

WOMEN IN PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELING

The Anima of Thought in Action



EDITED BY
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Published by Lexington Books
An imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowman.com

Unit A, Whitacre Mews, 26-34 Stannary Street, London SE11 4AB


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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Women in philosophical counseling : the anima of thought in action / edited by Luisa de Paula and Peter Raabe.
pages cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-7391-9165-1 (cloth : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-0-7391-9166-8 (electronic)
1. Philosophical counseling. 2. Women--Conduct of life. I. De Paula, Luisa, editor.
BJ1595.5.W66 2015
108.2--dc23
2015000473

™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

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Chapter Fourteen

Conversations with Women

M. G. Piety

PSYCHOTHERAPY AND PHILOSOPHY

"The talking cure" was an expression coined by Bertha Pappenheim (better known by the pseudonym Anna O.) for her therapy with Joseph Breuer, one of the founders of modern psychoanalytic theory. She gave it this name because it centered on conversation. The mere act of discussing her neurotic symptoms with Breuer, she discovered, had a therapeutic effect. Freud liked Pappenheim's expression and hence also occasionally used it to refer to his own method of psychoanalysis. Unfortunately, Breuer's treatment of Pappenheim was not nearly as successful as both he and Freud claimed.¹ Pappenheim was actually institutionalized *after* Breuer had purportedly cured her. Fortunately, she eventually recovered and became a distinguished social worker and advocate of women's rights.

What went wrong with Pappenheim's 'treatment?' Was it that talking was not actually so therapeutic as she had, at first, supposed? Or could the problem have been the nature of her "conversations" with Breuer? Breuer, like Freud, was a physician. That is, he was a man trained in the method of the natural sciences, a method that assumes a strong, law-like relationship between 'effects' and their purported causes, a method that denies human freedom any substantive role in a person's psychological and emotional life. Moreover, he was a man of his time, authoritarian both in his attitude as a physician toward his patients and in his attitude as a man toward women. Perhaps the problem with Pappenheim's 'conversations' with Breuer was that they were not really genuine conversations, that they were not marked by the mutual respect that is essential in all genuinely productive dialogues.²

"We live in a world," writes John Launer, "that is unified, if at all, by the idea that talking does indeed cure. Whether as doctors or therapists, our daily

experience is that letting people talk does make a difference (Launer, 466). Recognition of the psychotherapeutic potential of conversation and attempts to harness this power so that it could be used to improve people's lives are as old as philosophy itself, or at least as old as Plato. "Socratic conversation," observes the philosopher and psychoanalyst Jonathan Lear, "had a therapeutic intent."³

The general public has been very slow, however, in recognizing the therapeutic potential of philosophy. Philosophers are often told that they live too much in their heads, too much in the world of ideas, that they deny too much of their humanity by placing too much emphasis on thought. Many people argue that thought is a kind of flight from the present and that to think too much is to fail to live in the present and thus to miss what makes life truly valuable and meaningful. There is support for such a view in the philosophical tradition itself. Plato often speaks as if he sees thought as a kind of flight from concrete reality. Socrates famously describes philosophy in *The Phaedo* as preparation for death. The body, he points out, and its needs are a constant distraction, an irritation to the philosopher who would prefer to be rid of them. The senses deceive, and attending to physical needs takes time away from contemplation of the eternal, unchanging truth.

Kierkegaard also talks about thought as a kind of withdrawal from concrete reality. There is undoubtedly some truth to this perspective. Yet there is also a sense in which reflection is ineluctably part of the present, a part of the whole person and his or her experiences. This, I take it, is what lies behind the debate concerning whether it is actually possible to live as the Pyrrhonist skeptics advocate one should.⁴ That is, the debate concerns whether it is possible to live without beliefs, which is the same thing, really, as asking whether it is possible to live without reflecting on experience.

Maybe it is possible for animals to live without reflecting on their experience. It does not appear possible, however, for human beings to do this. Intellectual pleasures are as much a part of the present for us as are sensual or emotional ones. Human beings are thinking creatures, in the broadest sense of the term 'thinking.'⁵ They like thinking. Yes, thought would appear, at least, to have practical value. But that isn't the only reason engage in it. They do this because it is intrinsically valuable. Human beings like knowing things; they like understanding things. Knowledge and understanding are necessary for a fully satisfying human life, even for the least intellectual among us.

