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# COMMUNICATING PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELLING

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*During last two decades, means of communication went through significant changes. Next to the usual face-to-face communication, new forms of communication (e.g. free online video conversation services or social networks) are now integrated in everyday life. In this paper I shall focus on possibilities offered by such new forms to practice of philosophical counselling. I shall present three cases of counselling with clients: face-to-face counselling, online video counselling via Skype platform, and chat on Facebook. In the last part of the paper and based on these case-studies, I shall examine advantages and disadvantages of each method, show which one is the most convenient for philosophical counsellors and which one for clients, with a goal of further development of the profession and its image in public.*

***Key words:*** *philosophical counselling, communication, video conversation, chat*

## Introduction

During past thirty years many authors presented philosophical counselling mostly through their own practice and with aims they have set for themselves. Some of them described methods that were unsuccessful at the time. Others considered the problem of methods as more important. They defined philosophical counselling as "an approach for addressing the dilemmas, predicaments, and life issues of the person in the street through philosophical self-examination" (Lahav, 1996), as a "helping profession which seeks to understand critically the ideas and world-views associated with client's presenting life problems" (Paden,

1998), and as a "spoken dialogue with people who do not need to have (academic) training in philosophy" (Harteloh, 2010).

Philosophers cherish conversation, a dialogue with people, which mostly follows Socrates' method – asking short questions and asking for short answers, finding concepts, arguments and reasons for person's actions, emotions, or thoughts. Although philosophical counselling can be considered new and still unexplored philosophical field, some methods and approaches to clients have already been developed. In all of them a dialogue – as a bilateral method of communication – plays the key role. Following Harteloh's definition, it could be said that philosophical counselling is a (spoken or written) dialogue between a philosopher and a client. Clients present their problems, issues, or situations to a philosopher-counsellor who assists them in finding a solution or in clarifying problematic points. Counsellor and client examine the problem with a help of different philosophical methods, such as argumentation, rules of logic, conceptualization, questioning, majeutics, induction, deduction, etc.

Roger Paden (1998) argues that there are many elements which are distinguishing philosophical counselling from traditional philosophy, pastoral counselling, humanistic psychotherapy, and traditional psychotherapy. These differences are mostly related to a different nature of the relationship which is established between philosopher-counsellors and their clients. We share Paden's conviction: it is of the utmost importance that clients themselves recognize and define the problem, that they set it down before the counsellor, and do not fall under the influence of counsellor's own views and suggestions towards a solution.

## 1. Method

In the last 30 years, from the time when German philosopher Gerd Achenbach introduced philosophical practice and philosophical counselling, many different methods were developed by philosophers across the world. Most of them come close to the form of Socratic dialogue; however there are some which are closer to traditional psychotherapy. For this research I have used a method based on Socratic dialogue, developed by French philosopher Oscar Brenifier. This method relies on questioning, argumentation, conceptualization, and contradiction.

At the beginning of his session, Brenifier asks clients to present their problem in a form of a question. After that initial question which

was proposed by a client, other questions are asked by a counsellor only and the client is expected to answer them in short form. This is similar to situations described in Plato's dialogues which served as a model for Brenifier's method. It is a client-centered method, as it starts with defining the problem and continues with testing of all possible logical conclusions and examination of connections between firstly offered concepts and new ones. This approach analyzes every single issue that comes out as a result of client's stream of thoughts. Rather than to limit his efforts to finding a solution to initial problem, Brenifier examines every problem that arises from answers of a client. Watching Brenifier's public philosophical consultations, one gets an impression that his method is an insightful work; however clients often have a hard time when they are faced with simple questions which offer limited number of possible answers. People are generally so accustomed to answering long and thinking in complicated terms that it bothers them when they have to decide between simple yes/no answer or define actions or thoughts with only one adjective.

