

Philosophical Practice and Scientific Research: Controversies and Proposals

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Participants in this Master Class can expect to have more tools for Philosophical Counseling based on scientific evidence. There will be an analysis of case studies and a discussion of some skills that can be used to think about different kinds of problems. We will recommend the work of some researchers whose observational and experimental studies offer relevant insights about philosophical topics, and we will propose the development of a new field of study that can be extremely valuable for Philosophical Counseling, suggesting experimental study designs that can enrich the discipline with resources and procedures that are not based merely on personal opinions or on the authority of philosophical traditions. Finally, we will review some cultural and philosophical assumptions about happiness that have been supported by scientific evidence, and others that might be harmful if they are uncritically adopted by the consultant and/or the philosophical counselor.

I would like to show some tools for Philosophical Counseling based on scientific evidence and refer to some of them in the context of case studies. For this purpose, we will talk about some wellbeing's basic requirements, self-esteem's myths, expressive writing, the concept of alignment, the principle of adaptation, gratitude, the acts of kindness, the "experiencing self" and the "remembering self", the aging process and the relevance of empirical research.

For centuries, many philosophical proposals have been based on intuitions. Some of those intuitions have been confirmed by scientific research. Others have been refuted, or have lost their plausibility. I consider that it is very important to assess many of our philosophical assumptions in light of scientific research. Otherwise, we might contribute to perpetuate some mistakes. Opinion is the lowest level of evidence, and empirical research gives us the opportunity to advance in favor of some more objective perspective of knowledge.

For example, Epictetus gave us one of the great teachings of philosophy when he said that the key to the good life is to recognize that most human suffering comes not just from what happens to us, but from our ideas about what happens to us. Today we know that this is basically true, but it is also true that most people's wellbeing requires having two or three close relationships, and living above the poverty line. These necessary conditions seem to have a low variability between humans.

There are also many common sense ideas about human behavior, worldviews and philosophies of life that are not supported by scientific evidence.

For example, since 1970 self-esteem was considered one of the fundamental psychological resources for life (Juha, Owens). Popular culture considered that self-esteem has many benefits. Some studies found a correlation between low academic performance and low self-esteem. Several psychologists claimed that low self-esteem

originated violent behavior, drug abuse, narcissism and a high number of dysfunctional behaviors. They implemented plans to encourage the development of self-esteem in different areas, including education. More recent studies revealed that a high academic performance caused a rise in self-esteem, and not the other way around. So we need self-esteem, but not a high self-esteem. Self-esteem is only relevant in the initial social contact with others, because shy persons fear rejection and initiate fewer contacts. Research shows us that it is not self-esteem but self-control which tends to decrease disorders once attributed to the lack of self-esteem, that is, excessive conflict in interpersonal relationships, poor academic performance, substance abuse, violence, etc. Despite what is usually believed, feeling loved and valuable is not the only source of self-esteem, because if the individual does not agree with the evaluation, he will not agree with it.

Raising self-esteem is ineffective if the child has done nothing to deserve it and if he has not learned behavior skills that allow him to feel good about himself. To stimulate self-esteem is good for younger kids, not for more grown kids. Learning the right skills is, according to scientific evidence, more valuable for a good life. For example, learning how to enable cooperation and deal with conflict, how to share, communicate, and listen, how to be more empathetic, less egocentric and more sociocentric. People with a lot of self-esteem are not the most valued by their peers. Not all cultures have considered self-esteem as an important value. East cultures and ancient Greece culture exalted humility.

I would like to introduce other concepts and strategies based on scientific evidence that may be useful to examine philosophical problems.

The first practice that I would like to mention is the expressive writing. James Pennebaker conducted several studies, resumed in the book "Writing to heal", in which he shows that people who engage in expressive writing report feeling happier and less negative than before writing. The book offers exercises that anyone can undertake. Weeks and months after writing about emotional problems, reports of depressive symptoms, rumination and general anxiety tend to decrease. The simple act of writing about some important problems, even if people destroy the written text immediately afterwards, has a positive effect on health. Other studies showed that the benefits weren't just obtained by people who had tragic secrets, but they could also spread to persons who were dealing with divorces, job rejections or a stressful activity.

