

# A Practical Approach to Achieving the Highest Good In Philosophical Counseling

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## | Abstract |

A virtue based philosophical approach to counseling which frames itself around the highest good frees both the client and the counselor to immerse themselves more deeply in the counseling process. When they orient themselves and the process towards the highest good, a safe space is co-created for a dialogue about the client's deepest concerns. Other unique benefits which can be derived from this approach include hope, safety, and the deepening of trust.

Elements from phenomenology, pragmatism, and existentialism are utilized to support the client/counseling dyad that centers itself on a search for the highest good, a term used to describe the singular and overriding end that human beings ought to pursue. Existentially, the client gives real, sustained attention to the question of meaning, as well as to personal freedom, choice, and responsibility. Within a phenomenological framework, the counselor identifies meaningful connections from the client's world which inform the ethical choices he or she needs to make. Pragmatically speaking, both begin to look for the best practical results, realizing them within a flexible and provisional context. This pluralistic approach allows for the use of a variety of methods by both counselor and client as they work towards outcomes grounded in virtue. For these reasons and more, this approach can be remarkably powerful for certain clients.

|| Key word ||

existentialism, highest good, phenomenology, pragmatism, *summum bonum*.

## Introduction

The thesis for this paper is that a philosophical approach to counseling that frames itself around the highest good frees both the client and the counselor to immerse themselves more deeply in the counseling process. This is because everything that each one says and does is, from the beginning, informed by the highest good, as signified by a continuous search for it. Virtue and living the truly good life lead to true psychological depth, as well as greater honesty within the relationship.

It is in the nature of things that when you construct an approach or a model, you have to leave out many details, making it immediately less than totally true. At the same time, it is easy to recognize that a well-chosen approach, systematically presented, can provide useful approximations of reality and be a critical companion in the thinking process, as well as a tool for problem-solving and action. This is what we hope our philosophical approach to counseling will be.

Grounded in virtue and ethics, this approach is always oriented towards finding a solution that leads to the highest

good. Classically known as the *summum bonum*, the highest good has been thought to be the good that contains all other goods. It is not a single thing, such as happiness, but contains multiple distinct dimensions, all of which surround what it means to live a full and complete life, and which must be worked out individually by each person, in this case as a prime component of the counseling process.

(Summum Bonum, 2017.)

This approach creates a safety net for counselor and client alike. No matter whether it is hatred, sex, jealousy, one's own sadism or masochism etc., etc., these things are easier to face once the frame of looking for the highest good is put around them. It assures that the client will achieve an understanding of his disparate sides and be the better for it. It gives confidence to both parties that each person in the encounter is working towards the best for all concerned.

In psychology and psychiatry, the client doesn't know what looking at "dark things" will expose. It is easy for him to become frightened, to wonder what value bringing them up could possibly have. He might even wish he had never brought them up in the first place. By contrast, the noble context of knowing oneself within a search for the highest good provides a stable world in which uncomfortable and frightening things can be explored.

This approach to philosophical counseling becomes more

than just treating individual ethical problems. In order to do the highest good, one must know himself as he is. It is a necessary and important part of the process. The well-versed counselor can use other philosophical methods and psychological theories, as well as humanistic tools such as music and literature. This pluralistic approach has the advantage of being capable of adaptation for each client. Because it is participatory and provisional, it is also flexible, allowing for the specifics of what work will be done to be arrived at through dialogue. Different ways of discussing and doing things can be accommodated as a natural part of the process. This approach is also pragmatic and action oriented. Both participants are always looking for practical, positive results. Concomitantly, in order to achieve the highest good, one has to do something.

By having one of its feet, so to speak, in the world of phenomenology, this approach structures itself in the present, but looks for an understanding of any and all of the client's underlying meaningful connections. An understanding of what is meaningful to the client allows for a deeper, more collaborative relationship with the counselor. It enables their work to resonate more fully with the client's existence and helps him to choose his own meaning and purpose. Though its orientation towards the highest good does structure the work, because it is also about personal responsibility, this approach encourages and allows for autonomous choice.

The first four sections of this paper review the major schools of philosophy from which this approach draws: existentialism, phenomenology, pragmatism, and ethics theory, with an eye on the points most relevant to philosophical counselors. Because each of these schools of thought has also been utilized in the practice of psychiatry, psychology, and other forms of counseling such as Existence therapy, Existential Analysis, and Daseinanalysis, writings from these schools of thought have been utilized as well.

The final section, “The Approach in Action: A Client Speaks,” are reflections on my personal experience with this approach. At the time of writing this article, I have been a client in philosophical counseling for three and a half years. When I began working with my philosophical counselor, Dr. David Brendel, I was curious about his philosophical approach. He had written a book entitled *Healing Psychiatry: Bridging the Science/Humanism Divide* (Brendel, 2009) in which he laid out a philosophical model for psychiatrists based upon pragmatism, which he suggested I read.

