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TOWARDS ORIGINS OF PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE. TALKING TO J. MICHAEL RUSSELL

HACIA LOS ORÍGENES DE LA FILOSOFÍA APLICADA. CONVERSANDO CON J. MICHAEL RUSSELL

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José Barrientos
To meet Michael Russell means introducing ourselves into two experiences: the deepness of his writings and the practical knowledge of a man dedicated to helping other people during nearly fifty years. He opened his philosophical consultation in the early seventies. Therefore, he is a resource for this field, for people who want to open their own business in this sphere. His years behind his desk and the ideas behind his articles are an inspiration for all of us.

Michael, let me ask you how Philosophical Counseling appeared in your life? What happened in the sixties and seventies when I just was a project in my fathers´ mind?

Michael Russell
Let me give a detailed answer to this question. Maybe that will encourage other philosophical practitioners to find their own way while getting some idea from paths taken by others. .

As far back as 1965 when I was a teaching assistant for an introductory philosophy course I found that students who came to my office hours often wanted to talk about their personal problems regarding such matters as relationships, anxiety, meaning, love, sexuality, and the like. Perhaps the flavour of my lectures on existentialist philosophy and literature signalled my openness to that sort of thing. Usually I would encourage these students to go to the university's counseling center for a deeper kind of interaction than I felt competent to address, though not without first attempting some dialogue which was meaningful for us both.

By the time I became an assistant professor of philosophy at California State University, Fullerton, I had come to suspect that a background in philosophy might have more to offer on an applied and personal level than would be popularly supposed. That suspicion was deepened when I chanced upon opportunities to participate in some forms of "encounter groups" which were in vogue at that time. It was my good fortune to be able to audit an experimental "interdisciplinary" course at my school in which undergraduate students served as "group leaders." This course mixed weekly readings, weekly assigned reaction papers, and an "encounter group" format. I was still inclined to refer students with personal struggles to consult with the university's professional counsellors, but while I was learning from group leading and supervision I grew in confidence. I began to see myself as having some relevant basic skills for responding to the interpersonal issues that students presented in my office hours.

I decided that if I was indeed going to be presented with situations that called for counseling abilities—lowly philosopher that I might be—I had best do what I could to cultivate what abilities might come within my province. I grabbed every opportunity that served this end, taking experiential workshops, auditing counseling courses, and reading counseling books. I was able to create all sorts of formal and informal situations w*here* I would receive supervision for doing things of a counseling sort, including volunteering in community agencies. I sought out colleagues in the counseling department and the psychology department in my university. Apparently my credentials in philosophy intrigued my colleagues and this led to opportunities to collaborate on co-teaching classes. In 1972, one of my colleagues offered an especially innovative class that was offered off-campus in his mountain home. This led to my co-leading this experiential week-long residential group.

I continued to co-lead these week-long residential events for 19 years. By far, the biggest contribution to my becoming able to engage others on a level rich in affect-- countering my own fear of feelings in others and in myself-- came from participating in these and various forms of experiential groups. Meanwhile, within my own Philosophy Department, it was my good fortune to have colleagues who were receptive to my developing interests. As an academic with reasonably respectable credentials I was able to propose atypical courses. In 1973 I created and taught a course called "Existential Group." Unlike a traditional course on Existentialism (which I also teach) this one used readings in Existentialism as the vehicle for students talking and writing about personal issues. For example, students would read Kafka's *The Trial* and then I would ask them to talk and write about specific ways in which they, like Kafka's character, might be going through life vaguely feeling "accused" of something,

though no one would tell them exactly what it was or how to be acquitted of the charges. Or they might read something by Sartre and then prompted to address ways in which they might fit Sartre's descriptions of how we deceive ourselves. Or they might read something by Nietzsche and then look at ways in which their own values might be illuminated by his critique of "slave morality." My growing experience in leading groups led me to shift from worrying so much about stirring up feeling. With experience I was getting bolder about that. And where I had worried about whether as a philosopher I was trespassing into areas reserved for other disciplines, I was, more and more, seeing those fields as doing what I regarded as a province of philosophy.

