



## Philosophical counselling: Foundations and Functions

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the nature, scope and applications of philosophical counselling as a discipline. It illustrates the history and various approaches of counselling in relation to philosophy. It aims to project the philosophical foundations in the Eastern and Western traditions which highlight the ideas and possible claims to philosophical counselling. This is an exploratory work focused to bring about critical thinking and sharing of wisdom through ages in order to tackle real time issues of the present generation confused and anxious about the matters of reality and existence. The expected outcome is a different methodology to counselling, a new model apart from psychological and psychiatric approach to therapy. And finally, to set philosophy into practice as philosophical counselling.*

*Received 15 Nov., 2022; Revised 28 Nov., 2022; Accepted 30 Nov., 2022 © The author(s) 2022.*

*Published with open access at [www.questjournals.org](http://www.questjournals.org)*

### I. Introduction

Philosophical counselling also known as philosophical practice or clinical philosophy is a modern-day movement in the practical applications of philosophy. It involves a dialectical approach of therapy between two or more people. The movement is known to be rooted in Socratic tradition, which viewed philosophy as a search for the Good and the Good life. Socratic Method was that of dialogue which stimulated critical thinking in order to draw out ideas and possible solutions, which is a major requirement even today as people tend to be shallow in addressing many of the existential queries. Even while the most fundamental question of “knowing oneself” is overlooked how we would then understand the complexities of life, which require tremendous attention to solve. There are some serious wrongs that are happening with all of humanity which needs to be acknowledged and recognised by every one of us. A philosopher is one who is inclined to look at things as they are, with a neutral mind without judgements and assumptions.

A serious student of philosophy will develop an insight on how philosophy can be applied into the present-day scenario with a fresh perspective after studying the various philosophical theories and subjects. He may naturally cherish the idea of practising counselling as a personal ambition. This paper therefore is an attempt to delineate the range and scope of fulfilling such a goal of understanding oneself and guiding fellow beings to self-examination and self-management.

In this work it is intended to explore the methods and significance of applying philosophical concepts to counselling practice. The main objective is to bring out the scope of applying the ideas and theories put forth by philosophers to instigate critical thinking and sharing of wisdom that may help to tackle real time issues of the present generation of individuals who are visibly confused in matters of personal existence and coexistence. We shall further try to highlight the distinction of philosophical counselling as a new model apart from psychological and psychiatric approach of therapy.

The methodology used in this paper is exploratory, to examine the various aspects of philosophical counselling taking into account the different components and concerns involved in the process. Philosophical counselling is a subjective act; therefore, a number of methods and ideas are put into action. Philosophical tenets have been at the heart of the counselling process since its inception. The subject matter of this paper is therefore insightful, broad and analytical in its own accord. The results of such an exploration are expected to be its representations and understanding in my own words the ideas expressed by philosophers of past and present as applicable in the context of counselling.

### **Philosophical Counselling**

Philosophical counselling is rather a new stream of therapy which deals with existential problems pertaining to human life. It is a broad approach of analysing, interpreting and communicating deep philosophical theories and principles in order to understand and examine the modern existential problems of an individual. Philosophical counselling aims at a dialectical style of therapy through which an individual may understand his/her own position in the context of various philosophical viewpoints. The issues at hand are not looked at as issues but with an intention of taking a step back method through engaging in a dialogue and applying various philosophical insights and tenets in order to reach more clarity about one's position in society and the world at large. Ultimately every individual knowingly or unknowingly lives in according to a certain kind of philosophy, it may be in terms of a particular religion, spirituality or in a particular way of thinking as a sceptic, agnostic, atheistic, theistic etc.

### **What is Philosophical Counselling?**

A trained philosopher is one who will engage with the subject to understand the problems faced by a client and to provide insights through philosophical conversation. It is a very subjective approach where the problems may be due to conflicts within oneself or with outside public, which traps an individual into irrational thinking and becomes difficult to come out of it. The most common issue reported is the entrapment of one's own ego state which leads to emotional, mental, spiritual and physical problems that may lead to conflicts in life. There seems to be a cycle in which one may get stuck, and this kind of frame-up is a smaller replica of the Buddhist theory of *Samsāra* (Trainor, 2004), the cycle of life, death and reincarnation. In the present-day lifestyle, the issues are of virtues being in conflict with our true nature causing mental obstructions, unhealthy emotional outbreaks, anxiety, overthinking, losing meaning of life etc. Many a times, people tend to look for alternate ways to free themselves from this cycle of suffering without trying to investigate into the real nature of the problem. This is where a trained philosophical counsellor comes into the picture through sharing insights of various eastern and western schools of thought and theories which may help realign the individual to his/her life. It does not mean to force any kind of theory or idea onto the individual, but rather to provide support to think clearly, analytically and critically into one's own beliefs, values and potentials.

### **What Philosophical counselling is not?**

It is important to recognize that not all life-problems can be dealt with dialogue and guidance counselling. There are situations in which it is appropriate to seek the care of a health care professional with the training in psychology for treatment in emotional and behavioural disorder. There are instances in which a problem may be in one's brain-chemistry and it is appropriate to get the help of a medical professional who can prescribe medication.

