

## Nature Purpose and Modes of Philosophical Counselling

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### Abstract

The discipline of philosophy assists an inquisitive mind to think in an impartial, neutral, yet critical manner. To call philosophy merely a ‘love of wisdom’ gives an over-arching definition which, though it may provide a fair enough idea about the nature of this subject, won’t help us to distinguish philosophy from other related disciplines. It can be rightfully claimed that no definition of philosophy can be appreciated without acknowledging familiarity with the distinct methodology of the concerned school of philosophy. Once identified, this methodology provides an exclusive and distinct nature to the concerned school of philosophy and helps understand the multiple ways philosophy may be used in counselling. The following discussion has been presented in three distinct sections: What a Philosopher does (and how)? Why do we need Philosophical Counselling? And some case studies in Philosophical Counselling.

**Keywords:** *Analytic, Aporia, Ataraxia, Continental, Counsellor, Counselee, Facilitator, Speculative*

The discipline of philosophy assists an inquisitive mind to think in an impartial, neutral, yet critical manner. This quite agreeable description of the discipline may give an adequate exposition of how philosophy operates but does not define the subject per se. A generic definition of the discipline as ‘love of wisdom’ may serve sufficiently at the entry-level. Still, as we delve deeper into the complications of any philosophic discussion, it becomes evident that such a definition may not clarify this subject's exact nature and purpose. To call philosophy merely a ‘love of wisdom’ gives an over-arching definition which, - though it may provide a fair enough idea about the nature of this subject, won’t help us to distinguish philosophy from other related disciplines (such as Psychology, Anthropology, Sociology, Education etc.). This is why, compared to any other subject, constructing a concise yet precise definition of philosophy has remained problematic since its inception. The contingencies involved in defining philosophy are put overtly in the words of W.T. Stace, as he says:

“...it is not as easy to give a concise definition of philosophy, as it is of the other sciences. In the first place, the content of philosophy has differed considerably in different periods of history...” (Stace, p.1)

Stace gives an appropriate explanation for this remark immediately in the next line as follows:

“What chiefly militates against the effort to frame a definition is that the precise content of philosophy is differently viewed by different schools of thought... (thus) a definition of philosophy which a follower of Herbert Spencer might frame would be unacceptable to an Hegelian, and the Hegelian definition would be rejected by the Spencerian.” (Ibid)

Considering a workable definition of philosophy as ‘the knowledge of the Absolute’ won’t serve the purpose either. As Stace further adds:

“If we were to include in our definition some such phrase as ‘the knowledge of the Absolute’, while this might suit some philosophers, others would deny that there is any Absolute at all. Another school would say that there may be an Absolute, but that it is unknowable, so philosophy cannot be the knowledge of it. Yet another school would tell us that, whether there is or is not an Absolute, whether it is or is not knowable, the knowledge of it is in any case useless and ought not to be sought.” (Ibid)

In “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man”, Wilfrid Sellars lays out a bit clearer idea of philosophy as:

“The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.” (Sellars, Wilfrid, pp.35-78)

He further says:

“To achieve success in philosophy would be, to use a contemporary turn of phrase, to ‘know one’s way around’ ..., not in that unreflective way in which the centipede of the story knew its way around before it faced the question, ‘how do I walk?’, but in that reflective way which means that no intellectual holds are barred.” (Ibid)

At this juncture, it can be rightfully claimed that no definition of philosophy can be appreciated without acknowledging familiarity with the distinct methodology of the concerned school of philosophy. Once identified, this methodology provides an exclusive and distinct nature to the concerned school of philosophy and helps understand the multiple ways philosophy may be used in counselling.

For the sake of clarity and precision, the following discussion has been presented in three distinct sections as follows:

- What does a philosopher do (and how)?
- Why do we need Philosophical Counselling?
- Some Case Studies in Philosophical Counselling.

Let us take them one by one:

### **What does a philosopher do (and how)?**

As we have already seen (in the opening discussion) that any workable definition of philosophy demands familiarity with the concerned method of philosophising, it has to be accepted that any further discussion would presuppose adherence to some exclusive philosophical methodology. In *Philosophy in India: Traditions, Teaching and Research*, K. Satchidanand Murty (1924-2011) suggests that

philosophy may be approached (practised) in three different ways. These three ways are often called the three ‘modes’ or ‘methods’ of doing philosophy. These approaches characterise different ways a philosopher may engage with perennial questions, concepts and dilemmas (leading to *aporia*<sup>1</sup>). While these modes can be described in various ways, here is a common categorisation:

**Speculative philosophy:** Speculative philosophy involves exploring abstract concepts and ideas through rational speculation and logical reasoning. Philosophers in this mode aim to build up theories, frameworks, and systems of thought that elucidate the nature of reality, existence, and knowledge. They often engage in thought experiments, hypothetical scenarios, and logical deductions to reach conclusions. Speculative philosophy seeks to uncover fundamental truths about the world and human experience through careful reasoning.

