

The Communication Background of Philosophical Counselling

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Although to varying degrees, there is a principle link between any type of therapy and communication. When in 1872 Daniel Hack Tuke first used the term psychotherapy, he referred to the therapeutic power of imagination, by virtue of the tradition of using “moral treatment”, which was based on the persuasive force of words. Mesmer’s “magnetism” seemed to depart from this tradition, as it was later recognized as suggestion and hypnosis, which, according to Milton Erickson, is all about communication. As communication is not only the transmission of information but also the construction of relationships, the relationship between these two sides is fluctuating according to the situation: in the case of hypnosis, the transmission of information tends to be inexistent, while the relationship aspect tends towards infinity... The emergence of psychoanalysis – which was considered a “talking cure” – makes it clear that psycho-psychiatric therapies are based on communication, and that the later Lacanian stage, which is exemplary for structuralist semiology, only emphasizes this feature.

This finding remains valid for most of the therapies in circulation today. Cognitive-Behavioral Therapies, Person-Centered Therapies (Carl R. Rogers), Gestalt Therapy, Systemic Family Therapies (Palo Alto School) and Couple Therapies (Virginia Satir), Transactional Analysis (Eric Berne), Group Therapies, Logotherapy (Viktor Frank), Existential Therapy (Irvin Yalom), Supportive and Accompanying Therapies make the role of communication evident. Probably, hypnosis as therapy – in which Milton Erickson sees a relational communication – and psychobodily therapies – which in Paul Watzlawick’s terms below could be

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related to the analogical side of the communication – deserve a more detailed discussion. But for the purposes of this text, it is sufficient to note that psychotherapies should always be linked to this polarity of the power of communication and the power of psychiatric procedures, techniques or technologies.

Is this situation similar to that of philosophical counselling?² Even if we admit that we are not actually discussing psychotherapy, but only existential stylistics or "therapy" in the case of philosophical counselling, the question is worth asking because it could at least bring further clarification on the difference between psychotherapy and philosophical counselling. The main connection between therapy and communication is seen in the relationship between communication (understood in this case especially as a medium or channel of contact and transmission) and its content, ideas and interpretations, techniques and therapeutic procedures. Thus, for the therapies mentioned above, it is considered that the ideas, techniques and procedures that constitute them make the content of communication between the therapist and the patient. Regardless of the importance of communication for the respective therapies, it remains secondary, being the vehicle or channel that carries something more important than it is.

A first difference emerges that distinguishes philosophical counselling from the psychotherapies in function. As much as it is involved in therapy, in relation to the overall therapeutic process, communication, most often, only transmits (or, at least, claims to transmit) specific contents. This is not the case with philosophical counselling, which, in terms of its content, uses philosophy. In this case, the communication does not conform to a content produced outside it.

² "Philosophical counselling" is a more appropriate term in English where the term "therapy" has a more precise and restrictive meaning. "Doing therapy" in English means you are committed to achieving results, and that commitment can be accounted for and even legally tracked. But in Greek antiquity "therapy" (θεραπεία - *therapeia*) meant treatment, care, healing, and referred to all measures aimed at the positive influence of disabilities, diseases and injuries. It is also true that therapy requires more involvement from the therapist and more acceptance from the patient. Counselling is less engaging in terms of the counsellor and the client. I would personally prefer the term "existential stylist" instead of "philosophical counsellor." "Existential," because in the past two centuries existential or existentialist philosophy has been interested in the destiny of man and its values. "Stylist," because the philosophical counsellor adapts the style of the client's life and according it to the values for which he can choose without often being perfectly aware and without analysing them, in order to make it a responsible existence.

Rather, it puts into operation a content that seems to dominate from the perspective of the history of philosophy. With all rationality and logical coherence, philosophy is not specific knowledge and much less a technique or a technology (at most, philosophical counselling could make a technology or a technique from it. Unlike other therapies, philosophical counselling does not produce its content, which belongs to the history of philosophy and human spirituality in general. However, according to the post-modern formula, it redistributes it.

