



Encountering Encounters: Psychotherapy and the Challenge of Humanism

A Review of

*Philosophical Issues in Counseling and Psychotherapy: Encounters
With Four Questions About Knowing, Effectiveness, and Truth*

by James T. Hansen

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Reviewed by

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At the heart of James Hansen's brave little book, written with "displaced humanists' . . . in mind" (p. x), are four questions that presented themselves to him over the course of two decades of intellectual struggle: (a) What does it mean to know a client? (b) What makes counseling effective? (c) Are truths discovered or created in the counseling relationship? and (d) Should counselors abandon the idea of truth? These questions are explored against the backdrop of the history of mental health culture and the ascendance of the medical-scientific paradigm with its emphasis on symptom-based diagnostics and targeted, technique-based interventions.

Hansen's intention for *Philosophical Issues in Counseling and Psychotherapy: Encounters With Four Questions About Knowing, Effectiveness, and Truth* is to write a personal book rather than a formal philosophical treatise, and the approach to the four questions reflects his effort to emancipate himself from the psychoanalytic indoctrination that he felt subjected to in graduate school. Along the way he avails himself of recent philosophical and theoretical developments, such as social constructionism, neopragmatism, and the contextual model of treatment. The end product is an impassioned defense of the philosophical questioning of "received truths" that—so the author hopes—will lead to richer counseling encounters marked by authenticity, trust, and emotional honesty.

Hansen builds his arguments gradually by discrediting what he sees as questionable assumptions at the heart of modern mental health culture: the dominance of the medical model with its technical, reductionist focus; the modernist insistence on objective knowledge, along with the reliance on the correspondence theory of truth inherent in the theoretical scaffolding of traditional schools of psychotherapy; and the hegemonic aspirations of major explanatory systems, such as psychoanalysis. However, a reader

familiar with the territory that Hansen traverses cannot but feel that he is sometimes overstating his case in order to construct a better argument.

Sometimes this sleight of hand is minor, as in the case of the essentialist interpretation of Plato, a common oversimplification that is by no means generally accepted (see, e.g., Patočka, 1996). However, to claim that Rogerian humanism shares with psychoanalysis a fundamentally modernist base in that “proponents of both schools of thought presumed that therapists could come to know objective truths about clients” (p. 56) is simply not true. This assertion is refuted not only by the core tenets of the Rogerian approach—genuineness, unconditional positive regard, and empathic understanding (Rogers, 1980, pp. 113–136)—but also by his other writings (e.g., Rogers, 1980, pp. 27–45, 96–108). After all, is not a stance characterized by genuineness, unconditional positive regard, and empathic understanding the very opposite of the disinterested, decontextualized objectification that is the hallmark of modernism? To claim that “*accurate*, empathic understanding” (p. 56) is a “correct method” that Rogerians use to “know the objective truths about clients” (p. 56) is at best a misunderstanding and at worst an obfuscation.

Disturbing as they are, in the grand scheme of things these inaccuracies do not affect the thrust of the main argument. But what about the main argument?

Hansen’s struggle to throw off the straitjacket of modernist objectification and the correspondence theory of truth leads him to embrace a universalist, multicultural, postmodern perspective and a neopragmatic epistemology—“a Darwinist system, which sorts beliefs and statements according to their adaptive utility” (p. 129). Adopting such a stance leads to the conclusion that counseling is most effective when the counseling situation is characterized by the contextual factors common to all healing paradigms and when interventions are “judged by the degree to which they bring beneficial consequences to clients, not according to whether, in the practitioner’s judgment, they accurately correspond to the intrinsic nature of some client reality” (p. 128).

It is here that I find Hansen’s argument inconsistent. The realization that there is no unmediated truth and attempts to deal with the ensuing logical conundrums by some form of pragmatism go back to Christian Platonists. This makes pragmatism a very old philosophy, one that, however, has never succeeded in completely supplanting the correspondence theory of truth (Kolakowski, 2012). Which leads to an important question: Why does the theory persist? “What is the concept of truth as correspondence with reality for” (Kolakowski, 2012, p. 293)? As Kolakowski argued, it is in the nature of rational animals—creatures endowed with reason—to ask how things really are, apart from the consequences contingent on adopting one stance or another. And the answers to such questions, no matter how partial, logically indefensible, and without any discernible practical benefits, are what furnishes our lives with meanings and provides “mental and moral nourishment for ordinary people who have never so much as encountered the word ‘metaphysics’” (Kolakowski, 2012, p. 294).