**Analytic philosophy:** Analytic philosophy is characterised by its emphasis on clarity of language, logical analysis, and rigorous argumentation. Philosophers in this mode focus on dissecting complex issues into smaller components and then analysing each part systematically. The goal is to clarify and resolve conceptual confusion by breaking down problems into their most basic elements and addressing them through precise language and logical inference. Analytic philosophers often prioritize linguistic analysis and formal logic to solve philosophical problems.

**Continental philosophy:** Continental philosophy is known for its emphasis on existential, subjective and interpretive approaches to philosophical questions. Philosophers in this mode often explore topics related to human experience, culture, society, and personal identity. They engage with literature, art, history, and social context to gain insights into the nature of human existence and meaning. Continental philosophy is often associated with

<sup>1</sup> In philosophy, an *aporia* (Ancient Greek: ἀπορία, romanized: *aporía*, lit. 'literally: "lacking passage", also: "impasse", "difficulty in passage", "puzzlement") is a conundrum or state of puzzlement. In rhetoric, it is a declaration of doubt, made for rhetorical purpose and often feigned. ("*Aporia*", *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1989)

phenomenology, existentialism, hermeneutics, and critical theory.

It is important to note that these modes are not rigid categories, and many philosophers integrate/overlap elements from different philosophical approaches in their work. The distinction between these modes can sometimes be blurry, and different philosophers might emphasise different aspects of each approach.

At this point, at least this much minimal understanding may be reached (among philosophers) that studying philosophy would be conducive in the public sphere only if such an inquisitive mind is prepared to look into the philosophical problem through its own lens, i.e. think 'by itself' or 'for itself', and straddle these modes to get out of aporia (dilemmas leading to perplexity).

A person may be fascinated with his/her issues (such as relationship issues, societal insecurities, professional uncertainties or the meaning of one's life) or perennial dilemmas (such as mind-body relation, personal identity, the problem of induction, the existence of evil, is-ought dichotomy or the nature of liberation), but a proper comprehension of the exact nature of the problem cannot be acquired unless the same person struggles with some foundational questions (and their complementary dilemmas). A person may be fascinated by what the great philosophers Plato, Aristotle, Sankara, Gotama, Descartes, Kant, Wittgenstein, etc., have said but will not be able to appreciate what they have meant unless he/she has thought some of their thoughts by and for himself.<sup>2</sup> This won't happen if the person wishes to learn what philosophers have said and comprehend their main philosophical theories but doesn't want to do some 'real thinking'.

<sup>2</sup> You may just want to get good grades in a philosophy course. The sad fact is that people with brilliant minds and amazing memories sometimes do not get the top grades in philosophy courses because they have not tried to 'think for themselves'

<sup>3</sup> What has been said about poets is also relevant for a Philosophic Counselor. As T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) says: "When the two gases previously mentioned are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless, the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum."

With this submission, let us come to the second section of this paper.

### **Why do we need Philosophical Counselling?**

It may be said, thus, that to get out of aporia (dilemmas leading to perplexity), a person needs not only to learn and comprehend the philosophical theories but also to apply them to his/her own exclusive circumstances and, thus, search for a probable philosophic explanation as a remedy. This is something that the person has to pursue by himself/herself, though a philosophical counsellor may act as a catalyst for the entire process.<sup>3</sup>

The role of a Philosophical Counsellor must be seen as a facilitator and not merely an initiator of the process. A person may wish to resolve his aporia but doesn't want to accept that some of his/her deep-seated beliefs/convictions may be challenged; he doesn't want to get puzzled by the questions for which no final answers can be established; he doesn't want to take the risk that (at the end) he may feel that he knows less than he did before. Perhaps the person has firm convictions and just wants philosophy to prove that these are the only beliefs an intelligent person could have. Or perhaps he believes that science answers all questions, and he wants philosophy to prove that anyone with less than total faith in science is a fool. There may be umpteen possibilities here.

