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Contemplations on knowing in philosophical counselling

SUMMARY

Abstracted from experiences of philosophical counselling, which involve developing a deeper understanding of oneself and others, this paper discusses the critical moments when the counsellor and counsellee question their knowledge claims. Often, knowledge of the self and others is complementary, facilitating self-reflection and learning. Similar to other counselling contexts, philosophical counselling presupposes the counsellor's expertise and the counsellee's openness to change. In this process, people often feel exposed and vulnerable before they feel empowered. Furthermore, since philosophical counselling aims to enable the counsellee to live a contemplative life, counselling becomes a ground for constant negotiation about self and others, their identities, definitions, and transformations. Inevitably, in this counselling process, one enters someone's personal space, defined by the boundaries one draws around oneself. Although the counselling space is deliberate, entering the personal space may sometimes feel unwelcome. This act of overstepping, shifting, blurring, or breaking the boundaries may be understood as a transgression. Finally, the paper highlights the underlying philosophical assumptions that make the counselling process possible, discusses perspectives that may not regard transgression as an issue in philosophical counselling, and identifies conditions that may make transgression relevant for it.

Keywords: counselling ethics, knowing as transgression, ethics of difference, self in counselling, philosophical practice.

INTRODUCTION

Philosophical counselling emphasises the importance of philosophical ideas, concepts, and processes in comprehending and addressing life challenges. It draws on the wisdom of philosophical traditions and aims to help individuals lead more

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purposeful and fulfilling lives. In this attempt, philosophical counselling becomes a space of constant negotiation in the pursuit of self-understanding, and questions the very essence of our being: the core of who we are, how we perceive ourselves in relation to others, and the potential for transformation in both ourselves and others. This essay will explore the dynamics of entering a counsellee's personal space, a territory defined by the boundaries they draw for others.

There are multiple ways to understand the nature and formation of self and identity (Merry, 2010). Some thinkers conceptualise a personal identity (Baker, 2000), while others propose multiple or plural identities (Gaither, 2020); some view identity as psychological (Erikson, 1968), while others consider it socio-political (Appiah, 2005). Similarly, some conceive of the self as a construction (Gergen, 1991), whereas others consider it an integral aspect of one's existence (Strawson, 2009). Nevertheless, both self and identity make sense only in a context. They do not remain confined to an individual; they also include how the self relates to others. The relationship between the self and the other makes it intersubjective.

Philosophical counselling happens within this intersubjective space, as a collaborative exploration of life's profound questions. The counsellor acts as a guide, facilitating discussions on meaning, purpose, and core values. Inevitably, this delves into the counsellee's deepest thoughts, experiences, and vulnerabilities. As these are unpacked, understanding who they are and their identity becomes central. The counsellee also attempts to gauge the counsellor's position and questions it. Here, the negotiation begins.

Let us consider the case of Maya, a 35-year-old university teacher who recently secured a permanent position after working on a temporary basis for eight years. Despite her professional accomplishments, Maya experiences profound dissatisfaction and confusion regarding her identity and purpose. She was raised in a family that prioritised monetary success and adherence to societal expectations, which often influenced her choices. Now, she struggles to balance her passion for teaching with the pressure to meet her parents' traditional expectations, navigate a politically charged work environment, and cope with a sense of mediocrity. Additionally, Maya is experiencing disillusionment in her nine-year relationship, especially as she plans to marry the same person.

Maya has internalised many individuals, metaphorically present alongside the counsellor, including her parents, partner, and colleagues. These people represent relationships, societal expectations, and cultural norms. It is essential to examine how these external influences impact the Maya's identity, thereby adding another layer to the discussion. The first need here is for Maya, or any other counsellee, to experience a safe space where they may express themselves without judgment, with trust and confidentiality.

