Existential Phenomenological Reduction as a Tool for the Philosophical Counsellor: A Case Study in Decision Making

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Since a phenomenological reduction is traditionally thought of as a process for arriving at the foundation of what 'is' the case, and critical decisions depend on an assessment and understanding of what 'ought' to be done, the process would seem like an unlikely candidate for helping clients in decision making. If, however, Descartes is right in thinking that error is a function of judgement outstripping understanding, and that conversely clear understanding yields good judgements, then grasping the clear and distinct state of affairs that phenomenology encourages may be precisely what is required for making difficult decisions.[1] Decisions are difficult when equal but opposite directions for action are possible. In order to resolve the dilemma this causes, one of the terms in the equation must recede in value, or one must grow. In some cases, an existential phenomenological reduction can facilitate this change in the relative value of alternatives by revealing the underlying assumptions that fuel both choices, so issues that are not coherently grounded in lived experience can be mitigated.

The idea of using phenomenology in counselling is not new and has a reputation in psychological counselling and family therapy stretching back to Merleau-Ponty. Even existential psychologists such as Rollo May who emphasize freedom arguably rely like most contemporary existentialists on a phenomenological framework to achieve this (May, 1981). In philosophical counselling, it has become even more explicit. Rachel Blass, for example, suggests phenomenology as a way of uncovering the unexamined presuppositions that guide a client's behaviour (Blass, 1996)). Lahav, on the other hand, emphasizes the value of phenomenology in creating an objective view of a client's situation as it appears to her through her subjective experience (Lahav, 1995). The approach I am proposing is narrower than either of these. It focuses specifically on one phenomenological technique – the reduction – and combines that with an emphasis on existential subjectivity.

In this paper, I will use a case study to demonstrate how this process can work. Before doing so, let me explain more fully what I mean by an existential phenomenological reduction. Although the concept is rooted in Husserl's idea of bracketing in order to transcend the natural attitude and get to the structures of consciousness constitutive of the transcendental ego (Husserl, 1982), my interpretation of the concept is not so ambitious. An existential phenomenological reduction merely tries to get at the essence of lived experience. It is existential in that it embraces the legitimate subjectivity of the client's perspective: she can be trusted to see the truth. It is phenomenological in that it takes as its object the phenomena of the client's problem as its object of inquiry. Finally, it is a reduction in that it attempts to get at the condition of the possibility, or underlying assumptions of the client's understanding of that phenomenon as it appears to her and thus constitute her world.

In order to demonstrate this approach to philosophical counselling, the following case study will be divided into two parts. In the first part, I will describe the client and her dilemma, and provide a paraphrase of our sessions with a running commentary on my assessment of them. In the second part, I will draw on this foundation to identify and organize the underlying principles of an existential phenomenological reduction as they apply to a philosophical counselling session, and then discuss the advantages of including it in the arsenal of dialectic skills available to a philosophical counsellor.

Part One

Introduction: Rosa's Situation

[1] '[W]henever I restrict my volition within the bounds of my knowledge, whenever my volition makes no judgement except upon matters clearly and distinctly reported to it by the understanding, it cannot happen that I err.' (Descartes, 1951, 59)

Rosa[2] came to me to with the intention of having me help her to decide whether she should continue college at the San Francisco Bay Area University she had been attending for the last year, or return to her home and family in the Southwest, where she could attend a state college in the vicinity of her home. Rosa described herself initially as a traditional Latina woman, with an extended family in a New Mexico border town with whom she was very close. Although she saw herself as clinging to many of the assumed values of her community, she had long recognized that there was something that distinguished her from her many cousins. She had come to believe that difference was in her intellectual ability. She was able to assimilate and synthesize information better than other members of her family, and that had led her to be more successful in school than her peers – most of whom seemed from her description to be members of her family. Her success in school had led to wider recognition, and eventually to a substantial scholarship to the expensive private school she was now attending.