I soon found myself reading William James as well as the works of other pragmatists. As we went along, Dr. Brendel and I both added ideas from the writings of other philosophical schools which we felt would be useful to the process. The four we consistently found most helpful – existentialism, phenomenology, pragmatism, and the highest good, form the basis of the approach.

At first glance, it might seem as though it could be awkward and somehow intellectually intrusive for philosophical counseling counselors to introduce and follow this approach during the course of their work with clients. A way to didactically present both the introduction and follow through will be discussed toward the end of this paper.

A major advantage to this philosophical approach is that it would not have to be restricted to any one counseling profession or practice or to one academic discipline. It could be used effectively by a high school teacher, a pastoral counselor, a psychiatrist, a philosophical counselor, or within any other somewhat structured professional relationship.

## Existentialism

Existentialism has its roots in the Socratic dictum to know yourself, as well as in other philosophies that advise the individual not to look outside himself for answers. Subjectivity, the individual person, uniquely himself, ultimately alone, with a need to know who he is and why he is here, is its point of departure. (Flynn, 2006.) Since most people seeking philosophical counseling do so because they want to understand themselves in the particular situation(s) they are in, even a few basic ideas from existentialism can give a philosophical

counselor a better understanding of what it means to be human, which he can convey to his client.

The first principle of existentialism is: “Man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. He is solely responsible for his existence.” This is based on an extremely anxiety provoking moment every thoughtful person knows, that moment when he fully comprehends that he is alone. Rather than being one with everyone and everything, which is what he thought and felt was the case when he was a child, he comes to realize he is separate and isolated. After that moment, he is incapable ever again of being able to establish true solidarity with those who exist outside of himself. Despite the hope that other people might be fully accessible to him, he finds out they really aren't, and won't ever be. (Warnock, M., 1970.)

If he becomes involved in a dialogue with his anxiety, as philosophical counseling offers him the possibility of doing, he will find a positive aspect to his realization of his aloneness. It will enable him to begin to come to terms with the fact that his life is truly individual – his alone and no one else's. Rather than living as part of the crowd, he has the freedom to make his own choices and take responsibility for them.

Freedom means there are diverse possibilities between which the client must make a selection and to one of which he must commit himself. At the same time, there is a universal human condition he can't ignore, specifically all the limitations that *a*

*priori* define man's fundamental situation in the universe. What never varies is the necessity for him to be in the world, to work in it, to live out his life in it, and eventually, to die. His existence will always be defined in relationship to those generic parameters. (Jaspers, 1955.)

Existentialism focuses attention on various phenomena the individual faces, especially those that are negative or baffling. These include such things as the fact that all his possibilities are dependent upon his relationships with things and people; his dread of death; and his fear regarding the failure of his projects. Also included are insurmountable situations that have clear boundaries - struggle, frustration, suffering, pain, sickness, daily life situations and the boredom that comes from repetition. He also has to deal with the absurdity of dangling between the infinity of his aspirations and the finitude of his possibilities. These are just some of the essential human phenomena by which the individual is often left with feelings of guilt inherent in the limitation of his choices, along with the responsibilities derived from them.

There is a subjective and an objective dimension to these phenomena. On the one hand, they are objective because they affect everyone and are present everywhere. On the other, they are subjective because they are experienced uniquely by the individual person. Any phenomenon is irrelevant and meaningless if not experienced by the individual. Each

experienced phenomenon presents itself as an opportunity to attempt to surpass, postpone, or deny the limits of reality, or to come to terms with them. Once phenomena are experienced and recognized, each individual must freely determine himself and his existence in relation to them. (Abbagnano, N., 2012.)

Another primary principle of existentialism is contained within the phrase, "Existence precedes essence." This suggests that we are beings who come into existence before we can be defined. At the beginning of life, the individual is essentially nothing. He conceives of himself only after he comes into being, and then, over the course of time, he will become what he makes of himself. This is why it is important for him to know himself. He must on intimate terms with the self he is creating in order to create the self that is authentically his. (Sartre, 1957.)

Because existentialism is a philosophy of the individual, many people mistakenly believe the study and practice of it leads to complete narcissism and disregard for others. The reality is that as long as a person is alive, he must not only have contact with others, others are also indispensable to him - to his existence, and to his knowledge about himself. He cannot be anything, in the sense of being spiritual or cruel or jealous, unless in relationship to and acknowledged by others. He cannot discover any truth about himself except through the mediation of another as he lives his truth in the world.

Existentialism teaches us what it means to be human. The human being is thrown into the world and abandoned to a determinism that could render his initiatives impossible. Though he is free, his very freedom is conditioned and hampered by limitation that at any time could render the whole project of his life empty. Existentialists make it clear there is an instability and a risk to of all human reality. In addition, there is an inner subjectivity in which he decides who he is and others are, by virtue of which an individual comes to better realize himself. (Soccio, D., 2010.)

