

Gerd B. Achenbach's 'Beyond-Method' Method

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Abstract: In this essay, I take up the question of whether Gerd B. Achenbach's 'beyond-method' method provides a suitable approach to counseling for the philosophical counselor. Achenbach maintains that the best method to counseling is one that is beyond any one single system. Many scholars have expressed an increasing dissatisfaction with such a methodology. Although these critiques of Achenbach are helpful, I argue that they do not capture the real problem with his counseling method. After I discuss this additional difficulty, I conclude that it is beyond all dispute that the methods of philosophical counseling should be advanced along different lines.

INTRODUCTION

Gerd B. Achenbach is a scholar of special importance. He is credited with creating the modern movement called philosophical counseling.¹ As I will make clear soon, he advocates a particular version of philosophical counseling, one that turns upon certain specific assumptions. Unfortunately, a number of scholars have expressed a decreasing sense of dissatisfaction with his position. Therefore, in this essay, I will be concerned to show that the facts bear sufficient witness for the dissatisfaction. I will proceed by describing Achenbach's position. I will then consider several objections against his view. Finally, I will set out my own objections against his view as well.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL EXPERIENCE

Achenbach is unambiguous about philosophical counseling as he is about philosophy in general. In fact, his view of philosophical counseling stems from his approach to philosophy or what he calls the philosophical experience. I will begin with the latter.

The philosophical experience begins with a familiar commitment to skepticism. In fact, Achenbach's commitment is strictly impartial. In other words, the philosophical experience is skeptical about everything which "considers itself right, settled, conclusive, indubitable."² Although such a position appears to rule

out most, if not all, descriptive and normative theories, Achenbach wants to clarify his position beyond all possibility of contradiction. The goal of the philosophical experience must remain skeptical against “everything which considers itself ‘true.’”³

Three comments about this position are in order. First, from his essays which specifically address this point (and the one’s available in English), Achenbach does not discuss the foundation of such a thorough going skepticism. Second, as far as I can tell, Achenbach does not clarify just what he means by the term skepticism. Does he mean that we should reserve judgment about claims of truth or should we be suspicious about such claims? I cannot really tell. Finally, until we understand exactly why we should be skeptical about any claim that may be true, his position is susceptible to a variety of counter intuitive examples. For example, his position appears to support the view that we should be skeptical about the following claim: Elephants are taller than hamsters.

Although Achenbach’s position will not bear, so far, the test of exact criticism, he has a conviction why skepticism is necessary to maintain. There are two related points. First, skepticism is necessary to maintain an open-ended outlook, one that resists and refuses to abolish all further questioning.⁴ Second, skepticism is needed to “yield a renewed interest in everything which has been refuted, taken care of, finished, or explained as ‘untrue.’”⁵

Even if Achenbach casts an informing light upon the prerequisite of maintaining skepticism, he does not discuss why the points just mentioned follow from skepticism. Perhaps, he might argue that it needs no great play of imagination to see that the points follow directly from the deep-seated skepticism he promotes. In fact, he *might* argue in this way. If there is no touchstone that enables us to assign truth-values to statements, then our attention is drawn away from seeking answers and redirected back to the importance of formulating precise questions. Additionally, if there is no decisive factor to judge the worthiness of our beliefs, then we are, in a sense, liberated from thinking that there are positions impregnable as Gibraltar.

PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

As I mentioned earlier, Achenbach’s approach to philosophy serves as the basis for his viewpoint of philosophical counseling. I will now turn to that discussion.

Achenbach carves out his view of philosophical counseling by discussing the traditional relationships between philosophy and psychotherapy. He discusses three different stances before he elucidates his own.⁶

The first position is straight out from the shoulder. On this view, philosophy and psychotherapy are analogous to sovereign countries.⁷ Each one has its own separate methods and objects of knowledge. On this view, the philosophical counselor has nothing in common to the trained psychotherapist. Although this arrangement is tested occasionally with frictions at the borders, each discipline is secure in its own division of labor. Unfortunately, even though the primary value emphasizes non-interference, it seems unlikely that such a division of labor can be maintained.⁸ For example, in the ordinary duties of each discipline, neither one can help stepping in the waters of the other.

The task posed to philosophy in the second stance contends that philosophy is the handmaiden to the legitimate framework of the sciences including psychotherapy.⁹ On this view, philosophy, which has lost its own legitimate stance in the world, picks up the problems that the sciences cannot handle. For example, although the sciences may extend the life of each individual by means of the scientific method, the sciences are not equipped to deal with the fear of death. When such a problem arises, scientists push the problem across their borders into the eager arms of the philosopher. However, as Achenbach maintains, even though the philosopher may be equipped to discuss this issue, the worries do not come to an end. In fact, as such discussions go, the fear of death only deepens.