In broad, there are four fundamental and perennial questions of concern to us all:

- Who am I? (The philosophical question of 'Personal Identity' poses a dilemma here)
- What do I really know? (The philosophical question of 'Epistemic Justification' poses as dilemma here)
- Where am I going? (The philosophical question of 'Telos' poses a dilemma here)

- Where should I go? (The philosophical question of ‘Normativity’ poses a dilemma here)

More than thirty of the most important philosophers, from Pythagoras to the present, tried to tackle these questions in their own way (Howard, Alex, p. xiv). Their elaborate discursive attempts may be considered by a person undergoing aporia to understand the difference between good thinking and bad (leading to thoughtful-appropriate decision-making). Good thinking is sharp, creative, and careful; it aims to find the truth rather than winning arguments or impressing people.<sup>4</sup> This entire process, where a philosopher acts like a Counsellor to the person (hereby referred to as the counselee), may be conveniently referred to as ‘Philosophical Counselling’.

Indeed, in the end, some philosophers, encouraged by this interest in philosophical knowledge and skills, accepted the challenge and began helping people to reflect on everyday issues (Sulavikova, Blanka, p. 13). At the end of this process, the aporetic person emerges as a clearer, more careful, and more creative thinker.<sup>5</sup> This will also lead to a sincere appreciation for the efforts and problems of philosophers who have tried to refine our understanding of the most difficult problems human beings can think about. Finally, it would lead (hopefully) to ataraxia- a good life.<sup>6</sup>

This process called ‘Philosophical Counselling’ may be explained much more easily with some classic examples. In the next section, we shall take some cases where philosophical Counselling may prove more effective than other forms of (such as psychiatry and social/career/legal/financial) Counselling.

### Some Case Studies in Philosophical Counselling

Some classic issues (from various domains of philosophy) may be taken as case studies of Counselling here. This would help us to understand the precise methodology of philosophical counselling and thus pave the way for us to enter the field. These are as follows:

1. **Emphasising the relativity of judgments:** Different blindfolded people may define an elephant in diverse ways, and all of the given definitions may clash with each other; some may call it a pillar, or rope or (maybe) a box depending upon the specific organ of the elephant they have come in touch with. It is a philosopher acting as a Counsellor who may act as a facilitator/catalyst for the counselee to realise that all judgments may simultaneously be equally true or false. This realisation serves well in the dissolution of the counselee’s problem.
2. **Emphasising correcting the religious approach:** Christians believe that when people die, their souls live on in heaven. But this becomes very perplexing when we gaze at a person's entire life and wonder which part of it is continued in heaven. Let us suppose that someone is a good-tempered person and then has a car accident and spends the last years of his life with a changed personality. For the last few years, this person has been short-tempered and violent. Is it the earlier or the later personality that has an afterlife? One answer might be that both do. If God can give a person one afterlife, he can give them many. So, it is possible that after our deaths, our lives continue not from where they stopped but from all our living moments.
3. **Emphasising questioning the basics:** Scientific theories, believed to bear objectivity, constantly change. While physicists swear by Newton’s Laws of

<sup>4</sup> As is aptly put by French essayist Joseph Joubert: “The aim of any argument or discussion should be not victory, but progress.”

<sup>5</sup> This phenomenon may be clearly observed in Plato’s Dialogues, such as Protagoras, Theaetetus, Charmides, Laches, Timeus, Pheado, Phaederus, Meno, and so on.

<sup>6</sup> It must be mentioned here that Plato’s Socrates used the term *ataraxia* for the first time in response to the question, ‘What is the purpose of doing philosophy?’ Kindly note that instead of saying ‘Knowledge’, ‘Happiness’, or ‘Success’, Socrates prefers a ‘good life’.

Motion, the first law may not be able to explain the nature of the first mover (or the unmoved mover). The science of the next century might go back to thinking that Newton's first law may not be as perfect as it seems today.

4. **Emphasising the approach to Justice:** We value justice and think an unfair society ought to be changed. But then, it is usually seen that our understanding of justice prefers a 'reformative approach' in others' cases but transforms to a retributive one in any personal scenario.
5. **Emphasising the origin of moral codes:** Most of what we believe in our moral codes has been picked up unquestioningly from our parents. But there is very little evidence that any of these things are true. Most of the beliefs and morality of our time may seem to be superstitious nonsense.
6. **Emphasising Cosmo-centrism as a remedy:** We understand the significance of the earth's ecology and the life it supports. But one of the main problems for the earth is the human race. There are so many humans that they exclude other species, and industrial societies cause ecological disasters. Humans are intelligent enough to love the earth and to see the harm they are doing to it. So, humans can understand the duty to reduce the damage to the planet. This will mean an earth with far fewer humans on it. It may mean that the earth would be best without humans.

