The Modal World of Integrative Philosophical Counselling (II)

Introductory

In this second part of the special volume on philosophical counselling, another seven papers come together to complete the picture of the newly emerged field which, in an important sense, reaffirms and rearticulates an ancient way of conducting psychotherapy with the aid of philosophy.

Most traditional psychotherapists will readily point out that the very substance of their school or method is philosophy, and that, while psychotherapeutic intervention importantly rests on communication skills and interpretation of personal experience, its ideational substance, the content of the discussion which makes up therapy, is predominantly philosophy. There is a deep reason behind this, namely the original intention of philosophy, which was so poignantly elaborated by Pierre Hadot, to influence personal and social lives.[1]

We find ourselves torn between two fundamental conditions, namely what Heidegger calls the everyday, familiar and at least seemingly secure *everydayness* of our lives, on the one hand, and "the nothing of uncanniness uncovered by anxiety" which arises when we "fall under the spell of the world" and become "dispersed into it through diversions".[2] It is in the diversions, in which we lose ourselves, where the contact between our experiences and decisions, on the one hand, and our innermost values, on the other, is so blurred or severed that we seek philosophical and psychotherapeutic guidance. This context makes it clear just how much the two are identical: philosophical leadership and psychotherapeutic help.

Much of philosophical work with the clients involves fighting diversion. The mere act of prioritising goals leads to more focused decision-making and better life structure. However, just as Heidegger believed, introducing structure and eliminating diversions is difficult to achieve, though simple to conceptualise. It requires both cerebral and corporeal efforts. This is why philosophical practice is not an exclusively cerebral or theoretical activity: it is equally a form of training and development of self-discipline, which in the medium term will lead to the achievement of greater aesthetic goals in life and thus to a lifting of the overall quality of life. It is this effect that ancient philosophers considered the primary "therapeutic" effects of philosophy. When all of the traditional psychotherapeutic "techniques" are deconstructed to their

1 Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a way of life: spiritual exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, transl. Michael Chase, Blackwell, Oxford 1995.

2 Martin Heidegger, *The concept of time*, transl. Ingo Farin, Continuum Press, New York 2011, p. 43.

very core, they leave the identical content: attempts to structure priorities, introduce greater tranquillity and focus, and lift the level of joy in everyday life. However, contrary to many approaches in traditional psychotherapy, which describe themselves as "psychodynamic" or motivational, which focus on achieving an emotional "closure" or "catharsis", philosophical counselling retains a vision of the necessity of an epistemic outlook and a cognitive benefit from key experiences. This means that therapeutic intervention will not tend to have lasting effects if it is exhausted in a catharsis or emotional lightening of existential experience: every transformative experience, which ideally arises in therapy, must be followed by a cognitively significant elaboration and the drawing of conclusions in order to become a resource for the future. This theme was elaborated at length by Irvin Yalom and Molyn Leszcz in their existential reception of group psychotherapy.[3]

The epistemology of philosophical counselling comes close to an epistemology of life in general because the insights generated through the epistemic tools involved in counselling, once they are cognitively encapsulated in the mnemonic devices of generalisations arising from the counselling experience, lead to a better understanding of our existence. This has several important practical dimensions, all of which are associated with Heidegger's distinction between everydayness and anxiety as an outcome of distraction. Many clients come to philosophical counselling for the same reasons they attend standard psychotherapy, and one of the most common complaints is heightened anxiety. Understanding anxiety is thus key to a great proportion of the overall success of both psychotherapy and philosophical counselling, and philosophy has much to offer in that respect.

Most interpretations of anxiety depict this experience as primarily emotional, namely as a distressful situation where one has difficulty controlling one's emotions, particularly generalised fear. While "proper", specific fear is often seen as arising from a specific cause (fear of something); anxiety is sometimes described as "generalised fear" from the unknown, or a sense of dread or uncertainty associated with life in general. Thus, anxiety is a debilitating state of mind that typically leads to lowered functionality and the sufferer's quality of life. However, the cognitive aspects of anxiety, which Heidegger, among others, highlights, are usually neglected in standard psychotherapy. This primarily relates to the aspect of anxiety where it arises from a lack of singular focus and immersion in numerous distractions which obscure our vision of the main goal, problem or task in life. Thus anxiety can be seen as the emotional equivalent of a cognitively blurred vision of life. Conversely, the clearer the picture of life, the less anxiety there is likely to be.

