

Pretexts of Friendship.

Introduction to Philosophical Counseling

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Abstract: In this essay I will bring together a number of pretexts related explicitly or implicitly to the theme of friendship – experiences and concepts (§ 1), case studies (§ 2), exercises (§ 3), and again patterns (§ 4), variations (§ 5), and styles (§ 6) – which raise significant issues that I will use as an introduction to philosophical counseling. The aim is an original introduction *to* philosophical counseling starting *from* philosophical counseling itself and to show concretely, I hope also effectively, what a pretext function means.

Key-words: Philosophical Counseling; Philosophical Practice; Pretexts; Friendship;

1. Experiences and concepts. Being friends with oneself

“Some years ago when I was returning to England from a short trip abroad (I was then Master of Trinity College in Cambridge), the immigration officer at Heathrow, who scrutinized my Indian passport rather thoroughly, posed a philosophical question of some intricacy. Looking at my home address on the immigration form (Master’s Lodge, Trinity College, Cambridge), he asked me whether the Master, whose hospitality I evidently enjoyed, was a close friend of mine.

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This gave me pause since it was not altogether clear to me whether I could claim to be a friend of myself. On some reflection, I came to the conclusion that the answer must be yes, since I often treat myself in a fairly friendly way, and furthermore, when I say silly things, I can immediately see that with friends like me, I do not need any enemies” (Sen, 2006, xi).

This is a text that not only immediately strikes you, but also captures your attention. I had proof of this by proposing it in passing within a brief presentation of philosophical counseling; according to the program a group workshop would have followed. But when the participants were asked to freely propose themes to open the dialogue, they went back to Sen's monopolizing anecdote, and I questioned so that theirs was not inertia. It provides several ideas, not least possibly that of discrimination (the title of the book from which it is taken speaks of violence together with identity). I would like to gather the main ones around the first two of the four elements that identify the theoretical-practical framework of philosophy: attitude, competence/method, field/domain, and knowledge/culture. I agree with Oscar Brenifier's proposed structure (Brenifier, 2020). The elements philosophical knowledge/culture and field/domain will be mentioned again in this paper, respectively: §§ 2.2., 4, 5.2. and 6, § 6.

The philosophical attitude is here characterized as the grasping of the opportunity to philosophize. It is accompanied by a functional, albeit marginal, skill, such as what in the current term would be called resilience in dialogue, understood as the capacity to absorb. At the airport, passport control, in front of an official who asks a strange question. Given such a situation, as well as potential others, the philosophical attitude finds the stimulus for thought in a question that has never been asked before. And it is beautiful because it shifts the perspective on the thing, that is, on friendship (as well as on identity, as the author will consider a little later).

The displacement is not intentional on the part of the official; in fact no displacement results from asking two persons whether they are close friends. From this point of view one could at most reason about the pertinence of the question, or possibly about its impertinence. The shift arises in the passenger, Professor Sen, who does not share the official's implicit assumption (that the name and the role he reads on the

documents have *two distinct subjects* as referents) and has instead an implicit of his own: that, through direct knowledge, of the fact that name and role refer to *himself* (3, see below).

Well, from the passenger's point of view, a non-philosophical attitude would have dismissed the question – 'that's nonsense', or to the official 'no wait, there's a misunderstanding', etc. On the contrary, the philosophical attitude takes the opportunity to maintain the question even when the implicit that originated it has been dropped and in its place there is an assumption that would have made it completely absurd to ask it. In this way the attitude leads to philosophizing.

In the context of philosophical counseling (group or at the limit even individual) one might think, for example, whether the question concerning the close friendship between the passenger and the Master of Trinity College *is strange or becomes strange* (1), whether it remains *the same or is different* for the official and the passenger (2), etc.

This brings us to the second element of the framework of philosophy: competence/method. This second element intervenes by polarizing into contraries the conceptual material on which attitude dwells by questioning the reasons for experience. As we have seen above:

- (1) Being and becoming,
- (2) Same and different,
- (3) I/Other and I/I relationship, to which we add from the text:
- (4) Friend and foe.