Philosophical counselling is not a form of psychotherapy and does not reduce existential quandary to psychological abnormality. It never assumes that clients are neurotic or sick. Nor does it seek to affect a neurobiological cure. Human problems are not always invariably due to psychological abnormality. They may result from a lack of clarity in self-understanding. The dynamic interaction through philosophical counselling promotes clear thinking about fundamental issues. It does not, however, address conditions of clinical depression and delusional tendencies that should be handled by a professional psychiatrist. Philosophical counselling is not concerned with past traumas or childhood wounds. It concerns itself with the client's present problems and assumptions and values. (K.L.Sharma, n.d.)

### **Scope of practice for Philosophical Counselling**

Philosophy is a subject which deals with almost all general aspects of life and reality, its concern ranges from individual inquiries to the entire reality. Hence, the scope for applying philosophy can be extended to a number of areas as outlined below:

#### **Client consulting – Individual**

1. Complications with existential questions like meaning or purpose of life.
2. Complications with personal morality or ethics
3. Complications with analysing and interpreting personal belief systems
4. Complications with understanding various philosophical theories or ideas.

#### **Organisational Consulting – Institutional**

1. Complications with analysis and interpretation of Business entities, Business ethics, Human resource management
2. Complications with Social and Political development, think tanks and Environmental issues.
3. Complications with last stage patients/ End of life care in various hospitals seeking meaning of life and death.

4. Complications with academia relating to children and college students.
5. Complications with Career and professional fulfilment.

### **The Role of a Philosophical Counsellor**

A philosophical counsellor approaches his client on the premise of rationality and the willingness of functional individuals who are curious to understand the struggles and perplexities centred in human condition. These struggles may range to various degrees, on an individual level one may face identity crisis of not knowing oneself or lost in the doubts of knowing life and reality of what is true from false, also in the area of right knowledge to wrong, a philosophical counsellor works in a way to help the client navigate within oneself to find out the solutions to the problems, the client already possesses qualities such as critical thinking, rational mind, empathy, introspection, creativity and imagination, which is brought to the attention of the client and thus relating it to various theories and ideas which may bring about clarity of thought. This process may be used to find solutions to problems or even just mere curiosity to understand oneself better.

The responsibility of the counsellor is to enable the counsees to do a philosophical self-examination and to help to develop their own philosophical stance in order to deal with problems and lives in their own way. There are two major goals of philosophical counselling – one is the philosophical self-understanding or acquiring of wisdom which is an end in itself and the other is to overcome personal problems which may arise out of wrong belief systems and unethical life styles.

The philosophical counsellor may act as a navigation partner through dialogue in order to bring out the existing belief systems of the client and thus then introduce the various schools of thought which then match the temperament of the client. It is very important for the counsellor to be creative enough to understand the client's thinking and suggest relevant ideas for discussion. The counsellor never tells the client what to think or what to do, but instead asks questions and offers new perspectives, draws attention to matters that are important and makes connections in terms of ideas and reality. It is important to understand that every individual lives with a certain kind of philosophy, and so a philosophical counsellor's work would be to listen intently to the client and his operating worldview, and then work to develop a coherent philosophy that will serve him well-being.

In the world of business, large multinational organisations have to deal with a large number and wide variety of human resource, and so philosophical counselling will help in maintaining a systematic and considerate code of ethics which will ensure smooth management of the enterprise. It also analyses and interprets the channels of inner and outer communication lines in a more effective and broader perspective considering the fact that a multinational company functions all over the world facing challenges of cultural and language barriers. Philosophical counselling thus plays a vital role in advising the human resource department on the code of ethics and mode of human interaction.

Many of the social and political issues can be addressed skilfully and professionally with reference to the earlier philosophical ideas of great thinkers of ancient Greece like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle who is considered to be the father of Political science. Also, the ancient Indian legends like Kautilya the Chanakya, more modern thinkers and reformers like Sri Aurobindo and Swami Vivekananda who have clearly defined certain theories and principles in order to create a harmonious society which are centred in development, harmony and peace.

Environmental problems can be foreseen and dealt with various normative and explanatory theories. (Rich, 2014). Philosophy clearly defines the conservation ethics for making human communities and ecosystems better and for protecting important resources for the present and future. Philosophy defines the intrinsic values and aesthetics of nature. A philosophical consultant can systematically identify the issues of ecological devastation and bring them before the attention of people. This invokes the individual to live in tune with a philosophical outlook which satisfies the physical and psychological needs by tuning in with nature and farming to live without the corrupt tendencies of social life. This awakens the philosopher inside each individual to live on his or her own terms.

Philosophical counselling has remarkable scope of guidance in the area of terminally ill patients who are in end-of-life care who would be more inclined to the enquiry of life and death. Many cancer patients report changes in how they experience the meaning of life and being confronted with life's limitations, understanding themselves as being vulnerable, finite, and free beings. Many would like to receive psychotherapeutic help for this, Philosophical counsellor can help in providing various meanings and interpretations to the existential queries of these patients, the result of such a therapy may lead to a positive outlook of life by giving fresh perspectives for the unfortunate patient who are in the final stage of life. A counsellor can help in easing out the process by enriching the patient with the different interpretations of life and death theories.

