

Should Philosophical Counseling be Satisfied with only Worldview Interpretation?

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Abstract: In this essay, I address the question of whether a clear-cut division of labor can be maintained between what a philosophical counselor attempts to accomplish in a counseling context and what a formally trained psychologist endeavors to bring about in the same context. The defense of this outlook proceeds by maintaining a bifurcated analysis between the philosophical problem implied by the client's predicament and the cause of the client's problem. Thus, the job of a philosophical counseling, so to speak, is to focus on the former, and the responsibility of a psychologist is to concentrate on the latter. Certainly, the intuition behind affirming this viewpoint has the tide of victory set in its favor. However, I strongly suspect that its apparent strength rests upon a confusion of what would qualify as an accurate philosophical statement implied by the client's problem. In fact, I argue that any philosophical statement that correctly expresses the psychological predicament of the client is going to be related to what caused the client's problem in the first place. Thus, I conclude that because of this link, a philosophical counselor cannot avoid psychologizing, to some extent, the predicaments of a client while practicing philosophical counseling.

The chief challenge that philosophical counseling faces in the twenty-first century is this: There is a prevalent view among many scholars that philosophers, who practice as philosophical counselors, *can* and *should* avoid stepping into the waters of uncovering hidden psychological processes, waters reserved only for trained psychotherapists. Ran Lahav is one such scholar.¹ He argues that philosophers *can* do this because, as he sees things, there is a legitimate domain for philosophical counseling, a view that he calls "Worldview Interpretation."² He also argues that philosophical counselors *should* avoid such a move into such waters. His main reason is

¹ Ran Lahav, "A Conceptual Framework for Philosophical Counseling: Worldview Interpretation." In Ran Lahav and Maria da Venza Tillmanns (eds.), *Essay on Philosophical Counseling* (Lanham, New York and London: University of Press of America, Inc., 1995).

² *Ibid.*, 4-5.

this. It is basically a division of labor problem. Philosophers should not employ therapy techniques that they are not qualified to use. They should stay in their own yard. Only those counselors who are trained and equipped with the experience-based (empirical) knowledge of psychotherapies are qualified to navigate in those waters.³

Lahav's point is well taken. But before we concede to his line of reasoning, I should like to look more closely at his arguments for his views. I will proceed by analyzing his view of world interpretation. I will then consider two of his arguments for the bifurcation of psychotherapy and philosophical counseling. Finally, I will set out my arguments against his views.

I

Ran Lahav's view of worldview interpretation plays a central role in his thinking about the legitimate domain for philosophical counseling. To make clear why this is true, I will first explain what he means by worldview interpretation, and then I will try to show how it fits into his understanding of philosophical counseling.

Let us begin with what Lahav takes to be a worldview. A worldview is an abstract framework that interprets the structure and philosophical implications of one's conception of oneself and reality; a system of coordinates, so to speak, that organizes, makes distinctions, draws implications, compares, confers meanings, and thus makes sense of one's various attitudes towards oneself and one's world.⁴

Three points, in particular, should be noticed. First, Lahav begins with the plausible assumption that clients seeking counseling possess various attitudes about themselves and the world.

³ Ibid., 12.

⁴ Ibid., 7.

Second, Lahav argues that many, if not all, of these attitudes can be the focus of philosophical discussion because, as he puts it, they express an individual's "personal philosophy."⁵ In fact, Lahav writes earlier: "They [i.e., an individual's views] can be seen as expressing a conception of one's identity, of what life is all about, what is important, honorable, or fair, what can be expected of others, etc."⁶

Third, an abstract framework or what he calls a worldview, can organize the various views an individual possesses, which are typically not organized in any systematic way. This means that it is possible to arrange one's beliefs in such a way, to line them up so to speak, so that they will reflect an individual's overarching outlook about themselves and the world. Lahav, however, qualifies this point in two ways. This overarching outlook, Lahav points out, does not causally influence concrete events and the individual herself does not necessarily possess it.⁷ Instead, a worldview is a conceptual grid that is created and designed in the light of the client's various attitudes with this aim.