Rosa came to see me towards the middle of the second semester of her first year as a transfer student from the junior college in her hometown. She explained that outside of an occasional trip to Mexico to visit her parent's relatives, she had never been away from home. Nonetheless, she said that early on in her life she had developed the sense of having a 'destiny' and that had contributed to her decision to accept the scholarship and move so far away from home. She had come to school with the intention of studying communication, and then going back home to work in broadcast media. Eventually she hoped to be in a position to make a positive contribution to reporting on and representing the Hispanic perspective, which she felt continued to be under-represented in her city. Up until this point, her life seemed to be working according to her plan.

Session One

An existential phenomenological reduction must begin with the phenomena – or in this case the life conflict – as it appears to the client, since they are the ones responsible ultimately for performing the reduction. This is critical: the reduction can be guided by questions from the philosophical counsellor, but the conclusion about the essence of the issue under question must come from the client, not the counsellor. The first session, therefore, was devoted primarily to gathering the above information about the client's situation, and having her explain in her own terms what she saw as the issue that she had to work through. It is important at this point to pay special attention to how the client articulates the issues, because that articulation will be used as the path or first clue to the reduction. For example, it was clear from the frequence with which she mentioned family and from the way she described the issue either in relation to or in opposition to family that this was the arena in which the reduction would occur.

According to Rosa, her experience of the first year at college away from home had been a good one by most standards. She had met some people with whom she had become friends, and had a wide enough circle that she never lacked social opportunities. She had worked at a large chain department store in her hometown, and been able to transfer to this area without losing either seniority or benefits, so her job situation was exceptionally good for a college student. She had also met her expectations academically, having maintained a particularly high grade point average. The only real blot in her experience had been the failure of a long distance relationship, and even that had not been terribly disappointing because she had never had especially high hopes that it would work out; she and the man in question had seemed to have irreconcilable differences that distance from each other exacerbated, leading eventually to their mutual decision to move their relationship back into the arena of friendship. In sum, Rosa had had a remarkably common first year college experience, with no major problems and many successes.

So, what was the problem? Rosa felt inconsolably unhappy. She was talking on the phone to her mother practically every day, and found herself having to convince herself on a daily basis to stay through the semester. The idea of coming back for another year seemed impossible. She had come to talk with me to see if she could find a way of thinking about her situation that would make it easier to finish the semester, and perhaps to consider coming back. She felt, however, that returning was really a very remote possibility. When I asked her why she thought she was unhappy, Rosa was practically at a loss for an answer. All she could really say was that she missed her large, extended Hispanic family. At the same time, she said that she had always accepted that she would have to leave them in order to fulfil her sense of destiny, and it was very difficult for her to understand why she now

[2] The client's actual name and details of her life have been changed to protect her identity.

found it so difficult to be away. We decided after the initial consultation to meet at least one more time, and see if we could describe more carefully the reason for her dissatisfaction. As is often the case, just having talked about the issue seemed to lighten Rosa's load considerably. Although there is always the danger that a client will mistake initially the possibility of a solution for the solution itself, I felt confident that Rosa would not find the next week quite so lonely.

Session Two

When I saw Rosa for our next appointment I found my confidence had not been misplaced. She seemed in much better spirits, and much more able to describe her dissatisfaction. Rosa said that every time she went home for a weekend or holiday, she found herself drifting further away from her family. There seemed, she said, to be something ironic about coming to school in order to better serve her community, but then to find herself less and less a part of that community the longer she was at school.

At this point in our discussion, it seemed clear that we were going to have to focus more on identifying and articulating the critical issues so that we could examine them more closely, and specifically so we could begin our phenomenology of them. Otherwise, it was likely that our conversation would remain a superficial chat about the differences between being home and being at school. I asked her first to describe what she saw as the advantages of staying in school at the University she was currently attending. The list was long. She liked the education she was getting, she enjoyed her classes, she felt it was leading to the career she wanted, she liked the people she was meeting, she liked her living situation, and she liked her job well enough. When I asked her to describe what she saw as the advantages to not going to this University – excluding issues about her family – there really were almost none. She reported a certain degree of loneliness and lack of community, but as we discussed that in light of the friends she had made, it seemed again to be more about the difference between friends she had known all her life, and those she had known less than a year, than something wrong with the University itself. Although this does not seem like a giant step, it allowed her to clearly set aside any question about whether it was the University itself that made her want to leave, and focus instead on the issue of home and the reason it had such a hold on her.

