

Unveiling Philosophical Counselling in India: Navigating Post-pandemic Challenges

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Abstract

This paper explores philosophical counselling in India, shedding light on its essence, necessity, and applicability, particularly in the post-pandemic era. The author provides a nuanced perspective on philosophical counselling, emphasising its grassroots relevance and potential to address post-pandemic challenges.

Keywords: *Philosophy, philosophical counselling, philosophical practice, methods, psychiatry, mental health*

The global landscape has undergone profound transformations after the COVID-19 pandemic, reshaping social dynamics and catalysing shifts across various domains. The impact of the pandemic has been multifaceted, unveiling a heightened awareness of mental health issues and an imperative for digital transformation. Amid economic challenges marked by job losses and supply chain disruptions, the societal discourse has pivoted towards environmental sustainability and strengthened global cooperation (Kiran, 2020, p.16). Concurrently, discussions surrounding culture have gravitated towards nuanced explorations of identity and diversity, contributing to a dynamically evolving global environment characterised by continuous change. This exploration seeks to illuminate these 'trends' interconnectedness and implications for our evolving world.

The catalyst for adjustments, exemplified by the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, has prompted individuals to make multifaceted adaptations across various dimensions of their lives. These adjustments include shifts in lifestyle choices (Gür, 2022), alterations in work patterns such as the widespread adoption of remote work, adjustments in social interactions driven by social distancing measures, and fundamental changes in attitudes towards health and well-being. Economic adaptations, marked by responses to job losses and supply chain disruptions, further underscore the transformative nature of this external catalyst. This collective response reflects a dynamic and interconnected process of societal and individual

adjustments in the face of unprecedented challenges.

The acknowledged catalyst for adjustments in individuals, often attributed to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, has been recognised as a critical factor influencing shifts in traditional values and norms integral to every individual. This transformation manifests as a fundamental change in individuals' core beliefs and values (van de Poel et al., 2022), traditionally holding substantial sway over various facets of daily life. Accepting these shifts implies a cognisance of the transformative nature of external events on the individual minds, subsequently contributing to broader societal changes.

The pandemic has forced a reevaluation of priorities, challenging the conventional markers of success such as money, profession, and relationships. The once-stable foundations of individuals' lives were shaken, prompting a collective introspection into the meaning and purpose of life. For example, the fear of infection and especially the severity of the disease itself and death has undoubtedly become the cause of generalised anxiety and fear in many people. This anxiety may be dictated not only by fears for one's health but also for the health and lives of loved ones. (Łaskawiec, et al., 2022). The concept of "covidian burnout" (Łaskawiec et al., 2022) describes a psychological disorder resulting from continuous exposure to stressors related to the pandemic.

The pandemic had deliberately or unknowingly evoked different disturbing considerations for

everybody. It tested people's emotional reactivity, it questioned one's identity by propagating questions about the self and body, and in conclusion, it left a quiet comment that 'everything is momentary.' The Coronavirus Pandemic, by influencing every human adversely, likewise gave space to another comprehension of human existence - demanding a modified awareness of the connection between the 'self' and the 'other.' There is a need to understand life from an alternate point of view

Philosophers have pioneered in comprehending, critiquing, and introducing valuable perspectives to enhance human lives. Philosophy, often seen as the pursuit of wisdom and a tool for comprehending fundamental aspects of life, offers a unique platform for individuals to delve into their beliefs, values, and existential concerns. In the continual growth of knowledge across various disciplines and perspectives, it is notable that the fundamental significance of Philosophy has yet to garner the attention it deserves consistently.

While the benefits of philosophy have historically been confined to philosophers and theologians, the current era presents an opportune moment for the insights of philosophy to reach and resonate with a broader audience. Devarakonda (2021) emphasises the diverse interpretations of philosophy, ranging from Hadot's view of it as a way of life to the Indian concept of 'darśana' as a way of seeing/conceptualising.' Philosophy is a theoretical subject and a potent tool for life transformation and problem-solving. In exploring various perspectives, philosophy serves as a domain of inquiry that allows us to delve into different ways of comprehending human existence. (Devarakonda, 2021, p.2603). Notably, philosophers like Epicurus and Stoics have portrayed philosophy as an intellectual exercise and a therapeutic and practical guide for leading a meaningful and well-lived life (Raabe, n.d). Different ways of applying philosophical knowledge are being innovated, including, but not limited to, Philosophy Cafes, Philo dramas, etc.