A philosophical clarification of values, priorities and tasks seems to be the logical antidote to anxiety. It has been treated so throughout the history of "therapeutic" uses of philosophy, from the ancient schools of Epicureanism and Stoicism to today's schools of critical thinking.

One of the initial interventions in distress, when a person undergoes philosophical counselling, is to create conditions for a critical discussion of one's situation: such a discussion generates a sense of control of one's circumstances, or at least of one's subjective experience of life, and thus empowers the interlocutor to address their difficulties more productively. There is a hidden cognitive dimension in this intervention, which is equally applicable to treating anxiety: the clearer the vision of one's difficulties and the options to address them, the less anxiety is associated with the situation.

It seems that anxiety is connected with powerlessness, and the sense of empowerment is linked with an ideational projection of solutions to problematic situations.

No matter how difficult a particular set of circumstances might be for a person, ideas about potential solutions will lower the stress associated with the difficulties and increase a sense of optimism and empowerment. Thus one of the key emphases of integrative psychotherapy, besides establishing a critical discussion with the client, is to open up a horizon of potential interpretations of the situation and, consequently, potential solutions.

The therapeutic effect on emotions comes naturally after a "theory" of the problem is developed. Freud used to call psychosis a "mistaken theory of reality", which is methodologically the same as a "healthy" theory, however, the difference between the psychotic's theory of reality and that of the therapist is that the latter is shared by the majority or all other people, while the psychotic is often the only person subscribing to their theory.

An important aspect of this view is that the theory itself, even when it is a psychotic one, stabilises the person. A psychotic set of ideations compensates the person's emotions. The decompensation, or the falling apart of the person's "world" of experience, where intensive medication and often hospitalisation is required, occurs when the compensatory force of the theory, or ideation, is no longer able to hold together the raw experiences which the person cannot symbolically metabolise.

Similarly, the development of a "theory" of the situation, which is the person's complaint in psychotherapy or counselling, compensates the anxiety that follows a sense of powerlessness that typically accompanies such situations. This is why frequent arguments to the effect that practical philosophy, including philosophical counselling, should draw less on "theory" and more on "experience" are unfounded, given that in many cases, it is exactly the theory that makes for a change in emotional experience. This linkage between theory and emotions has been long forgotten and neglected, and it is one of the main achievements of philosophical practice that it is reaffirming this interface of theory and practice and bringing it back to the fore in discussions about the therapeutic role of ideas and critical conversations, both in psychotherapy and in philosophical counselling.

Put more radically: one wonders, given the perspective, whether there is any actual difference between psychotherapy and philosophical counselling. More precisely, could it be that *psychotherapy, of whatever tradition and school, is inevitably philosophical counselling*?

Freud's concept of theory as a worldview and psychosis as a theory, combined with the empirical insights that the more theory there is in interpreting and understanding life experience, the more bearable that experience becomes and is followed by less anxiety, suggests that therapy is theory. However, much of the so-called psychotherapeutic intervention in acute crises is putatively aimed at controlling the destructive effect, reducing suffering and thus "helping" the client. The problem with such exclusively psychodynamic ideas (it is worth remembering that Freud is also classified as a "psychodyna-

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Irvin Yalom, Molyn Leszcz, *The theory and practice of group psychotherapy*, Basic Books, New York 2005.

mist", although he claimed that theory is at the centre of our mental health and illness alike), is that the value of psychotherapy is extremely limited without turning experience into mnemonic devices to address similar experiences in the future. At the same time, the ability to condense experience into general principles, and use these principles as mnemonic devices to deal with similar situations in the future, is one of the very definitions of theory.