The counselee's subjective world is not immediately accessible to the counsellor. Along with a safe environment, counsees need personal space to explore their experiences independently and reconcile the opinions of significant others with their needs, desires, and values. Personal space can be understood as the invisible barrier surrounding an individual, delineating a physical and emotional comfort zone. It encompasses physical, emotional, and psychological dimensions and serves as a protective barrier, enabling individuals to safeguard their inner thoughts, emotions, and identities from external influences and potential harm. A safe space is also needed for the counselee to reflect on their attempts at identity development. In the current ethos, where no identity seems worthy after a time, the counselee's inner world is always in flux. Our notions of individuality, sociality, ethics, and commitments are constantly changing, with an increasing emphasis on transience, desire, and utility over permanence, contentment, and value. In the present digital age, despite increased interaction between people, there is a corresponding decline in connection (Palese, 2013). There is a growing alienation between the individual and their self, others, and society.

Exploring the counselee's personal space requires respecting a metaphorical boundary that shields their inner world. In Maya's case, the details of her subjective life are still unfurling; however, this process happens at her pace. It took her months to become comfortable discussing the complicated nature of her relationship and reflecting on her assumptions about herself and her significant other. The fear of being judged, the acknowledgement of her contradictions, the realisation of her patterns, and the recognition of gaps in her assumptions helped her, but only when she felt that all of this was part of the journey towards self-understanding. Also, the process is not a problem-solving exercise; rather, it is a healing process.

Therefore, as long as the counselee is comfortable opening up to the counsellor, the process proceeds smoothly. However, challenges emerge when counselling pauses because the counselee is uncomfortable opening up. In such moments, the intended safe space of counselling can sometimes feel like an intrusion. The counselee may perceive the counsellor as transgressing those boundaries by encouraging introspection and potentially challenging long-held beliefs, particularly when the counselee feels vulnerable or guarded. This tension between coming together in a relationship and needing some space to be with oneself is conceptualised by Buber (1957, p. 97) as the dialectic between distance and relation. The primal setting is of distance, in which the 'other' is a radical 'other'. From this primal setting, one moves towards "entering into relation" with 'others'. These two settings are complementary and require one another to be meaningful. This dialectic also plays out in a counselling setting, where the counsellor and counselee enter into relation at times and, at other times, find each other at a distance. In Buber's terminology, transgression is when the counselee is at a distance, and the counsellor is trying to enter into a relation or vice versa.

Thinking in terms of otherness, a reference is often made to Levinas's writings, who argues that the 'other' is always a radical 'other', and the self is responsible for the 'other'. This relationship between the self and the other is asymmetrical, and nothing can be expected from the 'other' (Levinas, 1979). Buber and Levinas have both been important thinkers in the field of counselling, and, depending on the context, counsellors utilise their ideas. (For example, for a discussion of Buber's ideas, see Katz (1975); for Levinas's ideas, see Loewenthal (2022)).

In situations where one needs to let the "other" be, then Buber's distance or Levinas' idea of radical otherness of the other makes sense. For example, Raj struggles with feelings of inadequacy, and delving into their childhood experiences or societal pressures is perceived as an intrusion. Similarly, although Manzar questions their religious beliefs, they hesitate to explore these doubts with a counsellor of a different faith, fearing judgment. Such feelings lead to resistance, which can also be understood as resistance to transgression or crossing a limit or boundary, whether moral, logical, or physical.

Furthermore, there are moments when the counsellor must rely on their expertise to make sense of a situation rather than on the conversation with the counselee. Take, for example, Jay, who sits slumped in his chair, makes minimal eye contact, and responds to questions with one-word answers. When asked how his week was, he said, "Fine, I guess. Nothing happened. I do not have anything to discuss today". In such a session, the counsellor may perceive the counselee as defensive or avoidant when talking about their issues. However, they may be tired and hopeless about engaging in the session for any significant period. In such common situations, assuming either way might lead the counsellor to ascribe a false mental state to the counselee. Here, the counsellor's judgement becomes more important than the actual state of mind. Thus, the counsellor's meaning of knowing is essential here. However, how does one differentiate between a conjecture and an imposed interpretation? Here, rather than focusing on a single criterion, one must focus on the engagement that happens between the counsellor and the counselee around the contested knowledge claim. The knowledge is constructed between them, rather than being professed by either of them.

