

## In Search for 'Good Life': Understanding Through Philosophical Counselling

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### Abstract

Philosophical counselling is regarded as a field of practical philosophy. One could say it is a philosophical practice that has been rediscovered over the ages. Such a form of philosophical practice was common in ancient Greece and the Roman Empire, where philosophers were often counsellors and consultants to common people and royalty. If we talk about the history of Western philosophy, it can be observed that philosophers have discussed issues that have concrete applications, and they have worked and developed a broad spectrum of ideas regarding how life should be understood and lived. Different methods and theories of philosophers like Cynics, Stoics, and Epicureans in ancient Greece and Rome, religious philosophies in Indian philosophical systems, and social philosophies such as Socialism, Communism, and Anarchism are found to have discussed and practised different techniques and methods to deal with daily mental issues and how to orient and shape the lives of individuals and societies. So, a philosophical practitioner can help clients clarify, explore, and comprehend different philosophical aspects like epistemological, metaphysical, ethical, and logical issues. German philosopher Gerd B. Achenbach, who founded the first association of philosophical counselling, believed that philosophising could give direction in its own right. In this paper, an attempt has been made to explore the application of Philosophical counselling for understanding and helping people achieve a good life, a life worth living.

**Keywords:** *Philosophical Counselling, Therapy, Good Life, Positive Psychology*

“Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with philosophers' problems and becomes a method cultivated by philosophers for dealing with men's problems.”

-John Dewey

What is “the good life”? This is one of the philosophical questions that everyone asks for. It can be asked in other ways, like how one should live. What does it mean to live well? But the question isn't as simple as it sounds. After all, everyone wants to live well, and no one wants a bad life. We also ask different questions concerning ourselves and others, our issues and everybody else's, the wide world and the vast universe, and the meaning and purpose of our existence. We inquire about the past, present, and future. And all these thoughts happen with the hope that something will give pure happiness and lead a good life. Many thinkers have discussed this moral conception of the good life in the past. For Aristotle, the good life includes happiness and engagement, where happiness is

defined as authentically expressing one's excellences or virtues. Expressing one's true self, making deliberate choices and taking responsibility for them, now commonly called authenticity, gives a sense of well-being and engagement in life.

Socrates and Plato prioritised virtue over all other supposedly good things, such as pleasure, wealth, or power. For Aristotle, acquiring intellectual and character virtues created the highest good, which he identified with the Greek word eudaimonia, often translated as happiness (Aristotle, 350 BCE/2004). Aristotle believed a person achieves eudaimonia when they possess all the virtues; however, acquiring them requires more than studying or training. External conditions beyond the control of individuals are needed, especially a form of state governance that permits people to live well. Plato's view of the good life was presented in *The Republic* (Plato, 380-375 BCE/2007) and supported the thoughts of his teacher, Socrates. *The Republic* examines virtue and the role of philosophy, community, and the state in creating the

conditions needed to live well. For Plato, a good life involves and defines living in harmony with one's inner nature and understanding the true nature of reality. To attain this, one must overcome negative emotions like anger and greed and embrace truth and knowledge.

Now, while dealing with the question of leading a good life, it has also been seen that many young or older adults live in an era in which material things are more meaningful and valuable. People fail to fill up their lives with true content and meaning. While dealing with this question, many people face difficulty in answering the question related to the meaning of life or the good life. This is where philosophy helps. Philosophy can be helpful to ordinary people through the application of useful ideas to their concrete problems of living. I have discussed some of the theories of philosophy which help define and clarify someone's thoughts and who is facing any discomfort. But before that, it is necessary to know some of the goals of philosophical counselling.

### **Objective of Philosophical Counselling**

Philosophical counselling aroused the interest of philosophers in the late twentieth century, as it brought to mind, among other things, the idea that philosophy, through its practical dimension, can be a path to a better life. Philosophical thinking involves pursuing knowledge and searching for truth, true knowledge. It also allows us to understand our values. Philosophical thinking involves the evaluation, criticism, and defence of a particular society's values. Therefore, philosophical counselling has been received as an alternative to other types of counselling (psychological, pastoral, spiritual, etc.).

