SOCRATES MEETS FREUD
Erik Boers

Why Socrates would look with wonder at 'trainers'… This article examines and analyses the practice of management training from a philosophical perspective, drawing on personal reflection and the writings of thinkers in the philosophy, psychology and training professions.

Introduction
As a management-consultant/trainer with a philosophical background I was asked to give a lecture for the conference called "Socrates meets Freud" (November 2004) organised by behavioural skills training group of the Dutch Psychological Institute. In this conference the practice of management training was analysed from both the psychological and philosophical perspective.

As a philosopher I feel comfortable in the world of behavioural skills trainings. Socrates one of my inspirers, regularly hung around with trainers. Not infrequently he and his friends conversed in or around the *gymnasion*, the ancient equivalent of our fitness centre, where Athenian men kept their bodies in shape, on account of the requirement to be permanently available for military service.

What do psychologists and philosophers have in common?

Psychotherapists and philosophers have more in common than we generally believe. The roots of psychotherapy can be found in ancient philosophy, for example in the *Stoa*. One discipline is, however, creative and the other preventive. Psychotherapy focuses on healing disturbed souls, while philosophy attempts to educate towards a balanced intellect (mind, spirit) and life. Philosophy is a form of 'psychagogy', according to Pierre Hadot in his brilliant book "Philosophy as a way of life." (p. 21)

Recently, together with a number of trainer-colleagues, I read "When Nietzsche Wept" by Irvin D. Yalom. He is professor of psychiatry at Stanford University and in 1980 published the standard textbook "Existential Psychotherapy". In preparing to write this book he spent years studying the works of philosophers like Sartre, Heidegger, Camus, Jaspers, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. It was Nietzsche whom he found to be the most powerful and creative. Nietzsche also seemed to him to be the most relevant person for psychotherapy. For this reason Yalom wanted to rewrite history. What would have happened if Nietzsche had come into contact with psychoanalysis? In "When Nietzsche Wept", Nietzsche comes into indirect contact

with Freud. Nietzsche starts to work with Freud's friend and mentor Josef Breuer. Freud is still a student in those days. Breuer receives the (confidential) request from Lou Salome to help Nietzsche overcome his depression. Breuer regularly discusses this unusual assignment with his student Freud. But as Nietzsche does not want to be helped for his depression, Breuer engineers a role-reversal: he will help Nietzsche get rid of his migraine, if Nietzsche will cure him of his despair. Nietzsche hesitates, admitting to his powerlessness (lack of experience as therapist), but finally agrees to make an attempt. And thus Nietzsche becomes Breuer's psychotherapist and friend, and in the end his own as well.

Yalom assumes that Nietzsche must be the master of a powerful methodology. In studying Nietzsche's life he learns that he makes a spectacular recovery from a vital depression in the very year in which the book is set. In 1882 suicide looms. Only a few months later, in the spring of 1883, Nietzsche energetically begins to write "Thus Spoke Zarathustra". The first three parts were completed in a mere 10 days. More significantly: this work is optimistic, life-confirming and full of vitality. How did Nietzsche manage to turn from a desperate hopelessness to an exuberant acceptance of life in such a short period? (Yalom Reader p386)

Two citations from "When Nietzsche Wept" strike me as particularly relevant:

> *"Our last sessions have been false and superficial. Look at what we tried to do: discipline your thoughts, control your behaviour! Thought training and behaviour shaping! These methods are not for the human realm! Ach, we're not animal trainers!"* (p. 219)

> *"I should be a raiser, not a lowerer! Treating him as a child whose mind must be slapped when it misbehaves is lowering him. And lowering me as well! IF A HEALING LOWERS THE HEALER, CAN IT POSSIBLY RAISE THE PATIENT?"* (p. 217)

In his writings Freud hardly referred to Nietzsche at all. However, in the notes of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society Yalom discovered two meetings in 1908 which were devoted entirely to Nietzsche's work. In these notes Freud acknowledges that Nietzsche's intuitive method had resulted in insights which showed a surprising agreement with the results of systematic scientific research by psychoanalysts. The Psychoanalytic Society praised Nietzsche for being the first person who had understood the significance of abreaction, repression, forgetting, flight into disease and the basic instincts of mental life (sexual as well as sadistic). (Yalom Reader, p. 382)

Yalom, as well as the Dutch writer Jac Graste in his book about the history of psychotherapy, make clear that philosophers and psychologists have a great deal in common. Perhaps we currently tend to assume more differences than there really are. The differences might lie elsewhere, for example between different streams of thought within each discipline (deconstructivists versus neo-Kantians, system-therapists versus Jungians). Or, even more likely, between any random group of trainers, or of psychologists! The key question is: Can we live with these differences? Or, to put it another way: How do we avoid a situation in which everyone just does whatever seems right to him or her at the time? What binds us together?

