

Philosophical Counseling Practice

Robert D. Walsh

Montana State University—Bozeman

This paper approaches philosophical counseling practice from the idea that philosophy itself is primarily a way of living and only secondarily a subject matter to be grasped and comprehended. Three things are shown to follow from this view: first, charging a fee for access to this practice is inimical to the practice itself; secondly, contrary to scientific 'objectivity' as the means to truth-speaking, this view of philosophy calls for a consciously articulated autobiographical expression or personal admission on the part of the philosophical practitioner; and, finally, an understanding of philosophical counseling practice emerges from this view of philosophy that is depicted as naturally occurring therapeutic interacting.

1. *Philosophy as a way of living*

In order to understand philosophical counseling practice in its relation to the whole field of philosophy—i.e., to understand philosophical counseling practice at all—it will be necessary to describe an approach to philosophy that does not presume it to be merely another subject matter among all other subject matters capable of being grasped and comprehended objectively by a detached and unaffected knower. Properly speaking there is no such thing as “Philosophy.” The idea that philosophy is a body of knowledge capable of being grasped by an independent knower is already an abstraction derived from the everyday experiencing of actual persons living philosophically. Philosophy is first of all a way of living. Wisdom can have no other origin or locus than the personal way of living of this or that philosopher here and now. Support for this position can be found in ancient Greece at the very dawn of the western philosophical tradition

For early Greek thinkers like Heraclitus, for example, according to Martin Heidegger, the loving, desiring, and seeking of wisdom (*philosophia*) by this or that particular person is primarily a *way* or a *path* and only secondarily and derivatively a *what* or a subject matter, as it will become for later Greek academic thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, and the entire so-called onto-theological tradition up to the present day. But originally, as Heidegger says in *What is Philosophy?*, “...the Greek word *philosophia* [φιλοσοφία] is a path along which we are traveling.”¹ And the philosopher is not traveling along this path alone because the path of the lover of wisdom already implicates a necessary connection and an openness to others in conversation:

The Greek adjective *philosophos* [φιλόσοφος] expresses something completely different from the adjective philosophical. An *aner philosophos* is *hos philei to sophon*, he who loves the *sophon*; *philein*, to love, signifies here, in the Heraclitean sense, *homolegein*, to speak in the way in which the *Logos* speaks, in correspondence with the *Logos*.... That one being reciprocally unites itself with another, that both are originally united to each other because they are at each other's disposal—this *harmonia* is the distinctive feature of *philein*, of “loving” in the Heraclitean sense.²

That philosophy is fundamentally a *praxis* (i.e., a living practice from within an originary ethical response-ability) of loving, caring interacting between persons who seek the truth, i.e., who seek to see and to speak in harmony and co-responsibility with the *Logos* of what is happening, as it is happening, and insofar as it *is* what is happening for me, for us, here and now... is crucial to understanding philosophical counseling practice and will allow it to be effectively distinguished from all other forms of psychological and psychotherapeutic counseling practices operating out of an abstract theoretical framework.

It is sometimes thought that the field of philosophical inquiry can be divided into theoretical or speculative reflection on the one hand, and a reflection whose aim is the practical application of theory to the consideration of moral, social, or political action on the other; what we might call the difference between abstract speculative philosophy and applied practical philosophy. The presumption that this bifurcation exhausts the field of philosophical engagement, however, overlooks a *tacit* or *lived* dimension of philosophical ‘activity’ brought to light by a long line of philosophers in the existential/phenomenological tradition. This dimension of *praxis* that is lived through and seen through focuses on the immediate experience of this or that philosopher who is philosophizing as *a way of life* rather than on “Philosophy” understood vaguely and imprecisely as a subject matter to be grasped and comprehended by an unaffected knower.

