

## **Philosophical Counseling and Self-Transformation**

**Ran Lahav**

This article appeared in *Philosophy, Counseling, and Psychotherapy*, edited by Elliot Cohen, Cambridge Scholarly Press, 2013.

### **Abstract**

This paper presents my approach to philosophical counseling, which is geared towards self-transformation, and is inspired by important thinkers throughout the history of Western philosophy whom I call transformational thinkers. I take from these thinkers the realization that our daily life is normally confined to rigid and superficial attitudes towards ourselves and our world. This is because individuals' everyday attitudes are based on limited understandings of life, which form what I call the person's perimeter, or perimetral worldview. The goal of philosophical counseling, as I see it, is to help counselees transcend their constricted perimetral worldview, or in the language of Plato – to realize that they are imprisoned in a “cave,” and then to step out of it towards a fuller reality. A case study is presented to illustrate the two main stages of the counseling process.

## **Philosophical Counseling and Self-Transformation**

**Ran Lahav**

Forthcoming in: Ed. Elliot Cohen, *Philosophy, Counseling, and Psychotherapy*, Cambridge Scholarly Press.

To an outside observer, the field of philosophical counseling might seem a confusing assortment of different approaches inspired by different thinkers, based on different assumptions, utilizing different techniques, and aimed at different goals. This is in part a consequence of the fact that philosophical counseling—and more generally the field of philosophical practice to which it belongs—has never had one central intellectual authority. We never had a Freud-like figure whose ideas were widely accepted as a fundamental paradigm, and as a starting point for debate.

The philosophical practice movement was founded in Europe in Germany in the early 1980's by Gerd Achenbach. He was not the first to apply philosophical thinking to the individual's everyday predicaments—many philosophers throughout the ages have done this—but he was the first to found an association devoted to this activity and to regard it as a separate field.

Philosophers in other countries soon heard of the idea, often without knowing how exactly it was being practiced in Germany because of language and distance barriers. Many started exploring the idea on their own, individually or in groups, at first in Holland, then in Israel, North America, virtually every West European country, a number of countries in Latin America, and recently in South and East Asia as well. The result today is a network of loosely connected groups and individuals who speak different languages, have different publications, adhere to different policies and aspirations, and whose acquaintance with each other is often flimsy at best.

To add to this complexity, philosophical practice has come to include several different formats in which it is practiced: one-time workshops for the general public, philosophical retreats, long-term self-reflection groups, the philosophical café, and of course philosophical counseling which is probably the most popular form of philosophical practice.

In this paper I will focus on the format of philosophical counseling, and will present the general outlines of my own approach, which I have been developing since the early 1990's.<sup>1</sup> I will explain the main stages of the counseling process and will illustrate them with a case study.

### **Approaches to philosophical counseling: a general classification**

As a general background to my approach, let me start by situating it on the general map of the field. The term “philosophical counseling” is commonly used to include any form of counseling sessions between a philosopher-practitioner who serves as a philosophical counselor, and an individual counselee. Typically the two meet once (or more) a week for several weeks or months, and together reflect philosophically on the counselee's personal life and predicaments.

Even within this specific kind of practice, we can still find considerable variation in how it is practiced by different practitioners and explained by different writers. However, on the basis of my communications with many groups and individuals around the globe, the apparent chaos is not as chaotic as it might seem. To begin with, I believe that one basic vision is common to virtually all of the different approaches to philosophical practice (and indeed to philosophical practice in general): that philosophical reflection can be made relevant to the life of the person in the street. Philosophy, after all, investigates basic life-issues such as what is a meaningful life, what is true love, and what is morally right or wrong. These issues concern not only philosophy professors, but every person who is capable of reflecting on his or her life. Thus, philosophy need not be limited to university classes and journal articles because it can help ordinary people address their daily personal predicaments. In this respect, philosophical counseling (and philosophical practice in general) can be seen as an attempt to revive those ancient Hellenistic philosophical traditions, such as Stoicism and Epicureanism, which sought to guide the individual towards the good life.

The idea that philosophical reflection is relevant to everyday life, and that it can be used to help us address our life-issues, is a lofty vision, and it raises a difficult challenge: Philosophy, especially Western philosophy, is a highly abstract discourse. It also deals with general ideas that are not specific to this or that individual. In contrast, the person in the street is normally not concerned with general, abstract issues. Sarah the accountant and John the store-manager are not normally worried about the general issue of the meaning of life or the universal definition of true

love—they are concerned about their specific, concrete problems, such as their rocky marriage or their dissatisfaction at work. How, then, can philosophical discourse help those individuals address their particular, concrete predicaments?