However, clients seem to respond better at the end of the session, because they have found out something new about themselves. Each session ends with five to ten minutes of evaluation, during which Brenifier encourages clients to express their thoughts about the session. I have noticed that in that time clients usually mention something regarding their habits and personal characteristic. My goal in the present research was to help clients to state that at the end of a session they have solved their initial problem. The goal of philosophical counselling is not to make clients happy, but to help them solve their problems. Problem solving skills are very important in this kind of work. Brenifier's method, oriented in a slightly different direction, helps us to achieve that goal.

We start our counselling session in the same way and with the help of the same philosophical tools – such as argumentation, conceptualization, contradiction, induction, deduction, etc. However, the questioning is focused on finding all possible solutions of the presented problem. All of those possibilities are then examined in the light of what clients find suitable. Next step is to discuss ways in which clients can solve their problem on their own. By examining concepts offered by clients we can help them to clear the way to greater awareness of the problem they have, to deal with it, and to find ways to cope with the problem

once the counselling session is over. At the end, this is what counts the most – what will clients do, which actions will they take in order to completely solve their problem in the "real world". During counselling session, and after examining ways of solving the problem, clients come up with their own answers. Solution then seems so simple and just as if it was there all the time. Some blockade prevented the client to see it, to understand it, and to perceive it as solution. However, it cannot be overemphasized how important for a counsellor is not to influence the clients during their search for solutions; he/she should only assist them in the process. Counsellor's task is to detect where the blockade is located and to reflect it to the clients.

At the end of a session, clients usually state that they have learnt something new about themselves, about the problem in question and, finally, that they have reached a solution. Counsellor should then ask clients about their future plans for dealing with the problem in the "real world", outside of their dialogue. After the client's answer, the session should be concluded with client's comments on the method and the dialogue itself. This will give clients more confidence in themselves and during the process of making decisions that lead towards the solution.

## 2. Three cases

In the following, I shall present three case studies. Each of them is an example of one possible way of communicating philosophical counselling through Socratic dialogue, with a purpose of finding the most suitable means of communication. Each of these sessions of philosophical counselling was with a different client – one male and two females, in an age range between 26 and 30. One client has a degree in philosophy, the other has some background in philosophy, while the third client has never had anything to do with philosophy. They all agreed to be included in this research. They were aware of other research participants; however they did not know their identities. Female client Nikolina wanted me to use her real name, while others gave me their aliases – in the following I shall refer to the male client as Dramatis Personae, or shorter Dramatis, and to the second female client as Ingrid. Only Dramatis had previous experience in philosophical counselling. Following the method of Oscar Brenifier, I have asked all clients to present their problem intended for counselling in a form of a question.

First philosophical counselling session was with Dramatis, on 18 April 2013. His question was: "Why don't I take my life into my own hands?" In the course of our dialogue, Dramatis stated that he felt like he was acting in front of other people, that he felt alienated from himself, and that he did not know what other people expected from him. He said that he felt pressured by the people who were surrounding him and that he feared for his independence. Dramatis felt trapped between his wishes and expectations of others – he confessed that he has done some things contrary to his wishes only because of the expectations of others. For example, during our session a question emerged on whether he has made an independent decision regarding shoes he bought. After one hour, he came to the conclusion that he was living in an environment where he was unable to express himself which subsequently prevented him from taking his life into his own hands. Interesting feature of this case is that our dialogue was in a written form and that both of us still have it saved as private messages on our Facebook profiles – our dialogue was actually Facebook chat philosophical counselling.

Second philosophical counselling session was with Ingrid, on 19 April 2013. Her question was: "Is forgetting the best way to get over someone?" In our dialogue, we examined possible ways of "getting over" and came across concepts such as distance, memory, and the relationship Me–Others. Ingrid feared that she might repeat her own past actions, which she regretted, so she wanted to know how to prevent that. At first, there were some contradictions in her statements, but after the questioning method was applied she overcame them with ease. Ingrid later expressed her fear that, even though her actions might not be harmful to others or to herself, others might react in an unpredictable way and hurt her, which concerned her greatly. At the end of the session, Ingrid's conclusions were that forgetting is not the best way to get over someone, that we are not in charge for actions of other people, and that she will examine other possible ways to solve her problem in the future. We have conducted our dialogue in an old-fashioned face-to-face session which lasted one hour.