My immediate lived experience as this particular person at this particular time and place interacting with these particular others necessarily in the context of my commitment to a philosophical way of life, is pre-reflective and pre-theoretical, happening before I know it as the invisible context or background of my interacting, before I have made “something” out of it, given it a name, judged it, categorized it, and relegated it to a narrative his-

tory as a “substantial” and meaningful event in “my life.” It is from this prior tacit or lived matrix of everyday life that theoretical reflection is possible, and not the other way around. The tacit “dimension” of everyday experience in which the meaningful first emerges and takes root personally and intimately “for me” *as* “this” or “that” is more fundamental and immediate than any theoretical reflection—however pure, practical, or logically “correct.” What I understand as philosophical counseling practice is located originally within the *praxis* of this life-matrix and only secondarily and derivatively is it represented in the reflective, “objective” application of theoretical speculation to specific problems or issues.

The idea of philosophy in accordance with this tripartite structure (speculative, applied, tacit) already presumes a notion of philosophical counseling practice, if counseling can be understood generally as an ethical way of living where the good of the other has priority over my own good; where being-for-the-other, as Emmanuel Levinas has described this in the context of what it means to be human, has priority over being-with or even “being-there” (*dasein*), as in Heidegger’s early formulation; a response-ability for the other prior to the consciousness of the other *as* this or that individual. Of course, philosophy *can* be treated as merely a subject matter to be grasped and comprehended, and the therapeutic gesture inherent in genuine philosophizing *can* be overlooked, downplayed, denied, commercialized, etc., but the outcome of this would be a derivative or truncated philosophical self-consciousness; a bloodless, showcase vision of philosophy ripped from the world of real people, forgetful of its original therapeutic orientation and its healing mission, and now stuck for the most part behind the walls of the academy where it is reserved for the few adepts speaking exclusively among themselves.

The healing dimension of philosophical living is not something new and not something that could have been added-on to or developed in some sense after philosophy had already established itself *as* philosophy. Rather, philosophy has *always* involved this call to a rigorous way of therapeutic living apart from the conventional and the common.

In one of its derivative, practical forms, therapeutic philosophy goes by the name of “Applied Ethics.” Applied ethics would be the practical implementation of philosophical wisdom to specific moral problems or issues, where wisdom is understood as knowledgeable discernment based on principles and deductive reasoning in the service of what is truly good.

There is a place for this practically-oriented, theoretical philosophizing, but it is not the most fundamental understanding of ethics. It overlooks ethics in its appearing as an *ethical therapeutics*, as I have argued elsewhere.³ Genuine ethical philosophizing always involves and alters the philosopher and comes with a risk that can become a disruptive and disquieting experience in one's personal life. Philosophy approached as a way of living is all vigilance and insomnia and wakefulness rather than the source of a good night's sleep.

The significance of looking at philosophy as a way of living, rather than a subject matter to be grasped and conquered, makes all the difference to an understanding of philosophical counseling practice. When you begin by thinking of philosophy as a subject matter to be grasped and comprehended by a detached and objective knower, you will end up thinking of philosophical counseling practice—or any counseling practice operating in that mode—as a technical process enacted by a disengaged “expert” technician applying theoretical insights or reflections to those in need, like pharmaceutical prescriptions being dosed out to heal the symptoms of their ills. But when you begin by thinking that there really is no such thing as “Philosophy” because there are and have only ever been particular *philosophers* living a philosophical way of life—i.e., a long line of *actual* philosophers philosophizing who, in one way or another, were and are trying to see clearly and without the prejudices born of conventional self-interest what is happening for them in their interacting with others—then a new sense of philosophical counseling practice emerges that I think of as *naturally occurring therapeutic interacting*.⁴ Thus, all philosophical articulating and interacting by a philosopher (all philosophical describing and prescribing) ought to involve an autobiographical element, since there can be no philosophy apart from the interacting of this or that particular philosophical practitioner, and this should be made clear in practice. Personal subjectivity is the starting place for all knowing, not an impediment.

One of the implications of the view that philosophical practice is a way of life and not a body of knowledge, is that charging a fee for access to practicing this way is incommensurate with, and perhaps positively destructive of, the practice itself—as Socrates argued. The western world might be a very different place today if Socrates had only compromised his idealistic moral principles and charged a fee for sharing the healing power of his philosophical practice, but he didn't.

