

Argentinian Perspectives on the Tenth ICPP

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Abstract

We compare what we have seen in the ICPP with the current status of the discipline in our country (Argentina). Then, we explore some convergences and divergences, in order to identify valuable contributions and criticize potentially harmful trends. We address the following issues: (1) the exploration of empirical issues which are relevant to philosophical practice (in contrast with an opposite trend to move as far away as possible from science, its results, and its methods), (2) the implementation of diverse speech acts (in contrast with an interaction based exclusively on the use of questions), (3) the subtle influences of our axiological perspectives in our practices (in contrast with a neglect of this issue with the excuse of a mythical “neutrality”), and (4) the relevance of the counselor’s training in critical thinking (in contrast with the unawareness of our tendencies make cognitive errors, like the confirmation bias or the confusion of correlation with causation).

Keywords: *philosophical practice in Argentina, harmful, science, speech acts, axiology, neutrality, critical thinking, cognitive errors*

We’ll give some of our impressions about the 10th ICPP. First of all, we are grateful for the hospitality of our hosts, who did excellent work in the organization of the event and the facilitation of the interactions between the participants. It was a valuable accomplishment that the conference included participants from many different countries and cultures. The 10th ICPP was a very good opportunity to know each other, exchange our points of view, explore possible trends for the future, observe how philosophical practitioners work in their sessions, and reflect about the ways in which philosophical practice can be taught.

It was interesting to explore the convergences and divergences between different cultural and personal perspectives. We compare what we have seen in the ICPP, with the current status of the discipline in our country. We’d say that the most developed subfield in Argentina is Philosophical Practice with Children. Many books about this topic have been published, and several philosophers work in this area (including Andrea Pac, who gave a workshop in the ICPP). The Philosophical Cafe is another subfield that is widely disseminated in Argentina (there are many Cafes around the country), but this kind of practice was almost absent in the ICPP. In comparison, Philosophical Counseling is much less disseminated, perhaps because Argentina has the greater number of psychologists per citizen in the world (154 psychologists per 100,000 citizens). Despite this situation, there are several colleagues working in Philosophical Counseling, and also some philosophically-oriented psychologists. Roxana Kreimer has organized the first Seminar of Philosophical Counseling in an Argentinian University (UCES, 2005) and has written the first book in Spanish about Philosophical Counseling (*Artes del buen vivir*, 2002/2005, published by Editorial Paidós, the biggest publishing company of Latin America). There is one private institute that teaches Philosophical Counseling, but (as far as we know) only one of its teachers has had some experience in this practice. The institutional teaching of Philosophical Practice has not achieved as much as other countries represented in the ICPP.

The exploration of convergences and divergences allowed us to identify some valuable contributions and criticize some potentially harmful trends. The exploration of some empirical issues which are relevant to Philosophical Practice is a valuable contribution for the discipline. (e.g. Antti Mattila's Workshop on "Happiness for a Nation", see also Mattila 2001; Snyder & Lopez 2002; Lyubomirsky 2007; Arieli 2009) There are many empirical issues that could be explored by interdisciplinary research between philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, linguists, and educators (e.g. interpersonal communication, personal experiences, belief systems, argumentation, reasoning, cognitive errors and biases, meaning of life, axiological hierarchies, ethical dilemmas, social injustice, religious practices, non-religious beliefs, etc). All these issues, and many others, could offer many potential contributions to the different subfields of Philosophical Practice, and we hope that they will be more explored in the future conferences of our discipline.

Unfortunately, we have seen very few examples of this search for empirical contributions in the ICPP, and we have observed in many cases an opposite trend to move as far away as possible from science, its results, and its methods (perhaps as a misplaced reaction to scientism, or a misguided effort to be different from psychology). For example, in Anders Lindseth's Seminar on "Philosophical Practice: A Method of Experiencing", it was argued that the method of proposing and testing hypotheses is worthy for exploring the external world, but that it cannot (or should not) be applied to the realm of personal experiences. Such restrictive advice does not seem to be well-justified: there are experiences that can be fruitfully explored with the method of proposing and testing hypotheses. A woman may think and feel that she does not like to dance, but, after a deeper exploration of this experience, she might realize that in fact she does not like the kind of music that is very repetitive, the loud volume that hurts her ears and prevents dialogue, the lack of communication between other people, the shame that she feels for not dancing as well as she wants, and the loneliness when she feels that nobody notices her presence. But then, she also might realize that none of those things means she does not like dancing. If she changes the kind of music, its volume, her dancing skills, and the social context, perhaps she might enjoy dancing. In this example, the process of "proposing and testing hypotheses" might allow her to realize that she was committing an overgeneralization, from some contingent and narrow aspects of her previous experiences, to the whole experience of dancing. So there's no good reason to dismiss the application of this method to personal experiences (and, of course, this doesn't imply that we should always use it).