On the logical-argumentative moves I will immediately return in § 2.1 until the more widespread discussion in §§ 3.1 and 6.

As for the content 'friendship', the new perspective of being friends with oneself has been gained. To which further perspectives may be added, as we shall see in §§ 3.2 and 5.1 in particular.

Because of all this, that is, because of the connection they felt was virtuous between the level of experience and the level of concept – virtuous, from the point of view of the philosophical counselor, in terms of the possibility of dialogue and re-signification of experience –, I think I can say that the participants in my workshop did not return to Sen out of inertia at all.

2. Case studies. True friendship and other forms

2.1. *The Conversation* (by Kristof Van Rossem)

Anne is a girl who offers the philosophical counselor a cue from a conversation with a friend, and with him she reflects on the qualities and reasons for her friendship with her. For it seems that Anne cannot say that Marian, at least at present, is her real friend. She has been thinking this for a while, and the cue she recounts simply brought it out in the open. More precisely, it has made it absolutely clear.

With a true friend, first of all you must feel that you can be yourself, that you are not limited but free to say whatever you want, and secondly there must be mutual understanding. And then, thirdly, a true friend does not disappoint you by showing you that she does not know herself at all. Only the first condition is necessary in order to speak of true friendship.

Now, given that she feels so limited with Marian that she can't consider her a real friend today, in her prediction Anne oscillates between an open hypothesis – 'who knows? (...) Marian might change in the course of her life...' – and a closed hypothesis – 'I'll always feel this way about her (...) and so it will never be real friendship with Marian'.

The philosophical counselor asks for arguments, in reference to the relationship with Marian, about both feeling this way all the time and the change. And then, point blank:

K: Do you have this feeling of being restricted now, in this talk with me?

A: To be honest: sometimes, yes; I'm afraid that I might say something wrong.

K: Does it mean then that I will never be a true friend of yours?

A: No, but if this feeling were to continue, then I think I would, indeed, never be your true friend.

K: So how many times would you need to have this feeling before you knew that I would never be a true friend?

A: I don't know how many!

K: So if you don't know how many times you need to feel this, how could you know this, all of a sudden, in the conversation with Marian?" (Van Rossem, 2014, 1347).

(It is only for the sake of greater efficiency that here and in the following examples I address the counselees on a first-name basis.)

The element of philosophical competence/method is doubly present in this excerpt from Van Rossem's dialogue.

First we have a shift in context. Anne's unpleasant feeling shifts from the conversation with her friend to the conversation with the philosophical counselor. Or rather, the counselee is asked to evaluate it in relation to a person whom only a new thought can imagine as her friend. This person does not in fact know Anne and is having a professional dialogue with her in the context of a workshop.

I think that the philosophical counselor came up with the idea of playing with the concept of true friendship in their brief dialogue on the basis of a couple of occasions when Anne asked him for confirmation, for support. I also think that the philosophical move cannot but be appreciated as such, and does not lend itself to being considered inappropriate – as perhaps at first glance it might be possible to think and as some of the students in training in philosophical counseling happened to comment.

The second note must be reserved for the logical-argumentative competence/method that anchors this dialogue on the paradox – or rather on the paradox within the paradox as we immediately see.

It is true friendship when the relationship allows you freedom of expression. If you once have the feeling that you cannot express yourself freely in a relationship, the friendship is currently untrue but can still become so. If twice you have the feeling that you cannot express yourself freely in a relationship, it can again be conceded that the friendship is currently untrue but can still become so. The argument proceeds in this way, gradually adding a unit – if three times..., and then if four times..., etc., – and concluding from each new premise that it is possible for that relationship to become a true friendship. In other words, the paradox, which in this section is the sorites paradox, leads to the statement that it is not given to you to know whether a relationship that has so far not been a true friendship will ever become one. That you do not know means that you cannot rule it out.

Let's try to think, even beyond friendship, of how many relationships in the personal and work spheres are punctually reconfirmed in their unpleasant (or negative, harmful, even violent) mode, yet they do not allow us to exclude that in the future it could not be otherwise. And they drag us through time.

