?', you may ask 'why is it important, or interesting?' A possible answer is 'my sister believes in God and I think that she is mistaken'. Thus, the discussion might rather focus on ethical questions of tolerance, acceptance and differences, than on epistemological questions. That is, the discussion can concentrate on key concepts that pertain to the good life, values and meaning.

After the counsellee explains why he came to see me, I ask him to formulate a question. If he cannot or if the question is not a 'good' one (it is too narrow, or too big, or unclear), I may take one of his assumptions and question it (Popper, 1963), that is, formulate a question about it, if possible, with multiple answers. Or, I may ask the counsellee why does he think that the question is interesting or important? If he cannot find a reason, we change the question. If he gives me reasons, I get a better feeling of what interests him. (There is one assumption, though: we do not discuss questions that the counsellee deems unimportant or uninteresting).

A last point regarding questions is worth mentioning. Some questions are more abstract, some more personal. The right succession of questions according to their level of abstraction might be decisive for the success of philosophical counselling. For example, when the initial question is formulated in personal terms, taking the next question to a more abstract level may sometimes prove beneficial. By disconnecting the client momentarily from his more personal concerns, the abstract allows for a space (sometimes a necessary hiding space) for understanding, and maybe change, to take place. To

take an opposite example, when the initial question is abstract (non-personal) and also non-ethical, it nevertheless has ethical and personal implications that usually are of the utmost importance and of the greatest interest for the counsellee. The counsellee does not differ in this aspect from most people who are interested in philosophy (Scharfstein, 1980).

The abstract as an inward space where thought can be expanded and freedom gained without the tyranny of personal fear is one of the great therapeutic inventions of philosophy. But any solution to any problem that would remain at the abstract level is useless. Self philosophical counselling as well as philosophical counselling for others presuppose some knowledge of the art of shades and light. Some people will perish from too much light, according to Plato (Plato, 1948; Amir 2001); all neurotics, that is, all of us, need the shade, according to Freud (Amir, 2005, forthcoming); and the value of an individual might well be the quantity of truth (light) she can bear, according to Nietzsche (Nietzsche, 1974; Amir 2004c).

In order to appreciate the following cases, in which the method I use is exemplified, some last remarks are needed regarding the goals of philosophical counselling, as I see them. The following list of goals will help me assess in the cases below to what extent I have failed or succeeded. In my practice, I attempt not only to clarify thought or minimise confusion (by detecting presuppositions, correcting faulty inferences, etc.) but also:

To expand options and broaden perspectives (through alternative answers; references to books and to philosophical systems of thought)

To gain inward space (using the momentary abstract as a mean)

To emphasise autonomy and responsibility (but adapting the level to the client's capacity) (Amir, 2004a)

To learn the trade, the art; to give tools for a future independent access to philosophy.

I propose now to share some cases which exemplify this method and in which these goals are, at least partially, achieved.

### Three Cases

The following cases exemplify the method I use. In order to follow the succession of questions more easily, I have italicised the questions. Furthermore,

after presenting each case, I attempt to assess which of the goals (from the list above) were reached. The cases I chose respect the anonymity of the clients, as their titles testify: 'the lonely high-ranked merchant marine officer', 'the jealous lover' and 'the unsatisfied worker'.

### 1. *The Lonely High-Ranked Merchant Marine Officer*

A high-ranked merchant marine officer spends long times at sea in painful isolation. He does not want to associate with other persons of the crew because they do not respect the law.

I asked him to formulate a question but he could not. I suggested the following question, formulated around what I saw as the most important concept till now, the law, and challenging his presupposition ('one has to respect the law'). *The first question was, thus, should one always respect the law (any law, at all costs)? Or, what should be the right attitude to law?* Various answers were presented and examined, among others one that he had to formulate as his colleagues' view. It amounted to this: 'there is a difference between various kinds of law. Respecting criminal law, but not custom laws, does not make you a criminal.' When the time came to explain this view, understand it and even defend it as an exercise, he refused. His own view he described as follows: 'one should always follow the law (any law), because it is good, right and fulfilling'. This was an exercise he did at home, and he thanked me for it, saying that it allowed him to get acquainted with his thought in a way unknown to him before. Though he was satisfied, we reached a dead end in our search for a solution to his solitude.