Most scientific theories have evolved from other theories or sets of expectations from the like application of like principles to like situations. In many cases, the old theory did not work, but it gave rise to new experiences, which suggested a different theory. Kuhn's idea of "scientific revolutions" is based on this principle of testing old theories until they fail, where the actual failure of the test is the most productive situation for science because new theories spring from failed experiments with old theories.[4]

If theory is at the core of managing life issues, as Freud believed, then every psychotherapy is based on theory as long as it results in lasting mnemonic tools for similar future situations. Thus every psychotherapy is a philotherapy, with the difference that psychotherapy may not be aware of its philosophical roots and nature, while philotherapy would, then, be a philosophically aware psychotherapy. This assumption is confirmed by experience, where it is often very difficult to draw a clear empirical boundary between a psychotherapeutic and a philotherapeutic session, for the questions, the relationship between the therapist, or counsellor, on the one hand, and the client, or interlocutor, on the other, seem the same. All of the traditionally recognised important phenomena which occur between the client and the psychotherapist also occur between the client and the philotherapist: transfer and countertransfer, for example.

One of the important ways in which the philotherapist will likely use the transfer is to educate the client and lead them in the direction of critical re-examination of their habitual models of thinking, interpreting the reality and decision-making. This is fundamentally the substance of philosophical education with a practical focus. Thus it could be argued that the content of psychotherapy as much as of philotherapy is philosophical education, and the difference between the two is that philotherapy does the same job with a more explicit and philosophically elaborate focus and breadth of methodology.

An example might be in order here. One of the most commonly used methods of psychotherapy is Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT). Some proponents of CBT argue that it is based on the philosophical tradition of Stoicism. Its modern emphasis is on identifying patterns of decision-making and action which, as habits, govern our behaviour, and the therapeutic focus is on working consciously to change these patterns to more appropriate and productive ones in the person's particular life circumstances.

The question that poses itself in changing the pattern is about the requirements this process normally presupposes. There is a reason for the existing patterns. They had likely served the person well for a long time. The usefulness of the old patterns had engendered confidence in the person. Thus, changing the patterns leads to a decreased sense of the self, lowering the overall quality of life and self-assurance, and consequently, it is met with resistance. This is why it is never easy to change.

To overcome the resistance to change, the person must adopt new vistas on one's life priorities and one's very identity. This is a philosophical task that typically becomes accomplished through a philosophical discussion.

Normative force arises from cognitive insights, and such insights require a value change in order to motivate behaviour change. Thus, it could be argued, any counselling in the way of psychotherapy is fundamentally a philosophical counselling, and at the same time, every therapeutic intervention with the aim to change the person (and allegedly this is the aim of all therapy) is fundamentally an intervention on the level of values. Thus CBT, focused as it is on the change of patterns of interpreting reality and making decisions, is necessarily about values and rests on successful philosophical arguments about the very necessity of change and ways to put that change into effect.

It is very difficult, if not impossible, to conduct a change of one's patterns without exhibiting an appropriate degree of philosophical curiosity about what is there as an alternative to the current patterns. This is a *par excellence* perspective of modal logic as it was outlined in the introduction to the first part of this special volume on philosophical counselling. To even grasp the presence of various modal worlds, which exist at the same time as possibilities that are only a decision, or "modal jump", away from our current choices and situations, one must first entertain philosophical curiosity which goes beyond what most people would consider "realism", or "being realistic", and what is in fact being closed to options other than the current one.

To go back to Galtung's distinction between the "real" and the "irreal" but possible, the difference between the current (the real) and the not-yet current (irreal) patterns of action or decisions is minuscule. Both modal worlds are there in proximity. One is actual, but only because we have chosen it to be so. The other could just as easily be actual, if we chose it to be so. The ontological difference between the two is at the same time immense (one, strictly speaking, "exists", and the other one, strictly speaking, does not), and exceptionally small. The difference is existentially enormous because of the magnitude of experience; however, it is actually almost negligible in light of what is required to completely change the existential experience. Again, an example will likely make this clearer.