When people write about emotional problems, their health often improves. They go to the doctor less. They have changes in immune functions.

When we translate an experience into language we essentially make the experience more clear. We establish an order. Thought is usually quite messy. If writing can have such a dramatic effect on our lives, does that mean that we would all be best if we kept a daily diary? Not necessarily, Pennebaker says. While his work is not inconsistent with diary keeping, it acts more as a kind of life course correction. It allows people to step back for a moment and evaluate their lives. Writing every day has the risk of getting into a sort of cycle of self-pity. But standing back every now and then and evaluating where you are in life is really important.

If we write so that we can draw a lesson about experience, writing helps us and we become active creators of our life stories.

Tips for writing to heal:

- 1) Find a time and a place where you will not be disturbed.
- 2) Write continuously for at least 20 minutes.
- 3) Don't worry about spelling or grammar
- 4) Write only for yourself
- 5) Write about something extremely personal and important for you.
- 6) Write only about things you can handle now

"People who are able to construct a story, to build some kind of narrative over the course of their writing, seem to benefit more than those who don't," Pennebaker says. Some time ago, a woman called Sara came to a session of Philosophical Counseling. She told me that Paul, one of her friends, was afraid to ask his doctor if he had a terminal illness. Paul asked her to go to the doctor in his place and find out. She accepted and unfortunately informed to him that he had the disease. Paul was very angry because of this, and could not distinguish the message from the messenger. Sara felt guilty about this situation for years, even being conscious that she only fulfilled Paul's request. We discussed the problem in the session and I asked her to write during three or four days, at least twenty minutes a day, about the story with his friend. On the first day of writing, her story was not very structured or coherent, but in three or four days of writing she was able to come up with a more structured story, and realized that it made no sense to continue with the feeling of guilt.

Making a story out of a messy, complicated experience may make the experience more manageable. The act of confessing or expressing trauma has been part of healing for virtually all cultures, ranging from Native American indigenous cultures to those based on both Western and Eastern religious beliefs. Pennebaker also notes that writing should be used cautiously. He doesn't recommend trying to write about a trauma too soon after it happens and says that if a topic seems like it's too much to handle, we should not try to tackle it before we are ready. The effects of writing can be subtle, but sometimes they can be dramatic.

Another concept that may be useful for solving problems is the concept of alignment. It comes from sociolinguistics and it refers to the implicit or explicit assumption of an interpersonal position. The speaker might include or exclude other person from an alliance (alignment with or against), and might show dominance or submission (superior/inferior alignment). Let's see it in an example.

Laura came to my office to try to solve a problem she had with Johanna, her niece. For twenty years, Laura was responsible for all financial costs of her sister and her niece. Her sister had not been able to keep a job, and Laura thought that paying for all the expenses had helped her sister to become economically dependent and unable to care for herself.

When her niece turned 21 years old, Laura said to Johanna that she would have to work, and that she would stop receiving her monthly payment. But Johanna didn't want to work. She saw that her mother had always received money from her sister and probably she thought that the same would happen to her. So Laura continued paying all the household bills, but she stopped giving her the monthly payment. Instead of being grateful towards her aunt, Johanna began to be very aggressive with her, and even told her that it would be better for her if her aunt and her own mother died.

Faced with such an aggressive message, Laura disregarded some legitimate claims made

by her niece (the need to continue in the same house a couple of months more, for example). When someone attacks us, we usually do not hear what the other person claims, and this turns him more aggressive.

In several emails Laura asked Johanna to obey her mother, to go with her to visit their cousins, to clean the house, etc. But if Laura wanted to improve her relation with Johanna, aligning herself with Johanna's mother was not a good communication strategy, because this made Johanna perceive that both of them were against her. When we speak with and about others, we are constantly empathizing with one or another, establishing alliances associated with different interests and strategies. It is important to know this, because the network of partnerships that we establish in dialogues are very important to have good communication tools.