Why would communication matter more for philosophical counselling than for other therapies? Very simple to say, because from the perspective of Western thought, for a century until now, communication has been the only accessible reality. Of course, a client of the philosophical counsellor could protest: we must resort to knowledge, because what is real is what you know is real. But how do you know? It has been told at school, seen on TV or in new media networks, heard or read somewhere... Maybe you told yourself... Or maybe, however, you were shown in the lab and then it seems we are coming back to know. But in the case of knowledge, it is as if you were “talking” with things because knowledge is, in fact, communication with things: perceptually and notionally, knowledge is a typical process of encoding - decoding - recoding. In short, everything we know and is a reality for us is, after all, the consequence of communication. Respectively: communication is prior to knowledge.

The history of Western thought confirms this conclusion in its evolution. The succession of philosophical thematizations, parallel to Gorgias’s trilemma on being, knowledge, communication, brings us to the linguistic turn or to the communication thematization. In the Heideggerian variant of this thematization, our very existence is communication because it is based on our authentic communication with Being. But perhaps the most beautiful test of the fact that reality is constituted in communication is the image of the starry sky. What is for us a sublime construction of the imperturbable reality, is, after all, a construction in communication and relative to communication: light has a constant speed and the interstellar and intergalactic distances are incredibly large; so, we see in this case what is communicated to us in successive layers of times, not an immutable reality.

But with even more significant consequences for existential therapy, communication is a relation. The idea of a relationship, which seems so

obvious today, has not found its place in the early history of psychiatric or psychological therapies. There was indeed an American psychoanalyst, Harry Stack Sullivan, who advocated - relatively late, in the 1960s, and with little success - for a relational theory of psychiatry, with the belief that psychiatric disorders had interactional origins. However, it is only the Palo Alto School - so closely linked, among others, to Gregory Bateson - that has imposed the importance of context and relationships in mental illness, using the idea that relationships are, in essence, communication. Any behaviour is communication and any communication affects the behaviour. The perspective is radically changed because the interest is not directed towards the relation of the signs with the transmitter or the receiver, but to the relation between the transmitter and the receiver, mediated by communication.³

Paul Watzlawick's 1967 book, *Pragmatics of human communication: a study of interactional patterns, pathologies, and paradoxes* (in collaboration with Janet Beavin Bavelas and Don D Jackson), develops this perspective on interpersonal relationships as communication. With this book, for the first time in psychotherapy, communication becomes the content of the therapy itself, because it is the form of the interaction that is its object, not just the form of the interaction between the therapist and the patient. It has been believed - and is still believed to be quite well grounded today - that a sector of communication, psychiatric communication, has imposed the theoretical model and pragmatic procedures on the whole communication through the Palo Alto School works and precisely through the work of Watzlawick.

In fact, the situation is more complex, as Watzlawick prevented: the references to the phenomenology of human communication are reviewed in the field of psychopathology not because they would be valid only there, "but simply that we consider them particularly relevant and evident in this area"⁴; the starting point remaining that of communication: "we have to start with some simple properties of communication that have fundamental interpersonal implications"⁵. After the linguistic turn - and, in particular, after structuralism - it became

³ Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin Bavelas, Don D Jackson, eds., *Pragmatics of human communication: a study of interactional patterns, pathologies, and paradoxes* (New York: Norton, 1967), 22.

⁴ *Ibidem*, 43.

⁵ *Ibidem*, 48.

evident in the 1960s that communication is the environment in which all human activities are incorporated. What Watzlawick does is very important because it takes into account the pragmatic side of communication, which has been avoided in the semiology of French structuralism. Moreover, it manages to formalize pragmatics in the form of very successful axioms, even if provisional and informal. These axioms seem to be extracted from therapeutic practice, but their value to all human communication is obvious. They are so obvious to us that, after half a century, they remained only as axioms of human communication, without any pathological specificity. But in order to be well understood and to return their initial meaning, I will review them summaries in their entirety of their initial meanings.

Communication is a very broad process and quite difficult to define. However, the communication units are clear: the messages. In human interaction, any behaviour is a message. Whatever someone does - words, gestures, inactivity or silence - is a message. As Watzlawick says, behaviour does not have an opposite and as long as the individual is alive, it exists in the relationship and cannot not behave in a certain way. Therefore “one cannot not communicate”⁶ whether it is acceptance/confirmation of communication, rejection of communication or disqualification/invalidation of communication. This first axiom of Watzlawick’s theory is just another form of the idea that communication builds reality, applied to human interaction. As in the 1960s, schizophrenia was a central theme for the Palo Alto Mental Research Institute to which Paul Watzlawick belonged, one of the examples offered is the schizophrenic situation in which someone strives not to communicate in order to avoid engaging with the recipient, but, paradoxical dilemma, even its non-communication communicates. Likewise, the symptom, which can be a catatonic or hysterical nonverbal message, etc., is just another way of communicating.