Some time ago, I met a young judge by the name of Ivana. She had just been appointed to the bar and tried to balance her sense of justice with an overexposed focus on her interest. All new judges are appointed to a limited term of office, and they are given permanent status once their work during the initial three years is evaluated. Ivana was concerned about receiving high evaluations, and for that purpose, was very sensitive to political influences on the court. She faced proceedings where she could not use judicial practice because the facts of the case were starkly at odds with what would be the ordinary decision-making in such cases. Her legal perspective should have been clear, as the law and the process conducted that far pointed to only one outcome. However, she did not want to antagonise the political powers because one of the parties to the case was a highly exposed representative of the ruling regime in a country officially described as a "hybrid regime" between democracy and autocracy.

Ivana's situation was difficult because she could not follow the expectations of the political regime without paying the price in terms of her reputation as an honest judge. Ruling in favour of the member of the ruling clique would

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Thomas Kuhn, *The structure of scientific revolutions*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1970.

tarnish her as a lawyer. However, at the same time, it would guarantee her appointment to a permanent judicial position. On the other hand, ruling in a principled and legally sound way, thus likely against the interests of the member of the ruling party, would increase her credibility in her profession and might contribute to her career more in the long run. This prospect requires courage and some risk-taking.

Ivana's situation at the time was one where she openly complained at hearings. She considered the case to be her "hardest" one, and openly stated that she needed someone outside the court to tell her how to rule. In itself, such a statement was scandalous for a judge, of course. However, Ivana was torn between two difficult scenarios, both with unwanted, uncertain consequences for her long term future.

Ivana's situation bordered on nightmarish because the country where she was a judge was in political turmoil, and political pressures on the judiciary were well known and publicised problem. Thus the media had taken an interest in corruption in the judiciary, and the opposition parties were promising, at the time when she was due to make a decision, to establish special prosecutorial offices for corruption in the public sector, including the judiciary. Thus her actions were likely to cause significant public relations consequences because if she acted in the interests of the member of the ruling party, this would be illegal. The situation threatened her main career prospects. The difference between the 'real' situation in which Ivana found herself and an "irreal" one in which her tension would go down significantly was existentially major: Ivana felt the burden but appeared unable to muster the knowledge and courage to break out of the predicament. She probably wished she was not in this situation in the first place.

However, at the same time, this situation was only negligibly different from what a productive and reasonable outcome would have looked like. If Ivana had been able to see that her situation was one of at least two different modal worlds which coexisted at the same time, where the decision to act legally and properly, based on the facts in the proceedings, was far less dramatic than it seemed to her at first sight, she could have, quite easily, made a "jump" from one modal world to another, where she would have ruled legally, concentrated on justifying the decision in the ruling, and portrayed herself as independent, thus at the same time fending off any further political consequences of her actions.

Acting outside of principle is what invites political consequences. Conversely, acting in a principled way may actually protect the person from any political fallout because it makes available to the person the arguments and resources to defend her actions. This was practically a very small and easy to make decision, which would have opened up a passage to a different, calmer and safer modal world for Ivana. The reason it appeared difficult to Ivana to make the transition was that she had not been educated how to make it: she had grown up in a fundamentally corrupt environment where cultivating unprincipled friendships and alliances had been seen as crucially instrumental for the achievement of one's professional goals. Thus she found it hard to understand that the very key assumption on which this type of judicial upbringing was based was mistaken: while in corrupt circumstances acting in a corrupt way may indeed help one to advance one's career, in the same circumstances, *acting in a principled and legal way may also help* one's career. This seems paradoxical, but in the described case, what is at stake is a situation where either decision will have

its benefits, where the corrupt decision's benefits are short term ones, and the principled decision's benefits are long term, with the possibility that even a short term fallout might be prevented or fended off if the decision was handled well. If Ivana had had a wise advisor or personal counsellor, she would likely have handled the situation both honourably and beneficially for her career. However, as it stood, Ivana was likely to fail the test and join the ranks of corruption in the degraded judiciary she was a part of.