Another very useful concept is the principle of adaptation (Ariely, 2010). We tend to adapt much more than we think to positive and negative circumstances in our lives. We do not realize that if we have an accident and are injured so that we cannot walk anymore, a year after the accident we will probably adapt to the new circumstance and will not be less happy than a person who is able to walk. In the same way, we do not realize that a year after we have obtained many of the things we want, we will adapt to them and no longer perceive them as a good. According to scientific research, this happens with couples, money, moving to a country with better climate and many other things. But it is in our power the ability to inhibit or slow the process of adaptation. For example, if someone moves to a city with better weather, you can avoid that habituation thinking or saying every morning something like "What a beautiful day", or remembering how much you suffered with cold climate. We can prevent the adaptation process in a couple expressing appreciation, affection and gratitude every day ("I'm proud of what you did"), talking when you don't feel stress, creating a routine like walking together or drinking in the kitchen, creating a ritual to spend several hours together once a week, having a part in the house where you can talk without electronic devices, a place designed to hold a conversation with low stress. These routines can be applied to the couple or to other close relationships.

Expressing gratitude is a way to avoid the principle of adaptation. You can remember small things: the sunlight entering the bedroom, the word of a friend, something we cook, an article we read. Perhaps we will think that we will feel stupid doing this, but it will allow us to discover many things about everyday life. In experimental studies they found out that it was very effective to do it three times a week, not more, probably because if we do it every day we get used to this practice. Another possibility is to tell somebody you trust what good things have happened to you.

Our political and economic system encourages us to raise expectations and the desire of consumption. This is the most direct shortcut to the dissatisfaction, and the opposite of gratitude. With such high expectations, there is no room for surprise. Gratitude, however, allows us to recover our sense of wonder.

Robert Emmons, the world's leading scientific expert on gratitude, studied more than one thousand people, from ages eight to 80, and found that people who practice gratitude consistently report a host of benefits:

Physical

- Stronger immune systems
- Lower blood pressure

- Sleep longer and feel more refreshed upon waking

Psychological

- Higher levels of positive emotions

Social

- More helpful, generous, and compassionate
- More forgiving
- Feel less lonely and isolated.

The social benefits are especially significant here because gratitude is a social emotion. It requires us to see how we've been supported and affirmed by other people.

Gratitude has two parts: 1) we affirm that there are good things in the world, gifts and benefits we've received. 2) We recognize the sources of this goodness as being outside of ourselves.

Gratitude allows us to make the present last more. Our emotional systems like change. We adapt to positive life circumstances and soon the new car, the new spouse and the new house don't feel so new and exciting anymore.

When things are going bad, we often compare the current state to the ideal. But when they improve, we forget to compare the present goods with the past goods. Gratitude allows you to recover balance.

Gratitude blocks toxic, negative emotions, such as envy, resentment, regret, emotions that can destroy our happiness. You cannot feel envious and grateful at the same time. They're incompatible feelings. There's even recent evidence, including a 2008 study by psychologist Alex Wood in the Journal of Research in Personality, showing that gratitude can reduce the frequency and duration of episodes of depression. So if we have to work with a consultant that is depressed, suggesting him to write a gratitude journal may be a good idea, and it is a good idea for all of us, a way to live again good things that have happened to us.

Another practice that has very good results (according to the research of Sonja Lyubomirsky) has to do with acts of kindness, significantly higher than the ones we can develop on a regular basis. To do good things for others, friends or strangers, in person or anonymously, paradoxically increases our own welfare. For centuries Buddhism warned: "If you want to be happy, practice compassion."

In one experiment they asked participants to perform five acts of kindness a week, for six weeks. A subgroup could choose to carry them out at any time during the week. Another group had to concentrate them on the same day. In the following months, those who performed all the acts the same day were more satisfied with their lives and, on average, had fewer depressive symptoms. The researchers' hypothesis is that when those acts were distributed through the week, their salience diminished. Doing something for others sometimes brings a momentary unhappiness, but as time goes by it increases personal satisfaction. Why does this happen? In part because it changes the value that people have of themselves, they feel more compassionate, they can illuminate their abilities, they receive certain sense of control in their own lives, it strengthens the ties with others and allows them to make them smile. If you don't do a lot, it does not produce any effect, if you do too much, it often brings fatigue or anger.