Finally, Educational area which mainly involves children who require guidance in choosing a profession as well as making informed decisions of life choices, a philosophical counsellor can play a vital role in shaping and moulding the child in the right direction by interpreting deep philosophical theories and ideas in simple terms to broaden the perspective of the child which in turn shapes the future. Education is the foundation of the future of the child as well as of humanity, firstly right education would mean interpretation and

understanding of the basic terms and correcting the flaws in the system, a philosophical counsellor in this area behaves as an academic adviser who shares and imparts the knowledge of philosophy to children in order to provide clarity in thinking, broader perspective and to make informed judgements especially in terms of choosing peer connections and future career decisions.

Philosophers can be seen as experts in analysing concepts of the world, both metaphysical and empirical (e.g., as in the philosophy of science). A trained philosopher is skilled in uncovering implied assumptions and offer alternative ones, recognising inconsistencies, in drawing implications through critical analysis and in exposing hidden patterns and structures. A philosopher who is familiar with ethics may be able to interpret easily to the clients what is right and what is wrong showing them alternative ideas and choices. A philosopher who is familiar with phenomenology is proficient in unfolding aspects of personal experiences that are commonly unnoticed by an average person.

The responsibility of the philosophical counsellor is to enrich oneself with the various schools of thought in accordance with one's own temperament and inclination. It is very important to have a strong hold on the basic ideas pertaining to different aspects of life and reality. It is required of the counsellor to know about matters concerning life, belief systems, religion and spirituality with reference to various schools of thought both western, and eastern.

### **Methods of Philosophical counselling**

Philosophical counselling is a wide spectrum of interrelated methods and approaches, due to the nature of counselling there can be different ways of guidance, many factors play part in a counselling session, first and foremost is the subjective experience of the counsellor and counselee, then follows the temperament of knowledge, skills, surrounding influences, education back grounds and the state of minds of both the individuals. The analysis of various approaches in modern philosophical counselling can be divided into three main groups. (Valentinovich, 2018)

#### **Problem solving approach**

This is a method focuses on specific problems of people with regard to life and the means to overcome them. These are issues such as dissatisfaction with work, marital relationships, low self-esteem, illogical belief systems, etc. It is very similar to the methods of psychotherapy, which involves a dialectical style of counselling usually with individuals or group. The main objective is to identify firstly the issue in the light of introspection and discussion. The counsellor may start of by asking relevant questions which help the client to navigate within oneself to recognise the issue, and the same shall be addressed in the light of various philosophical theories and ideas which give a new perspective or an alternative perspective that leads to a broader understanding.

#### **Thinking Skills Approach**

This is a method that helps individuals to develop thinking capabilities and skills. It is believed that each individual possesses in oneself the tools required to solve the issues and problems of life. At the same time, these tools help in questioning the deeper aspects of life, knowledge and metaphysical ideas. A philosophical counsellor uses this approach to help clients to recognise these tools that are already dormant within the client and most importantly use it in the favour of intellectual dissection of ideas that correspond to the existential queries of the client. The biggest empowerment by the philosophical counsellor to their clients is the guidance to develop this tool of self-thinking and self-analysis.

#### **Development Approach**

This is in continuation with the Thinking Skills Approach which encourages self-development to enrich the life of the client with meaning, wisdom and critical thinking. The counsellor through dialogue encourages clients to think independently, transacts worldviews to enable the client to solve problems, enhance wisdom and critically examine problems through self-recognition and self-realization. Ultimately, the counsellor will show the fallacies and deviant thoughts in the client's worldview through logical, existential and ethical analysis. Thus, a trained philosopher can use her wisdom and vision to bring out the hidden fears and potentials of a client.

## **II. Conclusion**

This work is merely a minor compilation of the vast subject matter of philosophical counselling, it is an attempt made to introduce the practice of philosophy as counselling. The classics and traditions of counselling gives us an insight on the early styles of counselling from the ancient African tribes to most modern European enterprises who give utmost emphasis on the mental health and wellbeing of human beings. Philosophy is a subject which deals with all aspects of life in general, and its method in the context of counselling will be holistic. Psychology today seems to be playing the major role in defining the methods and approaches in counselling field. Yet, its specialisation of the human mental faculties and behaviours limits its scope and

therefore philosophy as a broader subject can address the issues of life at a much deeper level going into the root cause of the problem by considering different facets of human existence in synthesis. Philosophical counselling enables us to synthesise different approaches to the reality of human life. Moreover, it demands the philosopher to deepen one's own knowledge through constant study and reflection of the theories and ideas. This study is expected to provide more qualitative, conceptual and suggested data for future research projects concerned with counselling applications of philosophy.

There is further scope for exploring the various Schools of thought in order to diversify the methods of philosophical counselling. Philosophy encourages critical thinking and analysis, counselling uses its tools to guide clients to self-realization and self-management. And there are prospective meeting points and possible linkages between the two to make philosophical counselling a potential area of self and social management in the present-day world.

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