

PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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Nemo Veritatem Regit

Nobody Governs Truth

The Transformational Power of Shared Written Reflections in Philosophical Counseling

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“How do I know what I think until I see what I say?” —E.M. Forster

Abstract

Shared written reflections are a powerful, transformative tool when used in the process of philosophical counseling. Rooted in an ancient tradition, written reflections are dialogues with one's Self, with the philosophical counselor, and with life, which contribute to the development of self and soul over a lifetime. The process of writing in and of itself accrues benefits through the establishment of neuronal pathways that enable rich connections with one's pre-existing schemas. It also supports the development of higher order thinking. Encouraging the client to pay attention to himself by writing, especially on a regular basis, can help him recognize what needs to be done in the face of events that happen and to profit from these experiences. It can also enable him to participate in philosophical counseling in a more proactive, intelligent, and informed manner.

Keywords: *hypomnemata, philosophical counseling, philosophical exercises, writing, written reflections*

Introduction

Written reflections have played an important part in the making of philosophers since ancient times. Especially then, when philosophy was thought of as a way of life involving care of the self and of the soul, writing was considered to have moral and existential value. Philosophers took notes on themselves, they wrote treatises and letters, and they kept notebooks, which they read and re-read, all in order to help themselves activate and reactivate the truths they needed for development of self and soul over a lifetime.

The act of writing enables the development of virtuous traits such as clarity of thought and perspective. When writing both for oneself and for a respected other such as the philosophical counselor, added benefits accrue. These include the opportunity to receive valuable insights, critical feedback, and friendly support while traveling along the sometimes rocky road to greater virtue and higher good. A major aim of this paper is to enable philosophical counselors to feel more comfortable and competent utilizing this important tool. Both the counselor and the client will accrue great benefits and make significant strides towards the aim of caring for self and soul when they more fully understand writing's value and know how to combine it with the use of other philosophical exercises.

The Historical Use of Writing within Philosophy

Philosophical counseling is rooted in an ancient tradition in which the use of written reflections was widely used. These written reflections were dialogues—with one's Self, with another and with life—carried on with the aims of delivering the individual of her many misconceptions and of enabling her to achieve greater awareness. In order to bring intelligence and order to this art, a wide variety of literary genres have been utilized. Essays, dialogues, meditations, confessions, memoirs, letters, and inquiries have all been known to help achieve this goal. Especially in ancient times, when philosophy was considered a way of life, writing was one of the major tools of ongoing philosophical dialogues, which were then thought of as a discipline or technique and as a spiritual exercise. For the Stoics, the Epicureans, the Cynics, and the Socratics, it was impossible to conceive of the project of knowing oneself without the use of writing. They understood that the transformation of the soul of each person seeking wisdom was enabled through this process. (Hadot, 2008)

Hypomnemata, a Greek word referring generally to collections of strictly personal and private notes, written on a day-to-day basis with the aims of forming oneself and transforming one's way of living, were considered to be a perfect form of philosophical production. The *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius falls into this category. He inscribed maxims that fortified him spiritually, reminiscences from his favorite authors, principles that sustained him throughout the day, and reproaches to his conscience. (Hadot, 1998)

Two of the many other examples of written reflections used for transformation, as well as to attain a certain state of perfection or happiness, can be found in Rousseau's *Confessions* and Descartes' *Meditations*. Through the use of his *Confessions*, Rousseau emerged as a unique individuated self who was able to differentiate between himself and others, and who, by examining himself honestly, ultimately achieved a universal frame of reference. Descartes used the writing of his *Meditations* to liberate himself from prejudices through a practice of universally doubting everything. The light of the truth of his insights led him to a higher stage of freedom and enlightenment. (Chase, 2013)

