

What Good is Philosophy?

Rob Reich
Stanford University

David Ericson explains the rise of philosophical counseling as a reaction to two troubling trends. First, in its attempt to make a difference to the lives of people here and now, philosophical counseling is said to stand in opposition to, or at least in tension with, academic, professionalized philosophy. Properly understood, philosophizing is an activity that everyone can do and at heart is about everyday living. Second, in its attempt to reclaim the original meaning of psychotherapy — care for the soul — philosophical counseling rejects the increasing tendency of therapists to turn everything into a classifiable disorder. Rather than seeking mental health through a treatment plan involving pharmaceuticals or a discussion of the childhood roots of maladjustment, philosophical counseling attempts to achieve a healthy psyche through Socratic dialogue and self-inquiry. Because, in Ericson's view, philosophical counseling is about enabling people to be evidential believers, the practice of such counseling is indistinguishable from education, and thus should be seen as a branch of philosophy of education.

I had heard very little about philosophical counseling until I read Ericson's essay. Rather than attributing its rise to a reaction against academic philosophy and the scientific pretensions of psychotherapists, I should admit that my first thought was very different: its growth is due to the glut of philosophy Ph.Ds and a scarcity of jobs in academia. As Ericson himself notes, even philosophers need to eat. But perhaps this is too cynical.

Let us leave aside a debate about the best explanation for the growth in philosophical counseling and consider Ericson's claims about the relationship between philosophical counselors, academic philosophy, and philosophy of education. I am prepared to grant that philosophical counseling is at heart an educational and therapeutic enterprise because philosophizing is at heart an educational and therapeutic activity. I think he is right to say that philosophers of education have something to contribute to philosophical counselors. What I wish to question about Ericson's analysis is his view that philosophical counseling, and by extension, philosophy of education, stand in tension with academic philosophy. At bottom, he expresses a view about the purpose of philosophy that I agree with, but that I find too narrow. Philosophizing, in my view, can be simultaneously an intensely personal and abstract and theoretical activity.

Ericson appears to side with Lou Marinoff, author of *Plato Not Prozac!* in his suspicion of most if not all institutionalized philosophy. He does not go as far as Marinoff in proclaiming academic philosophy "useless," but Ericson does say, for example, that professionalized philosophy rarely has "accessibility and immediate applicability to our lives in our circumstances." He then turns to and criticizes John Rawls in this regard, writing that Rawls "remains impenetrable to those unschooled" in philosophical discussions of justice. Ericson agrees with Marinoff in wishing to

“rescue philosophy from the deadening hands of the professionals in the academy who have turned it into an arcane subject.” This reminds me of a remark made by Ernest Gellner: “If the several thousands or more of professional philosophers in America were all assembled in one place, and a small nuclear device were detonated over it, American society would remain totally unaffected.”¹ I think this is wrong-headed because Gellner misunderstands how philosophers affect the world around them. Ericson, I suspect, would sympathize with Gellner’s view. In aligning philosophy of education with philosophical counseling — in equating therapy, teaching, and education — Ericson hopes to restore philosophy, as he says, “to its formerly high and rightful place in the conversation of everyday life.”

I am all for the attempt to get people to see philosophizing as part of the activity of living a good life. (I direct some of my own energies toward this goal; I run a program called the Philosophy Discovery Institute that introduces high school students to the subject.) But I disagree with Ericson that academic philosophy is incompatible with, or worse, is responsible for, undermining this goal. And I disagree in particular with his claim that Rawls’s moral theory has no practical effect and is impenetrable to all except those who are schooled in philosophical discussions of justice. Academic philosophy is important not because all people need to become professional philosophers in order to philosophize. Academic philosophy is important because such philosophers help to shape the conversations of everyday life.

Let us start with Rawls, since this is Ericson’s own example. While it is certainly true that no one will find *A Theory of Justice* to be summer beach reading, Rawls can have an impact on people unschooled in the history of Twentieth Century philosophy.² He passes what we could call the airplane test: you can explain to the random person sitting next to you on an airplane the core ideas of the original position and the veil of ignorance, and how the attendant notion of justice as fairness contrasts with utilitarianism. Rawls is far from impenetrable. This is not to say that the person who is conflicted about the meaning of justice will find answers in Rawls that are immediately and directly applicable to his or her life. It is rather to say that the academic, abstract theorizing of a philosopher such as Rawls can inspire self-inquiry or collective dialogue of exactly the sort that Ericson wishes to bring about.

