

Putting lives in order

CAN YOU REALLY CURE A BROKEN HEART BY READING EPICETUS? PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELLOR ANDREW TAGGART REPLIES TO CRITICS

For the past fifteen years, public debates surrounding philosophical counselling have seemed to me wrongheaded from the start. First of all, they've sought to bind philosophical counselling to a single essence for fear that otherwise it will blow away. My elliptical but not inaccurate reply to the question "What is philosophical counselling?" is that it's the art of putting lives in order.

The second mistake has been to liken philosophical counselling too quickly or too facilely to a therapeutic model. On this assumption, media headlines and newspaper accounts have tended to cast philosophical practice in psychotherapeutic and medical terms. Thus, "Socratic Shrink" (*New York Times*, 1994) makes the philosophical counsellor into a kind of therapist; "The Mental Health of Philosophical Counselling" (tpm, 2010) presumes that philosophical counselling

can be assessed according to Diagnostic and Statistical Manual standards; and "Prescribing Aristotle: Philosophical Counseling 101" (*Washington Post*, 2011) implies that a philosophical counsellor applies philosophers or perennial philosophical ideas to individual cases and that it is a kind of private tutorial. In the most recent *Washington Post* article on philosophical counselling, "Philosophical Counselors Rely on Eternal Wisdom of Great Thinkers", a "broken-hearted patient" is "prescribed" Epictetus in lieu of Effexor.

Most articles have then focused the reader's attention on some or all of the following issues.

- The Relation of Philosophical Counselling (PC) to Psychology. What is the relationship between psychology and PC? What stance does PC take on mental health and illness, on

diagnosis, treatment, and cure? In place of drugs, what does one prescribe to a “patient” or a “client”?

- **The Application of Theory.** Is PC simply the application of “eternal wisdom”, moral or political theories, or perennial ideas to individual cases? Is it just applied ethics?
- **The Measurement of Results.** Are the results of PC measurable? And if they aren’t (or haven’t been or can’t be), then what evidence can it adduce that it’s doing any good?
- **The Claim to Legitimacy.** What kind of training, credentializing body, and laws are there to ensure that PC is a legitimate profession? What protection does the “client” have against harm and malpractice? What recourse can she take in the event of potential wrongdoing?

It’s not uncommon to hear the last question raised in the context of the others with more than a hint of scepticism. My response is not to weigh

in on the debate but to put it aside. My reason for doing so is that I’m not sure that the questions are all that interesting. In particular, it’s not clear to me that my interlocutors and I have established what we’re aiming at, what we’re doing, or what we’re seeking or that I can, within the terms provided, venture an intelligible reply, or that the questions have any bearing on my practice as it is experienced “from the inside”.

This needn’t be taken as glibness on my part. As Anthony Appiah shows in *Cosmopolitanism*, homosexuality did not gain wider acceptance because certain ideas won out in public forums or at academic conferences but because heterosexuals slowly felt more comfortable living next to and working alongside their homosexual neighbours and colleagues. As homosexuals became more embedded within a collective way of life, people became more and more familiar with these practices. If Appiah is right, then in some cases it may be a better strategy simply to give the other some sense of what a practice is like.



I want to start by suggesting that any way of life can be regarded as flourishing, robust, or neither flourishing nor robust. By “a way of life”, I mean an individual’s or a collective’s model for leading a good life, a model that consists of practices taking place within particular institutions. An institution can be defined as a place where individuals and groups can cultivate practices that aim at well-established final ends. And a

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practice can be understood as a “style” or activity composed of habits, dispositions, strategies, and exercises all of which seek to realise these final ends. Philosophical practice will thus attend to and reflect upon our ways of life.

To determine how robust or flourishing a person’s way of life is, we’d do well to examine whether he has the right final ends in view; how well his practice is designed to achieve these ends; what strategies he adopts and employs; what virtues he’s cultivated; and what habits, self-conceptions, and basic understandings have facilitated or impeded his progress. Through dialogue, meditation, and guided inquiry, a philosophical practitioner tries to understand the extent to which an individual’s practice is out of joint and the reasons why a certain way of life can’t be sustained within and according to its own terms.

Understanding the reasons why a practice is causing somebody disquietude will involve more than helping her to achieve theoretical insight, though this will be one exercise among others. It

will also require guiding her through the various strategies she’s employed in order to hold onto a life that she still values and desires yet that cannot conceivably work. At the same time, the practice will be directed to getting her to develop new practices that carry the potential of realising worthwhile final ends.

Take love, for instance. As Augustine would have it, love is craving a good for its own sake. Once an agent’s hitherto-satisfied desires for the other and for the “we” are not being met, then he can resort to a suite of “strategies of retention” – trying them out, half-consciously, running through them, and returning to this or that one despite its inherent failings, time and again – in order to maintain his desire for this object and this form of life. There are only a finite set of general strategies that one can run through. One can, for example, posit the essential beyond oneself, the essential fullness of love only actualisable in the future, and then either wait for or work towards that which is, in principle, unattainable. As this strategy is exhausted, one can turn to “realism”, reconceiving one’s lover not in erotic but in companionable terms. Or one can engage in bargaining, revaluing, and trade-offs, all of which are ways of re-jiggering values and desires one way or another. Or move into the master or servant role. Or purify oneself of desire altogether, recasting oneself as an ascetic who is performing his “duty for duty’s sake”. Or simply withdraw from social life in an act of resignation. The upshot is that there is a tragic “lived logic”, an “indirect proof”, according to which many of the possibilities in a form of life must be tried out before the whole thing can be ruled out. Only then does one become conscious that a form of life is untenable; only then might

one fall into “conceptual despair”, not knowing how to go on.