The Benefits of Writing

The most precise and articulate means we have of expressing ourselves is language, which becomes even more precise when we write. Writing gives us an opportunity to struggle with concepts that concern us, and to mentally test our connections and their meanings. This opportunity to struggle with ideas important to us enables us to better perceive whether those ideas ultimately prove to be inadequate, false, or both. The knowledge we have accrues depth and breadth as we probe ourselves and our ideas. That knowledge also becomes more detailed and nuanced than it would be if it just remained on the level of idle thoughts or was simply spoken. Perhaps this is why it could be said that writing is like adding color to our existing knowledge, which otherwise could remain simplistic and somewhat black and white. In the end, because of writing, we are better able to express ourselves with focus and intensity and to take a more critical distance, one which is helpful when we go to examine our thoughts and feelings with an eye towards being impartial. (Gould, 2005)

Neuroscientists have been able to show us that writing actually produces effects within the brain similar to those produced by people who are skilled at other complex actions, like music and sports. They think that when people juggle several ideas at once, which happens when one writes, special

demands are placed upon their brain, forcing the establishment of neuronal pathways and enabling rich connections with one's already pre-existing schemas. Scientists have also found that writing helps with the ability to recognize and activate information stored in memory circuits throughout the brain's cerebral cortex which is relevant to evaluating and responding to new information and for producing new creative insights, whether academic, artistic, physical, emotional, or social. (Zimmer, 2014)

Of primary importance to philosophers is the fact that writing supports the development of higher order processes such as thinking conceptually and transferring knowledge in and across many different fields. The ability to judge, to make critical analyses, to be able to induce and deduce, and the ability to evaluate knowledge that could be used to predict what might happen in given situations are additional examples of higher order thinking aided by writing. In addition, writing can be said to assist in the delay of immediate gratification in order to achieve one's longer term goals. It increases the ability to recognize relationships which can be symbolically conceptualized. And it increases the ability to evaluate one's emotions, thus contributing to recognizing and analyzing the responses one makes to them. (Willis, 2006)

The Benefits of Writing within the Context of Philosophical Counseling

Writing is a way of paying attention to oneself, one that awakens rational principles of thought and action. Paying attention to ourselves by writing, especially on a regular basis, can help us recognize what needs to be done in the face of events that happen and to profit from these experiences. In all these ways, we can see writing as a tool which philosophers and would-be philosophers can use in their search for a better way of living.

We want to distinguish between what is commonly thought of as writing a diary or journal and recording philosophical reflections as a disciplined exercise. Likewise, we want to distinguish between the value of writing solely to and for oneself, as contrasted with writing done while one keeps in mind that someone else will be reading it—in this case, the philosophical counselor. In general, we understand the terms “diary” and “journal” either to indicate the outpourings of one's heart while trying to find consolation from reality or as an account of usual day-to-day events written down regularly. Neither reflects an explicit intent on the part of the writer to grow and improve. The writing of philosophical reflections, on the other hand, is done with the purpose of disciplining one's thinking around principle-based reasoning, rather than primarily emotion. This is accomplished by continuously placing oneself in the fundamental disposition of the philosopher who concentrates on becoming wise. (Martin, 1988)

Epicurus distinguished between individuals whose nature is such that they can become virtuous by their own impulse and efforts and those who want to do the right thing, but need some moral role model to instruct and to encourage them along the way. Philosophical counseling clients, like most human beings, are in the second category. Their daily reflections are written to themselves for their own edification and also to the philosophical counselor, who reflects on the writings and engages with the client in a dialogue about them.

The solitary process of thinking and writing between sessions enables the client to participate in philosophical counseling in a more proactive, intelligent and informed manner. It also encourages him to become a more active agent in his daily life. An important point here is that during the

process of writing the client is not being instructed by the counselor. Rather, he is writing down his own ideas, which encourages him to more consciously become the subject of his life, as well as the moral agent of it. (Reis, 2006)

Additional benefits to the client accrue from writing daily reflections to the counselor. For example, because an individual's view of himself is always partial and incomplete, expressing her thoughts and feelings through writing to the counselor encourages her to yield to the greater power of communicative rationality. Also, given that all of us, including philosophical counseling clients, constantly over-value our abilities and performance, and given that the client cannot always discern when her arguments lack rationality, the well intentioned philosophical counselor can provide a surer sense of the client's abilities, insights, and behaviors than she can discern on her own.