Human beings have an inherent need to reflect on their experiences, to make some kind of sense of them. They want an account of existence that will connect all the disparate temporal pieces of their lives into some sort of meaningful whole, something that will give an overarching meaning not merely to an individual life, but to a larger whole of which an individual life is only a part. And, of course, there are better and worse ways of doing this.

People don't want any old overarching account of the meaning of life. They want a coherent one. They want one that makes sense of their experience. They want one that will survive the tests of new experiences; one that will withstand scrutiny. Moreover, to the extent that people feel their lives are at least partially a result of choices over which they have some control, they want an account of existence that will enable them to exercise this control positively, or in ways that will help them to live happy and fulfilling lives. The production of such an account of the meaning of life requires a great deal of reflection, rigorous analysis, and even imagination.

An account of the meaning of life is, one could argue, the main purpose of philosophical reflection. We may never actually finish the project of producing such an account, but the activity of its production, no matter how large or how small a portion of our waking life it consumes (and it will consume greater or lesser amounts of people's lives depending on how reflective they are by nature), is crucial to a satisfying human life.

THE ESSENCE OF PHILOSOPHY

All philosophy is, in this sense, therapeutic. The ancients, particularly during the Hellenistic period, understood this.⁶ Now, finally, we are beginning to rediscover the therapeutic potential of philosophy. A person doesn't have to be a scholar to tap that potential. Anyone can do philosophy, even someone who's had little to no exposure to academic philosophy. There's no 'beginning' philosophy and no 'advanced' philosophy. You can't do philosophy at all without jumping right in the deep end of the very same questions all philosophers have wrestled with since the time of Plato, questions such as what it means to be happy, or whether people really have free will.

I have my students read John Searle's *Mind: A Brief Introduction* (Oxford, 2004) in my philosophy of mind class. One of the most interesting chapters of this book is on free will. You don't have to be a professional philosopher to be interested in the question of whether human beings have free will. Almost everyone is interested in this question because, it makes an enormous difference in the quality of a person's life if he feels his actions are, or are not, under his control.

But how can we know whether any of our actions are free? "The first thing to notice," Searle asserts, when examining such concepts as "psychological determinism" and "voluntary action," "is that our understanding of these concepts rests on an awareness of a contrast between the cases in which we are genuinely subject to psychological compulsion and those in which we are not" (Searle, 156).

"What do you think of that statement?" I asked my students. "Is there anything wrong with it?"

"It's begging the question," responded one of them matter-of-factly.

"Yes, that's right," I said smiling. "Searle is BEGGING THE QUESTION!" Mr. Big deal famous philosopher, John Searle, whose book was published by Oxford University Press, commits a fallacy that is easily identified by an undergraduate student who is not even a philosophy major. That is, the issue Searle examines in that chapter is whether we have free will. He even acknowledges that we sometimes think our actions are free when they clearly are not (the example he gives is of someone acting on a post-hypnotic suggestion, but other examples would be easy enough to produce).

But if we can be mistaken about whether a given action is free, how do we know that any of our actions are free? We assume that at least some of them are free because it sometimes seems to us that our actions are free and other times that they are compelled. But to say that it sometimes *seems* to us that our actions are free is a very different sort of observation from Searle's that we are sometimes *aware* that we are not, in fact, subject to psychological compulsion.

Searle distinguishes, however, between "psychological compulsion," which he associates with the conscious experience of compulsion, and what he calls "neurobiological determinism," which he asserts compels action just as effectively as the former, but which is never "experienced" consciously at all. So a charitable reading of the passage above might incline one to the view that Searle was not actually begging the question in that an awareness of an absence of psychological compulsion does not constitute an awareness of freedom.

But alas, Searle has to restate his position in the very next page in a manner that is even more conspicuously question begging. "We understand all of these cases [i.e., various cases of unfree action]," he asserts, "by contrasting them with the standard cases in which we *do* have free voluntary action" (Searle, 158; emphasis added). You can't get more question begging than that. The whole point is whether any human action is ever really free or voluntary.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN PHILOSOPHICAL CONVERSATION

Professional philosophers can be incredibly obtuse, and ordinary people, even today, with the right sort of help and encouragement, can expose that obtuseness. This is one of the primary joys of philosophy—intellectual problem solving. All inherently pleasurable activities, even intellectual ones, are therapeutic in that they are among the things that make life worth living.