The meaning is not predetermined. For example, Gadamer (2004) regards language as the living ground of human existence and human understanding. He considers language not merely a tool for conveying meanings predetermined for the receiver, but a means of communication between the author/speaker and the reader/audience. For Gadamer (2004, p. 387), in every true conversation, "each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says". This conversation becomes dialogical through reciprocity between the participants, or between the speaker and the interpreter. Thus, in a therapeutic relationship, the

knowledge of the ‘other’ becomes “an inward expression of our distinctively human strength, and ignorance means a stimulus, not a threat” (Hiltner, 1950, p. 35). A genuine understanding arises only when one is willing to yield to the horizon of the other (Gadamer, 2004). However, knowledge is typically conceptualised as an arsenal to be used strategically to control something. Thus, transgression is understood as a violation of the rules. In psychotherapy, this discourse is mostly focused on the non-professional conduct on the part of the counsellor and/or the counselee, where transgression is “conceptualised on a continuum ranging from boundary crossings to boundary violations” (Fasasi & Olowu, 2013, p. 139). See also Chadda and Slonim (1998), Plaut (1997), and van Rijn (2020). For example, they range from accepting gifts to sexual intimacy with the counselee. Such conceptualisations are typically rooted in codes of conduct laid out for practitioners. However, the conceptualisation of transgression in the form of ‘knowing’ in this paper is mainly about the knowledge claims that counsellors make concerning the mental states of the counsees. Such claims of knowledge cannot be verified by reference to any code of conduct, but rather by reflecting on the dynamics of the therapeutic relationship and the interpersonal sharing that occurs within it. Mutual trust also plays an important role in knowledge, namely, the belief that the knowledge claims are being posited and challenged in good faith for the sole benefit of the counselee rather than for any other reason.

THE SHIFTING BOUNDARIES OF SELF

As a facilitator of self-discovery, the counsellor treads a delicate path. Their work often involves venturing into the counselee’s personal space. Although intended as a safe space for growth, this exploration can sometimes feel intrusive. The counsellor’s questioning of long-held beliefs or exploration of societal pressures that contribute to a counselee’s sense of self may be perceived as a transgression. However, how does the counselee or the counsellor decide whether the exploration is transgressive?

At a conceptual level, it is essential to distinguish between transgression and mere exploration. A child who accidentally enters a forbidden space, without knowing it is forbidden, is not transgressing; they are simply exploring. Similarly, if a counsellor asks an uncomfortable question without anticipating its impact on the counselee, it is an act of exploration that one may temporarily stop. However, when the counsellor intentionally asks the same uncomfortable question, it may constitute a transgression.

A transgression is an intentional act: an informed questioning of the boundaries themselves. Here, the counsellor recognises that the counselee is attempting to set a boundary but questions it. For example, Uma believes that she tries to live an authentic life. However, having experienced childhood sexual abuse, she often

questions her worth to her family and the world. She wonders ‘whether she is lovable or not’, ‘whether she should live or die’, and ‘what is the point of living when no one values her’. She wishes to be true to herself, but her sense of self is rooted in her traumatic experiences alone. When this is pointed out to her and questions are raised, she becomes physically agitated and angry, saying that her experiences should not be discounted. It took a lot of time for her to realise that the counsellor was not negating her experiences but only suggesting, in congruence with her desire to be authentic, that she does not decide her self-worth based on traumatic experiences alone.

This continuous process of contesting boundaries is what Foucault terms “non-positive affirmation” (Allan, 2008, p. 93), which demands openness on the part of the counselee to transgression as an openness to the ‘other’, the unfamiliar, and the different. It may be easier for the transgressor to expect this openness, but for the transgressed, this could be a difficult process. Therefore, some psychological counsellors argue that openness on the part of the counsellor facilitates the counselling process. To help the counselee feel reassured in being vulnerable, the counsellor may show some vulnerability of their own. This mutuality is more significant in philosophical counselling, where the process is dialogical, and the goal is to minimise the hierarchy between the counselee and the counsellor. Transgression in philosophical counselling is a form of humanistic resistance to rigid systems of thought and existence, a striving for a more contemplative life where one is open to examination, questioning, and critique.