2. *Free Philosophical Counseling*

Socrates: "...although my accusers unblushingly charge me with all sorts of other crimes, there is one thing that they have not had the impudence to pretend on any testimony, and that is that I have ever exacted or asked a fee from anyone."

—Plato (*Apology* 31c)⁵

From a Socratic perspective, philosophical counseling can be viewed as a conversational process guided by dialectical reasoning aimed at reflecting upon concerns and issues that normally arise in the course of living your life—as well as on the meaningfulness of your life as a whole. Philosophers have been practicing this method of dialectical inquiry since it was first introduced by Socrates twenty-five hundred years ago. It involves a question and answer form of reflection where you dialogue with others, in a friendly and supportive way, in search of truth-speaking, knowledge, insight, wisdom, virtue, and happiness—whatever these turn out to be. In this way, philosophical inquiry can help you to live a more fulfilling, productive, meaningful and happy life.

Philosophical inquiry, ultimately, in the Socratic tradition, is a habitual, daily practice of reflecting upon, clarifying, coming to see, and making sense of your values, beliefs, ideas, judgments, desires, emotions, intuitions, feelings, goals, commitments, relationships, and, in general, all of the actions and experiences that constitute your life. To try to put a price on access to this process would create a problem for the philosopher, according to Socrates.

By desiring to make money from therapeutic interacting, it will be more difficult, perhaps impossible, for the philosopher to see clearly and truly what is happening—and seeing clearly and truly what is happening, as it is happening, *is* the practice. People often rush from the *what* and the *how* to the *why*. "Why did my marriage fail?" someone might ask. But I would redirect such a question to: What do you mean by "my marriage," "failure," etc.? How do these ideas manifest themselves in your situation? What are the values, beliefs, attitudes, etc. underlying this perception and these ideas? How have these emerged in your actual living? And so forth. This type of inquiry into the *what* and the *how*, pursued deeply and sensitively enough, will often obviate the need for any intellectualizing obfuscation born of unproductive "why-questioning." Again, Heidegger puts it this way: "Philosophy is a kind of aptness which makes it possible to see being in respect to *what it is* in so far as it is being."⁶

Philosophical counseling practice involves interacting with a particular philosopher who is aware of and committed to the rigors of living a philosophical way of life and who is therefore committed to becoming free of prejudices born of self-interest (insofar as this is possible), so as to be able to see what is happening and how it is happening clearly and distinctly with himself or herself first of all, and then, naturally and as a consequence of this, for others too. Thus, in keeping with the spirit of Socrates, this reflecting upon and questioning of the meaningfulness of your living ought to be made available free of charge. As Steven Gans puts it, perhaps prophetically, in *Just Listening*: “It’s not at all clear that one ought to be paid for this work. Why not be ethical all the time with everybody, without being paid?”⁷

Along with Steven Gans and Socrates, I think that it is of crucial importance that philosophical inquiry not be made into a commodity sold only to those who can afford it. In the dialogues of Plato, this commodification of wisdom was defined by Socrates as one of the most obvious characteristics of sophistry in ancient Greece. Charging a fee clearly distinguished sophists from philosophers. For a fee, a sophist would instruct you how to get what you want in the world by using clever, seductive, persuasive speech reinforced by rhetorical and oratorical techniques to produce what *seemed* to be true. Socrates criticized this commercial, sophistic practice because it was not an authentic pursuit of seeing and speaking the *actual* truth of what was happening, although it tried to appear as such; an insidious *mimesis*. How much do the sophistic, self-interested pretensions of modern, commercial healers—oriented to the sophists rather than the philosophers—contribute to this source of personal unhappiness from which they benefit financially? This is an issue that philosophical practitioners—to distinguish themselves from the psychotherapists—ought to confront openly, honestly, rigorously, and continuously.

