# Blind Men and Elephants

*reviewed by Susan Elinor Wright*

This is an intelligent book which makes a major contribution to the growing literature on philosophical counselling (I use the UK spelling). Traditionally, philosophical counsellors have been anxious to differentiate themselves from psychological counsellors, especially those who are psychodynamically oriented. Often, they have also been anxious to differentiate their own model of philosophical counselling from that of other practitioners. This book attempts a number of things: to survey current conceptions of philosophical counselling and its methods; to find its minimal criteria, if any; and to distinguish it, if possible, from psychotherapy. It goes on to find positive criteria (i.e. in terms of what it is, not what it is not) that will be both viable and flexible for a new model of philosophical counselling.

Raabe concludes that there is no current agreement about what philosophical counselling is, and no coherent way of distinguishing it from psychotherapy. He finds much that could be helpful to the philosophical counsellor in cognitively based and solution focussed approaches to counselling. He believes that these counsellors are already using philosophy to help clients find solutions to problems, but without a meta-view of the discipline. Philosophers do it better. Well (my comment) they would, wouldn't they?

Raabe suggests that many of the differences among the various theoretical approaches are more apparent than real. He quotes the story of the six blind men asked to describe an elephant. The one who is at the tail says it is a rope, the one at the trunk a tree, and so on. Raabe rejects the exclusiveness of just one description. He asserts that there is no reason that a model should not have, so to speak, a tail and a trunk - i.e. that the characteristics of philosophical counselling might well be different at different stages within its process.

There are some characteristics that Raabe appears to take as given and to find uncontentious, eg:

• philosophical counselling must be practised in morally responsible ways

• client and counsellor have logically distinct roles. The client comes with a problem; the counsellor has techniques for addressing problems

• the counsellor should respect, and, if possible, increase, the autonomy of the client

• the counsellor should try to increase the well-being of the client, or at least, do no harm

At least the last two of these, I submit, need to be argued for and defined.

Raabe's model is a four-stage one of: Free-Floating; Immediate Problem Resolution; Teaching as an Intentional Act; Transcendence. It is innovatory to include, in an account of philosophical counselling, such a strong emphasis on intentional teaching. The stages are spelt out in detail and are given life by case study material. They are flexible, do not all have to be gone through with every client, and there can be contexts in which a client would want to revert to an earlier stage.

Too much emphasis on one set of characteristics, leads us, like the blind men to a partial view and a mistaken one at that. Unless we can in some way «see» the whole, we are unlikely to appreciate the nature of what is within our grasp.

That I often want to say «Yes, but...» to the conclusions drawn is, perhaps paradoxically, a measure of my engagement with the arguments and of my respect for the author. I find Raabe's arguments interesting and want to have a dialogue. It is a virtue, not a defect, of the book that most readers will have their own niggles and their own points of agreement and disagreement. Here are some of my niggles.

I think the analogy of the blind men and the elephant misleading and misleading in an interesting way. The blind men after all made two category mistakes. First, they knew they all were trying to recognise the same thing, but did not know that they each had hold of very different parts of it. Secondly, they failed to recognise that they all had hold of a living being. Now, it can equally be a mistake to press an analogy too far, but I would suggest that deciding whether or not something is an elephant is not a matter of whether it has a tail and a trunk, but of its genus and species, i.e., whether it conforms to determinate biological characteristics. If we found an animal that looked like an elephant, but had no trunk, or was six inches high, there would be procedures for deciding the case. However, there is no agreed taxonomy of «genus counselling, species philosophical» which we can consult. That is what the problem was in the first place: not only is there no agreement on the defining characteristics, there is no agreed way of coming to an agreement, other than the very general one of observing the canons of philosophical argument.

Raabe has certainly shown, through his descriptions and through his case studies, that his stages work for him. He has not produced a convincing argument that they would work for every-

one. The important point is, in my opinion, that what is appropriate in the early stages of a counsellor/client relationship might not be so important later on, and vice versa. The stages seem to me to be developmental stages, with a strong cognitive focus. The kinds of philosophical understanding and insight of which the client is capable become more sophisticated, more generalisable and more abstract as the relationship develops. Ideally, by the end, it has become a dialogue between equals. The client has achieved autonomy and can cope with future issues of the same kind without needing to seek professional help. I can see a parallel here with the widely accepted view that trainee teachers need different kinds of support at different stages of their learning. In their early teaching practices they need «survival skills»; later on they are capable of reflective practice and can justify what they do by an appeal to educational principles.

The most contentious stage, in my view, is this inclusion of teaching as an intentional act. Raabe has much experience of teaching, of both adults and schoolchildren, and this shines through and enriches the book. He recommends specific readings to individual clients, and he has used Matthew Lipman's community of enquiry method both with school students and with a group of recovering drug and alcohol addicts. Tellingly, although it includes teaching, he describes what he has done with the recovering addicts as group counselling rather than as teaching.

I think that this is an instance where the reviewer has a moral responsibility to declare her interests. I have been a teacher of every age group from infant to adult, in schools, a university, and in more informal settings. I have used the community of enquiry method with both children and adults. And while I think that the community of enquiry has much in common with counselling, I contend that it is a blurring of boundaries to suggest that it is counselling.

Very briefly, Lipman and his followers use the method as a way of teaching children and young people to be philosophers at their own level. In response to a stimulus (often a story or other written material) the group formulates questions, and chooses one to discuss. The teacher's role is to facilitate, and, where appropriate, to introduce specifically philosophical skills (e.g. the use of reasons or counter examples). S/he also guides them to become increasingly abstract in their reasoning. The group has complete autonomy over the content of the discussion. Cooperation, rather than competition, is encouraged.

There are many parallels here with person-centred counselling eg:
- it is process rather than content focused
- the teacher acts as a facilitator rather than as a transmitter of knowledge
- all contributions are both valued and taken seriously
- the students, very largely, are the agents of their own development (as learners)
- an aim is for the students to become autonomous (as learners)

I would argue that all good education is therapeutic, and therefore resembles counselling, in as much as it leads students to be able to tolerate confusion and uncertainty; to become more confident in their own abilities; to be able to choose and justify their own values, including moral values. It may also improve their life skills in that they get better at making important life decisions, managing crises etc. But what distinguishes education from other ways of improving people's lives is its cognitive content - students should end up with a certain amount of knowledge - or at any rate the ability to acquire it if necessary. It is for this reason that we say teachers have students (not clients). Perhaps a similar defining characteristic of counselling might be that the client has to have a problem or problems for which s/he is seeking help.

Possibly it is just as difficult to distinguish teaching from philosophical counselling as it is to distinguish the latter from psychotherapy. I recommend you to read this book and form your own conclusions.

*Address correspondence to:*

**Susan Elinor Wright**

**Centre for Philosophy in Practice**

**32 Oak Village**

**London, NW5 4QN**

**United Kingdom**

**e-mail: susan@society-for-philosophy-in-practice.org**