

Book review

Practice and the human sciences: The case for a judgment-based practice of care, Donald E. Polkinghorne, SUNY Press, Albany, NY, 2004, 221 pp., \$24.95, paper (ISBN 7914-6200-5)

Life-directing attunements are assimilated over time and reinforced or calibrated under the influence of cultural and relational factors. Though these attunements tend to be ill-structured and ill-defined, they nevertheless operate as sediments of orientation, serving to shape, enact and critique the “narrative sense” mediating our daily experience. As such, life-directing attunements play a key role in shaping our aspirations and personal esteem, and they also influence our general orientation toward struggles and opportunities arising in our day-to-day lives. These attunements often play a pivotal role in shaping the sense of the world through which we affirm or question who and where we are in life. Yet we seldom subject these attunements to careful consideration or reflective clarification. If we sense a problem in the makeup of our experience, or someone confronts us with a challenge to our mode of existence, we are not likely to investigate the underlying influence of our life-directing attunements. We are far more likely to respond *from the standpoint* of these attunements.

As philosophers, our training and experience condition us to ask questions and conduct analyses within specific contexts of inquiry. When as philosophers we encounter the personal life-problems of other people as the context for inquiry--that is, when people engage philosophical assistance to guide their interrogation of a specific life-problem, for the purpose of helping them understand and address this problem--we can only provide this assistance from the orientation of our personal (and) philosophical attunements. The nature of these attunements will clearly play a significant role in determining how these philosophical encounters unfold.

In the spirit of Heidegger's analysis of Dasein's contribution to the disclosure and concealment of Being,¹ we might suggest at this point that attunement is our primary initiation to experience and meaning, to sense and world, and to ourselves and others. But if this is the case, then philosophical counselors -- and counselors of any stripe -- can operate, *as practitioners*, only within the question concerning the influence and calibration of the guiding attunements inherent in their professional practice. Should we be concerned to develop a philosophical practice that recognizes the force of this fundamental, ontological question?

Whether we recognize it or not, the calibration of attunement is a central, fundamental consideration for all counseling practices, one that applies to the full scope of interactions between practitioners and their clients. But what are we to make of this process of calibration? Should we aim for the mastery of a technique-driven process? Or will the complexities of counseling encounters demand a more phronetic, judgment-based approach to analysis? Why does it matter one way or the other?

¹ Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (SUNY, 1996), §29ff.

Taking our cue from Deleuze and Nancy,² we could suggest here that every engagement with inquiry involves an encounter with a present moment pregnant with an open future, harboring a *multiplicity* of possible resolutions for closing down questions that precipitate or fuel the inquiry. Once a point of entry is initiated, other possibilities disperse to the margins of inquiry or dissipate altogether. Each step, each response, each question addresses our attempt to clarify, redirect or open up lines of flight within our field of inquiry. Each serves to actualize certain possibilities, but only at the expense of others. Suppose I interject an analytical question concerning the meaning of key terms. Should we be concerned that an intervention of this sort might preclude exploring for reasons behind the ambiguous manner in which the problem was initially posed? Or should we be content to defer these questions until our original, ambiguous orientation to the problem is re-framed, and the key terms lodged within carefully prescribed meanings?

On the other hand, I might try to work from a phenomenological attunement, with the intention of taking up the issue or concern in its initial presentation and exploring the ambiguities inherent in this formulation. By examining the meanings inherent in the initial formulation of a problem, I might hope to learn more about how the problem looks to my interlocutor. But this could also mean I defer examining conceptual confusions that are contributing to this initial framing of the problem.

Adopting a hermeneutic attunement might mean we embark on a path of inquiry with the goal of contextualizing the emerging philosophical problem within a shared cultural heritage. This might help to reduce the sense of isolation inherent in our initial experience of the problem. But this, in turn, might preclude engaging the singular character of the life-experiences that are driving the problem to the surface in the first place. After all, why has *this* formulation of the problem surfaced in this person's life at this particular moment of engagement? Why has *this* formulation become the point-of-departure to set in motion the unfolding context of our inquiry?

Suppose my attunement suggests we are entertaining a moral or ethical problem, or an epistemic question concerning belief or judgment. Could this lead us to overlook the existential dimension of a problem altogether? Should the philosopher in me be concerned about this possibility? Or is it better that I try to dislodge problems from their singular point of reference in the life of my interlocutor? But if philosophical attunement works this way, how can my practice avoid becoming a philosophical intervention? Perhaps as a philosopher I should *expect* to intervene in my interlocutor's attempt to frame the problem for discussion. How can I avoid assimilating my interlocutor's problem to my own philosophical attunements? Should it concern me that my intervention might eclipse the original sensitivities from which the problem first emerged? Will this not "expropriate" the subjectivity of my interlocutor in service to the philosophical agenda motivating (or motivated by) my methods of analysis?