At about the same time that Existential Group class came about there were, from time to time, individuals who wanted to meet with me privately. After consulting with a lawyer about how to minimize my exposure to legal vulnerability I began to offer independently of my university private sessions for individuals and groups. My on-going self-styled education in counseling kept me appreciative of talents I needed which have been cultivated by other disciplines and which did not come as part of my formal training in philosophy. I certainly did have very relevant abilities in terms of being able to follow the complex thinking of another person, spot underlying assumptions (often rooted in familiar philosophical positions), and think of ways to defend the other person's perspective. I could be quick to think of counter-examples and counter-arguments to assertions about most anything. Where I was not so well grounded by philosophical training was more in the area of being ready to have and hear emotion.

At the same time, I was increasingly convinced that much of what is done in those other fields, which I formerly thought deserved a monopoly on serious and intensive self-inquiry, was about matters centrally philosophical in nature, and matters about which philosophy had a much longer standing claim—at least as far back as Socrates. If philosophers had a tendency to be somewhat out of touch with affect, this didn't have to be the case.

I was further encouraged by discovering in California laws about psychotherapy, that there was a clause saying, in effect, that these laws were not intended to preclude members in other professions from doing things within their purview. (I suspect that many of the state laws in America will have similar caveats.) While this was heartening, there would certainly be plenty of professional groups who would oppose my sort of applied philosophy. I thought it prudent to not be very conspicuous in offering a philosophical practice. Yet it seemed obvious to me that there were then, and before me, other philosophers who also would have been drawn into forms of discourse more personal, applied, different from the more usual format of lecturing to a class. Some philosophy

books in circulation at the time were plainly written for a far more individualized application than would be the case in the usual classroom. And there were well-known forms of psychotherapy current before then which were plainly and deeply built on existential philosophy (followers of Heidegger, like Boss and Binswanger, thinkers deeply indebted to Sartre, like R.D. Laing), mergers between counseling and Eastern philosophy, forms of intervention based on critical thinking, such as Rational-Emotive Therapy. I could hardly be the first to be taking the direction I did!

Mercifully, there is no such thing as a "license" for philosophers who wanted to do counseling. However, I wanted some assurance that I was not a simple charlatan. I found that I could take a rigorous examination used by some states in the United States for certifying counselors. Preparing for this exam and passing it was one of several self-imposed means of establishing that I was not utterly over my head in my practice. That was in 1983. At about the same time I found myself re-thinking what had been a pretty critical view of classical psychoanalysis. I started to become familiar with major developments in that realm. My exposure to the sometimes philosophically simplistic failings of pop-culture forms of therapy, and the philosophical shortcomings of academic and behaviorist psychology left me feeling that my expanded view of philosophy was a legitimate alternative. For different reasons I became positively impressed with psychoanalysis. There I saw very impressive intellectual sophistication. There was a lot I wanted to learn there. And I was (and am) convinced that psychoanalysis could profit greatly from increased input from philosophers. From 1983 to 1988 I trained and was certified in psychoanalysis and have offered a psychoanalytic practice since then. Let me emphasize here that this training surely did provide me with very extensive skills and training substantive and different than what came with my education in philosophy but, for all that, I have continued to believe that the core of what I offer to my clientele is fundamentally philosophical in character.

José Barrientos

There are different definitions and conceptions on Philosophical Counseling and Practice. Some authors have argued that education or "bildung" is basic in its development, others have defended that Critical Thinking is the basic tool and others have looked for rationality beyond analytic knowledge as a poetical reason. What is your definition on Philosophical Practice?

Michael Russell

The problem with this question is in the implication that there is some basic and essential defining feature of philosophical counseling and practice. Roughly,

philosophical counseling is any sort of counseling that conspicuously draws from philosophy. A philosophical counselor is someone emphasizing a background in philosophy. A philosophical practitioner is something done by a philosopher by way of an attempt to put his or her ideas and training to some real-life practical problem. So philosophical counseling is a species of philosophical practice. But I don't mean any of this to stand as definitions. I only want to give some indication of how we might make senses of these terms. I don't think there is any or only one thing that counts for "counseling" any more than there is just one way of being a philosopher or doing philosophy. There's not any one thing or only thing that counts for "counseling" any more than there is just one way of being a philosopher or doing philosophy. There is no single formula or any single methodological emphasis that is going to precisely capture the essence of either term or their combination. Inevitably, there will be diverse activities falling under either term whether taken alone or in combination. There will be overlapping and similar features between purportedly different activities. We can, of course, say some relevant things about what counts for philosophy, and we can do this for counseling. But philosophical counseling just isn't a distinct discipline.