Similar situations exist in counselling in cases where emotional relationships are at stake. Often an absorption with one's recognition in the eyes of another leads to confrontational situations which, in some cases, can last for years, while they could be swapped for a different modal world almost in an instant. In many couples counselling cases, people are absorbed by thoughts about infidelity, or by the betrayal of some other kind, or with low self-worth, all of which make up for low quality of life and unpleasant existential experience.

Often the mere change in thought patterns, the abandonment of ideas about chastity, respect or belonging, which may not be warranted given the other person's life, upbringing or simply choices made previously, opens up a way, and a fairly broad and comfortable one, into different experiences and often a better quality of the relationship.

On the one hand, the requirements to open such inroads into improvement seem major: one must go beyond one's values, and values make up our identity. On the other hand, in practice, this is really not such as major work as it seems when looked upon conceptually: going beyond one's values in an instant is a matter of more or less instantaneous decision with few major consequences for whom one feels one is.

Sometimes, in couples counselling, not acting on a difficulty or simply ignoring the problem while working on other issues that contribute to mutuality and togetherness in the relationship is the best way to preserve the relationship. This is easier to understand if it is conceptualised in terms of modal logic. *Switching one modal world for another is not "doing nothing"*: it may require not acting externally, not initiating a difficult discussion or the process of "cleaning up" the relationship. Such cleaning processes often lead to escalations in misunderstandings and cognitively, as well as affectively, hinder, rather than facilitating a resolution.

The principle in conflict theory, again advanced by Galtung, and based on modal logic, that every conflict has several different layers, one of which, typically an undercurrent of the visible conflict, is the layer of cooperation, is an example of the insights which may open up inroads into more collaborative decision-making.

Even when people conduct active conflicts, they collaborate on some level. The more aware they are of the fact that there are mutual understandings on which they rely, based on which some cooperation takes place, at least in tacit, invisible communications and mutual expectations, the abler they are in using the cooperation layer to address other layers of the conflict.

One of the epistemic phenomena involved in conducting a conflict productively is not cerebral, but somatic. It concerns the way in which we feel in the conflict: there is usually a manner of running the conflict which one could, on some level, and to some extent, enjoy. In choosing between whether to address a romantic relationship conflict by confronting the other person repeatedly about issues that have proven resilient to rational resolution, or to keep the conflict simmering on a backburner whilst pursuing the other, more

satisfying aspects of the relationship (which can also be very toxic in the long term), one is often best aided by paying attention to how one feels concerning either option.

Sometimes, the actual outcome of a conflict between two people is not all there is to a conflict: in marital conflicts, children are important stakeholders, and while keeping a low-level conflict active without escalating it through attempts at a resolution might not be the best option for the two people directly involved in the conflict, it may well be the best available option for the children.

Arguably we all live in multiple conflicts, and we survive by maintaining them on a low level: our conflicts with superiors at work whom we dislike, or who dislike us, conflicts with the political system or government we disapprove of, sometimes very strongly and acutely, conflicts with peers or neighbours, all of these conflicts are part of our everyday experience, and we do not feel that we must "resolve them". In fact, we learn how to live with the conflicts and even how to enjoy some of them, at least temporarily. It thus may seem merely a construct that we are conditioned to try and decisively "resolve" other conflicts, including ones concerning our romantic relationships.

The epistemology of conflicts appears to be blocked in situations where we are under pressure, mainly cultural and peer pressure, to face the conflict head-on. Learning to apply the same epistemology to culturally-induced acute conflicts as we do to most other conflicts we live with, including a somatic epistemology just described, is part of counselling.

I once had a client, Justine, whose husband had found a lover no less frivolously than in a flower shop just outside their building. Thus the husband would spend time with his new partner who worked at the flower shop, while the wife and the children would walk past the flower shop every day.