With all the emphasis on the relationship aspect, for Watzlawick, communication is not a pure relationship - it also involves the transmission of information. To explain the relationship between communication as relationship and communication as information transmitting, he invokes Bateson, who talks about “report” and “command”, or gives the example of the computer that needs

⁶ *Ibidem*, 51.

information (data) and information on how to proceed with this information, which means meta-information. Likewise, “Every communication has a content and a relationship aspect such that the latter classifies the former and is therefore a metacommunication”⁷. Communication about communication is the relational dimension of communication, metacommunication. The sign of maladaptive communication is “the constant struggle to define the relationship”, the content becoming less important in this struggle. Watzlawick considers such contamination or confusion between the level of information transmitting and that of the relationship one of the sources of logical paradoxes in interpersonal communication and pays attention to the problem in chapter six – *Paradoxical communication* – and seven – *The paradox in psychotherapy*.

The third axiom formulates the process characteristic of communication, which is based on feedback and circularity rather than linear causality. The communication between two participants can be regarded as an uninterrupted series of exchanges, circular and without clear starting points and boundaries. (One of the interesting and little understood consequences of this circularity of communication is that established by Baudrillard, according to which if you throw something in the communication, that something can never be fully withdrawn.) Watzlawick uses Bateson’s remark again: if one of the partners claims that there is a start to a communication problem, a dilemma arises. He uses not an easy term: punctuation, meaning that one of the communication partners establishes the order and effects in the communication of the sequences, as it suits him. The pathogenic punctuation of the series appears when one of the partners accuses the other: “you have started”, or when we have to do with an arms race, when each of the parties is armed because the other is armed first, or with a family quarrel, when each claims that the other is guilty. Disagreement about how a series of events is punctuated is the basis of countless relational conflicts, and “The nature of a relationship is contingent upon the punctuation of the communicational sequences between the communicants”⁸.

The fourth axiom is easy to understand as soon as we distinguish between analogical - the domain of motivated signs, indices or icons -

⁷ Ibidem, 54.

⁸ Ibidem, 59.

and digital - the domain of arbitrary, unmotivated signs, such as words or mathematical formulas. Analogical communication would then be nonverbal communication, body language, digital language being verbal language, which uses words. Man is the only being capable of both types of communication: "Human beings communicate both digitally and analogically. Digital language has a highly complex and powerful logical syntax but lacks adequate semantics in the field of relationship, while analogic language possesses the semantics but has no adequate syntax for the unambiguous definition of the nature of relationships".⁹ Each of these areas of communication has its limitations. Thus, the digital side of communication, otherwise very logical, precise and complex, lacks an adequate vocabulary for the forms that relationships take. In contrast, the analogue side of communication has great ambiguities in specifying one of the meanings of the expression, which can be quite the opposite: tears are sadness or joy?! The man, obliged to use both sides of the communication, must translate them into one another. Dilemmas arise - after marriage: do the two remain together because they want - the analogue part of their relationship, the courtship -, or because of the digital side, the marital contract?

Finally, the last of the axioms formulated in the paper, "All communicational interchanges are either symmetrical or complementary, depending on whether they are based on equality or difference".¹⁰ This idea is similar to Eric Berne's transactional analysis, which, as far as I know, has not been noticed. As Watzlawick worked mainly in family therapy, examples are chosen from pathological conflicts between spouses: symmetrical escalation (a more or less open war - "husbands engage in an upward pattern of frustration"), or rigid complementarity (a clear distribution of the main and secondary role in the interaction).

Watzlawick's 1967 book marked the shift from the interest of the monadic individual to the context, but especially to the interaction, understood from the perspective of communication: the attributes that identify human individuals are their communication behaviours, rather than the intrapsychic attributes. Also, here, somewhat anticipating the future perspectives, between which also that of philosophical counselling, the pathological idea of symptom is abandoned in favour of the idea of the problem. In addition, different from Freudian

⁹ Ibidem, 66-67.