As he refused to discuss tolerance towards digressions or flexibility towards the law, as well as the possible benefits of solitude (from which he suffered enormously), I asked a *second question*, namely, *why is it important not to associate with some people?* (or, why does it bother him so much to associate with his colleagues?) The first answer he proposed was that when one associates with people, it means that one shares their values. As he could not identify with his colleagues' values, he did not like the kind of persons they were. He thought that if he associates with them that meant that he necessarily adopts their values. I noticed the confusion and after clarifying it, I mentioned Aristotle's three levels of friendship in the eighth book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle differentiates there between

friendship based on utility, friendship based on pleasure and friendship based on the sharing of values. As luck would have it, the example he gives for the lower kind (utility) is that of persons at sea, whose friendship lasts as long as the trip.

My counsellee was immediately relieved. Disentangling his view of the meaning of association from his opinion of values, he believed that from now on, he could associate with these people for his and their benefits during the trip, without adopting their values. He bought a copy of Aristotle's *Ethics* and took it with him to sea, determined to learn more about philosophy.

I use this as an example in every interview, as I never had a more 'successful' case in my life. All the goals of my counselling (see the list above) were achieved in three sessions, to my satisfaction as well as to the client's.

### 2. *The Jealous Lover*

A somewhat renowned female writer complains about her jealousy. She has recently separated from her husband, her lover is still married and will stay so till his children grow up or forever (whatever comes first), but her jealousy is not provoked by his wife. Rather, by other women whom he invites to his office (which is not very far from hers) and with whom he apparently has sex. She does not want to confront him, she would rather get rid of her jealousy because she cannot write and she is damaging the relationship. She believes that her friend, who comes from a different culture (he is a Catholic Arab) than hers (she is a Jewish Israeli) will never renounce the other women and might also deny the facts. All she would like is to learn how to accept that. At my request, she formulated her *initial question*, namely 'how could I counter my jealousy?'

All this was against my better judgement. I questioned the assumption that 'jealousy is bad' and should, therefore, be countered, through the *second question*: *is jealousy only (and always) bad (for you, for your friend, for the relationship)?* We discussed several answers to this question, including one that finds some good in jealousy, because it might lead to a change in her friend's behaviour. Her definite answer, however, was that there is nothing good in jealousy in her case. For her friend will not change his behaviour, nor would she want him to do so for her. The jealousy she feels - not his actions (!) - is the only thing that is destroying her (she cannot write)

and their relationship (he does not like her being jealous).

At this point I could either ask her to leave or choose her initial question as *my second question*. *How could you counter your jealousy?* I asked. We discussed a few answers until we came to the Stoics' radical solution for the passions. We analysed the content of her evaluative belief that his being with other women is bad, instead of indifferent, as the Stoics would deem it. In order to see that, however, the counsellee would have to adopt a Stoic view of the bad, the good and the indifferent. That is, she would have to embrace their purpose, which was virtue or peace of mind (Nussbaum, 1994). This she could not do, of course, for she was a passionate woman who wanted to stay that way. She wanted to extirpate one passion, not all.

I therefore adapted the Stoics' view for her, as follows. Her main goal was the flourishing of the relationship she had with that man. From now on, anything that fosters the relationship will be deemed 'good', anything that hinders it will be deemed 'bad' and anything that does not foster nor hinder it will be deemed indifferent. Given her goal, she recognised her jealousy as 'bad'. 'Bad' was a thing to avoid at all costs. And so she did. Believe it or not, it worked. Later on, she told me that she never had to fight jealousy again.

I have a patent now for diets (cakes are 'bad', salads are 'good' and movies are indifferent) which, if rightly sold, could bring me millions. I will not forget those counselling sessions, however, for never before nor after was I asked to do something that was so incongruent with my personal convictions. I failed in my first goal (I did not manage to clarify her thought nor minimise what seems to me her confusion through correcting her faulty inferences). I think, however, that I succeeded in the others (expanding options, gaining inward space, emphasising autonomy and responsibility, having independent access to some tools). Though I must admit that there is something weird about the way these goals were (mis-) used by my client.