In Plato’s dialogues, Socrates frequently points to this money-making orientation of the sophists as a sign of the falseness, deceptiveness, and moral hypocrisy of their teaching. Rather than being a genuine search for the truth, the commodity that was being sold by the sophists under the guise of inquiry, learning and moral development was actually just a superficial mimicry of genuine wisdom, like some psychotherapy today may be a slick mimicry of genuine healing. Socrates, searching to see clearly and truly what was happening without prejudice, stood foursquare against this deceptiveness. His poverty was thus a badge of his philosophical honor and integrity.

For the philosopher who has undertaken philosophy as a way of life, it is an important matter to see how her or his perception and judgment is prejudiced by self-interest, since the philosophical way of life is precisely to be committed to a freedom from prejudice, requiring a perpetual beginning anew within the context of a living *epochē* or suspension of judgment, as Husserl taught: “Philosophy—wisdom (*sagesse*)—is the philosopher’s quite personal affair. . . . I have chosen to begin in absolute poverty, with an absolute lack of knowledge.”⁸

Of course, there are still plenty of sophists around today. The exorbitant fees for psychotherapeutic healing and personal development demanded by some sophistic psychotherapists and psychological counselors these days have put this expensive “therapy” out of reach for many people; and free clinics have limited outreach. Rather than joining Socrates in standing against this elitist commercialization of the pursuit of wisdom, philosophical counseling in many of its individual manifestations these days seems to be following modern, commercial psychotherapy down this misguided sophistic path. There is something intrinsically repugnant morally about making a profit from people’s personal life problems, like the repugnance of price-gauging basic goods after a hurricane, where self-interest comes before the good of the other.

Self-interest and genuine philosophical inquiry are mutually exclusive. Charging a fee for philosophical inquiry, or any personal counseling, inescapably throws the motive for the practice into question for the practitioner. It can never be entirely clear that I am speaking the truth as I see it to you, without prejudice, when collecting a fee from you for doing so is part of my goal—no matter how astute or “objective” I may think my power of moral discernment.

How might an understanding of philosophical counseling practice appear when it is thought as an organic way of living outside of this modern commercial orientation of contemporary psychotherapy? In other words, what follows from the understanding that philosophy is primarily an ethical way of living guided by perpetual astonishment and wonder and a desire to live with others in harmony with what is happening, and not as a subject matter to be grasped, conquered, and comprehended . . . and that the benefits of this very personal *praxis* ought to be available to others free of charge? What impact does this have on the self-understanding and appearance of philosophical counseling practice itself?

Let me approach these questions from a more personal, autobiographical point of view.

3. My philosophical practice

I found myself attracted to the study of philosophy as a university student some forty years ago. When I first arrived at college I already had many questions about who I was as a human being and my relation to the world around me and to others as a member of a family and a community, at work and at play and in all my social relations.

These questions and wonderings were not abstract and theoretical but embedded in my intimate personal life. Specifically, at that time, this involved fallout from a very problematic experience of childhood with my parents and family of origin, creating a rift in my psycho-social life that needed to be healed. The desire to understand and heal this fundamentally important relating—along with some unaccountable natural inclination, perhaps—motivated my philosophical interest long before I would come to understand theoretically that this is what this questioning, wondering way of life *was* that I had already embarked upon. I very much wanted answers to fundamental life questions that I woke up dealing with every day, and I thought philosophy might help me find these answers. Well, it didn't.

I often tell people that, over the years, my study of philosophy has not provided me with final, absolutely clear answers to any of these life and death and after-death questions, but it has helped me to see these questions more clearly and to learn to benefit from the questioning process itself. Rather than finding clear-cut or absolute answers, I have been drawn into a process of questioning and wondering ever more deeply from a philosophical perspective. Wonder, Aristotle said, is the starting point of philosophical questioning. I think it also should be the goal toward which philosophers continuously aspire.