The third thesis comes closer to the proper relationship that should exist between philosophical practice and psychotherapy.¹⁰ To his credit, Achenbach maintains that the philosophical practitioner assumes the proper role of mediator. On this view, the philosopher attempts to reconcile the counselee's experience with the counselee's values or worldview. Unfortunately, two problems remain. First, there is a tendency for the philosophical practitioner to maintain an objective spirit when attempting to act as the mediator. This means that the practitioner will offer solutions to the counselee's problems. Achenbach points out that the solutions or securities that are offered are either false or the practitioner will avoid problems he has no solutions to offer. The other problem is this. The philosophical practitioner assumes wrongly that the counselee desires a solution to his problem. In fact, Achenbach makes clear that this is a crucial mistake to make because, as he points out, a counselee typically expects no answers to his questions. Instead, what the counselee requires is recognition of his lonely position, his exclusion, or abandonment by others.

So far, Achenbach has offered critical accounts of three traditional relationships that exist between philosophy and psychotherapy. All that is left is to articulate his view.¹¹

According to Achenbach, the proper relationship between philosophy and psychotherapy grounds itself in a “relationship of cooperation and competition, that is, a dialectic relationship.” Unfortunately, without making this interesting point clear, Achenbach moves on and, at first glance, makes another point that appears to be unrelated. More specifically, Achenbach articulates that although philosophical practice and psychotherapy are not exactly the same enterprise, “psychotherapy is a form of practicing philosophy.” We are intended to understand the latter point and therefore (at least part of) the connection in this way.

First, although philosophy has no legitimate subject matter to explore, psychotherapy can benefit from the philosopher’s ability to uncover an individual’s fundamental assumptions and perspectives.¹²

Second, psychotherapy can benefit from philosophy in this way as well. Psychotherapy must embrace the radical skepticism discussed earlier. Once this is accomplished, the psychotherapist can realize something hitherto unnoticed before:

The “Freudian genital maturity,” the “Jungian individuality,” the “work-pleasure-and suffering –capability” would then lose their instrumental usefulness, would no longer be distorted as tools for determinate goals, and would finally come to be what they really are: questionable regulatives which, when extracted from the context of a discussion, become helpful for building and stabilizing theories.¹³

Before I move on to offer critical remarks, one further point is worth bringing forward for our attention. If the psychotherapist and the philosophical practitioner are liberated from the pursuit of truth and, as a result, unshackled from relying on a hegemonic psychotherapy theory (or any philosophical theory), what would a counseling situation look like? Fortunately, Achenbach provides us with four principles to follow.

There are four rules that a philosophical practitioner should follow.¹⁴ First, the counselor must understand that no two individuals are the same, and as a consequence, the counselor must adapt himself to the different needs of each client. Second, the counselor must attempt to understand his client and help his client to do the same. Third, no matter how tempting it is, the counselor must resist trying to change his client. Finally, the counselor must amplify his client’s perspective, and he must nurture his client with whatever seems appropriate.

Although there is nothing ambiguous about Achenbach's rules, he attempts to use the following romantic metaphor to vividly portray what he means.

The counselor is like the trained pilot of a boat. Although the pilot has training, it is not the kind customarily associated with a pilot. Normally, the training of a pilot includes knowledge of how to proceed from one point to another, and the training includes knowledge of dangerous areas that lie beneath the surface. Instead, Achenbach's pilot is an individual who steps aboard the ship of his client, a ship, which "has lost its speed or its direction or both." While onboard, the counselor does not show the owner of the ship where to go or where the dangers exist. Instead, they both sit together "exploring old and new maps inspecting the compass, sextant, and telescope." They will also chat possibly about the "prevailing winds, sea currents, and the stars." The pilot may also discuss with his client "what men in the past have said about being captain, and what those in other parts of the world have said about it." In the end, the conversation will continue, "until the captain once again takes up the controls of his ship, increases his speed, and goes his way."

CRITICAL REMARKS

Despite the lucidity of Achenbach's approach to philosophical counseling, there are problems with his views as I have analyzed it. I will now consider several objections.

A number of scholars have expressed several concerns about Achenbach's method. Before I discuss those concerns, I will begin with a comment by Shlomit C. Schuster.¹⁵ Schuster is credited with classifying Achenbach's approach as the "beyond-method" method.¹⁶ This seemingly paradoxical description appears to capture what Achenbach wants to depict in his own stance toward counseling. Instead of aligning himself with just one philosophical or psychological theory, Achenbach believes it is better to keep ones options open. In fact, such a position seems necessary in the light of the importance he places upon the individual and the failure of philosophical and psychological theories.