¹⁰ Ibidem, 78.

psychodynamics, the theory of communication as Watzlawick understands it to be used in various pathologies, concerns “for a pattern in the here and now rather than for symbolic meaning, past causes, or motivation”.¹¹ He is unambiguous: between the monadic psychodynamics up to him and his theory of communication, there is a “conceptual discontinuity”. Moreover, as stated earlier, Watzlawick had clearly located his interest, different from that of psychology, oriented towards the study of entities, closer to the mathematics interested in the study of relations, exactly as some of the linguistics and structuralism of those years had done.¹²

Even though Watzlawick’s merit with regard to Brief Therapy (solution-oriented short therapy) is acknowledged, with regard to the five axioms and, in general, the pragmatics of communication, psychotherapists are reserved. Today, the five axioms of communication pragmatics are mostly invoked by theorists and practitioners of interpersonal and public communication than the psychotherapists. Little used by therapists, their presence in the theory and practice of interpersonal and public communication makes us believe that a certain part of communication, the psychiatric one, has produced the new model of communication and current practices. However, what can be applied in family therapy or more widely, is reframing, a technique used also in counselling, which requires those who communicate to get out of the situation - with the problems, events or people involved - and to re-interpret its meanings because from a different perspective, the opportunities to find acceptable alternative solutions to their problems increase.

I think that’s why Watzlawick’s pragmatic axioms of communication can serve rather philosophical counsellors, namely, existential stylistics /therapy. If what I have said above are only negative arguments in favour of a close relationship between philosophical counselling and Watzlawick’s axioms, there is also a strong positive argument. From the beginning of his work, he accepts the proposed by Charles Morris to distinguish in the study of human communication in three areas,

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 45.

¹² *Ibidem*, 22-23.

syntactic, semantic and pragmatic.¹³ Syntactic would be the transmission of information, semantics is about meaning, and pragmatics is about how communication influences behaviour. Watzlawick accepts that the first part belongs to mathematical logic, the second to philosophy, and third, the pragmatics, to the psychology, but that these areas are not perfectly separate and they interfere in his works. He uses numerous examples of mathematical logic, still more psychological examples, but for what would be semantics he uses mainly literary examples, giving even an entire chapter to analysis Edward Albee's play: „A Communicational Approach to the Play WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?“.

It is quite clear today that human language and culture in general are significant activities, rather than codes. That is why the Saussure project of achieving a system of semantic paradigms of language has failed, and the codification of other activities of cultural significance, such as the arts, have had very relative successes. However, between the different cultural significance activities, there are differences between the degrees of ambiguity or the degrees of formalization. Literature, as significant activities, is much more ambiguous than philosophy, whose discourse supervised by logic, seems the closest to what can be a codification in the field of human semantics. When, especially towards the end of the paper, Watzlawick questions the meaning of existence, he invokes, somewhat in the continuity of his interest in mathematical theory and logic, Wittgenstein. But he also mentions existentialist philosophies. The presence of existentialist philosophy and Watzlawick's evident sympathy for it makes us wonder if philosophy could not be the approximate semantic code of human meanings, which would work well with a pragmatic of communication?

After initiating the comparison of compatibility between current philosophy and Watzlawick's thinking at the level of finding that the reality for us, people, is communication, I continued to invoke a more detailed analysis of communication as a relationship as Watzlawick did. In parallel with the change of the thematizations from the being to the knowledge and now to the communication, western thought has passed from the entities of the period of the thematicization of the being, to entities that are in relations in the context of the thematicization of the

¹³ Charles W. Morris, "Foundation of the Theory of Sign", in *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, vol. I, ed. Otto Neurath, Rudolf Carnap, Charles W. Morris (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1938), 77-137.

knowledge. Now we are in the thematization of communication in western thinking, where the ultimate fund of what exists is relations. Indeed, anthropology and psychology are alongside philosophy in stating that relationships - with others and with ourselves – constitute us as existents.

Or, in its communicative exercise, philosophical counselling – or existential stylistics/therapy – turns out to be very close to what philosophy is today. When, before, philosophy was about being, “Know thyself” meant: be aware that you are not a god, that you are not the absolute (you do not own all the truth, just participate in it). Then in modernity, when philosophy was about knowledge, it could mean: knowing yourself psychologically, with your qualities and flaws. Now it should be translated like this: Communicate well with yourself and others (I am ok, you are ok). According to what is now philosophy, philosophical counselling/existential stylistics or therapy has the communication itself as content and is the purest communicational between therapies!