II

Although worldview interpretation offers philosophers, and therefore, philosophical counselors, a subject matter that they are uniquely qualified to participate in, Lahav makes a much stronger and interesting point: *Worldview interpretation is the only legitimate domain for philosophical counselors.* I will now turn to that discussion and briefly explain why he believes that this is so.

⁵ Ibid., 4.

⁶ Ibid. See also Lahav, "What is Philosophical in Philosophical Counseling?" *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 13, no. 3 (1996): 265-266.

⁷ Ibid., 7

Lahav gives two basic reasons for why worldview interpretation is the only legitimate domain for philosophical counselors. The first reason rests upon his understanding of the various psychotherapies. The other rests upon his view of the nature of philosophy. I will begin with the former.

Almost immediately from the beginning of his essay, Lahav seeks to elaborate what worldview interpretation is and how it is different from the various psychotherapies. He mentions several by name, but he spends the most time distinguishing it from Freud's psychoanalysis. Later, after characterizing Freud's approach to counseling, Lahav mentions several other psychotherapies, and he describes all of them in the following way:

[S]pecifically, psychological approaches can be characterized, roughly, as dealing with psychological (affective, cognitive, behavioral) processes or events (e.g., conflicts, experiences, fantasies, thoughts, anxieties, etc.), i.e., processes inside the patient which underlie the predicament (or life) in question.⁸

Although Lahav's description of the aims of psychotherapy are familiar, what point does he want to drive home? His main point is this: philosophers are not qualified to use a psychotherapy because psychotherapies rely heavily on empirical studies that they are unacquainted with and upon scientifically-based theories and techniques that philosophers are not trained to use.⁹

Lahav's other point is this. It turns upon his characterization of philosophy. Philosopher's, according to Lahav, are trained only for conceptual analysis or what he calls pure (non-empirical-based) thinking.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁹ Ibid., 6 and 12.

¹⁰ Ibid., 12. Also see Lahav's discussion article "Using Analytic Philosophy in Philosophical Counseling," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (1993): 243-251. In this article he discusses in moral detail the role conceptual analysis may play in philosophical counseling. This same point is raised again by Lahav, 1996, 262-263, 267-268.

III

Despite Lahav's lucidity, there are problems with his views as I have analyzed it. I will now turn to consider some objections.

The first problem that I have with Lahav's view is the way he characterizes worldview interpretation. First, let me begin by agreeing with Lahav that a worldview is not necessarily something that resides in a person's mind. Nevertheless, Lahav's claim that a worldview is causally inert seems suspicious. Let me illustrate this in the following way. If worldviews are causally inert, then none of the worldviews articulated by Aristotle, Aquinas, Locke, Kant, Mill, or any other philosopher, have in any way affected the course of human events. But surely such a conclusion seems mistaken. Anyone acquainted with the history of philosophy or the history of ideas understands that the worldviews of certain individuals partly explains changes in the course of history. We should, then, reject Lahav's idea that worldviews are causally inert because it conflicts with what plainly seems to be true.

Lahav's view also seems suspicious for this reason as well. If a philosophical counselor is an advocate of worldview interpretation, then part of her therapeutic end for her client is to create a worldview expressed by the client's attitude and way of life. Lahav, as I pointed out earlier, defends this view. But why does the philosophical counselor want to do this? Well, certainly, the most obvious answer is that the philosophical counselor wants her client to benefit from such an exploration. That is, she wants her client, by means of worldview interpretation, to overcome personal predicaments. Lahav articulates the same.¹¹ However, if a worldview is causally inert, what expectations for positive change can a philosophical counselor reasonably

¹¹ Ibid., 15.

maintain for her client? It seems that such a view ultimately undermines any basis for the therapeutic aims of a philosophical counselor.¹²

The second problem is this. Lahav argues that worldview interpretation is the only legitimate domain for philosophical counselors because philosophers are typically not qualified to use psychotherapies, and because his view relies on his understanding of the nature of philosophy. Again, he sees philosophy as an endeavor committed primarily to conceptual analysis. I will begin with the former.