² Cf. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (University of Minnesota, 1987) and Jean-Luc Nancy, "Concealed Thinking," in *A Finite Thinking* (Stanford, 2003), especially pp. 43-46.

In *Practice and the human sciences*, Donald Polkinghorne presents a compelling critique of the dominant influence of technical-rational methods of practice in the human sciences.³ In the process, he also articulates the basis for a phronetic, “judgment-based” practice of care, drawing from a broad range of practical attunements that can be applied to methodological considerations in philosophical practice. The dominant thread of his analysis lies embedded in his critique of “technically informed decision processes.” His concern addresses technical-rational methods that have been “developed for the control and management of human behavior” (5). These manual-based methods have been instituted in response to pressures from “managed care” systems to link insurance coverage for treatment of human disorders to empirically validated methods of intervention. Manual-based practices gain traction in the managed care industry because they lead to generalized, predictable outcomes.

We find a simple motivation underlying the models of counseling intervention prescribed by managed care systems. As Polkinghorne notes, “manualized, empirically supported treatments” offer reliable, scripted techniques for “evidence-based” decision-making (4). If we assume the inherent predictability of human behavior, it would seem right to claim that care practices “should take advantage of this characteristic” by utilizing practices “that have been shown to produce a predictable result” (190). After all, is it not a mark of wisdom to “know in advance which actions will produce the desired outcomes,” and to determine the timeframe and expense of delivering these interventions “so managers can anticipate and control their costs?” Working from this attunement, how can the caregiver avoid striving to become “the strategic means for achieving institutional goals?” (129)

As a consequence of the expectations inherent in this approach, health-care practitioners learn to suspend their natural embodied reasoning aptitudes, or what some cognitive scientists refer to as the “background.” Polkinghorne has in mind the reasoning aptitudes that incorporate our “background knowledge, emotional feeling, imaginative scenarios, and reflective cognition.” He considers these aptitudes fundamental to our capacity for “integrative, nonlinear processing” and personalized deliberation (130-31). When models of intervention reduce the counselor’s practical judgment to manual-driven practices, systems of managed care (and counseling practices in general) risk losing touch with the specific needs of individuals. For to embrace these methods means “losing the flexibility provided by phronetically guided personal judgment to determine the most effective way to care for an individual with certain characteristics in a certain place at a certain time” (129).

This is not an insignificant loss, as Polkinghorne makes clear. The value inherent in a practice shaped by “background knowledge” derives from the production of “targeted” flexibility. Our background “configures itself according to specific contextual or situational needs.” In the process, “it does not bring to the fore the totality of all that it holds” but is instead “guided by the situation in which the person is acting” (157). As Aron Gurwitsch has remarked (in a passage quoted by Polkinghorne), in situations where background thinking is operational

³ Donald Polkinghorne, *Practice and the Human Sciences: The Case for a Judgment-Based Practice of Care* (SUNY, 2004).

(and for Gurwitsch there is no counseling situation where background is not operational), a special responsibility arises for the professional practitioner:

what is imposed on us [as a responsibility] is not determined by us as someone standing outside the situation simply looking in at it; what occurs and is imposed are rather prescribed by the situation and its own [unique] structure; and we do more and greater justice to it the more we let ourselves be guided by it, i.e., the less reserved we are in immersing ourselves in it and subordinating ourselves to it. We find ourselves in a situation and are interwoven with it, encompassed by it, indeed just “absorbed” into it.⁴

A judgment-based practice operates with a blend of reflective attunement and “nonconscious operations.” This complex blend of aptitudes allows us to “draw on complexly organized, internal understandings about the world and about what to do to get things done” in support of our “dialogic engagement” with the situation in which our practice is being conducted (163). This “results in an increasing understanding of the unfolding situation,” and this in turn provides intervals for recalibrating our attunement, e.g., by posing an iterative, dialectical series of questions. Drawing on Gadamer’s notion of “effective historical consciousness,” Polkinghorne remarks on the iterative process involved in this recalibration of attunement:

The formulation of questions progresses through stages of an unfocused ‘feeling’ that asks about the adequacy of the received interpretation to a more explicit questioning intended to solicit answers through a worldly response. As answers are received, questions are often modified and sharpened to produce [what Patrick Healy refers to as] a “new series of questions better attuned to the particularities of the subject matter.” Gadamer’s questioning process is an iterative and dialectic process whereby answers to initial questions produce further questions that require further testing.⁵

Another central component of this approach is drawn from Schön’s notion of “reflection in action,” which relates to Dewey’s concept of knowledge in action. Polkinghorne offers as examples the “improvisations that make up a good conversation and practitioners’ sensible on-the-spot responses to unexpected questions or statements from students or clients.” Of course, the challenge to this model from managed care systems is that practitioners rarely have the capacity to articulate what is involved in their knowledge-*in-action*. As a result, “outside observers cannot write it up so that it can be taught to others” or, more to the point, so it can be subjected to strategies of *empirical validation*. The difficulty

⁴ Aron Gurwitsch, *Human Encounters in the Social World* (Duquesne University, 1979), p. 67.