Which form should theory take?

Sometimes critical questions are asked about the manner in which trainers ply their trade: What in the love of God (for heavens sake) are we trainers *doing*? How do we know that we're doing something worthwhile? Are we all doing the same thing? Isn't it about time that, in addition to do carrying out our work, we develop a theory in order to be able to verify that we do is in fact what we set out to do? Do we learn from our own experience? Or do we merely seek confirmation for what we are doing and thinking anyway?

I support these critical questions, but I do not support the suggestion made that we look to the empirical-scientific method to work with. This is sometimes – mistakenly – proposed as the only possible method.

There are two questions which I would like to throw up in this context:
1. What type of theory is necessary – and possible – in our profession?
2. What do we do with our theories in the course of training events?

Let's have a look at a couple of scientists who have conducted research into 'learning in organisations'. The question is, which form should the proposed theory assume? An empirical-scientific form? That is difficult: according to Argyris, empirical-scientific research supports and stimulates Model 1 behaviour, 'maintaining unilateral control' (and therefore not being transparent), to be specific. If you explain all the ins and outs of the experiment to the test audience you will of course influence their behaviour. So you don't, and thereby you would, according to Argyris, contribute to the maintenance of an undesired form of collaboration and communication in organisations.

Similarly, Wierdsma and Swieringa in their last book about the learning organisation: the empirical-scientific approach is most suited to an authoritarian, mechanistic organisation. (This is something which, by the way, does find resonance with Freud's highly mechanistic theories.) Basic premise: objectives can be unambiguously formulated and simply measured. For example: a client's training request is analysed and the desired outcome is split up into constituent behaviours, the training is delivered and empirical studies are conducted on the outcome. Consider an example: the client desires a greater degree of intrapreneurship. This is analysed into constituent behaviours and people are trained accordingly. Each part of the programme is evaluated positively. But it is no easy task to identify all the required constituent behaviours, nor will subsequent evaluative measures guarantee that the quality of intrapreneurship will increase.

Or again: A client comes with a question or wish (internal consultants should behave less as experts and more as coaches), a programme is developed with relevant objectives and in the end totally different outcomes are named as being the most important: openness, *really* having time and attention for each other, a lesson in modesty, it was self-analysis through the mirror of another. It was hard work, you discovered different and subtle shades of meaning; it made you feel more light-hearted, more flexible. Does this mean that the training was a failure?

In short, to me it is dubious whether the empirical-scientific approach is applicable to our work. That becomes even clearer to me when I ask myself how I learned to do what I do. Which knowledge and which skills are necessary, and how do you acquire them? When I reflect on how I learned to be a trainer, it wasn't at the university. I learned to be a trainer by working with professional colleagues. Splendid trainers, with very different backgrounds, rarely inclined to publish or theorise. Does that make them any less? Not in my eyes. They are constantly in discussion with themselves and with each other about what went well and what went badly, and what the underlying reasons might be.

In what does their expertise reside? For example, in the ability to horse around with a group; razor-sharp timing; but also: in logistical control (the placing flipcharts, having every exercise ready to hand on time, organizing subgroups without hesitation…). I expect that remarkably few individuals will suggest that their expertise derives from knowledge of the most recent psychological or sociological theories. That is more the domain of lecturers. Or, it is at most only a part of what you have to offer, as trainer. You seduce and mould a group or an individual participant, and then in such a way that a greater level of skill is the result.

What type of knowledge, which type of theory would do justice to training: causal-determinism or teleology? Hermeneutics or phenomenology? All these schools are present in the history of scientific psychology. Or should we perhaps take a look at the contemplative traditions, like the Buddhists or Benedictine monks? You could also delve into how trainers describe and account for their work in publications. In my view, they usually work with case histories. What kind of theorising is that?

I started writing and publishing myself approximately two years after going into the training business. I have continued to reflect about my work. Has reflecting and writing made me a better trainer? I believe so: for example, during and after writing Free Space it became clearer in my mind what I was trying to do and how I could achieve it. But it is not the only means by which I seek to improve my work as a trainer. How do I learn? I learn by trying things out, by making mistakes, from client and participant feedback, and by talking things through with colleagues.

Should we seek to turn psychology into a serious science, à la Lewin, or into a practical art of living (teleological, according to Aristotle, instead of causal)?

How much theory should you offer?

Turning back to Yalom. He writes about encounter groups.