Although Achenbach's "beyond-method" appears to possess a certain advantage of having all methods available to him, it comes as no surprise that other scholars have expressed a decreasing sense of dissatisfaction with his idea. Margaret Goord is one such scholar.¹⁷

Like other scholars, Goord describes Achenbach's beyond-method as a commitment to "anything-goes" method. Of course, if she is right, then this leads to some unhappy conclusions. The problem is something like this: if "anything-goes" and there is no generally accepted criteria to guide philosophical practice, then there will be no criterion to "whether a psychological problem is susceptible too philosophical practice or not." The obvious consequence is that a philosophical counselor may not know if his client has a serious psychological disorder or he may attempt to treat a client with a personality disorder or schizophrenia.

If Goord's critique is accurate, then it would seem to point out a fatal flaw about Achenbach's approach. However, I am not sure that her initial analysis is correct. In fact, she is overstating the problem. That is, why should we suppose that Achenbach's refusal to bind himself to a particular psychological theory leads to the conclusion any respectable or disrespectable psychological methods maybe used by the philosophical counselor? Having said this, Goord's assessment of the lack of criterion gets closer to a serious problem with Achenbach's method. Without a specific philosophical or psychological criterion to follow, the philosophical counselor will not have the epistemic advantages that such theories bring with them.

Ida Jongsma also brings forward certain concerns about Achenbach's system.¹⁸ Apparently, her exposure to Achenbach's work has led her to the same conclusion as Goord: the "beyond-method" leads to the "anything goes" thesis.¹⁹ She underscores this point by adding: "This view seems to me to have dangerous consequence of giving license to philosophical counselors to do whatever they please."²⁰ Again, like Goord, she spends no time arguing why Achenbach's "beyond method" leads to the conclusion that "anything goes." Nevertheless, she does cast a shadow on Achenbach approach in this way. There are two concerns. First, if we suppose Achenbach's "beyond method" is the correct method, "how can we seek potential clients if it is unclear what we can offer them and what they can expect?"²¹ Second, without a common methodological approach, it would be difficult for a physician or psychologist to refer clients to philosophical counselors because "it would be hard to know in advance which basic premise and methodology any particular counselor uses."²²

Before I turn to my own critical observations, there is one more review to consider. Dries Boele brings forward the same sort of worries about Achenbach method.²³ Boele's concerns appear to be directed not so much at the suspicious "anything goes" feature discussed by Goord and Jongsma, but at the problems of not having a

clearly articulate method. Boele's essay, like the others, discusses why it is necessary to have clearly defined method. This is necessary for the articulation of standards, standards for the philosophical counselor to follow, and it is necessary for the standards for the eventual training of philosophical counselors.²⁴

The objections just discussed go some way towards undermining Achenbach's approach to philosophical counseling. They lead us to focus the issue by noting this: the fact that no single method is promoted leads to problems with the *perception* of the profession as a whole. But there are other problems with Achenbach's position, problems, as far as I know, not discussed until now.

Although Goord, Jongsma, and Boele help us understand the problem of not having a single method to follow, they do not go to the heart of the problem with Achenbach's "beyond- method" method. Here's the problem.

Achenbach claims that his method is one that is beyond any one single method. As a consequence of this view, he claims to have *any* method open to himself to be used. To his credit, Achenbach thinks this necessary in order to tailor his discussions to each client. Of course, the implication of his view is that if it is necessary, he may use the Freudian Psychoanalysis method. But, that is not the only method available. Psychologists employ a wide variety of approaches including the Existential Therapy, Cognitive Therapies and, specifically, Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy and Logotherapy. In fact, as Raabe points out, in 1986 there were more than 400 separate, distinct, and rival schools of psychotherapy.²⁵ That's a lot of methods to choose from!

Although the great diversity of psychotherapies make it virtually impossible to give them a general characterization, Ran Lahav points out that the majority may be illustrated in this way.²⁶ "[S]pecifically, psychological approaches can be characterized, roughly, as dealing with psychological (affective, cognitive, behavioral) processes or events (e.g., conflicts, experiences, fantasies, thoughts, anxieties, etc.), i.e., processes inside the patient which underlie the predicament (or life) in question."²⁷ During counseling sessions, the underlying processes serve as the main focus of the discussion between the therapist and his client.

If we suppose that Lahav's characterization is reasonable, what does he want to make of this point? The issue is this: employing a psychotherapy requires time and training including knowledge of the empirical studies that the theories are based upon. Lahav adds that without this training one cannot come to know how minds

operate (at least according to the theory). In fact, this point is directed specifically at philosophical counselors who may be tempted to employ such methods without the training.²⁸

But now it requires no extraordinary perception to discern the implication for Achenbach's position. Without the prerequisite training, philosophical counselors should not employ psychotherapies that they are not qualified to use. Therefore, Achenbach cannot maintain the "beyond-method" if that implies that *all* methods are open to him. In fact, if Lahav is right, this may limit in a dramatic way the number of therapies Achenbach has at his disposal.