In a phenomenological reduction, clarifying the phenomenon to be examined is critical, and in this case it clearly was not her experience with the University that needed to be examined. Outside of the usual complaints about the food, the noise in the dorms, and the occasional poor class, there was really no issue. At this point, I began to wonder and I asked her if there was really any issue at all here, because if she did not dislike the University, or did not have some issue with it that needed to be fixed, then it seemed pretty clear that she just missed home and wanted to be there. Then it would just be a matter of deciding whether or not her desire to be home was justification enough for her to leave the University.

That was exactly it, she said, she wanted to know whether her desire to be back in her community was sufficient reason to return there. This provided us with a starting place for a reduction, because we could begin by finding what it meant to have a reason to either stay or return. 'The main thing my mom says,' said Rosa, 'is that I am happy. She does not care what I do, as long as I am happy.' She said this several times in response to my questions about what constituted a reason for staying or leaving, so we began to pursue that assumption. I began by asking her whether she agreed with her mother, which she said she did. I asked her if she knew whether staying or leaving would make her happiest, and she quickly said that there was no question that leaving would make her happiest. What, then, was the problem? If the important thing was to be happiest, and going home would make her happiest, then that seemed the obvious right choice. She agreed that it seemed that way, but it did not feel that way.

I suggested then that either she did not really think that being happy was the most important thing – that there was more to the decision than just promoting happiness – or that she had two different notions of happiness that she was using, in which case leaving would make her happy in one sense, but unhappy in the other. I added that although many philosophers – most notably Aristotle – argued that happiness was the end and was therefore the motivation of all human activity, the view was not universal. Nietzsche, for example, claimed that it was unhappiness that fuelled human action. It could even be that duty might better describe her own ground for action. The point was that although we might start with happiness, she ought not be surprised if there was a different basis for action that was equally acceptable. Certainly at this point there was more to the question than just doing what made her happy. She agreed that this was the case, and why her mother's advice to do what made her happy seemed not to help much.

Nonetheless, since happiness was all we had for sure right now, and since there seemed to be an inconsistency in her understanding of it as a motivation, it seemed a reasonable starting place. I suggested that we assume there were different kinds of happiness, and that if we understood more about what would make her happy about being with her family, and what would make her happy about staying here, we might be in a better position to compare them, and see which was the more important to her. Rosa agreed to the project, so I asked her to start by just giving me some sense of who her family was, and what she particularly missed about being with them. At this point, I want to underscore again that the direction of the discussion is very much determined by the client, and the client's answers to questions. Through that process, the reduction soon came down to an analysis not of 'happiness', but of 'belonging'. This became critical after just a few minutes of describing her family clearly exposed that the problem was much deeper than a mere spate of homesickness on her part.

She began by saying that what made her happy about being with her family was the closeness she felt with them. I asked her to describe her family a little more, and to explain how that closeness was expressed. She began with her mother, and went in great detail discussing how much she owed to her, how grateful she was to her, what a fine and strong person she was and so on. I still was not sure about the relationship that she saw between her deep gratitude and her closeness with her mom, and asked her to elaborate. She was close to her mother, Rosa explained, because in a sense all they had was each other. I asked her how that went along with all the cousins she said that she had. After just a moment's hesitation, Rosa explained that her mother had not been married when she gave birth to her. She knew her father, and her father's family, but she had not been accepted by them most of her life. Recently they had invited her to come to a family wedding, and she said she had been very excited about it because it seemed that her grandparents and other members of the family had really wanted to talk to her for the first time in her life, and she felt accepted in the family for the first time. She had even made plans to see her grandparents again and some of the other members after the wedding. But the experience, she said, ended up being a disappointment. Despite all the enthusiasm for her at the wedding, when she contacted them a few weeks later, it was as it had always been; they did not want her to come over, and did not have time to see her.