However, transgression may become violence if it continues beyond the other person’s wishes; that is, critical questioning is acceptable only if the person being questioned permits it. Alternatively, the person being questioned is granting legitimacy to the questioning process rather than to the questioner. The legitimacy of the counsellor’s questioning is in the counselee’s acceptance of them, and the moment the counselee finds the process unacceptable, it must cease. However, can and should the therapeutic process follow the counselee’s wishes? Often, these ‘wishes’ emerge from a point of resistance and a false belief about oneself that one does not want to be disillusioned with. Thus, one must probably distinguish between decisions and wishes: decisions are relatively more rational, based on needs, and can be debated, whereas wishes are more emotional and may first be respected or accepted before being analysed. Without addressing resistance, questioning would have implicitly become imposing, which can indeed have negative consequences. An unsettling question might evoke discomfort, yet in a state of vulnerability, if someone receives advice shaped by another’s experiences or personal values, that can represent a violent transgression. For example, a counsellor with a failed marriage may suggest that the counselee’s efforts in their marital conflicts will not bear much fruit, and the conflict will end

in separation. Such a suggestion, which is rooted in the counsellor's experience, may negate the counselee's resolve to make their marriage work.

Another counselling dynamic that may become violent is the repetition of certain patterns, which can occur in both directions. Conversations can trend toward suggestiveness and become predetermined rather than genuinely dialogic. Should a counsellor adhere to a framework, there is a possibility that a counselee's repeated statements could elicit the same responses from the counsellor on multiple occasions. For example, Smriti, a 24-year-old graduate student, sought counselling to address workplace harassment and conflicted feelings about her career ambitions versus family expectations for marriage and children. The counsellor, holding strong feminist beliefs, consistently responded to Smriti's ambivalence with ideological interpretations, such as "That is internalised patriarchy speaking" or "You are allowing society to make you feel guilty for wanting what men take for granted". Over several sessions, whenever Smriti expressed complex feelings about gender roles, relationships, or career choices, the counsellor offered the same feminist framework. Smriti, in her vulnerable state and desire to please her counsellor, began parroting these phrases back: "I guess it is just internalised patriarchy" became her standard response to any conflicted feelings. If a counsellor's ideology surfaces, it becomes problematic, particularly if the counselee is wrestling with their own interpretation of feminism. In such a situation, the counselee may stop sharing perspectives that do not align with the counsellor's worldview, rather than exploring their authentic, contradictory feelings about gender, career, and family, transforming what should have been dialogic therapy into repetitive parroting. The counsellor transgresses, without the counselee being aware of it. This situation can be better understood through Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. For Bakhtin, life is not a "closed, univocal monologue in which only a single voice (perspective, theme, ideology, person) could be heard"; life is "an open dialogue characterised by multivocality and the indeterminacy inherent when those multiple voices interpenetrate" (Baxter, 2004, p. 108). Thus, the counsellor's action will be considered monological and hence restrictive for the counselee.

Thus, transgression is not simply the breaking of a boundary for its own sake; rather, it must serve a purpose within the counselling process. For instance, challenging a counselee's self-sabotaging beliefs, irrespective of their centrality in their lives, is a transgressive act that can lead to positive change. Not only in a counselling setting but also across socio-political contexts and throughout history, countless examples demonstrate that transgression, depending on context and intent, can be an act of courage, rebellion, or innovation hooks (1994) views transgression as a form of revolt and resistance against discrimination and injustice. Such an interpretation is more common in those settings where conventional norms are restrictive, for example, with people of colour, women, and other marginalised communities. Personal

transformations, like revolutions, are often fuelled by a desire to break free from restrictive boundaries and discover new ways of living. Rather than being restricted by the boundaries, a revolution is “an opportunity for discovering new ways of living, of bringing to the fore aspects of human creativity and hope that are usually suppressed” (Parker, 2007, p. 148). This desire for a new way of being cannot be imposed; rather, it can be stimulated and facilitated, but, above all, it needs to be sought.