Philosophy is a way of living that requires the philosopher to be actively thinking and mindful about what is happening all the time every day. This commitment gets somewhat easier with vigilant practice but always involves conscious effort. If I had to sum it up, I would say that the philosophical way of living is a way of being personally committed to developing the ability to see clearly and truly what is happening without prejudice and to act in harmony with this. This practice may not sound like much to some people, but, from my experience, I think it is the very center of living the

best possible life you can live. Vigilance free of self-interest is perhaps the most fundamental task of the philosopher and can bring philosophical practice into conflict and confrontation with others who perceive what is happening primarily through the prejudicial filter of conventional self-interest. Finding the balance between being a disturber of the peaceful but stagnant status quo, and being an instrument of healing growth and development—whether socially or individually—is a fine line requiring the continual development of discernment; the paradoxical practice of becoming wise to my own ignorance.

From this perspective, counseling is not what *I* do as the agent in charge, it is what I cannot help but do. I go about my philosophical practice; counseling happens. Others may benefit from this orientation of mine without having to become philosophical counselors themselves or even know about it; they need only “enter into” this therapeutic process to some degree by meeting me and interacting with me in some meaningful way *other* than for counseling. Counseling is an incidental, often inexplicit, offshoot or inadvertent outcome of this meeting. I may be talking with my brother or sister, friend, lover, colleague, stranger, housemate, neighbor, student, internet acquaintance, chambermaid at a hotel, someone I picked up in distress on the highway, or met at the spa—or anyone else who comes into my life in a meaningful way or with whom I come into proximity for some reason other than counseling, and who is thus already *nearby*, already my neighbor for whom I am more responsible than others, whose need to be heard I did not choose but cannot avoid—and counseling practice happens naturally, as if on its own. Inevitably, I will interact with these persons from the more or less invisible orientation of my philosophical practicing. There is no way I could *not* do this. To enter into my life at all is to enter into my philosophical counseling practice.

As a philosophical counselor, I see myself as a kind of human “instrument” by which others are helped to deal with their particular life issues by coming to see what is happening with themselves more clearly through conversations focusing on this question, generally and specifically, without any self-conscious fanfare about it being “therapy” or anything else other than seeing what is happening. Psycho-social-spiritual healing does not occur through the clinical application of abstract, theoretical intervention strategies—however subtle or clever—as is commonly and mistakenly believed. In fact, this impersonal model of manipulative, interventionist counseling may be detrimental as well as counterproductive—blindly producing exactly what it aims to cure....

Aristotle thought that one of the positive aspects of philosophy was that you didn't need any special tools or instruments or apparatuses to practice it, so you can practice it wherever you are and with whomever you might be. The further truth of this insight of Aristotle's is that once you are on the philosophical path, you will *always* be practicing it wherever you are; it is unavoidable. Yet no one may notice. Since it does not have an immediate external appearance by which it can be recognized, philosophical practice in everyday life is invisible. *Sans* declaration, "it" happens without any immediate recognition. It may appear that two people are simply having a conversation over a coffee or beer when what is actually going on is healing philosophical practice in action. This invisibility and lack of recognition, lack of remuneration and reciprocity, allow for a giving or going out from myself without hope of return, what no one else can do for me—the wandering of Abraham over the return of Ulysses; the positive potential of the ring of Gyges—an orientation to response-ability that is at the heart of Levinas' radical ethical understanding of the human situation.⁹

In her insightful and instructive book entitled *Philosophical Practice*, Shlomit Schuster points out, with reference to R.D.Laing's work, that any interacting which is healing and that helps us move away from needless suffering and toward greater happiness (with full cognizance of how much these terms need to be unpacked, excavated, and deconstructed) is therapeutic.¹⁰ I agree.

4. *The healing word*

Healing can be understood as the movement from a less desirable subjective reality to a more desirable one. This movement always involves the growth of new connective tissue, a stitching together of edges that have become separated, ripped, or torn apart; a making whole again.¹¹ Thus, "healing" is a term that is proper only to beings who are capable of personal growth and development. We do not *heal* a broken fence, and we do not *fix* a broken heart.