However, it also happens that Anne knows this at some point in her relationship with Marian. And that point is precisely the experience she recounts, of the lunchtime meeting when Marian, talking animatedly about her mother, came out with a 'I never judge!' Whereas Anne, believing her to be constantly judging, saw clearly at that moment that Marian would never be a true friend to her.

So, when you are in an untrue friendship, do you know or do you not know if it can one day be true? The paradox in which Anne finds herself leads us to say that we know and we don't know. You don't know, because you can't tell how many times you have to feel unfree before you realize that you can never be a true friend. You know, because there comes that time when you realize that nothing will ever change. Then maybe you turn your attention away from the realization you've reached and go back to thinking that things can change.

David Bohm would say in this regard that this is all part of the paradoxical quality of every existential question (Bohm, 2004, 70-78): is it (true) friendship or is it not (true) friendship? Yes *and* no.

At the end of the dialogue, Anne becomes a little tense with the philosophical counselor. Often discovering a paradox has an inhibiting effect on the counselees' answers, because they are afraid of getting them wrong. In reality, there are no wrong answers; Anne has made her paradoxical view on her friend explicit and enriched it, and will continue to reflect on it.

2.2. The Lonely High-Ranked Merchant Marine Officer (by Lydia Amir)

Emerging in the course of our investigation is the element of culture/knowledge among the four elements of the framework of philosophy.

A high-ranking merchant marine officer spends long periods at sea in forced isolation and profound loneliness because of his resolution not to share anything with the other members of the crew. The officer does not want to deal with them because they, in his opinion, do not respect the law (Amir, 2003, 38).

The first exercise I invite, when I find myself presenting this case of Amir, is to list some of the types of questions you would choose/avoid

if you were the philosophical counselor to whom the above-mentioned counselee approached:

- Irritating and useless, e.g. 'do you think you are better than others?', 'are you sure you suffer from loneliness during boarding?', etc.
- Problem solving oriented, e.g. 'have you tried to get a contract with shorter boarding periods?', etc.
- At the level of experience: oriented towards broadening the context, e.g. 'what do crew members do that is against the law?', 'what do you do when you feel lonely at sea? ', etc.
- At the level of concept, e.g. 'why is isolation at sea painful?', 'what is respect for the law?', etc.

Questions of the last type have at their disposal three conceptual cores provided by the case description. The first two are already in the question examples, isolation and law. The first core is not addressed by the author's strategy of conducting dialogue. The second one is, and yet it does not bring to any scratch the officer's assumption that the law should always be respected. Therefore, a more fruitful dialogue development is aimed at through the third concept, the idea of not wanting to form any relationship with the others on board. The reason is said, the others do not respect the law, so it is no longer in this direction that we will urge the thought, but to imagine what it would mean to form relationships with them. For the officer it would amount to sharing their values. By this he declares what is the noblest sphere of friendly relations, and perhaps admits only that.

The lesson of Aristotle (2011, VIII) can certainly help us by providing us with the two lower levels of a theory of friendship that contemplates exactly this form as its apex. In fact, descending from the form of friendship based on the sharing of values we add friendship based on pleasure and finally friendship based on utility. And the officer seems to convince himself rather easily, at least according to the text reporting his case, that friendship according to utility may be his future model of life at sea.

It was really a question of breaking the univocity of the meaning of the expressions 'to establish relations with them', 'to become their friend', 'to make them my friend', and so on. And to show instead of

univocity a prism of meanings corresponding to different levels of personal implication.

It seems to me that in reference to this case 'breaking univocity' is the key competence. This is how I would read Amir's *untangling* (*disentangling*) and *clarifying*: precisely, as clarifying more the merger made than the confusion and breaking it up (Amir, 2003, 38).

3. Exercises. Two groups of friends and making friends

Breaking away from the tracks, I now bring you a couple of exercises without a net.

3.1. Fragmentation

Exercise freely inspired by a testimony of David Sze (2017) between life and identity.

Someone tells you that they have two separate groups of friends, in which the friends are distinguished by the interests, life projects, professions, values, and ages of their members. And he tells you that he spontaneously feels part of both. Sometimes he prefers to be part of the first group, sometimes the second, and he can bring good reasons for each of the preferences. Sometimes he feels he is the only one struggling with the experience of such an intersection. Sometimes, finally, he perceives himself as clearly fragmented into his two selves.