The most direct applications of existentialism to philosophical counseling can be found in Sartre's work (Sartre, J.P., 2007), in which he lays out a method for conducting what he called "existential psychoanalysis," and in Jaspers' *Reason and Existenz* (1955), in which he talks about "existence therapy." Because they lived at approximately the same time, each one's ideas influenced those of the other. Their ideas are over-lapping. The most accessible and important ideas are presented here in order that the philosophical counselor may be able to use them to formulate and carry out his work, while utilizing this over-all approach.

An existential analysis constitutes a process in which the client comes to an authentic awareness of himself and of reality through the use of thinking as an inner activity. His authenticity is found in his primordial spontaneous depths and is his ultimate source, or ground. Never given, it must be

actualized by each person. It is referred to as possible because, in principle, it can never be fully achieved.

The individual is in the position of having to pursue the project of obtaining an authentic existence. He is not born with a sign indicating who he is or why he is here. Even after his birth, this knowledge is hidden from him. In the position of not knowing, he is often awaited by all the tasks placed along his way. Objects can make mute demands. He is nothing in himself but the passive obedience to these demands.

The task of existential analysis is to help the client become the subject of his life, through the process of being his own project, one in which he can become enthusiastically involved. First, he must catch sight of himself, see the way in which he, in thought, and in action, deals with himself and the world. Then he must determine the original choice through which he is now constructing his world, analyze the possibilities inherent in his situation, and thereafter decide upon his further choices. Through this process, the counselor helps the client make supportive choices.

This fundamental project of being for himself can be experienced subjectively only as a living possession, as it has no objective existence. The client gains knowledge of it only by reflection, which allows his project to make itself known through self-evident intuition. Though its result is not tangible, the process has as its object the realization of a

human being who is the subject of his own life.

The process is one of the client individuating in every concrete situation by means of a specific inquiry into the real possibilities it offers. It involves a constant confrontation between different truths as he experiences various situations. He is also required to make a choice among these possibilities, which implies risks, renunciation, and limitation.

The possible choices that exist for the client should be reckoned with only to the point where his actions would lead to constructive outcomes, and no further. The moment he is not rigorously involved in the possibilities he is considering, he must learn to disengage from them, because no god or scheme can adapt the world and its possibilities to his will. Though this can be embarrassing and disorienting, the worse risk is descent into inauthenticity and alienation.

Ideals can serve as guides. They are like beacons on a journey. However, the client should not linger with them, as though his goal and rest were already contained within them. For the essence of man consists not in the ideal that can be fixed, but only in his unlimited task, his primary project. Through its accomplishment, he penetrates to the origin from when he came and to which he gives himself.

Like more traditional psychoanalysis, the behaviors studied by this method include dreams, failures, obsessions, neuroses, the thoughts of waking life, successfully adjusted acts,

life-styles, and so forth. Generally speaking, there are no irreducible tastes or inclinations. They all represent a certain appropriative choice of being. It is up to the philosophical counselor and his client to compare and classify them and, ultimately, to decide whether and how to act on them.

Because this method of counseling consists of the analysis and determination of structures that constitute existence, all available techniques can be utilized. All positions can be considered, including those of science, religion, philosophy, and the arts. This gives the method the advantage of being pluralistic. All of the structures that constitute existence and all of the relations that connect the individual with other beings and with the world figure into it. As a result, both counselor and client are able to enter the widest realm of possibility.

Existentialism reminds us and our clients that life has no meaning *a priori*. Before we come alive, our life is nothing. It is up to us to give meaning and value to it. This basic philosophical operation demands a different kind of thinking, one that alters our being and allows it to have authentic expression. Though the process includes encounters with such feelings as anguish and dread, its absolute value is found when the person encounters his own spiritual intimacy. After all, life is nothing until it is lived, and, as existentialists would say, until it is lived authentically.

## Phenomenology

Phenomenology emerged as an original philosophical approach at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Started by Franz Brentano and his school of followers and then developed by many others, including Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, it can be defined as a study of human experience – *of the way things are* as they present themselves to us. Rather than being a set of doctrines, phenomenology is more accurately characterized as a way of seeing, one that involves taking a fresh, unprejudiced look at the essential features of human experiences. In that way, it strives to enact the philosophical life as practiced by the Ancient Greeks. (Soccio, 2010.)

Due to its disciplined, descriptive interpretation of the lived meaning of human experience, phenomenology and its methodologies have been applied to many fields, including psychiatry and psychology. In this section, we will review a few of the concepts essential to a basic understanding of phenomenology, as well as applications relevant to philosophical counseling which are found in phenomenological psychiatry and psychology. These can be especially useful to the philosophical counselor, not only in developing initial ideas about a case, but throughout the course of her work.

The word “phenomenology” is a compound made up of the Greek words “phainomena” and “logos.” Put together, these words signify

the activity of giving an account of various phenomena, as well as the way these phenomena appear to us as human beings. In order to reveal the essence of these things, phenomenology focuses on concrete experienced facts rather than abstractions. Put another way, it is reason's self-discovery in the presence of intelligible objects. (Sokolowski, 2000.)