It is precisely this what Watzlawick seems to develop with all his approaches to systems theory, game theory, paradox logic and math. More than psychological, not being founded on the territory of psychology or psychiatry, like the other psychotherapies, his therapy proves to be communicative. Especially the last two concluding chapters, six and seven – *Paradoxical Communication* and *Paradox in Psychotherapy* – make this option more clear. In fact, the procedure he proposes actually concerns the logic of communication: reframing, the mechanism of the double bond applied therapeutically or prescribing the symptom. All this is enough to infuse with so many communication procedures psychological therapy that it is increasingly difficult to distinguish in the common practice what actually belongs to psychology or psychiatry and what is only the communicative dexterity of the therapist. The more the cure in psychotherapy depends on the personality of the therapist, than on the consistency and relevance of the theory to which he feels connected.

But what is particularly forgotten today, is the end of Paul Watzlawick’s work. The work appears at a time of Western thought when structuralism became dominated. The period of relative forgetfulness that Watzlawick went through can also be explained by the fact that he is a follower of systems theory, but his preferences are those suggested

by computer systems, not by the language system, so he is somewhat pre-structuralist. The *Epilogue* of his work is called *Existentialism and the Theory of Human Communication: an Outlook*. It may seem curious that, instead of being consistent and moving in the direction of the evolution of his options for systems theory, which would have been structuralism, he returns to existentialism, which may then have seemed an outdated stage. Namely, he wonders if any of the principles of his theory of human communication pragmatics “can be of any use when the focus is shifted from the interpersonal to the existential, and if so, in what way”¹⁴

The essence of what he has to say starts from the idea that the human experience of reality usually has three levels: first, the perception of sensitive objects, respectively the knowledge of things, the second, the knowledge about knowledge, and the third is the knowledge about second-order knowledge, respectively the understanding of their meaning in relation to human existence: “Finally, out of the sum total of the meanings that he has deduced from his contacts with numerous single objects of his environment there grows a unified view of the world into which he finds himself “thrown” (to use an existentialist term again), and this view is of the third order”. This knowledge of the third order “offers a meaningful premise for one’s existence”.¹⁵ Man has great flexibility and adaptability as long as “his third-order premises about his existence, and the meaning of the world he lives in, remain inviolate”.¹⁶ Modifying the premises of the third order is possible only from a fourth level. This is the level of therapy. From this level we can see “that for all intents and purposes our subjective experience of existence is reality - reality is our patterning of something that most probably is totally beyond objective human verification”.¹⁷

In a general characterization, Paul Watzlawick is considered a theoretician of communication and radical constructivism, with comments in family therapy and general psychotherapy. Furthermore, philosophical counselling appears as a communicative practice, which uses philosophy as the most formalized semantics of human culture. The work of Paul Watzlawick, *Pragmatics of human communication...* should be considered theoretical prolegomena to any philosophical counselling.

¹⁴ Ibidem, 257.

¹⁵ Ibidem, 261.

¹⁶ Ibidem, 264.

¹⁷ Ibidem, 267.

There remains only one problem in identifying philosophical counselling with pure communicative therapy. Just as Watzlawick's pragmatics seem to be psychological or psychotherapeutic, philosophical counselling seems to lean toward practices that, at least at first glance, have little to do with communication. If philosophical counselling is essentially communicative, dialogic, it may seem a little strange to recommend, as a well-known representative of it does, meditation and particularly her most fashionable form today, mindfulness.¹⁸ Therefore, philosophical counselling recommends meditation - can it belong to pure communication therapy?

I think that the current form of man has reached the limit of his ability to abstract. Meaning, whether man is the product of biological evolution or divine creation, thinking has been made for nourishment and reproduction. The peremptory evidence is the statistical frequency with which great mathematicians, who go beyond the third level of abstraction, often have mental disturbances. I do not know whether or not the man invented computers to abstract in his place and beyond his mental limits, just as he invented other machines to take over his physical work beyond his powers.

Man is a neurotic animal, one that thinks more than it would have been biologically and evolutionarily appropriate. In human neurosis, philosophical counselling/existential stylistic or therapy needs to tell humans that thinking is not the effective reality and also that excessive and untested thinking separate, isolates us. Meditation means returning to sensory communication with things and with you as a thing. The return to perception, the exit from the hypnotic isolation of thought. As mindfulness is thinking without a thinker, it can only be communication.

¹⁸ Lou Marinoff, *Plato Not Prozac* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999).