It is often believed that when a counselee feels comfortable and safe, they may be more willing to explore sensitive topics, leading to transgressive discussions that push their comfort zones. However, the counselling process must continue even if the counselee feels uncomfortable, provided they are not violated. Here, Levinas’ (1979) idea of radical otherness is questioned: if otherness is considered unbridgeable, it may lead to rigid boundaries that may stifle open communication and impede the therapeutic process. Especially in counselling, these boundaries are not static; they are fluid and constantly in flux. They are neither purely subjective, since transgression requires limits set for others, nor purely objective, since the judgment of what constitutes a transgression is personal. Transgression is thus “a deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation” (Jenks, 2003, p. 2), a continual dance between challenging and creating new boundaries. Mutual transgression prompts a necessary conversation about connecting, confronting, and growing within the therapeutic space.

However, counsees who have experienced an event that has led them to doubt others’ intentions often resist transgressions more than others because they fear the same experience will recur. When they feel vulnerable, they resist transgression; when they feel excluded, they transgress in their effort to reformulate their identities. In other words, to be included in a process, people often challenge the foundations or justifications for the existing norms. This questioning occurs not only in intimate relationships but also in broader socio-political contexts. The act of transgression enables marginalised individuals to subvert norms in their struggle to reformulate identity. Foucault calls this sort of transgression ‘non-positive affirmation’. Therefore, conceptualising transgression is attractive, especially when theorising about the conditions of marginalised and oppressed groups, as it offers a form of recognition of their marginalisation (Allan, 2008, p. 31). The idea of transgression is inherently opposed to any monolithic formulation or unified structure. Since a boundary both includes and excludes, the illusion of a self-contained system, sooner or later, finds itself face-to-face with the ‘other’. The ‘other’ “exposes the impotence of an unambiguous, delineated and demarcated system” (Overlaet, 2010). It opens up spaces for revolution and resistance. Openness to transgression is inherently an openness to the “other”, the “unfamiliar” and the “different”. It is also a ray of hope towards a humanistic resistance to the mechanised ways of thinking and existence.

Kozielecki distinguishes between transgressive and ‘protective’ behaviours. Transgressive behaviour is “every kind of purposeful action that leads to an outcome exceeding the boundaries of the individual’s past achievements. In effect, the person moves beyond his or her ‘having’ or ‘being’” (Kozielecki, 1986, p. 89). In “protective” or “conserving” behaviour, the “self” chooses to adhere to established patterns and boundaries. It consists of the various “routine forms of behaviour which serve to preserve the status quo of the subject or restore the homeostasis of the system” (Kozielecki, 1986, p. 90). Thus, Kozielecki suggests that these boundaries are not always imposed by an external “other”; they can also be self-imposed limitations that prevent exploration. Especially in cultures where authority is valued, and submission is considered the norm.

Transgressions intend to catalyse positive change when the counselee is approached with sensitivity and collaboration. It is about “breaking new ground, promoting critical thinking, creating permissions that do not already exist...” (Simon, 2010, p. 309). By gently exploring the boundaries that contribute to troubling feelings, the counsellor might help the counselee discover the strength and resilience they did not know they possessed. In these shifting boundaries, identity negotiations fundamentally concern claims to knowledge about the self, the ‘other’ or both. In this process, the self attempts to know the “other”, and the “other” resists being defined in a particular way.

KNOWING AS TRANSGRESSION

Nevertheless, during their engagements, generally the counsellor, but occasionally the counselee, may assert some understanding of the other’s thoughts or actions. However, the other person may resist by questioning the legitimacy of the knowledge claim. In such moments, the most fundamental questions about philosophical counselling emerge: How can we justify claims to knowledge about the other? To what extent can we truly know another person? What are the ethical implications of pushing boundaries in the pursuit of knowledge?

The possibility that the self knows something about the ‘other’ that even the ‘other’ does not know also emerges in the famous ‘Johari window’¹, used as a training exercise in Human Resource Management. However, in such an organisational setting, the knowledge claim may not be as personal as in a counselling setting.

¹ The ‘Johari window’ consists of four quadrants. The Open Area consists of information about oneself that one knows and others also know. The Blind Spot contains characteristics and behavioural patterns that others perceive but one does not recognise in oneself. The Hidden Area encompasses information one knows about oneself but deliberately keeps private from others. The Unknown Area represents aspects of oneself that are unknown to both the person and others.