I asked Rosa how her relationship was with her father, and she explained that they really did not have much of a relationship. She had tried throughout her childhood to develop one with him by sending him cards and small gifts on father's day and on his birthday, but he rarely if ever responded in kind. Her mother refused child support, so he had no necessary reason to see or support her, and rarely had. In fact, recently she had been thinking that she should just quit trying to have any relationship at all.

I asked her if, since she was not close to her paternal grandparents and his family she was close to her maternal grandparents. They were in Mexico, she explained, and since they had largely severed contact with their daughter, they did not really have much relationship with her, their granddaughter. In fact when she had visited them, although they were very nice, it was almost as though they were not sure who she was when she was with them. Who, exactly, then, was she close to, I asked her again. Was it just her mother? After again hesitating, Rosa said that she really, really, loved her mother, but she was not exactly close to her anymore. When I asked her why, she explained that her mother had become so depressed, and was on so much medication and then drank so much on top of it that she really could not be close to anyone. She loved her mother, she kept reassuring me, but she felt increasingly at a loss with what to do to help her.

Perhaps it was not after all, her family that she wanted to go home to be close with, Rosa acknowledged. She did still feel sometimes like she wanted to go back to her town and be like her friends there – married at a young age and already with children. She just wondered if it was not perhaps in her nature to do that, to get married young and have children and just be part of the community like everyone else. However, she said, when she thought of doing that, she wondered if she would end up then trying to get her children to do what she had not done – leave the community, not have children young, get an education.

I wondered aloud why she would want that for her children when she did not want that now for herself when she had a chance. Why would closeness to their family be any less important to them than to her? This implies that it was not that she was actually giving up the closeness of her family as she had at first surmised. In fact, after our discussion I asked her if she could find a way of more accurately characterizing the nature of her relationship with her family. After a small amount of

discussion on what I meant by 'characterizing', Rosa decided that her relationship with her family had not actually been based on a history of closeness, but on a desire for closeness that had been fuelled by a history of rejection. Rejection therefore seemed to best characterize her relationship with them. This interpretation also seemed to explain why she would not want this for her children or herself.

At this point it may be easier to see the process of reduction if I summarize the discussion. This summary duplicates a process that Rosa and I went through as well at this juncture. We began with the assumption that she wanted to return home because it would make her happy. Her happiness would come from being with her family. She was happy being with her family because of their closeness. The closeness she felt was actually with her mom. She was close with her mom, because they were in a sense thrown together by their isolation. The closeness she felt with her mom, in other words, was built on the more abiding sense of rejection she felt from her father, her grandparents, and her extended family, as well as the family of her mother. Furthermore, the closeness she felt with her mom had been increasingly compromised by her mother's depressions and substance use and abuse. So our analysis revealed that to the degree that she was close – and increasingly she did not even feel that – it was with her mom, and that was largely because they had both been so severely rejected. In other words, the ground of where she was seeking her happiness was actually rejection. Just all at once confronting the degree of rejection that she had been subjected to seemed enough for this session, and Rosa agreed to think before our next meeting about the implications of this on her desire to return home.

Session Three

I began by reminding Rosa of what she had originally said had been her intention in discussing this issue: she wanted to know whether her reasons for staying were greater than the reasons she had for leaving. With that in mind, I suggested that rather than returning to the discussion about her family and her experience of rejection, we move on to a discussion of the nature of the happiness she felt towards being here. Rosa agreed, but asked if she could just talk about one realization she had from the last conversation. I reminded her gently that this was not therapy, and that she, not I, was in charge of the direction the discussions took. With that encouragement, she said she was just wondering since we talked last if the reason she had felt such a sense of destiny was not related to her sense of rejection. Perhaps, she explained, a sense of destiny was just her way of projecting herself out of an uncomfortable place. I agreed to this as possibility and observed that although we had started off with happiness as the reason for staying or leaving, perhaps both were actually rooted in her sense of rejection. I asked her if she thought it would be possible for her to reconcile herself with her family at this point. Given that she has been trying most of her life to do so and had been unsuccessful, she said she could see no reason to believe that now would be any different, and really doubted now whether going home really would make her happy. In fact, she wondered whether, if coming here had actually been a way of responding to and overcoming the rejection, maybe she should stay and give it a chance.