Words like "philosophical" and "counselor" are in the public domain of everyday language, and they remain so when philosophers who counsel use everyday language to describe what they do. So, nobody started philosophical counseling. Nobody has a "copyright" on these words. There are, of course, individuals and approaches that have gained prominence and advanced the idea that philosophy might be useful, and, thanks to these, there is a growing appreciation of possibilities for philosophical practice and philosophical counseling. But, to say it again, no one owns these terms.

Different philosophers will bring different interests and talents to the practical arena. My own vision of philosophy, certainly shared by the professional philosophers I know and respect, includes a high level of commitment to critical thinking and reasoned argument. Whatever else philosophical counselors incorporated into their services I would certainly hope critical thinking would play a big part. Having said that, one could imagine philosophical practitioners who drew from thinkers who challenged what they regarded as a misplaced emphasis on "being rational." I'm not sure I yet understand what "bildung" means but, again, if the idea is to capture or impose something that any and all philosophical counselors are supposedly about, this is, in my opinion, a mistake.

José Barrientos
How did you create this sort of definition?

Michael Russell
To be honest, my attempts to articulate the nature of philosophical counseling and to argue that it is not a distinct discipline were set in a personal context of frustration and annoyance on several levels. I found myself developing a "practice," a professional service that I wanted to be able to describe in a truthful and meaningful way. However, I did not want to unnecessarily attract attention in a manner that would create anxiety for me about either legal vulnerability or ethical concerns over what sort of competency to profess.

An added complication was in wanting to use terms that did not seem to already belong exclusively to other fields. I was worried about this well before the 1980s when I began to hear of philosophical practice in Europe. Some spoke of this as if referring to very specific practitioners and their restricted vision of practice. I did and do find it disturbing that a rather large number of the words with which one would naturally try to describe efforts at making applied use of philosophy might be treated as if these words could have something like a copyright. This would be like someone making a brand name out of an everyday term, like "book" and then declaring that you couldn't say you were "writing a book." Some words just naturally fit for the task of describing what a philosopher might be trying to do here, the words "philosophy" and "philosophical," obviously, and to some extent words like "counseling'" and "consulting." I also wanted words that would have some marketability or attraction or, at least, communicate something that might catch the attention of someone who might like the service. "Individualized Ontological Inquiry" would not attract many clients. The word "therapy" would have good marketing potential but for various reasons I did not much like that term. "Personal consultant" and "existential consultant" work decently well. "Philosophical counseling" also falls naturally in to serviceability here. I proceeded to describe myself in these sorts of ways, convinced that no one had a monopoly on these words.

José Barrientos
Has it changed in these forty years as Philosophical Counselor?

Michael Russell
Well, I've changed. Early on I was advocating the practical virtues of studying philosophy and a more bold vision of what philosophers might do, but I was careful to not to call attention to my own practice with words that might ask for trouble. Now I am more ready to be an open advocate of working in areas where other professions may think they should have a monopoly. I still do not much

like the word 'therapy'. Now that I am sure I can use the word legally, I am more willing to describe myself as a therapist and as doing therapy. This is a pragmatic matter of how to market services effectively. What I still don't like is the implication that I am going to do something to which my client is the passive recipient, and that if I do it right they will be fixed or cured.

José Barrientos
You have worked as Psychoanalyst and Philosophical Counselor. However, some counsellors have negated mental illness, others have talked about a kind of competition between our profession and psychologist and/psychoanalyst. What do you think about it?