My client decided to separate, and the husband moved out of their apartment. In a highly conflictual culture with regard to emotional relationships, all the conditions were there for an extremely toxic eruption of confrontation. However, the couple relied on an undercurrent of cooperation and mutual attraction. Justine let her husband keep a key to their apartment, under the excuse that he would walk the dog for her every morning. Thus the husband came to the apartment every day, saw his children, walked the dog, and after a while, they even went on holidays together. After one of the summer holidays that they had spent together, Justine said to me that what continued to connect them was their "sex life".

Any experienced counsellor will understand that the described situation is an extremely dangerous one: where the sexual attraction between a couple is preserved, they spend considerable time together, and there is a third person involved, the potential for violent conflict is very pronounced. Such situations consume a large amount of energy and maintain a high level of toxicity over a long time. The more the two people are directed towards each other, the more they continue to be attracted to one another, while their relationship is hindered by a parallel relationship between one of them and a third person, the more potential there is for deep-seated resentments, which may manifest later, and may lead to either open or concealed attempts to obstruct the other person's life, choices, or even health and wellbeing. Such cases are frequent and well documented in counselling practice. I was thus extremely wary about this situation. However, Justine's choices turned out to be perfect for her children. She had spared them a major loss of security associated with

the family, reduced the everyday hostility with her husband through their particular way of maintaining intimate encounters, and reduced the potential of her husband's other relationship to gain strength and pull her husband fully away from the family. By playing this complicated, dangerous and, frankly, ethically suspect game, she managed to evade most any functional complications typically expected in such situations. While she and her husband did not eventually come back together, they managed to establish a collaborative relationship whose boundaries remained unclear to me, but which obviously worked for Justine and her kids.

On a principled level, no school of psychotherapy would encourage such an approach to marital infidelity. However, the consequences, in this case, of a "principled" approach would likely have been far more traumatic, in fact quite disastrous, for the children and for Justine and her husband, compared to what they achieved by managing their conflict in their own way.

Justine was aware of the other modal world, which, while culturally highly discouraged and conceptually removed from her in her social situation, was only a small step away: it required some alternative thinking and a willingness to make decisions which, in practice, at the time, were relatively small ones, yet which allowed both Justine and her husband a successful "jump" to a different, "irreal" modality, where the relationship was far more acceptable for everyone directly concerned (themselves and their children), under the circumstances which were not ideal.

One of the most common questions that people ask when they come for counselling is how one can possibly know what kind of "jump" to a different modal world one is to execute. This comes down to the question about the epistemic reliability of our intuitions or insights gained in everyday situations.

It is a crucial part of counselling to point out to the client the various epistemic tools that might help identify the alternatives and present them in their almost-immediacy in decision-making situations. Sometimes all that is required is encouraging trust in one's somatic sensations, and sometimes more needs to be done by elucidating the theory behind such sensations. In other cases, a sense of value-priorities must be developed, and more often than not, this requires understanding ways to familiarise ourselves with our own values. One of the best epistemic tools for identifying own values is paying attention to emotions: there is a general law governing emotions that the more important the value in our value system, and the more radically a life experience affirms that value, the more intense pleasant emotion will arise. Conversely, the higher up a value is in our value system and the more intensely an experience militates against that value, the more intense the unpleasant emotion we will experience. Sometimes such simple regularities associated with how we process raw experience allow conclusions about ourselves that we would otherwise have difficulty arriving at.

All skills that include the development of epistemic tools for self-knowledge, decision-making, and effective negotiation or communication constitute the intervention strategies both in psychotherapy and in philosophical counselling. They are conceptual perspectives from a philosophical standpoint, and at the same time, therapeutic tactics in psychotherapy. This principle is compatible with the idea that every psychotherapy is philosophical counselling.

The seven papers which follow elaborate the various aspects of the principles here briefly hinted at, and more. They delve into some of the more complex issues of philosophical counselling, and into the actual experience of philo-

sophical counselling in its similarities to (and differences from) other relevant helping strategies. They also discuss, directly or indirectly, some of the key tenets of any counselling, such as meaning.

If an introduction's aim is to make what comes after it more accessible to the reader, there are then natural limitations to the introduction, where it should not purport to substitute the actual substance of what it introduces the reader to. That is where an introduction must stop.

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