I suggested that we go on to the second half of her concern given the time constraints we were working under, but instead of comparing the happiness of going home with the happiness of staying maybe we should consider whether she was more likely to overcome her sense of rejection by staying or going home. She began by listing some of the things she liked about the school she was attending, some of the friends she had made, and similar positive, but fairly superficial aspects of her life. I asked her to explain again why she had decided to come to the school she had selected, and she said that in large part it was simply because they had offered her a good financial package. I asked her if it was less expensive to come here than it would have been or would be for her to return home and go to a State school. After a moment she said that it would not be, actually. That led us both to consider the possibility that it was more than just the financial package.

After discussing it for a few minutes, she decided that part of the reason had simply been the acknowledgement she had received and that was represented by her scholarship. She said it seemed to confirm her own sense of destiny, or of feeling that she was meant for something special. She asked me if I thought that everyone had that feeling of being destined for something grand. I said that I knew of at least a few people who claimed that they did not see themselves that way, although it is always difficult to know what someone really thinks – or if perhaps there are not times in one's life that one might have a greater or lesser sense of destiny. The important thing now seemed to be that she did, and I asked her to explain it to me a little more, and perhaps talk about it in terms of coming to the Bay Area.

After thinking about it, Rosa said that honestly she did not really know what that destiny was, and at different times in her life she had different notions, from being a doctor to being a writer to now being a television journalist. It was, however, a sense about herself that she had had from a very early age. But the more she thought about it, the more sense it made that coming to the Bay Area and trying to fulfil that sense of herself really was a kind of reaction to the rejection, and that staying here would help her to accomplish that, especially since there was no reason to believe that things would be any different now than they had been if she went home. In fact, she wondered now if her other plan for going home, getting married and having children would not leave her as excluded as ever – as 'the one who could not handle the outside world and came back'.

I asked her if she thought staying away for a while and developing her career would work towards her reconciliation with her family. She doubted it because she felt further apart from them every time she went home. Perhaps that was a necessary first step, I observed. She agreed half-heartedly (the way you agree when you do not) and then pointed out that it did not matter. If she wanted to overcome that sense of rejection, she would have to choose and live her own life – for herself, she emphasized.

I asked her if she felt uncomfortable with that conclusion, and at first she seemed to be. She said her sense of destiny was not so meaningful if it was just a sort of psychological response to rejection by her family. I told her I could see how she could see it that way, but maybe the psychological reaction itself was just an indicator of something more meaningful: her recognition of the existential facticity of her life. She in fact was free to choose who she wanted to be, and did not have to live her life at home trying to be a person that would be accepted by her family.

The relief that Rosa seemed to derive from these conclusions was immense, although as with any change in worldview, it would take time for her to assimilate her new perspective. To help her hold on to the conclusions, we attempted to summarize the course of our discussion. The main problem Rosa had wanted to address was her unhappiness at being at the school she was attending, and her conflicted desire to return to her family. Since Rosa felt that the decision should be made in terms of what would make her happy, we began with that concept and attempted to look at how it manifested itself in her life. We then attempted to do a phenomenological reduction of the notion so that we could reveal its essence. Starting with the happiness she felt she would experience by going home, Rosa claimed that it would be based on the closeness she felt to her family. That closeness, however, turned out to be primarily with her mother, and was not in fact an affirmative but reactive closeness. The condition of the possibility of that closeness seemed to be the sense of isolation and rejection that she experienced. With that conclusion, it seemed clear that her desire to go home was not so much to experience the closeness she had, but to find the closeness she had never been able to have, but still yearned for. Her desire for that closeness in turn, was rooted in her desire to have an identity – something that she was sure on reflection that she could not get at home.