What would you ask him? And what do you think he would answer?

The exercise consists in simulating a dialogue of philosophical counseling for a certain number of opening lines, posing five questions of the counselor alternating with the five responses of the counselee, and in attributing to each, between questions and responses, the level to be identified between conceptual (c) and experiential (e) – or factual. This point will be taken up in § 6; here is an example of a question at the two levels:

- (c) What name would you give your state when you are not with either group?
- (e) What do you usually do when you are not with either group?

It should be considered that, in a real dialogical situation, the question and the answer do not always meet at the same level, for example one can ask about a concept obtaining in answer the description of an experience, or vice versa. And this shifting dynamic may or may not be reproduced in the simulation test.

The logic of the course is functional to the objective of the exercise, which is configured as a recognition: and of one's own spontaneous style in asking and dialoguing – what types of questions and interventions one is more inclined to do; and, at the same time, of the counselee-type that one creates – similar or extraneous to oneself, assonant or, on the contrary, dissonant with respect to one's own ways of dialoguing and one's own positioning of comfort between the two levels.

It would certainly be interesting to compare the many different person-types that the author of the starting testimony has become through the hypotheses of those who have engaged in this exercise with me. And on how many fronts the ideas of these different person-types have been solicited.

This last aspect gives us the clear consideration that, starting from a common pretext, there are as many possible developments of dialogue as there are philosophical counselors. Not only: as many are their occasions to face again the same case simulation.

3.2. One minute

Exercise freely inspired, as far as the 'cube' part is concerned, by David Sumiacher D'Angelo (2017).

The description of this exercise is an abbreviated story.

The request addressed to the participants of a group philosophical counseling concerns a manual skill. With a sheet of paper and using only their hands, everyone is invited to create a cube. The time available for the execution of the task is one minute.

I let you imagine the occurrence of disparate reactions. It is the time of the calculating mind, which lays out on the plane the faces of the solid. But it is also the time of the creativity of the figures, because there are those who would arrive at the cube through the sphere or the cone, time permitting – the sphere is nothing more than the rolled up sheet, to be shaped then with edges and faces. And it's the time of creativity also

for the supports, because just as everyone helps themselves to the table top (or did someone do without?), no one said that you can't use a cube box to wrap it with the sheet, or maybe anyone did? Add to that the fact that time is not enough and pressure does the rest.

Needless to say, it is not the fine workmanship of the cube that we are interested in evaluating at the end of the minute. Rather, it is the difficulty that each person has encountered in trying to complete the task. To which we must give a name that is a concept.

The philosophical dialogue continues, until it is suggested without warning that the task be repeated again in one minute. Because there are participants who during the dialogue have continued to rack their brains about how they could have made a better cube, just as there are those who have not thought about it anymore; all with the regret for that extra handful of seconds that would have made the difference. As an alternative to consolidating the useful 'cube' performance, or to a technical-creative variation on the theme, to which the second attempt should be devoted (e.g. creating a flower, as I once did by taking up the invitation to give space to a non-geometric thought), I started the stopwatch with the request to make friends in one minute.

It must be said immediately that the participants in question, about fifteen per group, did not know each other except for that first hour of online exercise already spent. They were seventeen and eighteen year old girls and boys. The most enterprising ones started to tell the others their name (even if they knew it was already read in the respective box of the video call), the city of origin, the school and to ask for the same. After the first few faces, the minute was up. As a result we gathered the range from additional frustration to moderate satisfaction for having been able to take on the new task, that is, for what had been done within the time limit.

When asked to compare and place through the question 'was it more difficult in one minute to make the cube or to make friends?' and the related answers with arguments, what had been the seemingly insurmountable difficulties encountered when grappling with the cube seemed to vanish. And this circumstance was also philosophically brought into theme. They gave all place to the serious thing of friendship in the irreverent confinement of a minute. 'How long does it take, then, to make friends?', 'Friendship not literally that of tyrannical time, I would

have called it rather making acquaintance', 'and then to be forced to talk to make friends'. Though no one had forced to speak.