There is no doubt that an honest, critical examination of oneself is likely to be painful. Disturbing personal flaws, feelings of guilt, and existential anguish are ubiquitous in everyone's experience of being human. Therefore, the opportunity to write reflections will be helpful to the client because it allows her to express these embarrassing realities and to be more rigorous and honest than she would be left to her own devices. Because she is revealing herself to someone whose care and loyalty she trusts and respects, she has a powerful incentive to do her best to be as clear, insightful, and articulate as she possibly can. Her revelations, precious to her, are received by her philosophical counselor, whose continuous extension of friendly professionalism affirms that she is respected and appreciated, especially because of her disciplined efforts at self-examination and improvement, as evidenced in her written reflections.

Another advantage to written reflections is in the time the client sets aside to compose them, which allows her to gather and to express her thoughts and feelings in a more cogent and organized manner than she would if she just expressed them on the spot. Also, rather than having to wait for the once a week appointment time, the client's soul searching messages can be composed in privacy and tranquility, at her leisure, without the need for the counselor to be present. At the same time, she experiences no fear that she will have to face an embarrassed, bored or disappointed look from the counselor at the very moment she first expresses something of importance to her.

Through the use of written daily reflections, the client can master the art of representing her life to another, emerging more confidently beyond her inner world into the intricacies of outer life. If the client keeps her inner world hidden, it may be doomed. In that case it rests too narrowly on the contingencies of individual experience, without the support outside recognition provides. The client's isolated attempts at self-analysis, when shared through written reflections, more readily lead to self-transcendence, particularly because they are shared with another who understands and cares.

For the philosophical counselor, written daily reflections on the part of his client enable him to examine her observations, confessions, and revelations at his convenience and at a pace and according to his schedule. Because the client's thoughts and feelings as written down are available to the counselor at all times, he can examine and re-examine them in order to ensure better understanding of her and her world and to provide more attentive, perceptive and valuable critical feedback. (Chase, 2013)

When we write, our thoughts take on a durable quality. They remain accessible to ourselves and others. Throughout the process of philosophical counseling, both the counselor and the client can take opportunities to consult and review what the client has written. Both individuals can more readily note the client's progress towards greater self-knowledge, as well as her cultivation of ideas over time. The written record of daily reflections enables both the counselor and the client to cherish, preserve and remember all that was gained in their process, an experience oral expression alone could not provide.

It is essential that the client and philosophical counselor have an agreement about how frequently the latter will read (and respond to) the written reflections of the former. If the reflections arrive by email too frequently or are too voluminous, it may be unrealistic for the philosophical counselor to read everything in depth before the next session. Without dialogue and agreement as to expectations, the client's feelings may be hurt if the counselor doesn't respond in accordance with the client's wishes. The parameters may shift over time, of course, depending on how much the client writes and on the counselor's general availability and "bandwidth" to absorb and reply to the written material.

Enabling Clients to Use Their Daily Reflections Wisely

For the ancients, virtues were similar to skills because they required practice, habit, and some understanding of what it takes to execute them. Philosophical counselors who wish to introduce their clients to the idea of writing daily reflections may need to offer encouragement in, and education about, what is likely to be a new habit and skill. The client's philosophical endeavors can be aided when the counselor offers her various ways to think about and conceptualize the concerns of her daily reflections.

The overall purpose of daily reflections could be explained as helping the client learn how to think about how to live while she discovers what the right things are to do in the context of her world and the life she wishes to live within it. "How should I live?" "What is the best life for me?" These are questions that invoke the perspective of the client, enabling her to think about and develop a first-person process based account of how she truly wishes to live.