We then turned to her sense of happiness at being here, and found our first clue to its essence in the satisfaction she found in being offered a scholarship. It had confirmed her sense of destiny for herself – a feeling she had had most of her life. That sense of destiny, it turned out, was in part a reaction to her life of rejection. It was not just a psychological reaction, but an existential reaction: a way of taking control of her own life. Her decision to come to the school seemed in that light to be an important step in her taking control of her own life. In light of our discussion, Rosa not only decided to finish out the year, but to return the following year.

Part Two

I will begin this reflection on the existential phenomenological elements of this case history with some general comments on phenomenology and the phenomenological method as a way of setting the context for more case-specific observations. Phenomenology is well known for the Husserlian battle cry, 'To the things themselves.' Although this still anchors the phenomenological method, one needs to acknowledge an important distinction between phenomena in counselling. Although the counselling session concerned a critical decision that had to be made about an issue over which the client was conflicted, the analysis did not focus on the issue of conflict, but the client's perception of the basis for a decision on the issue. Of course any phenomenological analysis concerns itself with appearances and perception, but I emphasize it in this case because the analysis must start not with a

reduction of the issue, but a reduction of the way the issue is being constructed.

This is true for two reasons. First, a phenomenological reduction of this type is inherently subjective. There is never the presumption of getting to 'what is really going on' in some objective sense. What the counsellor thinks is occurring has no bearing on the issue; all that matters is what the client sees. This is also why it is so important to make sure that the analysis is done using the client's terms, since the answer must be in their terms, otherwise it will not be an insight so much as just another person telling them what to do.

Having the emphasis be on subjectivity – which, as Sartre says – is the place that an existential consciousness must start (Sartre, 1994) also determines the relationship between the counsellor and the client. Since the answer lies in the perception of the client, there is no place for anything other than a facilitative relationship. This suggests a radical departure from the conventional medical model, in which it is the therapist's job to listen closely and ask questions leading to a diagnosis and an explanation to the client of what is really happening and what they must do about it. Such a Cartesian-based model assumes that there really is an answer 'out there' which can first be grasped by the therapist and then explained to the client. With the phenomenological model, on the other hand, there is no 'out there' to be understood – only the 'in there' of the client, and only the client, not the therapist, has access to it. This consequently shifts the role of the counsellor from authority to facilitator, and the emphasis on the discussion shifts from the truth of what is going on to the understanding of the client – or more simply: there is a shift from understanding the answer to understanding the client.

The second reason that the attention must start with the way the issue is perceived rather than the issue itself has to do with the nature of phenomenology itself. Although phenomenology identifies itself as a mode of inquiry that goes to the 'things themselves' one must not confuse this with empiricism. It is not an analysis of the thing, in this case the conflict, as an actual conflict, but as a perception grounded in a series of assumptions that can be brought to light. The method of phenomenology is always simply to look for the condition of the possibility of a thing being what it is, or that which – if removed – would make the 'thing' under observation no longer the thing that it is. So, for example, if one is looking for the essence of a table, one does not approach it inductively like an empiricist would and find what is common to all tables – one would take things away from an already identified table until one encountered something that could not be taken away if one were still to have a table. For example, one could take away a particular number of legs, the particular material out of what a table is constructed, its colour, shape or size. But if one takes away the flat surface – one no longer has a table. So the flat surface is what is phenomenologically essential to a table.

Using this approach, one must start with an already existing and presumably understood concept in a counselling situation in order to come up with its essential condition of possibility. The assumption of this approach is that laying bare that essence will in itself not be the answer to the dilemma, but provide the knowledge necessary to answer it. In Rosa's case, for example, the phenomenology did not look at her indecision, the nature of leaving or staying, or even the reason for the conflict; it looked only at the reason for choosing one thing or another which in this case was 'happiness'.