The quest for meaning that typifies the search for truth independent of its practical consequences is the quest that usually brings clients into counseling. Hansen says so more or less explicitly (“Counselors should . . . focus their concerns on whether their interventions are experientially meaningful to clients”; p. 127), but also implicitly in a little vignette about an intervention that highlighted a parallel between his client’s early life and her contemporary suffering. “My remark,” writes Hansen, “had an enormous experiential impact

on her, and she began to wonder whether a hidden part of herself had deliberately engineered her current state of suffering" (p. 127). Hansen is probably right that, from his point of view, it did not matter whether he uncovered some "truth" about his client, as long as she benefited from his intervention, but what is missing from this account is the client's view. And I would argue that from her perspective it was important that it felt true and meaningful, rather than a cocreation of a narrative that had positive consequences.

It seems to me, then, that the beneficial consequences of counseling interventions are not completely independent of "the intrinsic nature" of a "client's reality" (p. 128). True, it is not the reality represented by theoretical constructs of, say, id-ego-superego, but a reality nonetheless. Otherwise, how could the interventions be judged as meaningful or emotionally resonant (p. 127)?

Counseling (or *therapy*—Hansen uses these terms interchangeably) is not "simply an extended conversation between two people" (p. 135), although it is that, too. When an individual attends a counseling session, he or she does not just come for a chat. People come to counseling for help, and before they do so they typically have to conclude that they need help with some aspects of their lives that they find powerless to handle by themselves. Asking for help requires acknowledging one's limitation and giving up personal autonomy, at least to a degree. In return, what clients expect from their counselor is expertise, which includes an appreciation of what is likely meaningful to them, as well as help in discovering and articulating that meaning. Thus, the "Darwinian" criterion of usefulness is never completely independent of the larger question of meaning that can be rarely answered according to pragmatic criteria.

The important point is that the therapist, as an expert, must approach the client from some interpretive standpoint and situate his or her search for meaning in some framework. The theoretically informed frameworks that Hansen rightly criticizes tend to substitute the map for the territory. But Hansen's proposed solution based on the contextual model of healing, postmodern minimization of truth, and neopragmatic basis for decision making (pp. 116–117) appears to be missing the necessary connection between the context and the basis for the decision making. I would argue that, unless Hansen can show how the decisions about clinical interventions are tied to the context in which they occur, they are not different in kind from theory-informed interventions.

Let me illustrate the point by drawing on Deleuze's (1968/1994) analogy of theatrical play:

In the theatre, the hero repeats precisely because he is separated from an essential, infinite knowledge. This knowledge is in him, it is immersed in him and acts in him, but acts like something hidden, like a blocked representation. . . . In general, the practical problem consists in this: this unknown knowledge must be represented as bathing the whole scene, impregnating all the elements of the play and comprising in itself all the powers of mind and nature, but at the same time, the hero cannot represent it to *himself*—on the contrary, he must enact it, play it and repeat it until the acute moment that Aristotle called "recognition." At this point, repetition and representation confront one another and merge, without, however, confusing their two levels, the one reflecting itself in and being sustained by the other, the knowledge as it is represented on stage and as repeated by the actor then being recognised as the same. (p. 15)

The moment of recognition, then (which, incidentally, for Aristotle was the discovery of one's true identity), is when the actor's self-understanding is congruent with the context in which it occurs, when it reflects his or her "situatedness." This is consistent with the social constructionist idea that self or, rather, *selves* "are continually created and transformed as a function of the group in which a person participates" (p. 101). But what is important for our purpose is the understanding that the counselor must be bathed in the same contextual knowledge for his or her interventions to be meaningfully resonant, and that it is only insofar as he or she understands and appropriates the context that his or her interventions can be useful and meaningful! This essential tie to the context that alone can facilitate the interrelation of the knowledge (and the expertise) that the counselor brings to the therapeutic situation and the client's gradually developing knowledge informed by the search for meaning is underdeveloped in Hansen's account.

To be fair, Hansen says that these are his "general, beginning answers to the four questions," and he does not claim to have found definitive or correct answers. "Indeed, I hope that my questions and answers generate dynamic debate, controversy, and continued dialogue, rather than static acceptance" (p. 129). It is in this spirit that I offer my remarks.

One of my enduring memories from my undergraduate years involves a visit to a professor about an answer to an exam question. My thoughts at the time were that the answer was too simplistic, and as I explained my reasoning, the professor looked at me and said, "Do you know what your problem is? You think too much!" I was flabbergasted. Here I was, at one of the country's most prestigious centers of learning, and was told that I should not think!

This memory kept forcing itself into my mind as I was reading Hansen's account of his struggle to undo some of the negative effects his education had on him, to question received wisdom, to search and explore, and to grow in the process—and I envied his students. I also thought about his counseling clients who, I am sure, find in him a thoughtful, caring professional ready to question his cherished assumptions in order to aid them in their struggle to find meaning. It is my hope that his book will stimulate the dialogue he hopes for and that, in doing so, it might contribute to discrediting Carl Rogers's assertion that "by and large most psychologists are not open to new ideas" (Rogers, 1980, p. 39).

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