I suggest that the different approaches to philosophical counseling can be seen as different attempts to respond to this challenge. They are different attempts to connect between the domain of philosophical discourse and the domain of everyday life and predicaments. Despite their considerable variety, I believe that they can be divided into two basic types:

The more common type in the philosophical practice world is what can be termed the Critical Thinking Approach.<sup>2</sup> The basic idea here is that philosophy is a critical investigation of fundamental issues, and as such it employs a variety of thinking tools or techniques, such as the formulation of arguments, detection of logical validity and fallacies, analysis of concepts, exposure of hidden assumptions, etc. These thinking tools, collectively called Critical Thinking, can presumably be used to help counsees analyze their personal problems, their behavior, beliefs, and emotions. In short, this kind of philosophical counseling is based on the art of reasoning.

In principle, self-examination through reasoning, or critical thinking, can be used for a variety of goals: in order to develop self-understanding for its own sake, in order to enrich the counselee's world, to shatter the counselee's hidden assumptions and thus facilitate greater openness to life, etc. But by far the most popular goal in the critical thinking camp is problem resolution: helping counsees to define and resolve their personal problems.<sup>3</sup> Hence, this sub-type of the critical thinking approach can be called the Problem-Solving Approach of philosophical counseling.

Counselors who follow this approach typically focus on specific personal problems which the counselee wishes to address and solve, such as marital stress, anxiety, or difficulties at work. They use critical thinking primarily in order to find a solution to these personal problems. The counseling is regarded as successful to the extent to which at the end of the process the counselee can better deal with the personal problem at hand. We might say that the ultimate goal here is counsees' normalization: to enable them to return to normal life with greater satisfaction.

Looking at the critical thinking approach as a whole, especially its problem-solving sub-type, we may note that according to this approach, what philosophical counseling takes from twenty-six centuries of philosophy is not so much ideas but rather skills, not the "what" but the "how" of

traditional thought. In other words, these philosophical counselors utilize not so much the numerous philosophical theories which have been developed throughout the ages, but mainly the analytic thinking tools with which these theories have been presumably constructed. Opponents of this approach sometimes question whether critical thinking is the most significant contribution which philosophy can make to the individual's life, and whether the focus on the "how" does not leave out the more important "what" of great philosophies. They question whether critical thinking is indeed the important element in the philosophies of great thinkers such as Plato, Rousseau, or Sartre, and also whether critical thinking is special to philosophy, as opposed to any academic discipline.

Those who favor these considerations are often attracted to an alternative approach to philosophical counseling which does not focus on critical thinking, but rather seeks to receive from traditional philosophy a broader scope of insights and ideas. Here again we find a variety of different approaches, but the common element underlying them is that philosophical thought can be used to enrich our life and deepen it.<sup>4</sup> The process of philosophical counseling is viewed not as an attempt to fix a personal problem, but as a personal journey towards greater wisdom and meaning. The counseling does not end once a personal problem is solved, but rather is an ongoing process that never ends. Its goal is to enrich rather than simplify counselees' world, to problematize rather than resolve their personal problems. This approach can be called the Edification Approach to philosophical counseling.

I suggest that these two approaches—the problem-solving and the edification approaches—account for most of the current landscape of the philosophical counseling world. The picture is obviously more complicated—each of these two types can be further sub-divided; some practitioners utilize elements from both; a handful of practitioners do not seem to fall under any of these main categories and might require a third.<sup>5</sup> But for the present purpose this general map is sufficient to situate my own approach which I will now present.

### **Transformational philosophies**

My approach to philosophical counseling belongs to the second, edification-oriented group. It is based on the realization that ideas have an immense power to inspire us and even transform our lives. Consider, for example, how a new social vision about the plight of the unfortunate can

inspire someone to leave his secure job and start working for the poor, how an environmental awareness can make a person start behaving in a considerate and frugal way, how a religious realization can inspire a person to forsake his former ways and become humble and meek, or how an existential realization about the inevitability of death, or the futility of fame and money, can motivate an individual to set upon an intense personal journey.

To be sure, ideas can also be used to brainwash people, and they can result in horrible behavior, as in the case of nationalistic and racist ideologies, and in fact of any vision that is followed with dogmatism and excessive zeal. But this, too, demonstrates the power of ideas. The issue is, therefore, how to use ideas in a positive way in order to open the mind rather to close it, to deepen life rather than brainwash it with dogmatic slogans.

I suggest that an important way to do so is through philosophical reflection. Philosophical reflection, by its very nature, is an open-ended and open-minded investigation which seeks to examine the root of basic life-issues without taking for granted accepted assumptions, seeking to avoid dogmatic and one-sided thinking. As such it can be used to inspire us to relate to life in newer, deeper ways.