It is important to note that philosophical counselling has several approaches, methods, and techniques that can be helpful in the counselling process, depending on the problem the client is facing. The multitude of approaches, methods, and techniques is immediately due to the transdisciplinary nature of this field—either ideas from different subfields of philosophy are borrowed, methods from psychological counselling are borrowed, or general methods of

problem-solving are adapted to the specifics of philosophical counselling.

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 second is to overcome personal problems, which may arise out of wrong belief systems and unethical lifestyles. Here, the aim is not to find an answer, solution or mode of treatment but to attempt to attain philosophical skills, attitudes and knowledge. Philosophical counselling is useful to the extent the dialogue partner becomes more philosophical in word and action. In philosophical counselling, the counsellor and the counselee are not limited by a counselling method or directed by the counsellor's therapeutic aim. There is a place for various discussions, in which both practitioner and client may think about and discuss the nature of their communications during the sessions. Such a form of "thinking about thinking" creates an open, equal relation while reaching the final point. So, this will be more often a philosophical investigation rather than a philosophical therapy.

### **Tools for a Good Life through Philosophical Counselling**

Philosophy seeks life's wisdom, drawing on philosophical knowledge and methods to do so. Philosophical counselling can be considered an approach for addressing dilemmas, predicaments, and life issues through philosophical questions or self-examination. This form of counselling involves philosophising, and they indeed philosophise with their counsees. The role of the counsellor here is to lead a philosophical self-examination and to help counsees develop their philosophical understanding of themselves and their world, ready to empower themselves to deal with their problems and lead a life in their own way. So, the difficulty is how and to what end the philosophising is conducted during the counselling session. The counsellor uses philosophising certain basic things primarily to help counsees overcome their problems by analysing their beliefs about the situation they are going through or their attitudes towards it.

So, it is an approach that aims to assist people in dealing with life events effectively.

Earlier, many philosophical practitioners were influenced by Socrates. The Socratic method assigns a fundamental role to conversation in the thinking process. Thus, it is a way for someone to think individually. Conversation as a form of philosophical contemplation conforms to Socrates' intersubjective understanding of truth. Through the proper use of conversation, the Socratic method strives precisely to ensure unity in the intersubjective relationship with the subject, thereby guaranteeing critical thinking.

From a Socratic perspective, philosophical counselling can be viewed as a conversational process guided by dialectical reasoning aimed at reflecting upon the concerns and issues that normally arise through living one's life—as well as upon the meaningfulness of one's life as a whole. This method involves question-and-answer style reflection, where the individual enters into dialogue with others in a friendly and supportive way in search of the truth, knowledge, insight, wisdom, virtue, and happiness—whatever these are. In this way, philosophical inquiry can help a person live a more fulfilling, productive, meaningful and happy life. Ultimately, philosophical inquiry in the Socratic tradition is the habitual, daily practice of reflecting upon, clarifying, coming to see, and making sense of one's values, beliefs, ideas, judgments, desires, emotions, intuitions, feelings, goals, commitments, relationships, and, generally, all the actions and experiences that constitute a person's life (Walsh, 2005).

Tim LeBon, author of *Wise Therapy* (2001), defines philosophical counselling as using philosophical knowledge and methods to help people think through important issues to live wisely (Evans, 2011). For LeBon, there are two different ways in which philosophy can become part of counselling. These correspond to two approaches to philosophy discussed by Purton (1993). The first is the attempt to create favourable outcomes, for instance, how to live, and the second attempts to clarify and raise different questions. The first is performed by providing answers to questions relating to the

goals of the therapy, for instance, 'What is a good life?' and 'How can we strengthen the meaning of life?'

LeBon considers both existential and practical answers to the question of the "good life" to have appeal. He thinks the second method to be less controversial and extremely promising. In this philosophy is used to unrestrictedly clarify, ask questions and explore insofar as the topic is concerned. Counsellors can use clients' life philosophy to simplify their view of the world by asking them questions about their premises and other potential alternatives. This kind of philosophical counselling involves working on oneself by examining key points in one's conceptions. In this way, the counsellor can help the client 'examine life'. This examination may relate to premises such as those above and values, options and actions.

However, present-day philosophical counselling is different from most of these traditional approaches. The philosophical counsellor offers different thinking tools. Different approaches can be looked upon while dealing with certain cases or as philosophical counselling. Each approach uses different tools to achieve the client's objectives, though there is some overlap. However, it will be more convenient and acceptable if philosophical understanding grows from the individual without imposing any pre-conceived solution. In this respect, the philosophical counsellor is like Socrates, who regarded himself as a midwife who helped others give birth to their ideas. Instead of aiming at finished products, i.e., theories, it values the process of searching, and rather than constructing general and abstract theories, it encourages the unique expression of the individual's concrete way of being there in the world.