For us as philosophical counselors, one of the especially useful aspects of the descriptive and reflective method found in phenomenology is its focus on experience *as lived*. Since our clients present themselves to us in and through such experiences, being able to reflect upon them and to describe them accurately is important. With the use of the phenomenological method of immediately experiencing whatever it is that our client is offering, *without putting any abstractions or concepts on top of it*, we become capable of entering into our work with our clients as responsible agents of truth.

When we adopt this phenomenological attitude, we are acting not only as counselors, we become philosophers. I mean this in the sense that, when we engage with our clients from a phenomenological viewpoint, we look at, describe, and contemplate their particular and multi-faceted intentions, as well as their world beliefs and involvements. When we do this, we are philosophizing.

In phenomenological terms, *looking at* is more than just seeing - it is more accurately called perceiving that involves

synthesizing many presentations, both actual and potential. Thus, as counselors we have to submit to the way our clients present and disclose themselves in order to see what it is they are imparting. At the same time, as they disclose themselves to us, we must become aware of the parts and whole of the things and the circumstances they present, as well as what they leave out, what is absent. As we do this, we are engaged in the project of bringing into the open the life-world structure of our client, while we work to interpret what we find and to faithfully portray it.

In order to do this, we must be intentional in our perceptions and in our reflections of and to our clients. In phenomenological terms this means having a conscious awareness of, and relationship to, our own convictions, doubts, suspicions, certainties and impressions. Without that, we cannot be responsible agents of the truth. The purpose of this attitude is not to dilute, destroy, upset, or ridicule the intentionality we encounter in ourselves and in our clients. Rather, it helps us to assume a contemplative orientation towards them from which we can theorize and bring forth useful ideas and insights.

The process of being intentional involves not only having an awareness of our own beliefs, it also calls for a suspension of them. This suspension is called the “*epoche*.” The term comes from Greek Skepticism. It is the restraint Skeptics say we should have in our judgments of things. In the process of

counseling, it means we should refrain from judging what the client is presenting until the evidence is clear.

Suspending our beliefs enables us to be rigorous and disciplined and lets the phenomenon of our clients' world speak on its own terms. Though it is impossible to become aware of all our own presuppositions and to totally transcend the limitations of our perspectives, we become better able to distinguish reality from appearance and to preserve the truth of the client and his situation.

Another important tool that comes from phenomenologists is one that suggests you understand the world of your clients by identifying and observing their meaningful connections. Ask yourself, and the client, what could be the source of this or that phenomenon and with what else might it be connected? This requires that you sink yourself into his situation and understand him empathically. This will enable you to understand how one event emerges from another in his life and how these events are linked together.

Because events emerge out of one another in a way that is comprehensible, especially upon reflection, by noticing and attempting to understand these sorts of connections, you can better explain to yourself and to the client what appears to be happening causally. For example, you can help your client understand the development of a passion, the development of an error, or the effects of a suggestion. The levels reached by

understanding these meaningful connections will decide whether your orientation is towards the ordinary or the extraordinary, the plain and uncomplicated or the complex and manifold. (MacIntyre, 2007.) The richer you are in such meaningful insights, the subtler, more correct, and helpful your interpretations and interventions will be, and the more use you will be for your client.

This process is called phenomenological analysis. It enables the counselor to come to know the identity of her client through his various presentations, and at the same time to recognize his identity as something beyond surface appearances. Being receptive to your client and his world is the key. It involves opening your senses to the salient functional components of his life in all of its richness, observing how he approaches and moves through situations in the world and noticing how he influences and is influenced by his concrete, life-world milieu. This will help the counselor to preserve the reality and distinctiveness of each client and to avoid the human tendency towards reductionism.

“Phenomenological psychiatry, developed by Karl Jaspers (1997), a German psychiatrist turned philosopher, is an attempt to consider and enact human honesty. One of Jaspers’ starting points was Husserl’s concepts of intuition, description and avoidance of suppositions as a methodology. Though Jaspers’ initial texts were directed towards the education of

psychiatrists, much of what is contained within them is directly relevant for a philosophical counselor who wishes to more thoughtfully conceptualize what he is actually doing, and to think about what else might be possible to conceptualize and do in the course of his work.

Jaspers saw philosophy not as wisdom, but as the *love of* wisdom. To him it was meant, not as doctrine, but as a stimulus to the inward action that each person must perform in communication with others. Jaspers thought it crucial for us to recognize that we, as human beings, need to philosophize with respect to our style of life conduct. Existential questions, such as those about the super-personal sense of life, need to be addressed, and can only be addressed, philosophically.

Jaspers defined what we now would call philosophical counseling as a cathartic process that leads to the philosophizing self-development of a person. It takes place within existential communications between humans as fellow sufferers. Using the Socratic dialogue as a primary tool, the counselor calls upon the client as a rational person, evoking in him an understanding of the problems that derive from his situation and his personality. (Jaspers, 1955.)

The client's own concepts of health and well-being in relation to his life conduct are of central importance. The counselor and client work together to frame their goals around them. At the same time, the counselor recognizes and accepts

her client's fundamental being-as-it-is, and encourages him to do the same. This recognition can be articulated philosophically and becomes the basis of their existential communications. Awareness of it will enable the client to accept and admit the indeterminable quality of his freedom and of his ability to transcend his current situation.