For me, this vision is inspired by a number of important philosophers who envisioned a personal transformation through philosophical reflection. Included in this list are thinkers such as Plato, the Stoics, Plotinus, Spinoza, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Emerson, Bergson, Marcel, Buber, and many others. Interestingly, these thinkers belong to very different schools of philosophy, have different theories about life and use radically different concepts. And yet, common to all of them is the vision of self-transformation: They all note that normal life is limited and superficial, controlled by constricting mechanisms and influences, but that we are nevertheless capable of overcoming these limitations and of transforming our lives towards a deeper, fuller, truer, more meaningful way of being.

Plato, for example, expresses this vision in his Allegory of the Cave<sup>6</sup>, which compares us to prisoners tied to chairs, who believe that the shadows dancing on the wall in front of them are reality. Only those who leave the cave can learn, through a long and difficult process, to see the true reality outside. The Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius<sup>7</sup> holds that we are controlled by our automatic psychological reactions which seek satisfaction and result in unreasonable behavior, agitation and frustration. But appropriate philosophical exercises can connect us with the true

guiding principle that resides within us and enable us to become peaceful, rational, and in harmony with the cosmos. Jean-Jacques Rousseau<sup>8</sup> contends that people are commonly alienated from their natural self because they play social games which they mistake for their true self. An appropriate education can help us live a more authentic life, one which is animated by our natural self—the source of spontaneous, constructive energies within us. Friedrich Nietzsche<sup>9</sup> declares that the average person lives a small life of conformity and petty needs, clinging to comfort and security, but that a process of transformation is possible towards a bigger, more noble and intense life, or what he calls the “overman.” In one of his metaphors he likens this process to a camel carrying socially accepted values first becoming a lion who rejects those values, and eventually becoming a child who creates his life anew.<sup>10</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson<sup>11</sup> tells us that we are able to open ourselves to a higher source of inspiration and understanding which he calls “the over-soul,” and thus live a fuller life. Gabriel Marcel<sup>12</sup> holds that very often we live like an observer who looks at life from the outside, impersonally and without true involvement, but that we are capable of becoming witnesses—individuals who respond to life in a committed and personal way. Martin Buber<sup>13</sup> points out that normally our relations to others are distant and objectifying, or what he calls I-It relationships, but that we are able to open ourselves to a fuller kind of relationship, that of I-You, in which we are in full togetherness with the other. And the list goes on.

Obviously, these philosophers have very different conceptions of human existence and aspirations. Yet, their fundamental visions are basically the same: that our normal way of living is lacking—it is superficial, mechanistic, remote from potential sources of understanding and inspiration, but that it can be transformed and made deeper and more meaningful. I therefore suggest that these are different expressions of the same insight and the same yearning which “speak” in the human heart in different languages. It is the same voice under the garb of different theories, the same human aspiration that uses different concepts, cultural images, and words to express itself, namely the yearning to transform our everyday life and live more fully and meaningfully. I call these philosophers transformational thinkers.

I believe that this common transformational vision can serve as the foundation of a philosophical counseling which seeks fullness and depth.

## **The perimeter and the perimetral worldview**

One important point which I am taking from the transformational thinkers is the realization that the individual's everyday life is normally limited and superficial. Our behaviors, emotions, and thoughts are confined to a narrow and rigid repertoire which falls short of the potential fullness and richness of life. This is because to a large extent we follow fixed and automatic emotional and behavioral patterns, which do not give voice to deeper resources in us—sources of sensitivity, of inspiration, of wisdom.

I call this limited, rigid, superficial repertoire the person's *perimeter*. A perimeter is the limited range within which the person's habitual behaviors, emotions, and thoughts are normally confined. It can be seen as a kind of personal prison, analogous to Plato's cave. Just like Plato's prisoners, we are usually not aware of the fact that we are confined to a limited segment of life.

A perimeter is sustained by powerful psychological forces, or mechanisms, but we are usually not aware of them. We are so accustomed to our habitual behaviors and emotions that they feel to us normal, spontaneous, authentic and free. Indeed, for counselees in my philosophical practice it is usually a surprise, even a shock, to discover the narrow and rigid patterns which they normally follow unthinkingly. Usually we notice our perimeter only when we find ourselves struggling against it. For example, it is only when a talkative person tries being quiet, or that a shy person tries behaving boldly, that they realize how difficult it is to transcend their habitual boundaries.

I take two additional important points from the transformation thinkers: First, that with the help of various practices, such as self-reflection and contemplation of selected experiences, it is possible to step out of one's perimeter and in this way to liberate, broaden and deepen one's life. This inner transformation is not an easy process, and yet it is possible.