The therapeutic potential of philosophy is not exhausted, however, by this sort of pleasure. Human beings cannot help but reflect on their experience and *how* they reflect on their experience is an important constituent of that

experience. The skeptics were right about that. Thinking, for example, that an experience is bad, while it may not actually make the experience bad, will more than likely make it worse than if one could refrain from such reflections.

Philosophical reflection has obvious practical value. Things often do not turn out as we hope. We are thus continually forced to dig new channels into which to redirect our desires. This work, over time, can be exhausting. Reflecting on our experiences can help to make that labor more productive, can help us to conserve our energies.

Really to do philosophy, however, is not simply to think. Human beings are not merely intellectual creatures, they are also social ones. They need conversation. They need more than ordinary conversation, however, in order to develop fully their thoughts and insights. They need what Jonathan Lear referred to as "Socratic conversation." That is, they need conversation with someone practiced in philosophical reflection, someone who can gently help to direct their thoughts into productive channels.

When people think of philosophers, they typically think of men. This is undoubtedly part of the reason that men still greatly outnumber women in the ranks of professional philosophers. Western concepts of gender identity make it easier, however, for both men and women to engage in the kind of soul-searching exchanges that are essential to realizing the therapeutic potential of conversation when their interlocutors are women rather than men. This insight was alluded to in Socrates's own account in *The Symposium* of how it was a woman, Diotima, who taught him to be a philosopher. It seems Socrates had not himself developed the method of conversation that is now widely referred to as 'Socratic,' the method whereby a person's own assertions and arguments are used against him, or as one would say nowadays, are used to deconstruct his position.⁷ Socrates learned this method of directed questioning from Diotima.

That Socrates should have learned his method of conversation from a woman should not be surprising. Women have long been acknowledged as particularly adept at conversation. It was primarily women who lay behind the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century phenomenon of the literary "salon" where philosophy was often discussed and where conversation was raised to the status of an art.⁸ The role of women in the phenomenon of the "salon" is widely recognized. If Whitehead is correct, however, in his assertion that the entire history of Western philosophy can be characterized as a series of footnotes to Plato,⁹ then all of Western philosophy is ultimately traceable back to a woman.

What one could call the "feminine roots" of Western philosophy should, again, not be surprising. The kind of deep probing that is characteristic of philosophical conversation requires a certain vulnerability, a willingness to examine one's most firmly held and treasured beliefs. Vulnerability of that

sort is something women, at least in Western culture, are generally more comfortable with than are men. Moreover, men are generally more comfortable in exposing their vulnerability to women than they are in exposing it to other men. Women are, to a certain extent, socialized to be nurturing and this makes people in general more comfortable making themselves vulnerable to women than to men. Women are widely perceived to be less threatening, more supportive, more encouraging.

Anglo-American philosophy is among the most confrontational and combative of academic disciplines and this has made it a particularly difficult discipline for women. Sometimes this is because women, in Western culture, are not socialized to enjoy conflict the way men are and so the environment of academic philosophy can occasionally seem hostile to them. Other times stereotypes of femininity work against women who in fact thrive in such environments. Colleagues may condemn such women as 'overly aggressive' when, in fact, they are no more aggressive than their male counterparts.

There is one area of philosophy, however, for which enduring gender stereotypes make women better suited than men: philosophical counseling. Women are the ideal partners in the Socratic conversation the aim of which is to teach what one could call the 'method of philosophy' for revealing the essential components of the "good life." Female philosophical counselors are modern-day Diotimas teaching their interlocutors the joys of the life of the mind and the instrumental value of philosophical thought. And, indeed, many women, such as those in this volume, have played leading roles in this developing practice.