Accordingly, both work together to find a way for the client to conduct himself that offers personal freedom.

This is a hermeneutical method of self-enlightenment. Hence it can offer some guidance for one's life conduct. The process involves two primary steps. In the first, the counselor and client arrive at an agreed upon healthier life conduct for the client. This is done by giving him a better understanding of himself in his conscious and pre-conscious unity, and by offering new information and insights.

The second step implies an effort of will on the client's part to conduct his life according to the newly gained insights. Jaspers described conscious will as a three step process which involves weighing choices, deciding upon one, and then acting upon that decision. Features of this process could also be termed the inner fight, mastery, and a capacity to resist. It is by the exertion of his conscious will that the client is then able to accomplish his other goals. (Stanghellini, Fuchs, eds., 2013.)

A client will often seek counseling due to what Jaspers calls "limit" or "border" situations. These circumstances are unavoidable

during the course of one's life and involve such things as suffering due to an accident, injury, or death, illness, loss of a job, and divorce, among other things. These are plights that pose a challenge because they often don't have an immediate resolution. No matter how hard a person might try, there is no way to escape from them. As a result, he often feels alienated from himself, others, and life.

In limit or border situations the person realizes he cannot shape his life and reality to his own expectations, though he wants to, and he tries his best. These situations are undeniably difficult. However, they have the potential to give rise to existential questions that are intimately connected to his way of life and conduct. They can be opportunities for restructuring his life or for making necessary restitution. Though very uncomfortable and trying, these situations where a person is at a limit offer tremendous potential for him to become wise. (Marinoff, 2003.)

## **Pragmatism**

Pragmatism is a school of philosophy based on the principle that knowledge and truth are defined in terms of practical consequences. It is the usefulness, workability, and practicality of ideas that are the criteria of their merit, not their ability to

provoke endless abstractions. According to pragmatists, philosophy's true purpose is to help us live by showing us how to discover and adopt beliefs that fit our individual needs and temperaments and that, at the same time, work for us. Pragmatism speaks to the nearly universal need for ideas and truths that matter to the individual. (Smith, J., 1978.) These are just a few of the reasons why the study of pragmatism can be useful to philosophical counselors and their clients.

The word “pragmatism” is derived from the Greek *pragma*, which is an action or affair, and from which the words practice and practical come. An early use of the word can be found in the writings of the Greek historian, Polybius (d. 118 BCE), who referred to them as pragmatic, by which he meant that they were instructive and useful. Pragmatism also has its roots in Protagoras' doctrine that “man is the measure of all things,” which also links it to existentialism and phenomenology, and to Wittgenstein, who demanded that we return to the actual situation for a second look.

Prior to the philosophical term “pragmatism” being coined by Charles Pierce in the late 1800's, philosophy and pedagogy had been dominated by the assumption that a person had to study the *process* of knowing before he could find out the nature of things he wanted to know.

Knowledge thus rested on either authority or reason. Whatever was deduced by reason depended ultimately upon

authority, which resulted in an endless catch-22.

Though some schools of philosophy may have moved on, many people are still under the influence of the idea that having knowledge of *facts* is what it means to *know* something. That is unfortunate, because it doesn't allow for an individual to learn from direct experience, nor does it lead to workable solutions for the real life situations he faces. This is why pragmatism, with its appeal to what experience actually discloses, and with its focus on thought that aims for favorable, practical consequences in everyday life, is not only liberating for a person, but also empowering. Thus, pragmatism is a useful tool for philosophical counselors and their clients.

At first glance, bringing experience, thought and action together might seem to be a matter of simple, common sense. After all, don't we do that all the time, as a matter of course? Yes, we do, but here we are talking about *thoughtful* action, which requires belief and the short run assurance that we actually possess objective truth, or at least a close approximation of it. And, it is *thoughtful* action that we as philosophical counselors want to achieve in our work with our clients, and that we would like for them to achieve out in the world.

Of what does thoughtful action consist? First, it requires that the person believe that something is actually the case, rather than just thinking that it is. But, how does he obtain

that belief? Possibly he thinks it could help to know everything, but he realizes he can't. Perhaps, if he waits long enough, he will know absolutely everything he should know. The problem is, he can't wait until he knows everything there is to be known about the things he wants to undertake. He would have to wait forever simply because he can't know everything that is going to happen that could affect the action he wants to take.

The truth is, we are all limited by whatever knowledge we do and don't possess, which makes it hard to know what we can legitimately believe and then to act on that belief. At this point pragmatism can be helpful. It values purposive thought based on experience and the practical outcome of an idea above the idea itself.

For a client, what is often in question is his behavior as an agent who must decide here and now what to do. According to the pragmatists, in order to do this, he needs to know not only what particular line of conduct is enjoined by a given belief, but also what consequences his actions will have as a result.