Second, a person's perimeter has a specific inner logic, and it expresses the person's particular way of interpreting and understanding life. My perimeter—which includes my habitual repertoire of behaviors, emotions, and thoughts—expresses my attitude towards myself, towards others, towards the world. It expresses, in other words, my ways of interpreting life, my way of understanding basic life-issues. For example, the workaholic's need to be constantly productive expresses a certain conception of what is important and significant in life, namely productivity. A husband's domineering behavior towards his wife expresses the conception that love is a form



of possession. And a woman's need to be seen and appreciated all the time expresses her conception of her self as an object of others' looks. These conceptions are not usually conscious. They may even clash with the conscious opinions which the person expresses in words. Yet, they constitute a definite understanding of life.

I call this understanding of life the person's *perimetral worldview*, or *worldview* for short. A perimetral worldview is, then, the understanding of life which is expressed in the person's habitual patterns. It is the person's way of responding—not mainly in words but in behaviors and emotional reactions—to basic life-questions such as What is love? What is meaningful in life? What does it mean to be authentic? etc. We might say that a worldview is the person's implicit "philosophy of life," although it is rarely expressed in words. And of course, it need not be deep or even tenable. In short, a perimeter is the person's habitual patterns, as well as the worldview (or "philosophy of life") which these patterns express.

Taken together, these two points suggest that individuals are usually imprisoned in a narrow understanding of life, in other words in a limited perimetral worldview, and that these prison walls, though powerful, can be opened. I suggest that one important way to do so is through philosophical reflection. Philosophy deals with ways of understanding life, and it can therefore be used to examine and modify those prison walls. This is the goal of philosophical counseling as I see it: to help counselees understand the narrow perimetral worldview in which they are imprisoned, and to inspire them to transcend their prisons walls in order to enrich and deepen their lives. In Platonic terminology we might say that the goal is to understand the cave in which we are imprisoned, and eventually to step out of it.

In order to see how this might be done in practice, let us look at the following case study, which is a composite based on real cases from my practice.

*Laura complains to her philosophical counselor that she feels "alienated"—alienated from her workplace, her colleagues, her career, even her friends. She is a 38-year-old single woman working as an editor in a large publishing firm. She perceives herself as being a caring person who likes to give and help. She loves organizing surprise parties for colleagues' birthdays, discussion groups and fund drives. These events give her tremendous energy and satisfaction. "They give me life," she explains. "I sometimes feel that it's my mission in life to give to others."*

*In the first couple of months of her work in the publishing firm everything went very well. Her colleagues regarded her as a novelty and went along with her initiatives, often agreeing to participate in her organized events and volunteer for various roles. But this ended quite soon, and people started shunning her. Now, some two years later, she feels alienated. “My colleagues don’t respond to me as they used to,” she complains. “It’s virtually impossible to convince them to take part in my events. I am bored sitting at my desk and writing all day long without anything to look for.”*

A philosophical counselor from the problem-solving approach would probably try to analyze Laura’s problem more clearly and then look for ways to solve it. But from the perspective of the edification approach, solving her specific problem at work is not the main issue for the counseling. As the counselor told her in their first meeting, if solving her problem was her main goal, then she should go elsewhere. Her predicament was an opportunity for a broader goal: to examine herself, understand her way of relating to herself and to others, and eventually find ways to deepen and enrich her life.

From this perspective, Laura’s predicament is an expression of her general attitude to life, in other words of the perimetral worldview within which she is imprisoned. If she investigates her prison walls more fully, she could eventually step out of them. In the process, her specific predicament might be resolved, but only as a by-product of the main goal.

Thus, according to my approach, a typical counseling process comprises two stages. The first stage, which normally takes three to five sessions, is focused on exploring the counselee’s perimeter, or her Platonic cave so to speak. Everyday details in the counselee’s behaviors and emotions are examined, and if the philosophical counselor is experienced and perceptive, it is not long before they add up to an overall perimetral worldview. The second stage focuses on finding ways to step out of the Platonic cave—in other words, sources of inspiration to expand and deepen the counselee’s life beyond its current perimetral boundaries. This stage does not start abruptly, but gradually enters the picture to assume a central place in the sessions. It may take anywhere between several sessions to an entire life-time, depending on how deeply one wishes to go.

**First stage: Exploring the counselee's perimeter**

In order to explore the counselee's perimeter, the first task in the counseling process is to examine everyday situations and identify central behavioral and emotional patterns. A pattern is a habitual tendency, a repetition of the same theme in different circumstances over and over again. Identifying habitual patterns, though not yet a specifically philosophical endeavor, sets the stage for subsequent philosophical reflection on the meaning of those patterns.