Those with whom I interact therapeutically, that is to say, philosophically (including myself), are often dealing with some kind of rip or tear in the fabric of their lives. This is often a rip that they, themselves, are causing behind their own backs, a rip whose origin they may not be seeing or may be denying. They may wrongly be thinking that others are causing the rip, thus overlooking their own power and consequently feeling helpless and

despondent and ineffectual, without clearly seeing how this is happening, and then acting as if they *were* helpless, and then getting resentful about this, and then acting out passive-aggressively (again perhaps behind their own backs), and then not understanding what to do about some level of dissatisfaction or unhappiness that is occurring in their lives, in a relationship, for example, or at work. Often just listening to someone and questioning until I hear clearly and distinctly and without prejudice what they are saying helps immeasurably, I have found. However, in addition, I might want to invite the conversation toward a discussion of Epictetus' distinction between what is up to us and what is not, for example, and show how this is related to our real personal power—our ability to get what we want—and to see whether we give this power away behind our backs and blame others, or whether we take full responsibility for it and for who we are, thus opening up what is possible.

To become whole again, to be healed, would mean to repair the rip, to stitch the ragged edges of disengagement or disillusion or despondency back together again, to restore the integrity of the whole fabric by seeing it wholly, seeing how the two disparate edges do, in fact, fit together and belong together as a whole. This stitching is done with threads of speaking and listening. Therapeutic conversation is a combination of saying what is happening as truly as possible and just listening to the other that brings together what is divided or disparate or torn into a meaningful whole, or at least into a more meaningful whole than what had been before, for both myself and the other. This may happen suddenly or take a long time to develop, or both—but always in the context of love (*eros*) and care.

Therapeutic interacting is inevitably a local, personal affair, “the quite personal responsibility of our own true being as philosophers,” as Husserl puts it, “our inner, personal vocation....”¹² It happens between me and you who are in some way close to me, either as the result of desire or destiny or happenchance (but always with some *eros*), coming into my life in ways that are unpredictable and unexpected, for longer or shorter periods of time and for one reason or another.... I cannot choose to make these personal, therapeutic interactings with you happen, but I cannot avoid them either since they are the necessary elements of my own philosophical counseling practice—that is to say, the elements of my own personal way of living.

Notes

¹ Heidegger, Martin, *What is Philosophy?*, translated by W. Kluback and J.T.Wilde (New Haven, Conn.: College and University Press, 1956), 29.

² *Ibid.*, 47.

³ Walsh, Robert D., "Beyond Therapy: Levinas and Ethical Therapeutics," *European Journal of Psychotherapy, Counseling, and Health*, March-June 2005; 7(1-2) 29-35.

⁴ Walsh, Robert D., *Adolescence and the Naturally Occurring Therapeutic Relationship*. MA dissertation, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Chicago, 1973.

⁵ Plato. "Socrates' Defense (Apology)," trans. by H. Tredennick in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, Bollingen Series LXXI (Princeton: Princeton University Press; 11th printing, 1982), p. 17.

⁶ Heidegger, *Ibid.*, 59.

⁷ Gans, Steven and Redler, Leon. *Just Listening: Ethics and Therapy* (Xlibris Corp.: USA, 2001), p. 83.

⁸ Husserl, Edmund, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. by Dorian Cairns (Martinus Nijhoff: The Hague, 1977), p.2.

⁹ Walsh, Robert D. *The Priority of Responsibility in the Ethical Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Philosophy, Marquette University, 1989.

¹⁰ Schuster, Shlomit C. *Philosophy Practice: An Alternative to Counseling and Psychotherapy* (Praeger: Westport, Conn., 1999), p. 183.

¹¹ Walsh, Robert D., "The Healing Word: Language, Thinking, and Being in the Earlier and Later Philosophy of Martin Heidegger," *Philosophy Today* 35:3 (Fall 1991), pp. 231-32.

¹² Husserl, Edmund, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. by David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 17.