⁵ Polkinghorne, p. 165. The Healy quote is from “Situated Rationality and Hermeneutic Understanding: A Gadamerian Approach to Rationality.” *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 36 (2), 155-171.

here lies in the fact that any instance of knowledge-*in-action* “is a product of each practitioner’s unique history of personal experience” (169).

Polkinghorne contends the people served by care practices often “fall outside the categories” determining when to apply empirically validated theories and techniques. Recognizing the importance of this excess remainder, Polkinghorne argues that practitioners “need to reflect-*in-action* and adjust what they do on the move if they are to help clients achieve their goals” (170). He claims his judgment-based approach offers this flexibility, because the modes of thought it sanctions utilize reflective-understanding to draw on background knowledge and dialogic reflection. As he puts the point,

Reflective understanding draws on the full human capacities for interacting with other persons. It involves an integration of previous personal and cultural learning, imagined scenarios of responses to an action, and emotional readings of possible actions in the situation. In reflective understanding the practitioner is attuned to salient features of a specific situation and responsive to the nuanced changes that are occurring during an interchange. It is a decision process that adapts to the particular complex situations in which practitioners of care serve. (176)

Of course, questions will always arise concerning whether this approach can actually prepare a practitioner to do “the correct action or set of actions to produce the desired outcome.” At the same time, judgment-based practices are open to their own specific form of validation. The point is not to gauge validity in terms of empirical conformity, where, for instance, we might stress a conformity of rules and techniques to practices of deductive logic and calculative thinking (which in turn would determine the “correct” application of an intervention *prior* to its implementation). In a judgment-based (phronetic) practice, “correct actions are determined in the situation,” and validity hinges simply on the extent to which chosen interventions help clients make progress in attaining their goals. As Polkinghorne explains,

Actions in judgment practice, at the most basic level, are valid if they move the caring process forward. The validity of an action cannot be known in advance. Validity is determined by its effectiveness in a particular situation at a particular time. Whether or not a judgment about what to do was valid becomes known after the fact. Practitioners of care must monitor the effect of their judgments continuously. Determining the validity of judgments is an essential and ongoing part of the caring process. When actions prove ineffective or do not advance the process adequately, practitioners need to engage in reflective understanding to enlarge their perceptive understanding of the situation and consider other possible actions. (171-2)

This insight bears directly on the issue concerning calibrations of attunement in counseling practices. Recalibrating attunement often requires practitioners to make adjustments that “flow directly out of their background understanding without passing through awareness.” The implication that “two different practitioners can make different judgments in similar situations and both be correct,” each in their own specific way (172). As Healy remarks, “trained judgment brings with it the ability to recognize the salient features of a situation, the relevant constellation of operative factors and patterns, their harmony or disharmony, and the weight that they should have in a particular context.”⁶

Unfortunately, despite the obvious demand for judgment and openness in the “direct person-to-person interactions” of personal counseling practices, managed-care practitioners are facing an ever-increasing pressure “to conform to the dominant cultural themes of means-end rationality and ordered efficiency” (175). Indeed, “the institutions that control payment for these services...have demanded that practice become more technological, and the [counseling] disciplines have responded by shifting their research and training to a [technique] driven practice” as the most effective way to diagnose and respond to human problems (175). But as managed-care systems affirm the priority of technical-rational methods, the judgment-based practices become increasingly marginalized within the care professions. In the process, human components of the practitioner-client interaction become translated into abstract mechanical representations that are more conducive to manualized treatment.

The message for philosophical counseling is unambiguously clear. To the extent philosophical practices establish a foothold in the managed-care system and manage to qualify specific treatment plans for insurance coverage, possibilities for preserving the rich textures of human engagement will likely diminish in proportion to the implementation of practices conforming to technical-rational schemes of validity. This would lead to fewer opportunities for cultivating counseling practices in which attunement and openness are calibrated in response to the unique qualities of each specific encounter. If Polkinghorne’s analysis of managed care systems is prescient, the result could also lead to a commodification of the enterprise of philosophical engagement.

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⁶ Patrick Healy, “Rationality, Judgment, and Critical Inquiry,” *The Electronic Journal of Analytic Philosophy*, 1 (3), p.4.