Michael Russell
Psychoanalysis in the United States has historically been regarded as a branch of medicine. I think that perception is in transition partly because psychologists here have won the right to train in and practice psychoanalysis. Academic psychologists have regarded their work as empirical science, and many clinical psychologists work from the evolution of psychoanalytic concepts. Both groups see themselves as having distinctive methodologies, and most see themselves in a context of treatment and cure. Not surprisingly, there will be members of both groups who will be unfriendly to philosophers presumed untrained in all these aspects, just as there will be members of both groups who are open to the idea of philosophical practitioners. As a practical matter fears of "competition" are probably not terribly significant. The numbers of philosophical practitioners is likely to remain quite small in comparison to traditional ways of preparing for providing "therapy."
There certainly are problems with the language of mental illness, but it would be colossally naive to think this sort of language has no legitimate application to people who might seek out philosophical counseling. And, it would be badly mistaken to suppose that philosophical practitioners will (or should) only deal with "healthy" individuals. What counts for "mental health" is on a continuum. The helpfulness or unhelpfulness of diagnostic language is a pragmatic matter. Counselors ought to be reluctant to work with individuals who are well beyond their level of comfort, experience, and expertise, nor should they ever suppose they are working with someone to whom mental health vocabulary has no possible application.

José Barrientos
Briefly, could you review one of the counselees you received in 2010 in your consultation?

Michael Russell
I'm not comfortable writing about any of my recent counselees. I can tell you about a fictitious client I wrote about in Gerald Corey's Case Approach to Counseling and Psychotherapy (Thomson: Brooks/Cole, 2009). "Ruth" sought me out after taking a college course on theories of counseling. I had asked her instructor to include me on a list of referrals. Ruth was interested, generally, in an existential approach to better understanding herself, and she also wanted to address some specific issues. Her children were grown and in the process of moving out. Ruth had returned to college out of an interest in becoming a school counselor. She was anxious about this because she was in the habit of thinking of herself as "just a mom." Her husband thought himself supportive of her professional aspirations but gave her somewhat "mixed messages" in that he clearly liked being catered to in keeping with stereotype notions of what women ought to do by way of taking care of the household. Her relationship with her parents was somewhat strained owing to her having departed from her father's rather fundamentalist religious views. He was certain to disapprove of her career aspirations.

We met for about a year and addressed these and other issues. Initially Ruth seemed to expect that I would lecture her on how she was "responsible" and "had a choice" about this or that. She seemed to think that a self-proclaimed Existentialist" would preach about freedom. I think such lofty speeches are pointless. Over time I did challenge her to consider how her way of labelling herself with the identity of "just a mom" served to protect her from the anxiety of taking her life in new directions, challenging her husband's expectations, and risking parental disapproval. I did not mention that I got this line of thinking from reading Sartre. I also believe that I was right to refrain from providing encouragement about her talents and prospects. In the absence of either conspicuous approval or disapproval from me I think Ruth learned to better approve of herself.

José Barrientos
How do you distinguish between a person who needs Philosophical Counseling sessions and others who need therapy? Could you explain a case from your practice to explain the difference?

Michael Russell
It will come as no surprise that I do not have a "neat" answer for this question since I do not think that doing philosophical counseling and doing therapy are neatly distinct activities. One very rough indicator might be that philosophical counseling tends to emphasize thinking and therapy tends to emphasize affect,

but there are plenty of psychotherapists who see themselves as focusing on a client's belief system, and there surely will be some philosophical counselors who, like me, are more interested in eliciting affect. In my work with Ruth I see myself as doing both. Another rough indicator might lie in one's assessment of the overall severity of a client's complaints and a global assessment of that client's level of functioning. Ruth strikes me as high functioning, though her struggles certainly address powerful issues. Yet another indicator—an extremely important one, I think—is whether or not the counselor is explicitly offering and the client is explicitly seeking to have a condition diagnosed and treated. Having promoted my services as a psychotherapist, I am inclined to describe my services to Ruth as psychotherapy. I would not be so inclined had I simply promoted my services under the heading of "philosophical counseling."

José Barrientos
Another interesting topic on Philosophical Practice is on training. You have provided three day training and certification workshops with Professor Lou Marinoff, in Europe and in the United States. What do you think are the main topics that a counselor has to learn to become a good professional?