“What will be the effect if I accept this belief I am considering adopting?” “What will be the practical consequences that will follow if I believe a certain thing, and then act upon that belief?” These are the relevant pragmatic starting questions. Rather than trying to find the right answer through the use of intuition or a higher authority, the client can find it through working out its implications before adopting it as the

truth. It is in this way that purposive thought can provide him with ideas which can function as guides to action. (Kidder, R., 1995.)

Inquiry is the process of the overcoming of doubt about one's beliefs. Since the client needs, first of all, to believe in the actions he is going to take, it will help him to understand the process of obtaining his underlying belief. He must understand that actually believing something is not the same as saying that he believes it. Essential indices of his belief involve not only voicing it, but also being willing to act upon it, and assuming any and all risks and responsibilities involved. Believing usually starts with common sense, not privileged ideas. Thus the client must begin where he actually is and then utilize certain habits of thought in order to clarify the contents of the storehouse of beliefs he already has.

When he begins to do this, the client will find himself involved in a dialectic between the doubts he has about his beliefs and the intuitive faith he has in them. Doubting and believing are two distinct correlates in his debate. On the one hand, what he believes becomes a thought and rule for action. It is connected with certain ways of behaving towards other people and is meant to exercise some control over the future.

On the other hand, doubt, which is bound to arise when he begins to talk about belief, does not have the same effect. It arrests action and makes itself felt in the form of hesitation. It

is not entirely disconnected from action, however, because it is a state which is uneasy and dissatisfied, and one from which he will seek to free himself. Seen this way, doubt is actually the moving force that can lead to the overcoming of itself.

This triad of doubt, inquiry, and belief achieves a conclusion that is true for the client, which leads to purposeful action with good outcomes. The inquiry leads the client to an attainment of belief from which true action alone is possible. This is how and why pragmatism is useful for him as a working theory of truth. (Pierce, C., 1923)

William James, another leading proponent of pragmatism, believed that experience should be the ultimate context for everything. However, unlike some of the more rigid empirical philosophers, he said that experience was not only what was experienced by the senses, but could also include metaphysical ideas, religion and morality, or anything else that was a part of our lives as human beings. When contradictions between these experiences and philosophy arose and they couldn't be resolved on their own speculative terms, he became determined to discover the practical import of possible answers to them in time for the belief to make a difference in the conduct of people's lives.

James expanded upon Pierce's initial presentation of pragmatism, thereby enabling religious and spiritual beliefs to coexist with empirical thinking. Because religious beliefs are a

part of our existence as human beings, and because they add meaning to life and are good for so much, under the rubric of pragmatism, they are made “okay.” (James, W., 1995.)

In philosophical counseling, clients can come to understand that their religious beliefs can co-exist with empirical observations. The only difficulty with their beliefs comes when they get in the way or clash with other vital beliefs. In that case, the client can see that the truth of his religious ideas depends on their relationships to other truths that must be acknowledged. Thus, pragmatic reasoning can be useful to the client.

Philosophical counselors and their clients are partners in a longitudinal process of exchanging data and ideas about how best to proceed. While the counselor may be able to offer technical expertise, the client must participate as fully as possible in order to ensure efficacy in their work together. Since there is no Archimedean point, no explanatory end-of-the-line place that can be known ahead of time, no brute appeal to reality, the use of the pragmatic method can help to integrate the available data and various ideas about how to proceed in a way that aims at practical results and that respects and enables both the client and counselor's involvement in the process.

## The Highest Good

When a client enters philosophical counseling, he is often filled with questions about how he should live his life and what aims he should pursue. Many times he faces tough choices or has to make some difficult decisions. In these important situations, it is not just a matter of choosing answers, it is of utmost importance that he chooses well. He will be greatly helped when the philosophical counselor directs him to an understanding of the highest good in order that he will be better able to choose well in all that he does.

It is likely he has not been trained to reflect with reason *grounded in consideration of the highest good*. On his own he might have tried to solve the questions and tough choices he faced by avoiding them. He might have brooded endlessly over possible outcomes or agonized about which path to pursue. He may simply have pushed his way through circumstances by sheer impatience and assertive self will, as though getting the matter resolved were more important than getting it right. Since none of those behaviors guarantees good outcomes, it is important that he learn a new way of thinking which includes concern for the highest good that can be achieved. Then, rather than unthinkingly deferring to his strongest motives, he can accomplish the best action – the highest good – by consciously working toward it (Kidder, R., 1995).

But, what exactly is the highest good? Aristotle thought it was best represented as happiness achieved through living a virtuous life. Many people think happiness by itself results in the highest good. However, because they often define it within the narrower focus of their own narcissistic fulfillment, when they think of being happy, they don't consider other people or the situation around them. This can lead to less than desirable, if not disastrous, results. It is only through the pursuit of happiness combined with the pursuit of virtue that the person will get the best results possible, which is also known as the highest good. (Rohlf, M., 2016.)