Third philosophical counselling session was with Nikolina, on 6 May 2013. Nikolina asked: "Why am I not more motivated to do physics?" Only few minutes after the initial question, we came to the problems of self-doubt, low self-esteem, and confusion. Nikolina stated that she did not know enough about physics and that she did not achieve as

much as other people did, which lead her to doubt her intellect. Similar to Dramatis and Ingrid, Nikolina also positioned herself in relation with others – she compared her academic results and her wishes with results and wishes of others and subsequently saw herself as inferior to them. Nikolina wanted to feel passionate towards physics and motivated in some way she could appreciate. She mostly spoke about the relationship between knowledge, ability, and desires. On another level she referred to academic arrogance, titles, and school system in general. Her final conclusion was that she needed more external influences which would motivate her to do physics. We have conducted our one hour session using Skype video-call.

## 3. Means of communication

In the following, I shall examine means of communication used in these three cases, starting with the Facebook chat philosophical counselling. Facebook chat tries to mimic spoken conversation in written form. Dramatis and I have agreed that both of us will be completely concentrated on our dialogue and disregard any outer distractions, just as we would do in a face-to-face session. However, Dramatis one time broke this rule, because a family member needed him. In that moment he gave advantage to other people over our session – in other words, he chose to focus his attention to people who were in his physical surrounding. We have also agreed that he will not write long answers and that he will type a bit faster than usual. This aimed to prevent him from avoiding answering. He broke that promise, too. I had no choice but to let him write all what he meant, because I had no option to interrupt him. However, after I have read his complete answer, I tried to make him write shorter answers, which he sometimes found difficult. Till the end of the session he managed to follow all rules: he was really fast and precise in his answers, which only helped him to better understand both the problem and the solution. At the end he concluded that he was not happy with the answer to his initial question, but that he was satisfied with the session itself. This is the answer I often hear after sessions. It has to be emphasized that philosophical counselling does not promise happiness at the end of a dialogue; it offers a solution to a problem. Solutions are not always easy to reach; if we wish to implement steps leading to them, sometimes we need to make sacrifices, or change our

views or actions. Dramatis concluded that it was his environment what prevented him from taking his life into his own hands – he will have to deal with that problem in future, as he promised to do.

Great advantage of Facebook chat philosophical counselling is that a counsellor does not need to take any notes, as everything is already written. Counsellor therefore can at any moment return to every sentence of the client. This is a useful tool in getting back to previous concepts or thoughts, in connecting the beginning with later parts of the session, and also in drawing conclusions about clients' habits, opinions, worldviews, and actions, which all at the end helps in guiding clients towards solutions. At this point I shall remind of a Harteloh's claim that philosophical counselling can also be a written dialogue, not only a spoken one (Harteloh, 2010). Facebook chat is a good solution with clients who are shy or have some sort of social anxiety. Also, it is a good technical solution for clients who live far away or have technical problems with video-call platforms. Latest developments in technology are enabling even the use of mobile devices, now available at the market, for written communication in philosophical counseling.

Presented case of Facebook chat philosophical counselling also showed some disadvantages of that model. First, counsellor cannot see client's non-verbal reactions to questions, which are usually very helpful in counselling process. Counsellor also does not have client's full attention, as client can be distracted by events taking place in his physical surrounding. Finally, counsellor does not have full control over the counselling process, so clients can easily manipulate their answers. That is not primarily a problem for a counsellor but for clients who are then dealing with the issue in less efficient way. The time lost in explaining to clients that they should keep their answers short and conceptualize them would be better spent in dealing with their problem.

In a second case, face-to-face communication with Ingrid, her experience was different from the one of Dramatis. Ingrid was not at home, she drove to the session to be there on time, she faced the counsellor in person, and she was not in the control of the session in a way the counsellor was. During our dialogue, Ingrid was calm, self-confident, and focused on her problem. She has already tried to find a solution. She was troubled when she was confronted with new situations or problems; nevertheless she tried to overcome them. During our dialogue, Ingrid did not break any rule we agreed upon before the session,

but she often looked in the direction of my notes. Other than that, our conversation was like a friendly chat.