Michael Russell
I hope readers will look at the American Philosophical Practitioners Association website – www.appa.edu/--for the official account of the nature and intent of the basic certification workshops that Lou and I offer. These training events have been mainly for people already well educated in philosophy who are in early stages of exploring prospects for philosophical practice. There are also professionals from other fields who are intrigued with the idea of including more of an explicitly philosophical sort in what they provide. Obviously, there are limits to what we can do in three days. Speaking just for myself here, I think we are "certifying" that these individuals have reasonably solid philosophical credentials and apparently laudable motivation. We provide an overview of the history and scope of philosophical practice. We offer both encouragement and some cautions about making philosophical practice a facet of ones career. We address ethical concerns. We provide some basic considerations regarding the selection of clients. We provide ideas about when and how to seek out consultation. We review various techniques for utilizing philosophy within a counseling setting, and discuss different options regarding whether or not to emphasize affect in ones way of working. We provide demonstrations and opportunities for each participant to conduct "sessions." We present basic ideas on how to network and market ones practice. In short, we provide an endorsement of the participants as being off to a good start and having a good

mix of boldness and modesty as they seek to create their own ways of being of service.

These are among the appropriate areas to be addressed early. APPA also offers advanced levels of certification. To date, I have not been involved in these. I do want to preserve my liberal portrait of philosophical counseling as something that can take on quite diverse forms. So while one person might develop abilities in Socratic dialogue, another might try to develop applied critical thinking, another in working out implications of some particular philosopher or school of philosophy. I am ready to be convinced of advanced areas that should be addressed by all.

José Barrientos
What do you think is the best type way of giving this training (Master, certification, bachelor,….)?

Michael Russell
My role in certification is with persons already trained in philosophy at a masters or doctorate level. Here the question is how to supplement what they already know. But let me be absolutely clear that I do not believe training in philosophy begins to be sufficient for providing some of the sorts of interventions that a layman would call "psychotherapy," at the level of emotionality that psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, psychoanalysts have tried to prepare themselves to do. What I do think is that philosophy provides a much better foundation for doing that sort of thing than might be widely supposed, and that neither medicine nor the science of psychology are plainly preferable in the intellectual styles they foster. A very different matter is what sort of additional training needs to be built on that foundation. Minimally this should include very extensive emotionally focused self-exploration by the aspiring practitioner and very extensive experience with clients supplemented by supervision or consultation with experienced helping professionals.

José Barrientos
In addition to your curriculum as philosophical counsellor you have taught courses in the Department of Philosophy and the Department of Human Services at California State University, Fullerton. What do you think is the relationship between the academic and Philosophical Practice? What should be this relationship in the future?

Michael Russell
I know there are many advocates of philosophical practice who are very critical of academic philosophy. Not me. My own experience in academia has been very positive both in what I got from my undergraduate and graduate education and in what I have been free to do as a member of the academy. I studied the familiar cannons of Western philosophy, analytic and continental philosophy, some Eastern thinking, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, logic—all the things that were "mainstream" in the '60s and '70s. My vision of Philosophical Practice draws from my positive regard for most of this. I do think quite a large part of this can help one prepare for offering helpful interactions to people with every-day practical issues. And, to be honest, I tend to not have much of a high opinion of the philosophical credentials of those who either lack exposure to the traditional areas or lack respect for them.

José Barrientos
Sometimes, I have said that Philosophical Practice should be understood as a branch of Philosophy like Philosophy of Technology, Logic, or Aesthetics. All of them have a common philosophical core and a peculiar development. Therefore, when we are working with counselees, mainly, we are doing philosophy in a specific way. What do you think of this point? Is it possible to see in the future the creation of a chair or lectureship of Philosophical Practice or Philosophical Counseling in University?

Michael Russell
Well as I've said, I value the tradition of philosophy in which I was educated: history, analytic, continental, etc. I wish everyone were exposed to much of what I studied. At the same time, I respect diversity. I would want to be cautious about the extent to which I would either assume or insist that others share my background. I would hope that a university chair would share my mix of a conservative vision of the nature of philosophy and a liberal and creative vision of what might be done with this.

José Barrientos
Let's finish talking about the future. What do you see ahead for Philosophical Practice and what are your quests for oncoming years?

Michael Russell
I hope and predict that philosophical practice will continue to grow and will do so in diverse ways. The point should be promoting the value of philosophy, and hopefully we will get past in fighting among philosophers and cross-disciplinary

squabbling over territory. Hopefully we will advance our capacity to learn from one-another. I hope to continue to play a role in fostering both boldness and modesty in philosophers pursuing this path. And I expect to continue to think about matters which are both philosophical and practical in character.

José Barrientos
Thank you, Michael. It is always is a pleasure to talk to you and to Valerie. I hope to see you as soon as possible… Maybe in Korea.