I would like to challenge Lahav's view in the following way. Let us suppose for the sake of argument that Lahav is right that philosophers are not qualified to use psychotherapies. Lahav argues that since this is true, then a philosophical counselor should refuse to psychologize the predicaments of his client.¹³ Certainly, the truth of this claim depends upon whether Lahav can maintain such a bifurcated view, and whether it is really possible to avoid psychologizing the predicaments of a client while practicing philosophical counseling.

Let me begin my critique with an admission. I agree with Lahav that a philosopher, who is not trained in psychology, should not employ or admit to employing a psychological theory he is not qualified to use. Having said that, I do not think that a philosophical counseling can avoid psychologizing the predicaments of a client while practicing philosophical counseling. Let me try to briefly explain why.

Suppose an individual comes to a philosophical counselor because of a relationship problem. He expresses his dissatisfaction with his current relationship, and he wants to discuss

¹² Lahav raised this objection against his view in a later article (1996, 263). Later, in the same article, he makes clear that the clarification of a client's worldview "makes it easier to deal with problems and work towards self-change. Philosophical counseling can help counselees to deal with their predicament by helping them to organize it in an understandable scheme" (266).

¹³ Ibid., 16.

with the philosophical counselor whether he should break up with his girl friend. During the conversation, the counselor discovers that his client's dissatisfaction is linked to the abortion his girl friend had a year earlier. He wanted to be a parent, but his girl friend was not ready. How is the philosophical counselor supposed to handle this matter?

Let's take Lahav's approach. It seems to involve (at least) two steps. First, we must identify some aspect of the conversation that seems to be psychologically relevant. I imagine that the counselor and the counselee would identify this issue together. Suppose they choose to talk about the counselee's anger. Next, according to Lahav, we must come up with a philosophical statement that is, at the same time, *expressed* by the anger but not the *cause* of the anger. Again, even as Lahav himself points out, the philosophical statement has to be related to the counselee's context. Not every interpretation goes.

Well, let's see how this will work. What would count as an accurate philosophical statement? Using Lahav's own words, the anger expresses what the client believes is important in life. Certainly, the client would probably agree with this. But does this really get at the heart of what the client believes is important? I think the answer is no. Then what is at stake? Certainly, what could be at stake is the client's autonomy and the way he believes that his girl friend violated it. If the client agrees, then they have found something psychologically relevant.

Now the counselor could lead his client in a discussion of the concept of autonomy; unfortunately, although this is a philosophical statement expressed by the anger, this will not work because it also appears to be the *cause* of the anger. But how do we know this? Consider this line of reasoning: The client's girlfriend had an abortion. As a consequence, the client is angry and he wants to break off the relationship. However, it is not the fact that she had an abortion that makes him so upset. He is angry with her because he *believes* that she took away

his ability to have a choice in the matter (something, on the client's view, that she should not have done). In other words, this line of reasoning shows that what is partially causing him to break off the relationship is his *belief* that his girl friend took away an important choice.

Before I continue along this line of reasoning (and I am sure that I could), let me explain what I think is happening here. Lahav's approach to philosophical counseling is constrained in an important way. For example, his method is constrained by what counts as an accurate philosophical statement expressed by the psychological states of his client (even if, as Lahav makes clear, more than one could accurately represent the psychological state). For example, of these philosophical statements, Lahav writes: "Like in art criticism, not everything goes. Some interpretations are more coherent, illuminating, elegant, or faithful to the data than others."¹⁴ But what am I suggesting? I am proposing that *any* philosophical statement that correctly expresses the psychological state of the client is going to be related to what caused the client's predicament in the first place.

Now, of course, I have not conclusively shown this to be true. But I predict that for any correct philosophical statement that may be generated by the psychological states of an individual, it will be linked to the cause of the psychological state in question. Having said this, what do I want to claim? I want to maintain that because of this link a philosophical counselor cannot avoid psychologizing the predicaments of a client while practicing philosophical counseling.