Socrates argued that he was no more knowledgeable than any of his contemporaries, or that if he did possess what one could call an epistemic advantage relative to them, it consisted merely in the fact that while everyone appeared to him to be equally ignorant, he alone was aware of his ignorance. Socratic conversation, at least genuinely Socratic conversation, does not involve leading people to predetermined conclusions. Such one-sidedness was very likely part of the reason that Pappenheim did not benefit from her 'conversations' with Breuer to the extent that both Breuer and Freud claimed that she did. "Socratic conversation," writes Jonathan Lear, was meant to motivate a person to care about his soul.¹⁰ This is done by gently encouraging people to examine their lives and their beliefs, and in this way to come to their own conclusions about how best to live, to develop their own overarching accounts of the meaning of life.

The female philosophical counselor gently teaches her client to think in, again, the most holistic sense of that term. She teaches her client to examine his or her life in a way not generally encouraged in our fiercely anti-intellectual culture.¹¹ What can be a disadvantage to female philosophers—for instance, that they are sometimes not perceived to speak with the same authority as are men—is actually an advantage to the philosophical counselor. A

good philosophical counselor does not lecture. She engages her client in life-changing conversation, introduces that person to the joys of the life of the mind and to the potential of philosophical reflection to improve the quality of a person's life.

CONCLUSION

Thought never disappoints. The more faithful you are to it, the more faithful it is to you. The more time you devote to it, the more it rewards you. It is unfailing that way. Thought is not like the capricious lover, happy one day, impossible to please the next. Thought is patient and always responsive to the one who attends to it. It always waits for you and always receives you warmly on your return. And it is full of friends: Plato and Aristotle, Epictetus and Kant, all wait there like Aspasia (another woman well-versed in the art of conversation) ready to engage, to challenge, to stimulate.

Let's return now to the example with which I began this paper, the chapter from John Searle's *Mind: A Brief Introduction* that dealt with the question of whether human beings have free will. I did not tell my student that Searle's argument begged the question. I opened up space in the conversation for him to come to that insight on his own.

Do human beings have free will? It certainly seems like they do. Isaiah Berlin argues in his essay *Historical Inevitability* that it doesn't really matter whether we can prove that human beings have free will because we cannot rid ourselves of the impression that we do.¹² That we cannot escape the impression that it is possible for us to shape, at least to some extent, the course of our lives means that we similarly cannot escape the impression that we need to devote at least some thought to how best to do that.

What better way, what more effective way is there to work out one's thoughts than through conversation? And what better conversational partners can one find than women, than modern-day Diotimas gently helping people to discover the good life for themselves?

NOTES

1. See, for example, John Launer, "Anna O. and the 'talking cure,'" *QJM: An International Journal of Medicine* 98 (2005): 465-466.

2. I do not mean by this to suggest that Breuer had no respect for Pappenheim. He described her as "markedly intelligent, with an astonishingly quick grasp of things and penetrating intuition" (John Launer "Anna O. and the 'talking cure.'" *QJM: An International Journal of Medicine* 98 [2005]: 465). My point here is simply to remark that Breuer would not have considered a patient and, in particular, a female patient, to be on an equal footing with himself so far as discussions of that patient's illness were concerned.

3. "The Socratic Method and Psychoanalysis," *A Companion to Socrates*, ed. Sara Ahbel-Rappe and Rachana Kamtekar (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 442.

4. See M. F. Burnyeat, "Can the Skeptic Live his Skepticism?" in *Explorations in Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 205–235.

5. When I say "broadest sense of the term 'thinking'" I am explicitly distancing myself from that portion of the philosophical tradition that professes belief in the possibility of purely objective, or 'pure thought,' divorced from the emotional life and subjective experience of the thinker.

6. See Susan Suavé Meyer, *Ancient Ethics* (London: Routledge, 2008).

7. See *Plato's Symposium*, ed. and trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989) 201e–203b. See also Jonathan Lear, "The Ironic Creativity of Socratic Doubt," *MLN* vol. 128 no. 5, 1007.

8. See Dena Goodman, "Enlightenment Salons: The Convergence of Female and Philosophic Ambitions," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 22, 3 (1989): 338.

9. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1979) 39.

10. Lear, "The Socratic Method of Psychoanalysis," 442.

11. See Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (Vintage, 1966).

12. Isaiah Berlin, "Historical Inevitability," *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997) 119–190. I am indebted to my father, Harold Russell Piety, for his generous gift to me of this volume.

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