- (1) Friendship and time,
- (2) Making friends and getting to know each other,
- (3) Word and silence,

And finally, the most radical problematization should be noted, which originated from a participant who had observed that, well before the exchange between them of the few logistical and/or personal coordinates, a certain form of friendship could be said to have arisen from the exchange of ideas that had involved them during the first hour of the workshop. As if to say that they were already friends to a certain extent, so that the request to make friends could be said to have come late in the day.

- (4) Data and ideas.

4. Patterns. The Apology of Socrates in Catfish?

I was at the beginning of researching material for a philosophical counseling project on virtual identity and came across *Catfish*: a television format and before that a docufilm, an animal and a curious title.

I'll make this story even shorter.

A mysterious new contact proposes himself via social network, accumulating fragments of the invented life of a peculiar family, in the real version of which a little girl is not a prodigious painter, a sister much older than her probably doesn't exist, two other brothers suffer from mental disorders, a woman in her forties who has created a false profile exaggerates her alleged illness and denies the evidence. A very complicated picture, in every sense of the word. And then there is the lured, a young photographer who wants to get to the bottom of it. He reaches the place where the woman and her family live. He observes and investigates, then turns to her husband and asks him if he knows about Angela's online plans. Vince takes it in stride, his answer implied. He tells a story that some say comes from the twentieth-century tradition at the turn of the century, specifically from two authors who had titled the first an essay and the second a novel exactly *Catfish* (<https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catfishing>. Henry W. Nevinson's *Essays in Rebellion* and Charles Marriott's *The Catfish*, both 1913, are cited).

“They used to tank cod from Alaska all the way to China. They'd keep them in vats in the ship. By the time the codfish reached China, the flesh was mush and tasteless. So this guy came up with the idea that if you put these cods in these big vats, put some catfish in with them and the catfish will keep the cod agile. And there are those people who are catfish in life. And they keep you on your toes. They keep you guessing, they keep you thinking, they keep you fresh. And I thank God for the catfish because we would be... boring and dull if we didn't have somebody nipping at our fin” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catfish:_The_TV_Show. Vince Pierce, Angela Wesselman-Pierce's husband, from the 2010 film *Catfish*).

Well, what is the significant point of recalling this history? It will not be here the examination of the tradition of the term *catfish/catfishing*, nor the holding of the story by virtue of the consideration of the different types of water of the two fish, fresh for the catfish and salt for the cod. Nor will the point be the debt that the construction of this text would pay to a famous passage in the *Apology of Socrates*:

“For if you kill me, you will not easily discover another of my sort, who – even if it is rather ridiculous to say – has simply been set upon the city by the god, as though upon a great and well-born horse who is rather sluggish because of his great size and needs to be awakened by some gadfly. Just so, in fact, the god seems to me to have set me upon the city as someone of this sort: I awaken and persuade and reproach each one of you, and I do not stop settling down everywhere upon you the whole day” (Plato, 1979, 30e-31a).

The attribution to Plato of the model of this story, however unstated, seems to me to be arguable rather clearly. The significant point for our consideration, however, is, beginning with the attribution itself, more specifically conceptual. And it insists on the relationship that the figures of the catfish and its antecedent, the gadfly, have to friendship.

The story Vince tells to justify, clumsily as we can readily admit, his wife's actions extends broadly to recognizing the value of those people in life who make you ask questions, make you think, and keep you awake. Can we call them friends?

- 1) Spurring is a form of friendship,
- 2) Spurring is not a form of friendship,
- 3) Other forms of friendship.

Is Socrates a friend of his interlocutors? – The theme becomes one of *philia*. And of us readers?

Finally, why is Angela simply not like the catfish (unless the catfish itself turns out to be a devious agitator of waters and balances), let alone comparable to Socrates? – The answer is that of the Platonic model the cast loses the necessary link to truth. For in the first place Socrates is a friend of truth. On the contrary, in pretending to be other than herself, as well as in pretending her own world other than the real, Angela cannot but be a friend of the false and the falsehood.