Although the client is responsible for the conclusion, the counsellor is responsible for choosing that concept which is most likely to provide the insight necessary to resolve the issue. In Rosa's case, it was soon clear that the problem was in the criterion she was using for adjudicating the decision: 'happiness'. This became clear as soon as an inconsistency in her thinking came to light. She believed she ought to do what would make her happy, she believed going home would make her happy, but she still could not accept this course of action. By looking at the issue of happiness, the term which was at the centre of the inconsistency, a richer interpretation of her situation became possible. She was not basing her decision to stay or return on happiness as she had expected, but on her unhappiness. When that became apparent, it seemed easy to reject it as a basis for action, and the dilemma was resolved.

In addition to having to do the phenomenology on a particular concept as opposed to an actual thing, one must also be clear on what counts as legitimate evidence. Unlike traditional modes of reasoning, there is no room in a phenomenological inquiry for arguments. I define arguments as claims with evidence held together my legitimate inferences. In a phenomenological inquiry, evidence is nothing more that a phenomenological 'seeing'. If this seems a bit 'light' or mystical, one need only remember that the client's existentiality is the legitimizing ground of the conclusion. If she 'sees' an answer she can act on, it is

the right answer. This does not mean that 'seeing' is a matter of making truth whatever one wants it to be. Rather, seeing means grasping an issue so fundamentally that it cannot be seen as otherwise. For example, imagine an object, and then try to remove 'space'. Obviously it cannot be done, so one can 'see' that space is a necessary condition of any object. Using Rosa's situation, one can see that if one took away her sense of rejection, one could not longer conceive of her dilemma of staying or leaving. She could clearly 'see' that rejection was the fundamental condition of the possibility of her situation.

Thus two general features of phenomenology set the context for an existential phenomenological reduction. Phenomenology is in all cases a return to the 'things themselves'. This is meant in an idealistic sense, not an empirical sense. What one is trying to get at are the underlying assumptions of an inconsistent perception. This allows for a subjective model of interaction which puts the emphasis on the view of the client rather than the 'real truth' of the situation and implicates a facilitator rather than an authoritarian relationship between the counsellor and client. Second, phenomenology is an approach that abandons arguments. The counsellor is never called upon to make and defend an argument about what the client is experiencing.

With these general observations as background, let us turn to the phenomenological underpinnings of the discussion with Rosa. Rosa's difficulty was resolved in a particularly tidy fashion (one of the reasons I used it for this sample). Nonetheless, there are two categories of features of the process which are consistent and which are revealed especially well. The first category has to do with conditions in the counselling situation which make this approach viable; the second category has to do with the process of the reduction itself.

Since phenomenology works with perceptions only, the first requirement of using this approach to resolve Rosa's issue was to achieve clarity not only on what the problem was, but what the alternatives were. This was necessary as a first step to casting the alternatives in the conceptual terms that would yield to a phenomenological analysis. In Rosa's case, the alternatives were either staying or going home – but the conceptual ground of that dilemma was a question of happiness for her. But critical decisions are often made in terms of other issues like duty, power, and ambition. Seeing the fundamental relationship between alternatives requires that they be cast within a comparative framework, otherwise the reduction of the alternatives will simply re-inscribe the problems on a transcendental but no more easily solved plane.

This does not mean that the actual decision-making terms cannot be different. To the contrary, they often are. For example, a person may see one alternative as characterized by duty and the other alternative as characterized by happiness, so the decision requiring her to adjudicate between the two would be facilitated by her phenomenological grasp of the essence of each within a comparative framework. By this I mean that each must be reduced to a comparable ground. Duty and happiness, for example, could in some circumstances be conceived of as grounded in self-identity. Once this common essence was ascertained, the existential weight of each could be compared. In some cases, duty would contribute more to self-identity than happiness; in other cases the opposite would be true. Deciding which was the case could provide the client with a basis for action.