Another valuable contribution was the possibility of observing some sessions of Philosophical Counseling, which allowed a detailed analysis of the verbal and nonverbal communication between counselor and client (absent in the descriptions of case studies). In those sessions, we have observed that most philosophical counselors interacted with the client exclusively through questions, as if they were afraid of using other speech acts that could be interpreted as more "directive". The implicit assumption might be that we should avoid influencing the client with our own thoughts. But questions can also function as advice ("Have you considered doing this?"), warnings ("Did you assess the risks?"), direct requests ("Could you give me that?"), indirect requests ("Are you hungry?") or indirect criticisms ("You're wearing that?"). In fact, questions might even increase the risks of undesirable influence, because they can be less explicit than other speech acts. If someone thinks that he can avoid giving advice by using questions, then he is neglecting the indirect effects of questions (Levinson 1983; Searle 1969; Tannen 1990). We don't know if this restriction was a voluntary or an involuntary choice, but there seems to be no good reason to dismiss a wise implementation of other speech acts, or for being overconfident that questions can prevent undesirable influences on the client.

We can understand a question as a request to give an answer that brings about a desideratum (i.e., the state of affairs in which the questioner acknowledges that the question has been answered; Sintonen 1996). Closed questions are answered by yes or no, while open questions require longer answers. Unlike the more assertive speech acts (which can be dismissed without further analysis), questions require at least that the respondent makes the effort of understanding and giving an answer. Questions allow us to interrupt and redirect the interpersonal dialogue and/or the intrapersonal stream of consciousness. For example, if a couple begins to fight about each other's faults, the counselor might interrupt their mutual blaming by asking them "How long have you been together?" and this question may redirect the dialogue. Questions may also help the client to explore some previously neglected hypotheses and evidence. For example, when a client complains about how bad things are, a counselor asks "Why do you think things haven't gotten even worse?", and this may make the client more aware of some positive influences (McGee et al. 2005).

Questions have embedded presuppositions (i.e., propositions whose truth is necessary for the question to have an answer). Those presuppositions exert a framing effect on the respondent, because they establish the conceptual space where the respondent will search for an answer, and at the same time, they implicitly exclude other potential conceptual spaces (Sintonen 1996). This framing effect is very important, because it can generate beneficial or harmful consequences, depending on the case. A question that presupposes a client's strengths or a client's weaknesses will probably increase the client's awareness of those strengths or weaknesses (McGee et al. 2005). The question "What made you decide to make such positive change?" presupposes that the change was "positive" and that it was a "voluntary decision". We can see that even if it seems, superficially, that the counselor is seeking new information from the client, on the presuppositional level the counselor is introducing some new information to the client (McGee et al. 2005). The potential risk of this mechanism is that, if the question presupposes a wrong framing, it will be very difficult for the client to oppose it (see Savater 2003, on truth conditions and axiological frames). The only way to oppose a wrong framing (e.g., the loaded question "Have you stopped beating your wife yet?") would be a meta-communication (e.g., "That question is ill-conceived").