*In their second session, the counselor asks Laura to tell him about the first couple of months at her workplace and why she had found them enjoyable.*

*"Every time I had a few minutes," Laura recalls, "I would drop by somebody's office. I would bring them something to eat or drink, maybe cookies or a cup of coffee. We would chat a little, and they would tell me about themselves—their problems with the kids, their dinner plans, their new shoes, that sort of stuff."*

*"And did you share with them your personal life?"*

*"Well, I didn't think anybody would be interested to hear about me. I prefer listening. I am a good listener—I know how to ask questions. I like to help and to give a good piece of advice."*

*"For example?"*

*"For example, I would say: You shouldn't really let your husband go out by himself at night, or: I think you should tell your teenage daughter to be at home for dinner. And they would nod and think about it, and a day or two later I would stop by to find out what happened."*

*"To find out what happened?"*

*"Sure. What's advice good for if you don't know if it worked? At first people liked this, but then something happened, I don't know what, and they lost patience with me. Sometimes they would not let me into their office and tell me they were busy. And they no longer wanted to participate in my little events."*

*"It must have been quite distressing for you."*

*"Well, I don't know. The fun part of work was no longer there for me to enjoy. Working by myself alone in my office—that's all that's left for me now."*

*“Tell me more,” the counselor requests, “about some of you colleagues and how they changed their attitude towards you.”*

*Laura gladly tells him about her colleagues, and quickly slides to the personal stories she had heard from them, recounting them in detail and with obvious delight. Later she also starts telling him about her family members and neighbors. Now the counselor realizes that a common pattern is starting to emerge in Laura’s reports: She is focused on other people’s stories—other people’s feelings, plans, problems and needs, while being almost oblivious to her own. It is as if she lives their lives, not hers. The counselor now wants to point this out to Laura.*

*“It is interesting,” he comments, “that you have told me about other people’s experiences in great detail, but you have never said anything about your own feelings.”*

*“What’s there to tell? The stories were about them, not about me.”*

*“Well, did you have any particular feeling when your colleagues revealed their private matters? Did you feel pity, for example? Or did you feel embarrassed?”*

*“I never feel embarrassed. Why should I? If they don’t like what I’m doing, it’s their business.”*

*“In order to feel embarrassed one need to look at oneself. One needs to see oneself from other people’s perspective.”*

*“I guess I don’t like doing that,” Laura replies dismissively.*

*“It is as if your eyes, Laura, are always turned towards others. You are telling me that the interesting things happen to them, not to you.”*

*At first the idea is hard for Laura to digest. She keeps dismissing it or changing the topic to other people’s stories, and the counselor tries bringing it up again several times. Counselees often find it difficult to accept that their behaviors follow relatively fixed patterns. When Laura finally understands the counselor’s observation, the two examine its validity by looking at a broader scope of behaviors. After realizing that the observation does indeed apply to many cases, they continue to explore its scope and details by looking at additional kinds of situations.*

*Thus, for example, Laura notes that her TV at home is always on, and that she watches it in her free time as well as while cleaning or cooking or lying in bed before falling asleep. Being quietly by herself is very difficult for her. She is especially interested in romantic comedies. She now*

*recognizes the connection to previously mentioned behaviors: she seeks diversion in other people, and is fascinated by watching other people's lives.*

Normally one central pattern is found at the center of the counselee's everyday attitudes. When two or more patterns are found, they usually turn out to be parts of one larger, unifying pattern (for example, two variations on the same general pattern, or two opposites in a pattern of inner conflict). After all, the counselee's behaviors all belong to one single person, and so they are usually attuned to one another. The counselee's central pattern is not, of course, all there is to the person—human beings are much more than patterns—but it can be likened to the central theme around which a novel is constructed, or the skeleton around which the body grows.

Once the central pattern in the counselee's everyday life becomes clear, it is time to move on to the more philosophical task. A behavioral and emotional pattern expresses a certain attitude to oneself and others. It expresses, in other words, a specific way of interpreting and understanding life—it expresses what I called a perimetral worldview. What kind of worldview does Laura's pattern express? In other words, by behaving and emoting the way she does, how is she thereby interpreting herself and others?

Note that unlike the psychologist who might also be interested in behavioral and emotional patterns, the philosophical counselor is not interested in tapping into hidden psychological causes. Philosophy is about ideas, not about psychological mechanisms. The philosophical counselor is primarily interested in the counselee's worldview, in her "philosophy of life" so to speak, which underlies her habitual behavioral and emotional patterns.