Sometimes the client will need help in understanding that each of his actions has a consequence. While he is trying to decide what to do, he can be helped to form ideas, not only about the immediate and near-term consequences of his actions, but also about their ultimate consequences. Since the things he's tried in the past probably haven't worked as well as he would have liked, he might want the counselor to give him a general rule or guideline to follow in order to help ensure better results. But, excellent ethical choices are not made through the use of cookie cutter methods. He must fit his choices to the complex requirements of his concrete situation while taking all of its contextual features into account.

The client can be encouraged to think about things like his reasons in favor of, or against, a course of action and then to

reflect on how important it is in the grand scheme of things. He could take into consideration his inclinations and decide whether it would be harmful for him follow them. He must also look to see what his judgments are based upon, what his duties and obligations are, and he must think about possible consequences of his choice. Finally, he must be sure he is able to endorse the course of action he has decided upon, and then be able carry it out. Throughout this process, the emphasis is on his use of reason and will. (Macaro, A., 2006.)

Rather than being left solely to his own resources, however, the client can be encouraged to explore other ways of thinking about the important situations he faces. The teachings of various religions, the writings of moral ethicists, the reasoning contained within legal moralism, and other important teachings can all be utilized in the service of the client's quest to enact the highest good through a process of meta-ethical reasoning that balances general principles with an accurate understanding of his particular situation. (Marinoff, 2003.)

As the client becomes more facile in knowing how to achieve the highest good, he will be able to make appropriate shifts between reflecting on and engaging with it in specific situations. He will be able to reason and to act with perspective, to bring his actions in line with his value commitments, and to direct his life so that these valuable commitments ultimately shape his every important action and choice. He can live in the

world knowing how to live the best life he can, because he endorses his life from his own reflective point of view. As a result, he will have the assurance, and the peace, of having achieved the highest good within his world. (Tiberius, V., 2008.)

The Approach in Action: The Author Shares her Process.

When I began philosophical counseling, I was not handling a number of situations in my life well. Though I needed help, every time I thought about going to a psychologically trained counselor, I just didn't believe I would get the help I needed. Therefore, I didn't seek one out.

Prior to that time, I had not studied much Western philosophy. Of the philosophy I had studied, it was the Ancient Greeks and Simone Weil who had called me the most. Under their influence, I practiced being as good, true, and beautiful as I could be, striving to do the highest good according to my best understanding. That worked pretty well, but only got me so far. Between the complexities of my situation and the strength of my personality, I found I wasn't able to achieve the highest good as easily as I had hoped. I was often uncertain about what to do or how to proceed. To know that I needed help was to know that I could not trust what I thought I knew. To acknowledge that was to acknowledge my doubt about the very things that made me human.

Fortunately, I had read *Plato not Prozac* (Marinoff, L., 1999) a few years before. This led me to want to give philosophical

counseling a try. I contacted Dr. David Brendel, a certified philosophical counselor, psychiatrist, and executive coach, and we began our work. But, what was our work, really? And how would we proceed with it in a philosophical manner? Those were inchoate mysteries for me, ones I was greatly eager to delve into.

From the start of our work, I emphasized the importance of finding the highest good in every situation I encountered. Simone Weil had been my beacon of light for many years in that regard. I wanted to follow in her footsteps, but her way often seemed harsh. I needed help with another way to approach things.

Dr. Brendel agreed to help keep the focus of our work upon this goal. As we went along, we were both pleased at the places I reached towards in myself, both good and bad. We came to understand that the frame of the highest good functioned as a safety net which allowed for greater trust and honesty. In previous therapies, though I wanted to know myself, I shied away from doing so. Was I supposed to admit to my dark side only to be proven that I, too, was humanly flawed? I could never figure out to what end the exploration was leading, except embarrassment and shame. Therefore, when he and I formed an alliance around the highest good, and we figured out the pragmatic, pluralistic ways for me to achieve it, I found myself more willing and able to explore many things about myself and

my world that I never would have before.

Though I didn't realize it, I also had much work to do to become the subject of my life. Dr. Brendel was a great help in my seeing how many of my complaints stemmed from this deficit. Even if I enjoyed thinking I was liberated, it became obvious through my recounting that, in many cases, I simply wasn't the agent of my life. As a result, I wasn't free. As I found out from reading Nietzsche, I was unconsciously taking my revenge out on the world because of this shortcoming.

Dr. Brendel suggested that a useful starting point for reflecting upon what it would mean to become the agent of my life would be to re-read Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Her thorough phenomenological analysis of the existential situation of women, with their historical lack of freedom and choice, led me to understand a good part of why I had not taken personal responsibility for my own life, and subsequently enabled me to begin doing so.

One of the more important, seemingly insolvable problems I presented to Dr. Brendel arose out of a vision I had had when I was seven, in which I was "informed" I would be the next Virgin Mary. Just six months before that event, my mother had been killed in a car accident on Christmas day, one in which my whole family was involved. I was deeply wounded and disoriented by the experience. Even if the vision was irrational and inexplicable, it became my guiding light, one I couldn't give

up, even when priests and ministers belittled it, or psychologists and friends called me narcissistic and deluded.