Comparison between first two cases shows that face-to-face counselling enabled counsellor greater control over the session – here the counsellor creates the atmosphere in the comfort of his office, and he/she is in charge for setting up the rules (giving short answers, yes/no answers when needed, insisting on arguments, concepts, and so on). During the session, he/she can remind the client of any rule that he/she feels is being violated in any way. Counsellor can influence clients when they go too far in their answers, change the topic, intentionally avoid answering, or intervene when they are scared of answering. Counsellor can see clients' reactions, hear their answers and act accordingly when they occur, saving time and energy of counselling for more important issues.

The same goes for the third case, with Nikolina. Nikolina had the same comfort of her home as Dramatis did, but concerning the control she was in same position as Ingrid. Any kind of video-call counselling is good for clients – they feel more relaxed and comfortable, as well as for the counsellors – they have better control over the dialogue. The same as any form of Internet communication, video-calls are good way of communication in philosophical counselling. They are convenient for clients, since they do not have to travel and could be located worldwide (naturally, the counselor and the client have to speak the same language). This model of counselling is more affordable for clients, less stressful, and provides the clients with the same results. At the same time, it opens wider market for the counsellor. It is a challenging task as it may include dealing with different cultures and worldviews, but simultaneously it offers different perspectives in approaching the problem. As mentioned earlier, video-call philosophical counselling gives the counsellor control over the situation and information on client's reactions – both verbal and non-verbal communication play an important role in philosophical counselling. That leaves us with a new question – does philosophical counselling have to provide convenience for clients or for counsellors?

## Conclusion

Some might argue that we should abandon Facebook chat philosophical counselling because video-call is better method for both the counsellor and the client. However, what should be taken into account

is that some clients prefer complete anonymity, some might feel scared before cameras, some are shy, and some might not feel comfortable with saying their problems out loud. On the other hand, some clients feel better when they speak with their counsellor face-to-face – maybe they feel more confident, or they could say more. Regardless of clients' reasons, their wishes should be respected. Since the client's well-being is of the outmost importance to counsellor, he/she should take into account client's preferences regarding the means of communication. Counsellor should be open to clients' suggestions and respect their wishes, so they could express, define, and understand themselves with the final goal of solving their problem or at least finding the best way of coping with it.

For the future research I intend to test different communication models with different clients. The clients themselves can also suggest their preferred means of communication. Valid results could be reached only after the research was conducted over a longer period of time and with more clients. During past decade, philosophers engaged in discussions over definition and methods of philosophical counselling. Consensus is still not reached, which does not surprise given the fact that the debate on definition and methods of philosophy itself is still ongoing. Philosophical counselling as such has many perspectives which demand our attention, with the final goal of improved communication with clients. New means of communication can provide new counselling methods, improve the practice of counselling, and offer something new to clients while keeping the same quality to which they were accustomed in past.

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## KOMUNICIRATI FILOZOFSKO SAVJETOVANJE

Zoran Kojčić

*Sredstva komunikacije znatno su se promijenila tijekom posljednjih dvaju desetljeća. Uz uobičajenu komunikaciju licem u lice, novi oblici komuniciranja (npr. besplatni servisi za video-razgovore ili društvene mreže) danas su integrirani u svakodnevni život. U ovome radu istražit ću mogućnosti koje novi oblici komunikacije pružaju za praksu filozofskoga savjetovanja. Prezentirat ću tri primjera: savjetovanje licem u lice, online savjetovanje posredstvom Skype platforme i savjetovanje kroz Facebook chat. U zadnjemu dijelu rada i temeljem iskustava iz ovih primjera, istražit ću prednosti i mane svake od navedenih metoda, pokazati koja od njih najviše odgovara savjetniku a koja klijentu, s ciljem doprinosa daljnjem razvoju profesije filozofskoga savjetovanja i načina na koji se ono doživljava u javnosti.*

***Ključne riječi:*** *filozofsko savjetovanje, komunikacija, video razgovor, chat*