Though these Socratic type questions are more than familiar to the philosophical counselor, the thought of actually attempting to answer them can be daunting for a client. She might feel tongue-tied or like she has had a brain freeze. In that case, offering her a structure for thinking through the process of becoming wise is the next tool to offer. The philosophical counselor can explain to the client that wise people have relatively stable sets of values and commitments. In order for her to know how she should live, she must become familiar with the values that are important to her. She can carefully consider and learn about these values through thinking, reading and writing, all the while placing them in relationship to her own experiences, past and present. This process will give her opportunities to be totally engaged with her particular practical perspectives while experiencing a blossoming awareness of what is really important to her.

How will the counselor, and the client, know when she has achieved a level of competency from her attempts to live wisely? One clear indication would be when she can observe, through her writing and actions, that she can reflect and act with a perspective on a relatively stable set of values. At the

same time, they will be able to observe her ability to make appropriate shifts between reflecting on her values and engaging with them in specific situations.

She will also be increasingly able to bring her emotions and actions into line with her value commitments. Her commitments to people and things will be based on her own set of standards, upon which she can also base her evaluations of herself and her actions. She will be able to direct her life so that these valuable commitments ultimately shape every important action and choice. At the point she achieves all those things, the counselor and the client can rest assured that she will go forth into her world knowing how to live the best life she can because she endorses her life from her own reflective point of view. (Tiberius, 2008)

The Client Speaks

The authors of this article are a philosophical counselor (David) and client (Shanti) who have worked together continually since early 2014. Here are Shanti's observations on the use of written reflections shared with the philosophical counselor throughout the process:

From the start, writing figured substantially in my work with David. Upon my first inquiry as to whether we would be able to work together, he asked me to write a few paragraphs about the philosophical and ethical questions I had been considering and what they meant to me. He also suggested I could include any thoughts I might have about philosophers who had been important to me. He wanted to get a feel for how the theoretical questions raised by philosophers I was familiar with resonated with and informed the personal, practical dilemmas I was facing.

I eagerly responded to his request. Ever since reading *Plato, Not Prozac!* (Marinoff, 1999), I had been working on my own to think about the dilemmas I was facing in a philosophical rather than primarily a psychological manner. Frankly, reading and thinking alone were not getting me very far. As a result of David's asking me to clarify my dilemmas by writing about them, as well as about the philosophical texts I already loved, I knew I had found someone who could help me fulfill some of my deepest introspective longings. David's initial inquiry was the start of my regular practice of, and enthusiastic commitment to, writing my reflections on an almost daily basis.

Simone Weil's journals have been a source of inspiration to me for many years. Through the process of studying them (Weil, 1991) and her other writings (Panichas, 1977) I came to understand the use of philosophical journal writing and how it could be an important tool in caring for myself and my soul (Przybylska, 2010). Very soon in our work together, David also suggested reading the diaries of Alice James. (Edel, 1999) Reading and reflecting on them also helped me comprehend the importance of considering and writing about my own phenomenological experience, which I would have otherwise discounted in favor of more abstract or theoretical discourses.

I sincerely wanted to achieve greater understanding of myself and the dilemmas I was facing, and when I care deeply about something, I will put much effort into doing so. As I suggested above, writing enabled me to work far harder as a philosophical client than I otherwise would have. It gave me a way to make regular efforts outside of the one-hour, once-a-week time frame usually allotted to the counseling process. Also, the entire cycle of writing down my thoughts and then refining them, giving them to David to read, dialoguing about them in our sessions, and then re-reading

and revising what I had written allowed for a richer process than if I had confined myself solely to a once-a-week dialogue.

One of the dilemmas I was facing when I began philosophical counseling concerned family issues that had been going on for at least two decades. My ways of handling the situations tended to be erratic, emotional, and not well thought out. As things often go, the longer the situation went on, the more confused things became, and the more confused I became. Things remained that way over quite a number of years. I knew I owed a duty to myself, and to my family, to get things right. So much was at stake. As I began to write my thoughts about the issues and then to dialogue about them with David, the personal and ethical issues involved became clearer. As a result, I was able to construct a coherent story about the situation rather than a fragmented one. At that point I could orient myself towards achieving the highest good within it.