The second process issue in using this approach is an attitude of responsibility on the part of the client. Since the client is not assumed to be 'ill' or to have a problem that the counsellor will get to the bottom of and essentially solve, she must be willing to and interested in taking on the existential responsibility of solving the problem herself and acting on her solution. She must, in other words, be interested in taking an active rather than passive role in the resolution of the issue. The counsellor, on the other hand, must through his or her recognition of the client's responsibility be willing to take a largely passive role. This does not mean that the counsellor is not actively engaged in leading the discussion in ways he anticipated may be fruitful, or even that he may not suggest possibilities. What it does mean is that the counsellor cannot settle on a solution and then work on the client to overcome her 'resistance' to accepting what he has proposed. In Rosa's case, for example, it was very tempting for me at one point to suggest that the root of her issue was really identity in agency, and her need to realize it through her existential freedom. Although we ended up somewhere close to that together, her articulation of it was much richer and useful to her than my more technical philosophical description would have been.

With these conditions as the backdrop, the actual approach to doing an existential phenomenological reduction is straightforward. One must begin by explaining to the client how they are going to proceed.

With Rosa, this step included setting up a tentative number of sessions, and a discussion of what to focus on. It is important for the client to know from the outset that the questions the client will be asking do not lead him or her to a diagnosis, but only to the right questions to ask for the client to reach an understanding of her situation. It is also necessary to clearly explain what a phenomenological reduction is, and what kind of essence it revealed. (I usually use the table and space examples, above, in extended versions).

I solicited Rosa's agreement on the project of looking at the two notions of happiness, and asked her later if she was comfortable changing that to an analysis of her sense of rejection as the best path for overcoming it when that seemed to be a more productive direction. The reason for this is to make sure that the client has sufficiently bought into the idea that she will be able to sustain a phenomenological analysis and to make sure the client uses terms with which she is comfortable. This does not mean that the client cannot be introduced to a philosophical vocabulary if it will help her to focus on her issues more closely. As with Rosa, however, such an introduction to philosophical terms is more useful as a way of capturing what she has understood rather than helping her to understand what she has not yet captured. The danger in the latter is that the client will lapse into a submissive role, and simply adopt what ends up being the counsellor's philosophical interpretation of the situation. I have also found Rosa's experience with epiphany consistent with clients who undergo an existential phenomenological reduction of their issue. At some point, when the client gets to what she sees as the essence of the issue, all the pieces seem to fall into place, and the solution comes not so much gradually as instantaneously. Naturally it takes time to fill out the solution, translate it into practical terms, and then realize it – but the recognition of the crux of the problem seems to occur with surprising legerity.

Throughout the process of the discourse, Rosa increased her participation in the process, and began offering more and more possible solutions to the issues we confronted. One of the advantages of the phenomenological process is that it is relatively easy for clients to get a handle on in a rudimentary sense, and therefore begin doing their own analysis. If one takes the responsibility of the philosophical counsellor as not only to address particular issues, but to help clients learn to do their own philosophical reflections, phenomenology seems to be a reasonable and accessible place to start in decision making or more generally, in helping a client create a coherent world view.

It is a process that works by embracing several principles of a philosophical counselling relationship, including a commitment by the counsellor to equality in discourse, the subjective legitimacy of the client's conclusions, the rejection of the medical model of the 'ill' patient and knowing therapist, and an attitude of participatory philosophical exploration. In addition, the approach fosters a bridge between theoretical philosophy and lived experience by working towards a transcendental conclusion that takes its direction from the historically situated client.

The idea of the historically situated client lends itself to a number of other hermeneutic approaches to philosophical counselling, including ontological analysis, analysis based on power vectors, discussions based on Gadamer's notion of the fusion of horizons, and so on. Thus, an existential phenomenological reduction can be a useful addition to the philosophical counsellor's arsenal of dialectic techniques which will include several approaches drawn from contemporary continental philosophy.

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