Here, a counsellor facilitates a counselee to comprehend certain philosophical theories and apply them to his/her case. The counselee may get rid of the aporia as he/she realises (over a while) that:

- The Counselee is not the only person suffering from such a perplexing scenario. There are others, too, who understand and have already discussed elaborately on the issue.

- The counselee is not the only person responsible for such a perplexing scenario. Rather, it is a circumstantial issue that may dissolve, provided the roots of the problem are identified clearly, neutrally, and critically. Several philosophers have already addressed the issue.
- The counselee needs an empathetic environment conducive to the dissolution of the problem. The role of the counsellor-philosopher is merely that of a catalyst/facilitator in the entire process.

At the end of the sessions, a counselee may want to reconsider his existing situation, though in a refined manner (parishkaar). It is to be noted here that a counsellor-philosopher will not tell whether the existing scenario is correct. This is vital. People often think that as they study philosophy, they will find some argument by some philosopher that will confirm what reality is really like, and they would suddenly realise, making sense of their lives. This may happen. Some people find Plato or Sankara such a philosopher, while others may seek solace in Bhagwadgita, Stoicism, Epicureanism, or Existentialism. But that is not the main point.

The main point is to find out how to think about these and other important questions- the main concern should be philosophy's methodology. Thinking about the dilemmas may tell that they have no answers or that there are more important questions to ask. But as one's thinking becomes stronger and more confident, the counselee will hold on to the powers to think and discuss more than the answers they give you.

We may remain uncertain about questions of life, but at least we will be certain that we think clearly, argue persuasively, and see through other people's bad reasoning. This refined understanding (Parishkaar vidya) may dissolve the aporia and lead to ataraxia.

Here, in case the philosophical acumen and activity are to be applied to a field like that of

Counselling, it seems necessary, at the very outset, to divide between its two types:<sup>7</sup>

1. Narrow Sense of Philosophical Counselling.
2. Broad sense of Philosophical Counselling

The term ‘Narrow’ is used not with reference to the mentality/approach but to the scope of the Counselling. Here, the concerns (and, therefore, the scope) are immediate (with reference to the client). We may use the Wittgensteinian sense, where he says that what he does in philosophy is “to show the fly out of the fly bottle” (Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical Investigations*). In the Indian context, the Krishna-Upadesa to Arjuna may be taken as the classic example of this. Here, the indecisive warrior doesn’t want to fight with his relative. Still, the Counsellor provides various alternatives to solve the perplexity: firstly, by the binding of duty (purusārtha), then by the direct show of the inevitability of events in the cosmic space (Virāt Swarup) and finally by asking for complete submission (Māmekam Sharanām Gatam).

In a ‘Broad sense’, the concerns are not immediate but rather of a ‘perennial nature’. It may, again, be of two types:

- A. The counsellor helps the counselee develop clarity of larger/deeper/general concepts by taking them (counselee) back to the alternate courses of history or introducing them to the multiple ways of resolving the perplexity. Here, the counsellor stands by the counselee in the entire process of resolving the issue. The entire Bhagwadgita discourse may also be understood in this context. Along with this, the Yāgyavalkya-Gārgi Samvād or the Yam-Nachiketā Samvād may be an appropriate reference to Philosophical Counselling: It helps the counselee to

somehow get out of the ‘perplexity’ (Duvidhā).

- B. To imagine that the individual's specific problem can be related to a larger philosophical issue and may be solved in a particular way with their (Counsellor and Counselee's) joint effort. Quite interestingly, the Prasthān-trayi (Brahma Sutra, Srimad Bhagwadgita and the Upanisads) may be considered an apt example in this case.

In the end, the quote from Ludwig Wittgenstein seems appropriate:

“When most people ought to engage in philosophical investigation, they act like someone who is looking for an object in a drawer very seriously. He throws papers out of the drawer- what he is looking for may be among them- leafs through the others hastily and sloppily. Throws some back into the drawer, mixes them up with the other, and so on. Then one can only tell him: Stop, if you look in that way, I can’t help you look. First, you have to start to examine one thing after another methodically, and in peace and quiet; then I am willing to look with you and direct myself with you as model in the method.”

As the concluding remark, it may be rightfully said that the author, at no point, intends to assert that ‘Philosophy’ and ‘Counselling’ are one and the same. Neither of these two is considered to overlap. The author, at the end, merely intends to conclude that Philosophical Counselling should be seen as the application/practicality of the theoretical discipline called Philosophy.

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