The best way to illustrate my point is to refer to two passages from the philosopher Thomas Nagel.³ In the first passage, Nagel expresses a view of academic philosophy that helps explain why Ericson is wrong to be suspicious of the usefulness of professional philosophers. Nagel has characterized Rawls, and political philosophy generally, in the following way.

As is always the case with philosophy, Rawls’s direct influence is almost entirely intellectual. Even political philosophy, when it has an impact on the world, affects the world only indirectly, through the gradual penetration, usually over generations, of questions and arguments from abstruse theoretical writings into the consciousness and the habits of thought of educated persons, and from there into political and legal argument, and eventually into the structure of alternatives among which political and practical choices are actually made.⁴

The point from Nagel is that academic philosophy need not have immediate and direct application in order to be practical. While reading and discussing Rawls may not issue in policy directives, the impact of his thought is undeniable. In my view,

Ericson is wrong to say that Rawls, and by extension academic philosophy, is deadening to the average person. On the contrary, Rawls, and other political philosophers before him, have contributed enormously to the very shape of our everyday discourse about justice.

But this fact does not imply that in order to take part in this everyday discourse — in order to philosophize — all people need to become academic philosophers. In the second passage from Nagel, he makes just this point, with slightly alarming implications for those of us employed as philosophers. Here is Nagel again:

Bernard Williams once posed the awkward question, What is the point of doing philosophy if you are not extraordinarily good at it? The problem is that you cannot, by sheer hard work, like a historian of modest gifts, make solid discoveries that others can then rely on in building up larger results. If you are not extraordinary, what you do in philosophy will be either unoriginal (and therefore unnecessary) or inadequately supported (and therefore useless). More likely, it will be both unoriginal and wrong. That is why most of the philosophy of the past is not worth studying. So is not there something fundamentally absurd about paying thousands of people to think about these fundamental questions?⁵

Thinking about fundamental questions of life — the very activity of philosophizing — is something in which all people may engage. I take this to be the goal of philosophical counseling at some level, the very reason Ericson wishes to equate it with teaching and education.

There is no necessary tension, however, between simultaneously believing Nagel and encouraging all people to philosophize. Philosophy can be conducted at the highest levels of abstraction by those trained in the discipline; the product of such philosophy can also be useful, if only indirectly so, to the average person. Philosophy can also be conducted in a practical manner by average people; the product of such philosophy is the Socratic or examined life, just the sort of thing advocated by Ericson and philosophical counselors. The existence of the former enriches, indeed may make possible, the latter.

In the final analysis, the two kinds of philosophy — the academic and theoretical version and the everyday practical version — begin to meld together. The distinction may be a matter of degree than of kind. As Alexander Nehamas has recently written,

The theoretical life...affects the character of those who lead it. Theory and practice, discourse and life, affect one another; people become philosophers because they are able and willing to be the best human type and to live as well as a human being possibly can. What one believes and how one lives have a direct bearing on one another.⁶

Even academic philosophy has practical effects, for it is in a sense philosophical counseling of the self. The practice of philosophy acts to shape the kinds of lives we lead. This is the sense in which Ericson and the philosophical counseling movement is right: philosophy is therapy of the mind and soul. But philosophical counselors should not impugn academic philosophy, they should embrace it.

1. Ernest Gellner, *The Devil in Modern Philosophy* (Boston: Routledge, Kegan, and Paul, 1974), 37-38.

2. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

3. Thomas Nagel, "Justice, Justice, Shalt Thou Pursue," *The New Republic*, 25 October 1999, and *Other Minds: Critical Essays 1969-1994* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 10.
4. Nagel, "Justice, Justice, Shalt Thou Promise," 36-37.
5. Nagel, *Other Minds*, 10.
6. Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 2.