Nevertheless, answers to the questions above are often rooted in authority, such as knowledge, expertise, and experience. However, they are not always resolved through rational deliberations alone. Therefore, many practitioners believe that philosophical counselling is more than a rational, dialogical exchange because it presupposes that emotions arise from cognition and that all experiences can be cognitively articulated.

Alternatively, they posit a radical difference between the 'self' and the 'other' that can never be traversed. It is an unbridgeable gap that makes the 'other' inaccessible to one's exploration. They suggest acknowledging and respecting the 'other' without reducing it to the 'self' or any other idea or category. Any attempt to possess the 'other' would involve "forging the world into what Levinas would call a totality or an economy of sameness, thematising the world into categories" (Joldersma, 2001, p. 136). This understanding of the 'other' "rejects both the desirability and possibility of constructing an all-explaining architectonic or systematic philosophy" (Gutek, 2009, p. 101). Thus, philosophical counselling would have to be viewed as an unfinished project with a constant need for improvement, one that can provide space and voice to the 'other' rather than imposing the familiar or the known onto it.

In this unfinished project, a counsellor may need to consider multiple stances from different perspectives. For example, Rogers (1964) identified three basic ways of knowing in the counselling process: subjective, which involves knowing oneself; interpersonal, which involves knowing through conversation with the counselee from their perspective; and objective, which involves knowing through external reference. Often, these different ways are changed based on the necessity of the concern, but there may also be a need to shift because of the resistance by the „other“ to one's knowledge claims. Nevertheless, the tentativeness of one's interpretation, analysis, positions, and judgements requires one to be open to the 'other'.

The value of this openness has led to the conception of philosophical counselling as an unending dialogue. Buber (1958) understands such dialogue as an "I-Thou" relation, which involves turning towards the other with one's whole being, in complete mutuality, reciprocity, and wholeness. Hierarchical relationships, like counselling, are made possible by "mutuality" (Buber, 2002, p. 119) because it makes the counselee trusting and accessible; however, this one-sidedness makes the counsellor even more responsible because they would also have to know about the unarticulated limits that the 'other' has drawn for them.

In dialogue, the 'other' cannot be viewed as "a projection of self, in terms of its purpose, desire, satisfaction, gratification and many other things in the world that a self wishes to have or to be by achieving/*having* them" (Biswas, 2011, pp. 19-20). If the 'other' is disrespected or considered as a thing, separate and detached, to be utilised, dominated, or controlled, then the relationship that gets established would

be of a subject with an object, that of an ‘I’ with an ‘It’, which is non-dialogical or monological. Rather, the ‘other’ person here has an ‘otherness’ that is radical and unassimilable within the self.

Respecting boundaries, philosophical counsellors must carefully consider the nature and context of transgressions when juggling judgments. For example, the judgment of action being transgressive depends on people’s understanding of right and wrong (moral transgressions), sacred and profane (religious transgressions), sane and insane (psychological transgressions), and public and private (political transgressions). These may appear to be separate contexts; however, they all require the counsellor to understand the counselee’s position, mindset, and understanding of each.

These complexities require careful consideration of the counselee’s autonomy and the potential consequences of transgressing the boundaries of the counselling relationship. In these moments, many counselling skills developed by psychologists come into play, such as Carl Rogers’ (1964) active listening, empathy, and the creation of a safe, non-judgmental environment with unconditional positive regard. Building trust with the counselee is essential in maintaining a respectful and supportive counselling environment. For further aspects of therapeutic practice across different psychotherapeutic traditions, see Finlay (2015).

CHALLENGES TO KNOWING IN PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELLING

Philosophical counselling may be considered as a dialectic between creating and dissolving boundaries. This process becomes contentious because the counsellor or counselee may feel uncomfortable, and that discomfort may be deemed not genuine and dismissed as resistance to the therapeutic process. Thus, philosophical counselling is a relationship that requires all concerned to think about the ‘self’ as well as the ‘other’. Since identities are in flux, relational conceptions of identities become central in philosophical counselling. Thus, relational theories such as those of Buber, Levinas, Bakhtin and Gadamer find much scope in this endeavour. Thus, only in situations in which there is no possibility of a relationship does the notion of contesting knowledge claims become impossible.