My claim is that one doesn't begin to reflect on the shape of one's life until that life has collapsed. Coming to an awareness of the reasons why that life is collapsing is a certain kind of theoretical insight and an achievement at that. Yet theoretical insight is only one kind of exercise; there are other, more important ones. Conceptual analysis, which arises from a life need for greater clarity, teaches us how to disentangle various conceptions, draw relevant distinctions, hone our faculty of judgement, and pick out examples and counterexamples. Prizing apart one conception of happiness from another can go some way towards uncluttering one's conceptual repertoire. On its own, however, conceptual analysis is not sufficient for going on otherwise and not least because an individual has become accustomed to living out certain conceptions of happiness within the institutions through which he passes and to which he half-heartedly belongs, conceptions that he repeats in his actions and behaviours. Other exercises such as premeditation, letter writing, and examinations of conscience may also figure more or less prominently in his attempts to re-craft a practice, depending on his needs or the ends.

To make the transition from one form of life to another, an individual also will have to develop new practices. Someone getting over a past love or out of a broken marriage must learn to perform new activities that, however mundane or trivial, put her back in touch with the world. In so doing, she is educating herself in the art of desiring again, in the art of desiring other, higher ends, at the same time that she is anchoring herself to the kind of world where these desires

can be satisfied. She is discovering that other, more worthwhile ends can be satisfied or satisfied otherwise or that her table of values has changed considerably or that different virtues are being exercised for the sake of higher ends. She is learning how to live again. Insight into her “lived logic”, exercises as part of establishing better practices, and the cultivation of a new practice in different surroundings: these are all necessary

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ingredients in the art of putting her life in order.

Necessary but not sufficient. One of the seminal lessons of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* is that alienation entails nihilism. Once an individual is “peeled off” an institution and can no longer identify with his social role, he immediately has trouble finding good or good-enough reasons for striving towards one end rather than another. I take nihilism to be the sense of groundlessness that accompanies having no non-arbitrary criterion with which to determine why one form of life is better or worse than another. I can live this way, but why should I? Living in exile, therefore, is fraught with the possibility that one is always potentially a wastrel, a flâneur, a prodigal son.

To take MacIntyre's thought seriously is to insist that any viable form of life conform to three formal criteria: meaning, wholeness, and clarity. In *The Examined Life*, Robert Nozick makes an important distinction between value and meaning. Value, he says, means that something has “organic unity” or independent worthwhile

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meaning, a relational concept, is what attaches us to an item of value. An authentic life is not sufficient for leading a good life inasmuch as the former may be internally cohesive yet utterly trivial with respect to value. Hence, meaningful practices must be oriented towards and connected to the common good, love, friendship, well-made things, and the transcendent (if one believes in God).

The second criterion is the aesthetic concept of wholeness, what Aquinas calls *integritas*. A form of life is externally integrated, let's say, to the extent that a person can see his practices as contributing to the flourishing of the institutions to which he belongs. It is internally integrated only if an individual's ultimate aims do not lead to tragic conflicts between incommensurable goods but come together in a life-work.

Clarity is the final, non-negotiable criterion. As practical beings first and foremost, we need not necessarily have the clarity esteemed and sought by contemplatives or speculative philosophers, but we do need a good-enough understanding of what it means to go on and keep our lives in order. We have to see, that is, that these institutions are working for us, that our practices are making sense of our actions and ideas, and we can't be left stranded with grave or paralysing doubts concerning how to get on and what's to be done. Clarity of the "just-enough kind" will be whatever is sufficient to illuminate a life path so that doubts concerning powerlessness, restlessness, exhaustion, and suicide can't get a foothold.

The implication of my claim that overcoming alienation entails the disappearance of nihilism is that this is true only if institutions' final ends are actually of independent value. If an institution is not, as a matter of fact, oriented towards higher things, then alienation and nihilism will be global problems not for this or that individual but for most of us. And this will be the case because we won't know, collectively, how to go on.

And what would good institutions look like? They would have to be places where persons and groups can cultivate good practices such that the three criteria adumbrated above can be satisfied. In which case, they ought to last provided that they are capable of adapting to changing circumstances and provided also that they continue to fulfil aims of independent value.

What remains to be considered is whether institutions in the early twenty-first century do in fact support good practices. I'm not sure they do, though I can't broach this topic here. Suffice it to say, if they do and if they are robust enough to adapt to external obstacles, then the source of one's errors may lie squarely with his practices, and the task of philosophical practice will be to help him to reconcile his practice with the institutions in which he is embedded. If they don't, then the source of our problems may lie even further back than we thought. It may lie not in our heads but at the heart of our collective way of life.

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