Two concepts that come from the recent scientific research of Nobel Prize Daniel Kahneman can be very useful for a philosophical analysis. Using examples from vacations to colonoscopies, Kahneman reveals how our "experiencing selves" and our

"remembering selves" perceive happiness differently. This new insight has profound implications for economics, public policy and our own self-awareness. The experiencing self can enjoy something, and the remembering self cannot. How does he know this? Because he studies what people say during the experience, and when the experience has finished. A man can emigrate to live in a city of better weather. The experiencing self usually adapts to the new situation, gets used to it, and does not enjoy it anymore. But if the remembering self compares the warm climate with the cold one he used to live in, he feels good.

The remembering self suffers from several distortions. For example, if the end of an experience is not good, let's say a terrible noise in the end of a concert, the whole event will be remembered as bad. A good example is the one of the members of a couple that have a bad divorce and they consider that the whole relation has been bad, although this might not be true. When we choose something for our lives, we choose among memories of experiences. And we often choose among the distortions of our memory. We are all storytellers, because we tell the story of our lives to ourselves. What determines this story are the changes, the significant moments and the endings. Experiences are lost forever.

For the experiencing self, if we go two weeks on vacations to the same place, we enjoy the double than if we go only one week. For the remembering self, going two weeks is the same that going one, because we don't add new experiences.

This is very important for philosophy, because we work with the memory, we help the consultant to make a story of his life, a logical and interesting story. Knowing the difference between the two selves is useful to become aware that an important part of life is in our hands, and that we can remember the best, enjoying the treasures of memory, learning from mistakes. It can also help us not to distort good experiences just because they have a bad ending. And not to overvalue them just because the end was good. And we come again to Epictetus, when he said that most people care more about their ideas of things than about things themselves.

Philosophical analysis can also be linked with research about the aging process. Several studies, including one conducted by Laura Carstensen of Stanford Center for Longevity, suggest that older persons tend to feel more joy and gratitude, and less stress and depression. When we realize that we do not have all the time ahead, we see more clearly the priorities. We intensify the pleasures because we know that they are finite. Older adults change their definition of happiness and they related it to serenity. In general they feel more satisfied than younger people. They remember with particular interest the positive images, they are, on average, better at resolving conflicts, are more open to reconciliation and have more mixed emotions, as when we cry and smile with a friend. Young people often explore, risk to learn, have more blind dates and have more uncertain adventures. When we believe that there is a whole life ahead, we are less selective. Older adults focus on what they consider important and do not want to waste time.

Stereotypes of the elderly are not the most common thing in observational studies. If the years have not passed in vain, most older adults learn to take life philosophically. The art of living requires skills and experience, and years tend to favor this view. There were more chances to learn from the mistakes, and although you have less energy, you administrate it more effectively. It is when we develop the art of acceptance.

I would like to share with you a video of a session of philosophical counseling were we talked about this perspective. A woman feels pity for the process of aging of her parents. This has to do with a process of physical deterioration, but mainly with her prejudices and stereotypes about aging. Being aware of some recent research about this process helps us to provide a different perspective to the client.

(We will see the video) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgjQUH7IKQ8>

The scope of philosophy is not equivalent to the scope of science. It is clear that not all philosophical proposals can be subjects of scientific research. Nevertheless, I think that there is a continuity between philosophy and science. If part of philosophy requires the assessment of some empirical claims (and this seems to be the case with Philosophical Counseling) it will require some of the research strategies that were developed by the empirical sciences. Otherwise, it might adopt some inaccurate assumptions about empirical issues, and those assumptions might have harmful consequences.

One of the most common arguments against science says that science makes many mistakes, and that we cannot know if what science says today will be true tomorrow.

Albert Einstein wrote that all our science is primitive, and yet it is the most precious thing we have. To answer some questions, it is the most precious thing we have.

Michael Shermer says that “science is not a set of beliefs but a process of research devoted to the construction of a testable set of knowledge constantly open to refutation”

Unlike other human institutions, science does not have a preconceived notion of what we have to believe. It is a process we use to understand the world. It allows us, as Bertrand Russell said in a wider context, to have an open mind, but not so open that our brains falls out.

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