*"Laura," the counselor says at the beginning of their third session, "in our last session we noted that you focus on other people's stories and virtually ignore your own story. Other people's stories fascinate you, excite you—in a sense they give you life. What kind of attitude is this? What is it saying about your relationship to yourself and to other people?"*

*"I guess it is saying: I, Laura, am not like you people. We have different roles in life."*

*"How are your roles different?"*

*Laura ponders. "Their role is to live life, my role is to observe life."*

*This is a relevant proposal—that her worldview portrays her as an observer—but it does not seem to fully agree with the facts. The counselor points out to Laura that she often actively involves herself in the lives of others. She enjoys organizing events for others, giving them little presents, manipulating them to reveal their private affairs, and telling them what to do. She is not really a mere observer.*

*Laura agrees. “Maybe all this means that I like giving. That I love people.”*

*Little by little Laura realizes that her conception of herself as a loving giver is inaccurate too. It would be more accurate to say, as the counselor summarizes, that she lives through others—through their stories, their pains and joys, their concerns and actions.*

*Laura suddenly chuckles. “I am like a theater director who is so engrossed in her fictional characters that she lives through them. I don’t know what to do with myself without my little theater.”*

*“This is a very appropriate metaphor,” the counselor smiles. “In other words, you have an interesting conception, or ‘theory,’ about who you are, who others are, and how you are related to them. Can we try to articulate this ‘theory’?”*

*In order to deepen the discussion, the counselor introduces several relevant ideas from various philosophies. The first idea he introduces is Ned Noddings’ notion of “motivational displacement.” In Noddings’ philosophy<sup>14</sup> the term refers to the way a caring person is motivated by the distress of the cared-for, as if it was her own distress. As Laura reinterprets the notion, “The concerns that motivate me are those that reside in the other person’s heart, not in my own heart.” Of course, there are also significant differences between Noddings’ idea and Laura’s attitude. For one thing, Laura is not worried about the others’ distress, but mainly enjoys hearing about it and commenting on it—but those differences too shed light on Laura’s attitude and help to sharpen it.*

*In the subsequent session the counselor also introduces alternative views on relationships, such as Martin Buber’s notion of I-You<sup>15</sup>, Jean-Paul Sartre’s idea of the Other as an objectifying look<sup>16</sup>, and Emmanuel Levinas’ notion of the Other as an ethical demand to which I am called to respond<sup>17</sup>. We can learn a great deal about our own “theory” by comparing it to those that are different from ours. At times Laura and the counselor read a short excerpt and reflect together*

*on some concept or distinction, and then use it to reflect on her experiences. In this way the conversation moves back and forth between relevant philosophical ideas and Laura's attitude. Their understanding of her attitude gradually attains greater clarity and complexity.*

*Eventually they summarize Laura's "theory," or worldview, thus: The self has very little inner life of its own—there is little substance in it, and no point in searching within it. It gains life only when receiving it from an Other, when the Other is viewed, encountered, and manipulated from the outside. The Other is, therefore, the ground of the life of the self. An interpersonal relationship is a form of utilization or consumption. Life is thus lived from the outside, by means utilizing others.*

*There are still a number of details in Laura's theory that remain to be clarified (for example, how it relates to her intimate relationships with men), but even at this point it clearly does not resemble familiar philosophical theories from the history of philosophy. Yet, like them it is a response to a much-discussed life-issue, namely what the self is and how it relates to others. This is not to say that her theory is as deep or tenable as those of Buber or Sartre's or Levinas, or that it is based on considerations as insightful as theirs. But like them it expresses a specific understanding of what it means to encounter another person, even though it does so not in words but rather through her actual behavioral and emotional patterns.*

*In sum, we may say that Laura's perimeter, as revealed so far in the counseling, is composed of two elements: First, behavioral and emotional patterns involving immense fascination with other people's private affairs. Second, the worldview or "theory" which those patterns express, namely, that the Other is a life-giving material to an otherwise empty self.*

### **Second stage: Stepping out of the counselee's perimeter**

Now that the counselor and counselee have reached a fuller understanding of the latter's Platonic cave, or perimeter, it is time to move on to the second stage of the counseling: exploring ways to transcend its limited boundaries. Her perimeter is not necessarily distressing, but it is narrow and rigid, and it limits her life and impoverishes it.

One might be tempted to use reasoning to define an alternative attitude for Laura, and then to try convincing her to change her ways. However, imposing ideas on a person's behavior by the

sheer power of reasoning tends to remain on the surface, without resulting in a deep change. This might work for problem-solving approaches, but not for approaches that seek to enrich and deepen life.