For example, Kapur’s (2006) tripartite analysis of non-dialogical engagement highlights the possibility of failed encounters with otherness and an absence of dialogue. First among these is assimilation and domestication, which manifest as the systematic negation of otherness. This kind of negation happens when the counselee’s worldview is rejected by the counsellor, for example, spiritual experiences or other metaphysical ideas. Such a negation is also understood as “epistemic violence”

(Colombo, 2020; Moon, 2011), and it emerges when particular knowledge is claimed as “global knowledge”: a form of knowledge that is claimed to have an epistemic sovereignty over all other forms of knowledge (Foucault, 1980).

The second kind of engagement is “essentialist incommensurability”, which emerges when either party posits unbridgeable ontological differences, or, in other words, the ‘other’ must be left alone. This position, often masked as cultural sensitivity or therapeutic neutrality, actually constitutes a form of epistemic resignation. The counselee’s insistence on cultural relativism (“you cannot understand my experience as an X”) or the counsellor’s retreat into professional boundaries both foreclose the transgressive possibility. This position contradicts the inherently normative structure of counselling, which tends to push the relationship towards an ideal. Such a stance undermines the very purpose of counselling, as one does not intend to change at all. This stance is visible in the postmodern emphasis on the fragmented nature of experience and identity. Instead of a coherent, unified self, postmodernism suggests that identity is fluid, multiple, and constantly evolving. Thus, from a post-modernist standpoint, no substantial self can be formed. This notion challenges the traditional view of a fixed and stable identity. Furthermore, the postmodern perspective will question the possibility of counselling as a practice because it would negate any stable goal for the self.

The third kind of engagement is “defensive othering”, in which the ‘other’ is rejected because a genuine encounter might destabilise one’s psychological equilibrium. There is a sort of “ontological anxiety” that leads to resistance to transgressive exploration, demanding epistemological surety that cannot be provided.

Another way knowledge in philosophical counselling may be challenged is rooted in one’s metaphysical assumptions. This occurs when either the self or the other is rejected, thereby rendering knowledge meaningless. For example, in a solipsistic understanding where there is no genuine ‘other’, there is no point in engaging in a dialogue with others. In Hegelian dialectics, the apparent otherness is subsumed within the self-movement of the Absolute Spirit (Hegel, 1977). The dialectical encounter with otherness serves the Absolute’s self-recognition rather than constituting genuine alterity. Transgression becomes a moment in Spirit’s return to itself, ultimately negating the radical otherness it appears to encounter.

Similarly, in non-dualistic philosophies like Advaita Vedanta, knowing oneself is the key to knowing everything, including the ‘other’ and even the divine. All distinctions and dualities mentioned above become insignificant and momentary in Advaita. If complete self-knowledge implies knowledge of others, then the concept of transgression as a process of encountering the ‘other’ seems redundant.

THE CONDITIONS OF TRANSGRESSIVE POSSIBILITY

Transgression emerges as philosophically viable only within a dualistic framework that preserves both the reality of finite subjects and the irreducible otherness of the other. This position, drawing on phenomenological insights, maintains that consciousness is always the consciousness of something while preserving the transcendence of its objects. Transgression requires a relationship in which both the self and the other are sustained and valued. Following Levinas and Buber, the Other must never be reduced to a totality or sameness, which leads to domination and instrumentalisation, as the ‘other’ is treated as an object (“I-It”). In contrast, Buber’s (1958) conception of the “I-Thou” relationship offers an ideal toward which philosophical counselling should aspire: an ethos of openness, reciprocity, and recognition of the other in their irreducible alterity.