5. Variations

5.1. About brainstorming

- 1) Good friend, Beautiful friend, True friend,
- 2) Friendly questions, friendly fire, etc.
- 3) Finding/losing a friend, being a friend, etc.
- 4) Book Friend, etc.
- 5) Be a friend of truth, freedom, etc.
- 6) He who finds a friend finds a treasure, etc.
- 7) *To a healed friend* (Foscolo, 2019).

You can start by collecting everything that, with imagination and memory, comes up as pertinent to friendship, from noun and adjective functions to idioms, quotations and so on. Continue with the criteria of association and distinction between some of the items or the criteria of choice and exclusion, reformulation and argumentation. On the planes of experience and concept in their mutual reference.

5.2. *Sophia reflects about Camus after a philosophical café* (by Carmen Zavala)

Thinking back to the *café philo* she attended a few days earlier on topics such as the meaning of life and the meaningful life, Sophia wonders what the significance of the same philosophical discussion and free exchange of opinions one evening is in the economy of a life that then resumes ever the same (Zavala, 2017).

Camus, who comes to mind with Sophia, (Camus, 2018) called for keeping the absurd alive by contemplating it. Absurd is having to work every day and having time to think only when you are in bed, with your husband and children sleeping. Is it absurd to yearn to go out and think together with others? To take pleasure in a *café philo*, however spiritual or intellectual it may be – and even illusory, like certain mental experiences and fantasies? Would it also be absurd to live in a society, assuming it existed, where everyone thinks together most of the time? After all, is there anything that is not absurd?

The class of philosophical counselors-in-training with whom I worked on this text identified the following:

- Synonyms for absurd: senseless, aporetic, and
- Antonyms of absurd: self-reflexive, rational, certain, normal, logical; (Is meaningful synonymous with or the opposite of absurd?)
- Argument: certain is the opposite of absurd because it implies that only one option is certain, whereas absurd implies that multiple options can be certain.

Sophia knows that a *café philo* is not the same as a chat with friends. At first she is unable to thematize the difference, then she makes use of the memory of Camus. Thanks to his theme of the absurd, the difference becomes thematizable and leads to identify the *café philo* as a meaningful experience in itself, by virtue of the questions it raises even days later in the person who participated in it. Does Sophia's life really continue as it always has insofar as she asks herself those questions?

Café philo is a friend of the absurd.

6. Styles. The move of the horse

A difficult thing in philosophical counseling is to know how to use philosophical knowledge/culture. We have just seen with Camus, and in the preceding paragraphs with Aristotle and Plato, how the introduction of a philosophical concept into the dialogical process (even when the dialogue is with oneself) serves to confer not authority, but a perspective of articulation.

What I call the horse's move in philosophical counseling outlines a style starting from a rule of the game of chess, as if to say: the philosophical counselor 'moves' like this, in L for 2+1 squares, not one

more and not one less. The horse's move is not structured as a method divided into stages, rather it remains a process in the sense of the way of proceeding.

One side of the L-shaped movement unites the levels of concept and experience – from concept to experience *and* from experience to concept. The side orthogonal to the first, on the other hand, represents the metaphor or image, the opposite, etc. I would not say that this second side opens up thinking any more than conceptualization and exemplification do. In fact, the latter can already contain elements that problematize the ideas of the counselee. It opens, elsewhere, nonetheless. Moreover, the horse's move is such that it can be oriented in different ways on the chessboard, which takes up the whole space of the dialogue. And the side of the metaphor or of the image or of the opposite, etc. can well become the first in the questioning of the counselor.

Philosophical counseling represents the dialogical declination of the horse's step. We have given voice to it in these pages, circumscribing the philosophical field/domain to the pretexts of friendship. This is the gait with which anyone who wants to dialogue philosophically is invited to measure themselves – and which we imagine is also, in a contemporary reinterpretation, the gait of the great and well-born horse, of the city.

Note: It is a pleasure for me, as well as a duty, to extend my thanks to all the students of philosophical counseling, workshop participants and colleagues, whose ideas have nourished my writing today. I especially apologize to those who, in our meetings, have made relevant contributions to these pretexts of friendship that I have forgotten to take into account here.

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