How, then, can the counselor facilitate a deeper change in Laura, one that would emerge from within her? This is the central challenge for the second stage of the counseling. Here we should remember a point mentioned earlier, that ideas have an immense power to inspire and change us. Despite a common tendency among psychologists to emphasize the importance of emotions at the expense of thoughts and ideas, our understanding of ourselves and of our world has a tremendous power to shape our lives.

In his classic *Meditations*<sup>18</sup>, the Roman emperor-philosopher Marcus Aurelius faces a similar challenge when he attempts to live in accordance with Stoic principles. To address this challenge, Marcus Aurelius employs a variety of philosophical exercises that are intended to awaken his true self, the so-called guiding principle, which, according to Stoic philosophy, is usually dormant in us. In fact, several scholars<sup>19</sup> interpret his *Meditations* to be an exercise notebook. His exercises include writing behavioral instructions to himself, formulating and reformulating Stoic principles, contemplating various behaviors and imagining their consequences, envisioning one's place in the universe, and so on.

Beyond the details of his Stoic approach, for the present purpose the important point is that Marcus Aurelius is not trying to create in himself a new attitude out of nothing, but rather to inspire and awaken an already existing, though dormant attitude. As he and other Stoics saw it, something within him already knows the futility of normal behaviors and the value of Stoic attitudes: the deep self within him which is drowned by powerful psychological mechanisms. Philosophizing about Stoic ideas is intended to awaken this deep understanding, or “voice” within him.

In my approach to philosophical counseling I use this strategy primarily in the second stage of the process.<sup>20</sup> Far from trying to impose on Laura superficial attitudes, I would seek to inspire and awaken “voices” that already live deeply within her—so deeply that they are normally drowned by everyday concerns and inner tumult. We have all experienced, I believe, an idea we encounter—in a novel, a movie, a conversation—suddenly touching us deeply and awakening a



deep-seated understanding which we have been neglecting. We feel that we have always known it semi-consciously.

*“Laura, can you think of recent situations where you did not follow your usual patterns, where you related to somebody in an unusual way?” The counselor explains to her that although normally the “voice” of our perimetral worldview dominates us, sometimes a different “voice” motivates us. It is worth listening to such divergent voices.*

*Laura ponders for a long time. “Yes, I recall a situation from last week. I was sitting in a bus, and as usual I couldn’t keep quiet and started talking with the woman sitting next to me. We talked for about twenty minutes, and looking back I realize that I never asked her about her personal story, not even once!”*

*“Interesting. What did you talk about, then?”*

*“We found out right away that we had studied in the same high school, ten years apart, and that we knew the same teacher. We talked about him, about his infatuation with the math instructor, about his fight with the principal, and some other funny incidents. It was a lot of fun.”*

*“I see, Laura. So you shared with this woman your fascination with somebody else’s private life.”*

*“Mmm... I see what you mean,” Laura deliberates. “So this wasn’t, after all, very different from my usual ways. Well, let me see if I can remember a better example.” But nothing comes to her mind.*

*In the absence of an actual example, the counselor suggests reading a few lines from Gabriel Marcel’s article “Testimony and Existentialism”<sup>21</sup>. Marcel describes an attitude of free, creative, committed response to a “light,” or a vision that inspires us. It is opposed, according to Marcel, to an attitude of “observation,” which, though not identical to Laura’s attitude, is reminiscent of it because it relates to life from the outside.*

*The idea of an inner light moves Laura. She recalls an episode, three or four weeks earlier, in which she walked alone in a park, and a profound silence descended on her. “The silence was marvelous,” she explained. “I could listen to every thought in my mind, to every sensation in my body. And then I had an insight: ‘Of course my colleagues don’t like me—I am imposing myself*

*on them. Let them live their lives! Your life is yours, their life is theirs!’ This insight stayed with me for a couple of days, and it made me more tranquil and quiet at work. But only for a couple of days. Then I slid back to my usual self.”*

*This memory brings to her mind several related experiences: Sitting by herself in a café without feeling her usual urge to talk with her neighbors, only being intensely aware of her thoughts and emotions; letting her nephew paint without imposing on him her usual suggestions; and the realization that once gripped her in a funeral that her neighbor’s mourning was a sacred space which she was not allowed to disturb with her usual prattle and advices.*

*“Very interesting,” the counselor says thoughtfully. “It seems to me that in all those experiences something called you to be less dominating, less outside yourself, more attuned to yourself and to others.”*

*“This is the voice of listening,” Laura agrees. “It reminds me that I don’t need to meddle with other people’s life all the time. I can listen to my own life, and I can listen to others.”*