So, another basic idea in philosophical counselling is to help the counselee investigate his or her life or world. Here, it would not be wrong to call it philosophical self-investigation, a kind of philosophical self-understanding. To count as philosophical, an investigation must deal primarily with ideas in the public realm. That means it must have concepts, conceptions,

assumptions, theories, etc., rather than exposing concrete events or processes cognitive, emotional, etc. More accurately, philosophical counselling deals with the contents of the person's understanding of the world. A philosophical self-investigation seeks to examine the person's understanding in terms of ideas and to investigate their logic, structure, and implications.

Another tool in philosophical counselling is critical examination of basic principles. A philosophical form of investigation is one that critically examines concepts. This implies that in philosophical counselling, self-investigation is concerned not just with describing somebody's understandings but mainly with critically uncovering their basic elements and structure, analysing them, and examining their consistency, implications, and acceptability.

Linda Elder (2007) defines critical thinking differently. People who think critically try to live rationally, sensibly and empathetically. They recognise that human thinking is inherently faulty and try to eradicate their egocentric and socio-centric tendencies. They use the intellectual tools critical thinking has to offer—its concepts and principles—to enable them to analyse, assess and improve their thinking. They work diligently to develop the intellectual virtues of intellectual integrity, intellectual humility, intellectual civility, intellectual empathy, intellectual sense of justice, and confidence in reason. They realise that, regardless of how skilled they are as thinkers, they will always improve their ability to reason, and sometimes they will make mistakes while doing so; nonetheless, they will rid themselves of their human irrationality, prejudices, biases, distortions, uncritically accepted social rules and taboos, self-interest, and vested interest. They attempt to improve the world in any way and also can contribute to a more rational, civilised society. They embody the Socratic principle: *an unexamined life is not worth living* because they realise that an unexamined life results in an uncritical, unjust and dangerous world.

Now, philosophical self-investigation, in general, is based primarily on non-empirical

considerations, that is, on 'pure' thinking that is relatively independent of data collected empirically from the world. It focuses on the 'logic', the analysis, and the ideas in question rather than on contingent states of affairs. If investigation is philosophical, it cannot focus on tracing the person's unconscious thoughts, which may or may not exist and can only be discovered through empirical observations such as psychological tests. So, it can be said that a philosophical self-investigation, in the context of philosophical counselling, is a critical, non-empirical investigation of the fundamental principles underlying the person's world-view. It seeks to deepen one's understanding of the situation, the processes, and the network of basic ideas which compose the landscape of the person's world and to examine their structure, implications, and tenability.

Another approach that can be taken here is Virtue. For Kant, a capacity for virtue is unique to human beings because the ability to resist bodily desires requires the exercise of reason. Kant claims that human reason makes us worthy of happiness by helping us become virtuous (Kant, 1785/2012). Philosophical counselling is, therefore, “a process of fostering virtues” (Tukiainen, 2011). Virtues are associated with self-understanding. Tukiainen distinguishes between cognitive and practical virtues, although the distinction is unclear. Cognitive virtues include self-knowledge, which is very important and enables people to follow their goals and understand their fears and emotions. Our knowledge of the external world, which enables us to lead satisfactory and morally acceptable lives, can also be seen as a virtue. This knowledge is very important since the success of our actions depends upon it, and it affects our ability to make decisions based on our awareness of the value, feasibility and appropriateness of the various actions that lead us to make our judgment. “Openness to new ways of understanding ourselves and our world is a cognitive virtue” (ibid, 2), for sometimes we have to adopt radically new perspectives and concepts that cannot be derived from our ideas thus far.

Existentialism emerged in late-nineteenth-century Europe, based on the idea that the material existence of a thing precedes its immaterial essence. This reverses Plato's position that intangible essence precedes a thing's material existence. For example, according to Plato, goodness is an eternal idea. What makes a deed "good" is the extent to which it contains the essence of goodness. So, to do good, you need to understand goodness and capture its essence in your deeds. The existentialists, on the other hand, reject Platonism. They suppose you choose to do a given act according to your deliberations and preferences. Once you've done a deed, then we can determine from its existence your essential idea of goodness (Marinoff, 2002).