Despite my own persistent doubts, the meaningful convictions I formed and nourished as a result of my vision persisted throughout my life and influenced everything I did. Could philosophy help me find a comfortable resting place for it within my authentic self and my world? I waited with bated breath to see if Dr. Brendel could really help me with this.

He did. One of the first philosophical perspectives he thought could be helpful to me was pragmatism. He explained what it meant to think about things in a pragmatic way and directed me to the writings of William James and to other thinkers in the field. From them, I learned that what is true is good, and what is good is true, and that a person would know if they were on the path of truth and goodness when one good thing led to another. When I reflected back on my belief in myself as a manifestation of Mary, as a representation of the Divine Feminine, as a spiritual mother, it had led to many good things that were, if not true, close to true. Amidst the difficult and bad, one good thing had led to another.

With my newly won ability to embrace my childhood vision as true and good, I was also able to see that it had provided me with the symbol I needed in order to comprehend what existentialists would call my “fundamental project.” Deciding to base my life upon my vision was my “original” choice. To accept

myself as an incarnation of Mary determined my work life's work and helped to decide all the subsequent choices with which I constructed my world as it so satisfyingly exists today.

Each human being is unique and cannot be duplicated, and that includes me. With Dr. Brendel's help, I now know that I, too am allowed to live my particular relation with God. "This woman - this God," a major theme of the Bible, and of philosophy, is one I now understand and can own as mine.

At the time of writing this article, Dr. Brendel and I have worked together consistently for three years. Our dialogues have included consideration of why our work together is so effective and satisfying and why it proceeds so remarkably well for both of us. He had told me about a book he had written in which he had laid out a model that was based on what he called the "four P's" of pragmatism. It encouraged psychiatrists to think of their work in a more *participatory, practical, pluralistic, and provisional* manner. We agreed that our work had been influenced by his model, while it also included elements born out of our mutual interests, particularly those of always focusing on the highest good, as well as insights contained within existentialism and phenomenology. At some point we understood that, out of the work we had done, an approach to philosophical counseling had been created that could be useful for counselors of all persuasions. That, along with his invaluable assistance, is what led to my writing this

article.

As I began to understand its value, I started utilizing this approach in my own counseling work. I have more certainty about what I am doing. I am confident that my client and I will secure the best possible outcome as we participate in a flexible process that includes helping him to become the subject of his life, as well consideration of how he will achieve the highest good. As a counselor, my first duty is to the general well-being of my client. (Marinoff, 1995.) With this philosophical approach directed towards the *summum bonum*, I have more confidence I will fulfill my duty with flying colors.

### Structuring the Application of this Approach

In the first session with a client, you introduce them to the over-all goal of your work together. You will help them to establish what the deeply held meaningful connections are that they have to things, ideas, and people. You can explain that understanding these important connections will empower them to make the best possible choices, in part because they have a clear knowledge of what is truly important to them. This will lead towards the over-all goal of responsibly achieving the highest good in practical ways throughout their day to day life.

Though the ideas are presented didactically at the beginning,

both client and counselor do things to help themselves follow through on achieving this goal. For example, the client can be instructed to do some regular journaling. Shared written reflections focused on these themes are beneficial and will help both participants to be more deeply engaged in the process. (Jones, S., Brendel, D., 2015.) The counselor can also insert regular 'check - ins' to be sure he/she is on track. This will help to insure all the key elements are covered. In addition, each time the client identifies connections meaningful to them, or asserts herself responsibly as the subject of her life, or achieves the best possible solution given the circumstances, the counselor can mirror this back to her.

## **Conclusion**

As posited at the outset, a virtue based approach to philosophical counseling that utilizes elements from phenomenology, pragmatism, and existentialism and that centers itself on a search for the highest good offers the counselor and clients a broad array of options for achieving successful outcomes. To summarize:

From existentialism we see that philosophical counseling offers the client who becomes involved in a dialogue with his anxiety a positive aspect to his realization of his aloneness. He

will begin to come to terms with the fact that his life is truly individual – his alone and no one else's. Rather than living as part of the crowd, he then has the freedom to make his own choices and take responsibility for them.

Phenomenology is a way of seeing that focuses on our clients' lived experiences. From phenomenology we learn that an understanding of what is meaningful to the client is essential. With the use of the phenomenological method of immediately experiencing whatever it is that our clients offer, *without putting any abstractions or concepts on top of it*, we become capable of entering into our work as responsible agents of truth.

Pragmatism teaches us to help our clients value purposive thought *based on experience* and to value the practical outcome of an idea above the idea itself. Thus the client can be empowered, even liberated.

The pursuit of happiness combined with the pursuit of virtue ensures that the client, and indeed any person, will get the best result possible, which is also known as the *highest good*. The frame of the highest good functions as a safety net which allows for greater trust and honesty between counselor and client. And, when all four philosophical methods are considered and utilized from the beginning of a counseling relationship, the counselor, and the client, are certain of achieving a deeper and broader perspective, and more positive results.

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