*The task for Laura now is to understand this voice more fully and open herself to it, letting it live in her, side by side with other voices, and inspire her. The goal of the counseling is not to replace her perimetral voices with this newly discovered voice—that would amount to replacing one Platonic cave with another cave—but to learn how to be attentive and open to both voices, to many voices, to the fullness of life within her and outside her. Life can be richer than one single automatic voice.*

### **Conclusion: self-transformation as a goal of philosophizing**

Looking at the process of philosophical counseling as a whole, we may note that it is geared towards self-transformation, and in this sense it echoes the basic vision of transformational thinkers. In line with their approaches, it recognizes that our everyday life is usually confined to a narrow, rigid and superficial attitude—narrow in the sense that it represents only a tiny slice of human possibilities; rigid in the sense that it is resistant to change; and superficial in the sense that it involves primarily the easily accessible parts of our selves, leaving additional inner resources inactive and dormant. Philosophical counseling as I see it is geared towards overcoming this “Platonic cave” towards a fuller, freer, deeper life. In the course of the

counseling counsees learn to understand this potential fullness—not only in words, but mainly through their emotions, behaviors, and entire range of attitudes. Since this approach revolves around understanding conceptions of life, it is obviously a *philosophical* kind of counseling, and it makes use of some of the rich treasures of ideas which have been accumulated throughout the history of philosophy.

The different transformational philosophies can be seen as complementary to each other. There is no need to decide between, say, Rousseau’s goal of connecting to the natural self and Marcel’s goal of being a witness to a light. The two address different kinds of perimeters, or human limitations, and attempt to open the individual to different voices, or to different themes of human existence. Human life is richer than this or that theory, and can be likened to a choir of voices rather than a single “correct” voice.

Obviously, the goal of self-transformation cannot be achieved in a month or two of counseling. I regard philosophical counseling as a moment within the life-long journey towards a fuller existence. Philosophical counseling is not a time-out from life, not a preparation for living, but an integral part of life which is a never-ending process.

---

## Footnotes

1. For more details about my approach to philosophical counseling, and to philosophical practice in general, see my website [www.PhiloLife.net](http://www.PhiloLife.net). In Italian, see my book *Oltre la Filosofia: alla ricerca della saggezza* (In Italian: *Beyond Philosophy: the investigation of wisdom*), Milano: Apogeo, 2010. The manuscript will be published in English in the near future.
2. See for example Lou Marinoff, *Plato, Not Prozac*, New York: HarperCollins, 1999; Elliot Cohen, *What Would Aristotle Do?*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2003.
3. Oscar Brenifier's work is an example of a critical thinking approach which does not aim at solving personal problems, but rather at undermining hidden assumptions in order to open a space of self-reflection. Videos on philosophical counseling can be watched at [www.brenifier.com/en/welcome.html](http://www.brenifier.com/en/welcome.html).
4. Gerd Achenbach, "Philosophy, Philosophical Practice, and Psychotherapy," in Ran Lahav and Maria Tillmanns (eds.), *Essays on Philosophical Counseling*, Lanham: University Press of American, 1995, pp. 61-74; Ran Lahav, "Philosophical Counseling as a Quest for Wisdom," *Practical Philosophy*, 1: 2001; Neri Pollastri, "Philosophy, and Nothing Else," *Philosophical Practice in Italy*, Trapani: Di Girolamo, Italy, 2008, pp. 21-32.
5. An example is the Finnish philosophical practitioner Arto Tukiainen, who believes that philosophical counseling should be aimed at cultivating universal values, such as receptivity or openness of mind, which he calls "releasement." "The virtue of releasement in philosophical practice," forthcoming.
6. *Republic*, Book 7, translation by Benjamin Jowett, *The Internet Classic Archive* at <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html>.
7. *Meditations*, translation by George Long, *The Internet Classic Archive* at <http://classics.mit.edu/Antoninus/meditations.html>.
8. *Emile*, London: Dutton, 1966.
9. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, New York: Penguin Books, 1978, pp. 103-442. See for example sections 4 and 5 in the Prologue, pp. 126-131.

- 
10. "On the Three Metamorphoses," *Ibid.* pages 137-140.
  11. "The Oversoul," *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, New York: New American Library, 1965, pp. 280-295.
  12. "Testimony and Existentialism," in *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, New York: Citadel Press, 1995.
  13. *I and Thou*, New York: Scribner, 1970.
  14. *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, especially pp. 30-46.
  15. *I and Thou*, New York: Scribner, 1970.
  16. *Being and Nothingness*, New York: Washington Square Press, 1966.
  17. *Alterity and Transcendence*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
  18. *Ibid.*
  19. Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.
  20. Ran Lahav, "Self-Talk in Marcus Aurelius Meditations," *Philosophical Practice*, 4: 2009.
  21. *Ibid.*