Such a framework necessitates what we might call “epistemic humility” (Potter, 2022) that involves “critically reflecting on our ontological commitments, one’s beliefs and belief systems, one’s biases, and one’s assumptions, and being willing to change or modify them” (p.121). For the counsellor, this means abandoning the fantasy of therapeutic mastery in favour of what Levinas (1981) terms “ethical proximity”, an infinite responsibility for the other’s well-being. The other retains what Marion (1996) calls “saturated phenomenon” status: an excess of meaning that overflows conceptual determination while remaining genuinely encountered rather than merely constructed. This approach moves beyond simple respect for autonomy toward a recognition that the patient’s lived experience of illness cannot be fully subsumed by medical knowledge. Informed consent is not merely the transfer of information but a genuine encounter between medical expertise and the patient’s values. All such matters are not just questions of definition; they are questions of dialogue between people engaged in the process. Furthermore, such reflections in a philosophical counselling approach could help make decisions in unconventional or contested situations, such as end-of-life decision-making (see Hornos, 2025), or for a detailed understanding of the nature of transformative experience in philosophical counselling (see Kapusta, 2025).

In conclusion, philosophical counselling serves as a vital platform for counsees to navigate the complexities of their identities and the myriad influences that shape them. By fostering an environment of trust and openness, the counselling process enables counsees to confront their vulnerabilities and engage in meaningful reflections about their lives. Often meta-communicative aspects, such as explicitly discussing boundaries and potential discomfort during the therapeutic process, the role of supervision and collegial consultation as a means of reflecting on potential transgressions, and techniques of meaning-checking, such as the counsellor explicitly

asking the counselee to confirm or challenge an interpretation, are used in professional setups; however, this journey requires a self-discovery and a deeper understanding of the intersubjective nature of self and identity. The relational nature of the counselling process will change with the changing assumption of relationship, self, or other (e.g. see Doubková et al., 2024), for a detailed discussion of diverse positions on otherness in different disciplines).

As counsees explore their personal narratives and the societal frameworks that impact them, they are empowered to redefine their sense of purpose and direction. This sense of purpose is central to Philosophical Counselling, which necessarily has a positive aim of growth and nurturance, which may be articulated as, but not limited to, Eudaimonia, flourishing, wisdom, self-actualisation, or authenticity. This unique aim of Philosophical Counselling necessitates that such ideas as knowledge and knowing be problematised and rethought, which are taken for granted in other forms of counselling. Such an analysis can lead one to develop methods beyond those currently accepted (see Hagiú et al., 2023) in the developing field of Philosophical Counselling.

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Promišljanja o spoznaji u filozofskom savjetovanju

SAŽETAK

Polazeći od iskustava filozofskog savjetovanja, koja uključuju razvijanje dubljega razumijevanja sebe i drugih, ovaj rad razmatra kritične trenutke u kojima savjetnik i savjetovani propituju svoje tvrdnje o znanju. Znanje o sebi i drugima često je komplementarno te potiče samorefleksiju i učenje. Kao i u drugim savjetodavnim kontekstima, filozofsko savjetovanje pretpostavlja stručnost savjetnika i otvorenost savjetovanoga prema promjeni. U tome se ljudi često osjećaju izloženima i ranjivima prije nego što osjete osnaženje. Nadalje, budući da filozofsko savjetovanje nastoji omogućiti savjetovanome vođenje kontemplativnoga života, savjetovanje postaje prostor stalnoga pregovaranja o sebi i drugima, njihovim identitetima, definicijama i transformacijama. Neizbježno je da se u tome procesu ulazi u nečiji osobni prostor, određen granicama koje pojedinac postavlja oko sebe. Iako je savjetodavni prostor namjerno uspostavljen, ulazak u osobni prostor ponekad se može doživjeti kao nepoželjan. Taj čin prekoračenja, pomicanja, zamagljivanja ili narušavanja granica može se razumjeti kao transgresija. Naposljetku, rad ističe temeljne filozofske pretpostavke koje omogućuju savjetodavni proces, razmatra perspektive koje transgresiju ne smatraju problematičnom u filozofskome savjetovanju te identificira uvjete koji je mogu učiniti relevantnom.

Ključne riječi: etika savjetovanja, spoznaja kao transgresija, etika razlike, sebstvo u savjetovanju, filozofska praksa.