> *In a study of encounter groups my colleagues and I learned that positive outcome was highly correlated with insight. Those subjects who obtained insight and were able to organize their experience in some coherent pattern had a positive outcome. Furthermore, the successful group leaders were those who provided some type of cognitive framework for their members. The type of insight that the successful members had, and the specific content of the ideological school from which the successful leaders sprang, had little to do with the positive outcome. The important feature was not* what *they had learned but* that *they had learned.* (Existential Psychotherapy, p.343)

Training experiences must be accompanied by interpretation, by a sense-making frame of reference, coming either from the facilitator or from the participant him- or herself. That is a territory in which the philosopher feels at home. Whether it is exclusively his territory, I don't know.

It is interesting to note that, even if one were to make use of empirical-scientific research methods, one would quickly encounter the limits of this approach. Research shows that sense-making is a requisite for a good training. This is incompatible with a strictly causal-deterministic approach, because sense-making cannot be captured in general statements which are valid under all circumstances. Sense-making is dependent on the person, on the time and on the circumstances. This makes it difficult to make generally acceptable or valid statements about it. The question is: should one even try?

The importance of sense-making is also clear from a quite different research approach, namely that employed by Victor Frankl. (*"Man's search for meaning"*) He conducted research, but in a quite personal manner – of necessity, while living in a concentration camp. His most important conclusion: it is only possible to survive if you have an expectation, something to look forward to, a sense-making frame of reference. He, who lost that, lost his life within several weeks. He was able to predict that quite reliably. So, quite literally, his own research kept him alive. According to Frankl, man seeks meaning: "Man's quest for meaning is a primary motivating factor, not a secondary rationalisation of more primary motives."

How do you provide a place for the primary urge towards sense-making in your work as a trainer? Is it a matter of importance to provide numerous theoretical frameworks in order to facilitate learning. (This is also the way in which a number of philosophical trainers work: texts, sayings, well worked-out views of man and the world from the history of Western philosophy are a source of inspiration for personal and professional reflection.) But the question remains, whether this is sufficient to stimulate people to make sense of their own professional realities.

Fate

Let's look at an example provided by a psychologist-trainer colleague.

He trains and coaches a group of trainers who work within a client organisation. There was a certain amount of friction around the right approach: should the group be working strictly in a fixed, project-like manner, or was it alright to be somewhat flexible with regard to agreements made. There was a split down the middle in the group: the structuralists and the creatives. The trainer was asked to facilitate a session to resolve this dispute. He placed the structuralists in an inner circle and the creatives in an outer circle. The creatives shadowed the members of the inner circle one to one to ensure that each would be heard. In this way everyone was forced to listen carefully to and take responsibility for another person. After a period of time the roles were reversed. In addition to this structural intervention, the trainer had provided content by giving the group the following question to consider" "Do I feel accepted?" He did this because that he felt that a general instruction to "evaluate process" would lead to little more than judgments and the settlement of old scores. ***You cannot leave people to their own fate".*** As background to this question about acceptance he provided Gibb's

model of group development, as a sense-making tool. Without a sense-making frame of reference it is impossible to take a step back. And as he wanted to turn this group into a learning organisation (no easy task) he felt he was responsible for the quality of the meeting. As a trainer he felt he was always responsible for providing theoretical frameworks in order to assist participants to bridge the gap between what they were saying and what they were doing. He had also explained his approach clearly to the group at the beginning of the session. He obeyed Argyris's call for transparency.

While preparing this approach, he had consulted a leading training professional. This person had advised: "In this (crisis) situation you must not let the degree of freedom increase. Force participants to behave in accordance with your role-modelling behaviour."

The meeting was a great success. The group moved very organically from this intervention to a fruitful discussion about a two-day programme in which many real and problematical situations were resolved.

I would guess that the participants indeed gave the session high marks for effectiveness. Empirically you could determine that the intervention worked, that this methodology is appropriate for this type of situation. What remains unclear is what the intervention or the method in fact was. Of course it is possible to write down the details of the intervention procedure, to create a guideline for future action. But what is actually happening here? How should we interpret it? Which objectives were being realised?

To my question, whether he had built in a moment of reflection during which the participants could think about what had happened and what it meant, the trainer replied in the negative. "I would regard thinking about your own values as collateral damage." Literally:

> In my view, personal values are a form of "collateral damage", about which participants sometimes make the most remarkable comments. The personal meaning which people attach to their experiences during a training and development program is, to put it positively, a secondary benefit.

The group could proceed; they were more skilled in handling internal conflict. That was it.