### 3. *The Unsatisfied Worker*

A woman of about 50 came to see me with the following problem. She had to work a lot of hours because she had a private business of public

relations. She was tired of this job and not interested in it anymore. She had no time for a private life but felt obligated to continue working at this rhythm for the financial sake of her (grown-up) children and the financial security of her older days. She asked me if I could help her find some solution to this problem.

I asked her in return to formulate a question. Her *first question* was, *what can I do in my situation, what are my options?* As she insisted that she had no idea what her options could be, I proposed various possibilities or answers to the question at hand, which we evaluated one after the other. Reducing the hours she worked, hiring an assistant, working as an employee in someone else's business, changing her profession, studying something else while working in order to change her profession in the future, accepting that she would have less money in the future, organising her future accordingly, re-evaluating her obligations to her children, rethinking her priorities, etc. - these are some of the answers I proposed.

She rejected all the proposals, deeming them unrealistic. She said that more or less each year she goes to another expert to see if something can be done about her impossible situation and she always comes out with the same results: the *inescapable necessity* of her situation. At that point, she was very angry with me because I could not 'solve' the 'unsolvable', but satisfied of being reinforced in her conviction of the inevitability of her situation. Since she managed to convince herself of the 'necessity' of her situation, and it seemed as if convincing me was no less important for her, I thought that maybe to stop 'fighting' her assumption would be more helpful. I decided to take 'nothing can be done regarding my situation: it's inescapable' as her final answer to her first question, i.e. what can be done in my situation? I suggested therefore the following (*second and third*) questions: *are there various ways of bearing the necessary? If yes, which ways?*

She found this approach more 'worthy of her money', because she felt she was getting something out of the discussion. Obviously, she had already analysed all the 'practical' solutions to her problem that we discussed in the answers to question one, and was not ready to re-evaluate the importance of money or security nor her preference of the future over the present. The answers to the second question were innovative for her, as they involved a kind of thought unknown to her. We discussed several answers, one of them was that accepting the

necessary can be liberating (according to Spinoza (1985; Amir, 2004b), and Nietzsche (1968; Amir, 2004c), for example). This answer she liked, and she learned to 'love' the 'fate' that she had decided (long ago) was hers.

This case illustrates how one can work with a client who does not want to change. When I attempt to evaluate the goals I achieved in this particular case, I realise that I failed in the first goal (clarifying thought or minimising confusion - detecting presuppositions, correcting faulty inferences). I did not succeed in convincing the counsellee that she should revise her thinking through detecting her presuppositions. I succeeded in some sense of the second goal (expanding options). I could not expand her options regarding the actual situation, but I expanded them regarding the way in which she felt about the situation. I succeeded only partly in furthering goal three (gaining inward space) for the same reasons. I succeeded only partially in goal four (emphasising autonomy and responsibility): she would not take the responsibility of the situation but she accepted responsibility of the way she felt towards the situation. Finally, she learned how to use a powerful tool, which is the fifth goal, namely, one's attitude towards a situation need not be determined by the situation.

## Conclusion

Each of the above cases could have been addressed in a different way than the one outlined here. The necessary creativity involved in philosophical counselling rarely obtains similar results, nor should it aim at uniformity. In a presentation of an earlier draft of this paper to Italian philosophical counsellors, I was impressed by the variety of approaches to my counsellees' problems.<sup>2</sup> I would, therefore, welcome any comment, suggestion or criticism of the method, the goals and the cases presented above. I find no better way to finish this paper than thanking you in advance for your response and giving you my e-mail address: [lydamir@colman.ac.il](mailto:lydamir@colman.ac.il)

<sup>2</sup> An earlier draft of this paper was presented in a conference on cases organised in Florence by Italian philosophical counsellors. This is the opportunity to thank Paola Grossi again for inviting me, and all the counsellors for forcing me to clarify my thought on the method, the goals and the cases.

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