Existentialists think that authenticity is important and that people should acknowledge the givens in life—for example, they must acknowledge that their meaning is their mortality. Hence, they defend a certain way of existence, a way of life that corresponds to the values of existentialism. Van Deurzen-Smith (1994) says counsellors should 'investigate and rigorously apply the laws of existence'. By contrast, utilitarians think the good life maximises happiness. From this perspective, the philosophical counsellor should encourage the client to examine the consequences of their actions, look at the alternatives and be aware of what it means to be happy.

E. D. Cohen describes Logic-Based Therapy (LBT) as "a variant of the theory of psychotherapy known as Rational-Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT). It is also a leading modality of 'philosophical practice' (or 'philosophical counselling')" (2013, p. 2). It works by helping the client overcome unrealistic conclusions derived from irrational premises. Logic-based therapy, therefore, provides the critical thinking tools designed to correct the client's erroneous reasoning, identifying and refuting its irrational premises and building philosophically grounded premises, guided by a corresponding amount of 'transcendental virtues', such as respect (of oneself, others and the world), metaphysical principles, courage and

temperance. It concerns behavioural change to overcome irrational tendencies and cultivate virtuous habits (ibid., p. 2). personal problems by analysing their beliefs about or attitudes to their situation. For him, this approach reduces philosophical counselling to a tool for promoting client satisfaction. The motive of philosophy here is helping the client feel better regardless of how intellectually rich, conceptually grounded or spiritually deep it is. Whether counsellors' philosophising is deep or shallow, coherent, or a pile of isolated clichés is irrelevant; what is important is that the client's problem is solved and that he or she becomes happy.

Philosophers are deeply interested in belief systems. Many philosophers, from Plato to William James, have noted the vital role our beliefs play – for better or worse - in getting us through the day. Hobbes observed that the human world is governed by opinion. The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts, as described by Marcus Aurelius.

Another Philosophical theory that can also be considered is the Deontology Theory. This comes from the Greek word *deon*, which is related to the notion of duty. In practice, it means following a rule book of morality. The rules themselves are predefined as "good." Following them is therefore treated as "right." If most people followed them, society would appear "just.". In secular contexts, some philosophers adhere to a rule of Kant's known as the "categorical imperative." This is something which is an unconditional moral obligation that is not dependent on one person's inclination or purpose. Another theory is Teleology. This also comes from a Greek word, *telos*, meaning "purpose" or "end." Teleology (or consequentialism, as it is often called) asserts that no act is right or wrong in and of itself but that its rightness or wrongness depends on the goodness or badness of the consequences it brings. In other words, if you get a good outcome, you do the "right" thing. If you get a bad outcome, you do the "wrong" thing. One of the more prevalent forms of teleology is called "act- utilitarianism." It would say, "Act in such a

way as to produce the greatest good for the greatest number." So, there are different philosophical approaches that can be used as an approach in philosophical counselling for leading a good and favourable life.

### Conclusion

Philosophical counselling is a search for a means of broadening and deepening life. Its role is not to help counselees become happier but wiser; it is not to overcome problems in the workplace or marriage but to explore the domain of ideas and grow towards wisdom.

It can be rightly pointed out that philosophical counselling plays a great role in people's lives in many different ways. Its goal is hinted at by the Greek meaning of 'philo' and 'sophia' means love of wisdom. It expresses a vision which (though not unprecedented) is especially significant in our technological and problem-solving-oriented society. Unlike traditional philosophy, it does not think that the role of

philosophising is to churn out theories, solutions to problems, or finished philosophical products. It regards philosophising as a process of growth, an individual quest in the landscape of meanings or ideas. The positive mindset in every approach plays a bigger role. Positive psychology began as an inquiry into the good life to establish a science of human flourishing and improve our understanding of what makes life worth living (Lopez & Snyder, 2011). Yet, to be happy, one must gather all physical and mental powers and organise and plan life because the search for happiness is a task we accept voluntarily. And this is not easy. We need to think about what makes us happy.

It can be concluded with a note that the greatest potential benefit of positive psychology is that it can teach or lead the power of shifting one's perspective because a small change in someone's perspective can lead to outstanding shifts in well-being and quality of life.

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