Looked at through the eyes of a philosopher, an important opportunity had been missed. It is precisely at that point, when the question "How do we make sense of this?" is discussed, that new and improved insights into one's own profession and own behaviour can develop. As trainer you can also make surprising discoveries. A trainer might think that participants have learned how to work together more effectively but perhaps they have a quite different perspective on the matter. It is when such different viewpoints exist that, in my view, interesting 'science' or 'theory' is created.

To the motto "Don't leave them to their own fate" I would counter: ***"Take your fate into your own hands."*** Reflecting on your own values and interpretations is not

'collateral damage', a secondary outcome, but exactly what training is all about. With as caveat that this reflection should take place *together*.

What is critical, in my view, is that we not restrict ourselves to providing meaningful frames of reference (plucked from our bookcases). These can help people to understand what a sense-making frame of reference can look like. But in the long run every individual needs to take his fate into his own hands, meaning: he should feel himself to be his own researcher, or philosopher. People need to develop their own frames of reference, while engaging in action. And this coincides with Socrates' appeal: think carefully about what you are doing, challenge each other in this regard, because right behaviour goes hand in hand with right insight.

The words of Epictetus capture the essence of what this is about:

> *The life of wisdom begins with learning how to put principles, such as "we ought not to lie," into practice. The second step is to demonstrate the truth of the principles, such as why it is that we ought not to lie. The third step, which connects the first two, is to indicate why the explanations suffice to justify the principles. While the second and the third steps are valuable, it is the fist step that matters most. For it is all too easy and common to lie while cleverly demonstrating that lying is wrong. (–Encheiridion # 56)*

It's not about subjecting everything to minute analysis, etc. It's about living in accordance with the right rules. That is also a form of training: training in good living. Epictetus and Socrates were accomplished developers of theory, but they left no models or publications for posterity. They tried to leave behind a set of practices, an exemplary way of living and thinking together.

Socrates' Astonishment: facilitating?

That this results in some irritating discussions, as we read in Plato, has to be freely admitted. Socrates, after all, rarely asked open questions. He asks very leading and suggestive questions. He also talks a great deal. That makes him a difficult character. But does this make him a bad trainer? It's the question whether we as trainer really ought to be facilitating. Shouldn't we rather be making things difficult for people? Or: shouldn't we constantly be making life difficult for ourselves? Granted, that will not result in high evaluation ratings, in our culture of experiencing and entertaining. Perhaps we shouldn't be 'facilitating' but *'difficilitating'*. The urge to act frequently wins out over the necessity to reflect. Where solutions begin, where helping begins, where advising begins: that's where thinking ends.

But that sort of adage doesn't always sit well with a group. People want to get on with things: everything is going well, isn't it? They think they agree. Why do we need to stop to consider the question: What *is* this, really? Why do we interpret that in this way? People find this difficult. It is not goal-directed. It is directed towards (shared) insight – while everyone has long since reached agreement.

What is this?

In short, my philosophical approach can be captured in: 'a joint exploration, initiated by the question "What is this?"'. A question we have to interpret as: What does this *mean*? What *are* we doing here? How should we *understand* this?

A simple exercise can make people sensitive for this way form of reflection (from my colleague Hans Bolten) . Just place any odd object in front of a group and asks: What is this? (Imagine taking an ordinary cigar from a box. and showing it to the group.) Immediately people will come up with different answers (A thing that looks like a cigar; a facilitator who starts an exercise; a sex toy, a movement …). From this confusion philosophising and sense making (and confusion) begins. And then the dialogue will reflect on itself: What's happening here? How should be understand what's going on?

Socrates wouldn't know what to make of this specific cigar. He is representative of a sort of professional naiveté. "I don't know, but let us investigate it."

Following the surrealistic painter Margritte the philosopher Foucault might say, "This is not a cigar."

And Freud was once quoted as saying: "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar." (But note the suggestion which hides behind the word 'sometimes'.)

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BIOGRAPHOCAL NOTE

During his studies in philosophy at the Free University, Amsterdam, **Erik Boers** (1960), together with some lecturers, established the branch of study *Philosophy on the Job*. To gain experience in management and organisation practice he started to train managers in a large electronics firm and moved on to a training and consulting bureau. From 1997 onwards he expressly concentrated on development and application of philosphical methods in management training and management consulting. Together with Jos Kessels he established The New Trivium in 1999. As philosopher/trainer he stimulates people to reflect, by letting them think systematically about their own practice, simultaneously urging them to critical self-reflection. Annually, Erik conducts a series of guest-lectures 'Philosophising in organisations' at the Free University, Amsterdam. He wrote articles that appeared in
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