Another aspect of my regular writing of my reflections I particularly appreciated, especially in the situation I am referring to, was that talking alone would not have gotten me to the point of clarity at which I arrived. I can't imagine how I would have arrived at the point of being the ethical subject of my behavior in the family drama in which I had long felt myself to be a victim if David had not suggested including writing as a core part of my philosophical counseling. The fact that I wrote about it, got feedback, wrote about it again, etc., made the situation ever more real and increasingly more important to me. I HAD to get things right.

No one likes to feel uncertain and anxious about what one is doing, myself included. That I could come up with a set of principles upon which to act, and have been able to enact them consistently, adds to my pride and my self-esteem. I feel myself to be more solid and substantial as I remain on firm footing with the decisions I made with the help of my thinking, writing, and my highly respected philosophical counselor, David. Reading back over my reflections, I can see that I have learned to think more clearly about myself and my world. My progressive consideration of myself through this process has helped me to transform that hard earned truth into a permanent principle of action. I feel certain I would not have achieved the progress I did without my commitment to regularly writing my reflections.

The Philosophical Counselor Reflects on the Process

Shanti has made extraordinary use of philosophical counseling, especially through sharing her written reflections with me and engaging in ongoing dialogue about what she has thought about and written. Early in the process, we agreed that she could email me approximately 1-2 pages of written reflections on a daily basis. In reality, she has written 2 or 3 times per week on average. I told her that I would always acknowledge that I received her emails, but my capacity to read and respond to them would vary over time in light of my other commitments and responsibilities. Establishing these parameters and ground rules freed us to make effective use of her written reflections.

Shanti's writings ranged from detailed descriptions of personal life events to philosophical expositions on complex topics, some of which arose out of texts she was reading or ideas that I had suggested in our weekly sessions. Over the course of time, her writing became more rigorous and empowered her to develop a conceptual and ethical world-view that she found highly valuable as she navigated complicated and emotional dimensions of her life. Reading her reflections each

week empowered me to support and help her, insofar as they gave me a valuable glimpse into the evolution of her thought process even before our official dialogues began each week. The process of discussing her written reflections has not been burdensome to either of us. Quite the contrary, it has been extremely rewarding and it has deepened our working alliance in significant ways.

Conclusion

Regular written reflections, when added to the process of philosophical counseling, provide benefits to the client, and to the counselor, beyond those of verbal dialogue alone. They enable the client to transform her vision of her world and herself within that world, and to become their ethical agent. What is philosophy, after all, if not an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought? (Foucault, 1986) And what better way is there to observe this activity than to write about it? There is no doubt that, for some philosophical counselors and their clients, their work together will be enhanced with the use of this powerful and timeless tool.

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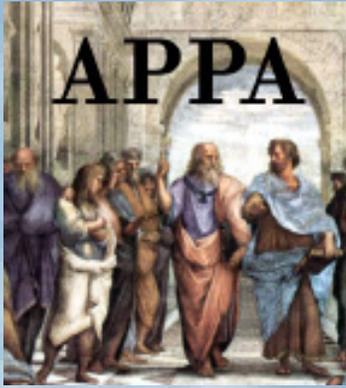
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David H. Brendel, Ph.D., is an APPA-certified philosophical counselor based in the Boston area. He earned his Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Chicago and served as a Faculty Fellow in the Harvard University Center for Ethics and the Professions. David applies his experience and expertise as a certified executive coach and career consultant. His company, Leading Minds Executive & Personal Coaching, provides a wide range of coaching and consulting services for individuals, organizations, and corporations.

Shanti (Barbara Jones) has known since she was seven years old that her calling was that of a teacher and “Spiritual Mother.” In order to better fulfill that role, she obtained a B.S. in Food Science and Nutrition, a Masters degree in Counseling, and a Ph.D. in Transpersonal Psychology. She has also worked extensively with spiritual teachers, attended modeling and acting schools, and studied piano, voice and dance. Shanti currently works as a self-actualization coach, has led workshops in creativity, meditation, and sand play, and taught classes on developing personal style. She is also a cabaret performer.





PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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Aims and Scope

Philosophical Practice is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

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