The exact choice of words is a very important aspect of the framing effect (Mattila 2001). For example, clients might categorize their situation with different concepts (such as "disorder," "symptom," "mental illness," "complaint," "life problem," "difficulty," "personal weakness," "disability"), and their questions within the session might be formulated in many ways ("what is more reasonable to do?", "what should be done?", "what is closer to my values?"). The philosophical counselors might accept those categories, or challenge them, or inquire about them, but they surely cannot choose all these options with all those categories, so they must decide what to do. Regarding these decisions, we have seen that some philosophical counselors still believe that they must hold a complete "neutrality" about values (e.g., this claim was raised as an objection in Roxana Kreimer's Master Class). We think that such neutrality is not possible, because the philosophical counselor inevitably must select which categories will be explored or challenged with questions and which categories will be accepted without further questions (it would be impossible to explore and challenge each and every concept used by the client, and it would be uncritical to accept all the concepts without further analysis). Therefore, the axiological perspectives of the counselors will inevitably be expressed in their selection and dismissal of potential questions. Given that our values will have inevitable effects on our practice, whether we like it or not, it would be a better option to be more explicit in our reflections on the different axiological perspectives and their influences in our practices, instead of neglecting the whole issue with the excuse of a mythical "neutrality" (Bunge 1989; Kreimer 2005; Savater 2003).

We'd like to mention some other mistakes that we've observed in the conference and in other sources of analysis (e.g., many video-recordings of sessions with different counselors, provided by Carmen Zavala to the Hispano-American mailing list of Philosophical Practice—FIACOF—for a collective analysis and discussion). During the sessions, both counselor and client are exploring and trying to make sense of different situations and experiences, by constructing and improving their respective hypotheses and framings (Mattila 2001; McGee et al. 2005). In the process, they are exposed to many cognitive errors (Boudry & Braeckman 2010; Gilovich 1991), including the confirmation bias and the confusion of correlation with causation. The confirmation bias is a tendency to have excessive confidence that our statements are correct. For example:

Counselor: You are eight years older than your partner, before you were married to a man that was fifteen years older than you. The younger one was like a son for you.

Client: No.

Counselor: Well, I am trying to see beneath the surface.

But, beneath the surface, we can make a mistake. The problem is the neglect of other possible hypotheses: it might be that the age of her partner was not important for her, that our society encourages women to prefer an older partner, that she changed her preferences, or that the whole issue of age is irrelevant. Some philosophical counselors (e.g., Oscar Brenifier, in the previously mentioned video-recordings) have adopted a perspective that closely resembles the psychoanalytic concept of "resistance" (without necessarily using this name). But if the client does not accept an hypothesis, it would be authoritarian to impose it, and it would be dogmatic to dismiss the possibility that we might be wrong. Those attitudes can easily function as immunizing strategies and epistemic defense mechanisms (Boudry & Braeckman 2010). In those situations, possibly it's a better option to assess and explore different hypotheses. For example: "Given what you have said, it might be that your implicit philosophy is this, or perhaps that. What do you think?"

Another common mistake is the confusion of correlation (of events or ideas) with causation (Boudry & Braeckman 2010; Gilovich 1991). In one of the workshops in the previously mentioned video-recordings, a participant finished an exercise and gave it to the philosophical counselor. The counselor asked the participant if he gives "too much weight" to authority, and the participant answered "Yes." But this interpretation neglected other possible hypotheses: the participant might simply have finished his exercise, without further implications. The philosophical counselor has assumed that his association of ideas accurately described a causal relation, but the association of ideas may not be describing a causal relation.

The counselor might have induced the affirmative answer of the participant with his question. This kind of influence is well known by memory researchers: decades ago, psychologists involuntarily induced false memories in some of their female patients of being abused (Loftus 1994). We must remember that clients usually have a tendency to believe their counselors, so we should be very careful with these kinds of questions that can induce an answer. In this example, both the counselor and the participant were exposed to the risk of confirmation bias (the counselor confirmed his interpretation, and the participant confirmed his trust).

There's evidence that all of us are exposed to these kinds of cognitive errors, and to many others (Gilovich 1991). The only way to decrease their frequency and their potential harmfulness is that philosophical counselors train themselves in informal logic and critical thinking skills, a very exciting interdisciplinary

nary area of research that is based on the joint contributions of philosophers, psychologists, and educators (Comesaña 2001; Facione 2000, 2004; Walton 1989). During the ICPP dialogue about Philosophical Counseling Training, José Barrientos informed us that the course he has organized in Spain gave a preponderant place to critical thinking skills. We think that those skills need not only be theoretically learned by philosophical counselors, but they also need to be put into practice in the context of concrete situations and experiences.

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