IV

Although the way I have characterized Lahav's views is not wholly immune to criticism, none of the criticisms are completely conclusive. Let me illustrate two.

¹⁴ Ibid., 9. See also Lahav, 1996, 266.

The first possible problem is that I may have not represented Lahav's idea of worldview interpretation correctly. Lahav argues that a worldview is causally inert. I attempted to counter his point by denoting individuals whose writings reflect a worldview and whose writings have exerted a certain amount of influence on the thinking of other people. I also attempted to oppose it by arguing that such a view ultimately undermines any basis for the therapeutic aims of a philosophical counselor. But perhaps the problem here is that my objections employ a concept of worldview that is foreign to Lahav's version. So, let us return to Lahav's view to see what he means.

Basically, as I pointed out earlier, Lahav makes clear that a worldview is an "abstract framework that interprets the structure and philosophical implications of one's conception of oneself and reality." In other words, a worldview "makes sense of one's various attitudes towards oneself and one's world." Certainly, this seems reasonable. However, for some reason he draws from this that a worldview does not causally influence concrete events. Although Lahav does not state clearly why this is true, perhaps I can make sense of his view in the following way.

Lahav may think that a worldview is causally inert because it is not psychologically real. Lahav does make this point,¹⁵ but what does this mean? As far as I can tell a worldview is not psychologically real because it not something that resides in a person's mind. Instead, a worldview is a framework that is created by the philosophical counselor with the purpose of making sense of the counselees various attitudes.¹⁶ Of course, as I pointed out earlier, Lahav

¹⁵ Ibid., 8.

¹⁶ In another article, Lahav writes: "[T]hus conceived, a lived understanding is something of which the person is not necessarily conscious. But neither is it unconscious, for it is not a psychological structure which resides in the person's mind. It is, rather, the meaning, implications, or 'logic' of the person's attitudes towards life." See Lahav, 1996, 265.

adds that although the philosophical counselor creates it, it is not arbitrarily created because it is supposed to correspond to real psychological events.¹⁷ Nevertheless, it is not something that is real and so it cannot causally influence concrete events.

Although Lahav's view is plausible, I would like to challenge the assumption that a worldview does not reside in a person's mind. To do this fully, unfortunately, would take too much time. Instead, I will briefly describe why I think a worldview does reside in a person's mind.

My point, in short, is this: a worldview resides in a person's mind *in the same way* that an enthymematic principle resides in the mind of a person. What I mean is that on a deductive counseling model, one that assumes that people generally decide to feel a certain way or to behave in a certain way by "logically deducing them from premises harbored within their belief system,"¹⁸ the harbored premises are often unexpressed. So, on this model, the job of a counselor is to expose the unexpressed premises harbored by the client because doing so makes clear why the client decided to feel a certain or to behave in a certain way. Thus, on my view, an individual harbors a worldview in the same way that an individual might harbor unexpressed premises.

V

In this paper, I have articulated one challenge that philosophical counseling faces in the twenty-first century. In fact, I take this to be the chief challenge, and it is one that is articulated by many scholars including Ran Lahav: philosophers, who practice philosophical counselor, *can*

¹⁷ Ibid., 9.

¹⁸ Elliot D. Cohen, "Logic, Rationality and Counseling," *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (Spring, 1990): 44. See also Elliot D. Cohen, "Philosophical Principles of Logic-Based Therapy," *Practical Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2003).

and *should* avoid stepping into the waters of uncovering hidden psychological processes, waters reserved only for trained psychotherapists. After briefly examining Lahav's position, three views emerge. First, a worldview is not causally inert. Second, a counselor who advocates worldview interpretation as a counseling method must also maintain that organizing a client's attitudes into a meaningful overall picture has therapeutic benefits that can be described in causal terms. Finally, although I agree with Lahav that a philosopher, who is not trained in psychology, should not employ or admit to employing a psychological theory he is not qualified to use, philosophical counseling cannot avoid psychologizing to some extent the predicaments of a client while practicing philosophical counseling.