I would like to discuss one more objection even though this problem is not directed so much at Achenbach's "beyond-method" method. Let me attempt to explain what is at stake. There is a tendency within the literature, and among philosophical counselors, that philosophical counselors should resist leading their clients toward specific goals or to the truth. Some scholars like Achenbach argue that in spite of all our optimism the evidence is overwhelming that there is no truth to lead them to. Others, like Lahav, argue that such a goal is outside the scope of the philosophical counselor. Instead, as Lahav makes clear, such goals are available only to those whose qualifications entitle them to pursue such a goal within a counseling context. If we suppose that this view is correct, the following problem immediately emerges.

When a client approaches a philosophical counselor, typically some sort of predicament motivates the client. Additionally, the philosophical counselor hopefully wants his client to *benefit* from such an exploration. That is, he wants his client to overcome personal predicaments. Therefore, the philosophical counselor has therapeutic ends for his client. But now notice the following point. If we embrace Achenbach's "beyond-method" method (or even Lahav's World View Interpretation), we cut off from ourselves any sort of therapeutic ends that we might have for our client. This is so because any topic that we discuss with a client has been cutoff because of our metaphysical commitments, i.e., there is no truth, or if Lahav is correct, it is related to the underlying psychological problem that plagues the client. If we assume that Achenbach's outlook is correct, we may wonder whether a client would want such an approach, and we may wonder why he still describes philosophical counseling as a type of counseling.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to discuss the growing dissatisfaction with Achenbach's "beyond-method" method. After a brief examination of Achenbach's position, it is perfectly clear, at least to me, that there are several serious problems with his view. Therefore, although we owe Achenbach a great intellectual debt for trail blazing the movement of philosophical counseling, the objections discussed earlier cast an informing light upon the need to develop philosophical counseling along different lines.

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NOTES

1. Peter B. Raabe, *Philosophical Counseling: Theory and Practice* (Connecticut and London: Praeger, 2001), 50. Raabe's book is, perhaps, the best text devoted to the theoretical aspects of philosophical counseling. I am intellectually indebted to his discussions, and this paper takes advantage of the extensive list of scholars brought forward by his bibliography.
2. Gerd B. Achenbach, "Philosophy, Philosophical Practice, and Psychotherapy," in *Essays On Philosophical Counseling*, eds. Ran Lahav and Maria da Venza Tillmanns (Lanham, New York and London: University Press of America, Inc., 1995), 73.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 64-74.
7. Ibid., 64-65.
8. Ran Lahav attempts to maintain such a division. See his essay "A Conceptual Framework for Philosophical Counseling: Worldview Interpretation," in *Essays On Philosophical Counseling*, op. cit., 3-24. I have argued that such a position is not fea-

sible to maintain in “Challenges To An Emerging Profession: Should Philosophical Counseling Be Satisfied With Worldview Interpretation,” *International Journal of Philosophical Practice* 1, no. 4 (Summer 2003).

9. Achenbach, “Philosophy, Philosophical Practice, and Psychotherapy,” 65-69.
10. Ibid., 69-72.
11. Ibid., 72-74.
12. This point is also brought out by Raabe. See his book, *Philosophical Counseling*, 52-53.
13. Ibid., 73,
14. The following discussion relies heavily upon Peter Raabe’s book, *Philosophical Counseling*, 57.
15. Shlomit C. Schuster, *Philosophy Practice: An Alternative to Counseling and Psychotherapy* (Connecticut and London: Praeger, 1999).
16. Raabe, *Philosophical Counseling*, 57; cf., Schuster, *Philosophy Practice*, 39.
17. Margaret Goord, “Philosophical Counselling: The Case Against,” *The Philosopher’s Magazine*, www.philosophersnet.com/magazine/article.php?id=151. I am indebted to Raabe’s book for bringing this article to my attention.
18. Ida Jongsma, “Philosophical Counseling in Holland: History and Open Issues,” in *Essays on Philosophical Counseling*, op. cit., 25-34.
19. Ibid., 31.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Boele’s article is not published; fortunately, Raabe discusses Boele’s views in his book, *Philosophical Counseling*, 58-59.
24. Raabe, *Philosophical Counseling*, 59.
25. Ibid., 80.
26. Ran Lahav, “A Conceptual Framework for Philosophical Counseling: World-view Interpretation,” 11.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., 12.

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