One such significant endeavour is Philosophical Counseling, which attempts to support those who need a philosopher to address their concerns. Philosophical counselling is a crucial endeavour contributing to an enhanced understanding of 'human existence and its relations.' This comprehension is notably influenced by the concrete challenges posed by the realities of lockdown, isolated living, and social uncertainties. In the midst of and beyond these circumstances, Philosophical Counselling holds profound significance for addressing the complexities of contemporary life.

Philosophical counselling is a redefined approach where the counselee's concerns are addressed via different philosophical tools and methods. It is an interactive process that works through an extensive exchange of dialogues and discussions about the other's beliefs, actions, values, purposes, and commitments, not only what they presently are but also whether and to what extent they can be evolved. According to Padin,

"Philosophical counselling refers to a process in which a counsellor works with a client to critically reflect on the ideas and worldviews associated with the specific life problems brought to the counselling sessions and preliminarily defined by the client. The process of philosophical counselling, therefore, involves the articulation of both the client's life goals and life problems, as well as the relevant aspects of their implicit worldview (understood to be the underlying source of the client's problems); the critical analysis of that worldview during which deeper philosophical problems might be discovered; the analysis of those problems; and the repair of the worldview" (Padin, 2013).

This practice aims to identify the problem, dilemma, inquiry, or puzzle with an insightful discussion about the issue, which eventually helps the counselee recognise incorrect, inaccurate, maladaptive, or impractical beliefs. According to Raabe (2000), one of the pioneer philosophical practitioners,

"The philosophical counsellor understands that most individuals live by many unexamined (rather than unconscious) assumptions and values that can affect thinking and behaviour in puzzling or distressing ways. Through dialogues, the philosophical counsellor helps the client become aware of hidden biases, unspoken assumptions, and conflicting values that may prevent an inquiry into alternative perspectives that could help ease the problem" (Raabe, 2000).

In philosophical counselling, paramount importance is placed on the concept of personal philosophy. This term refers to the deliberate and conscious expression of an individual's rational and empirical beliefs. Articulating personal philosophy is an intrinsic process wherein the counselee may possess an internal understanding of this philosophy but feels a disconnection. This detachment might have occurred over time, or the individual may need assistance recognising its existence. The ancient injunction to "know thyself" often goes unheeded, as individuals may question its value or remain uncertain about how to actualise it.

Professor Šulavikova, a trailblazing female philosophical practitioner, underscores the significance of personal philosophy in this field. She articulates the aim of philosophical counselling as guiding individuals through exploring their personal life philosophy. This process unfolds as a conversational journey, fostering dialectic thinking and delving into the fears and questions that manifest in everyday life. Furthermore, it grapples with inquiries about the meaning of life. In essence, philosophical counselling serves as a tool to facilitate a deeper understanding of one's philosophy, offering insights and guidance as individuals navigate the complexities of existence. (Šulavikova, 2011).

This is where philosophical counselling differs from other well-established counselling practices. PC is an insight-oriented therapy, assuming the pursuit of wisdom is a valued ideal. Philosophical counselling presupposes that

people can exercise reflection and make choices by themselves. Psychological and psychotherapist counselling are more concerned with the problem at hand, i.e., what the client is currently thinking about, whereas philosophical counselling is concerned with how one thinks. It addresses any conceptual issues that one may have. Marinoff (1999) says,

"too much of psychology and psychiatry have been aimed at 'disease-ifying' (that is, medicalising) everyone and everything in sight, looking to diagnose each person who walks in the door and find what syndrome or disorder could be the cause of their problems" (Marinoff, 1999, p. 28)

The critique captures a broader sentiment shared by some proponents of philosophical counselling that the medical model in psychology and psychiatry may have limitations. However, the general nature of the statement might need to pay attention to the diverse approaches within these fields and the ongoing debates and discussions about the appropriate balance between medical and holistic perspectives. While the statement raises a valid point about the potential drawbacks of overreliance on diagnoses, it would benefit from more specificity to make the critique more robust and credible.

Philosophical counselling is a valuable resource for individuals navigating challenges related to their sense of purpose, values, goals, conflicts, relationships, loss, gain, or career changes. Importantly, these issues stand apart from symptoms of mental illness. There is no imperative for individuals to delve into their childhood experiences to decipher the roots of their current challenges because the emphasis is on addressing existential and life-oriented concerns rather than pathologising them; in contrast to a diagnostic approach, philosophical counselling delves into life's intricacies through meaningful philosophical dialogue. Here, engaging in dialogue is a positive indicator of mental health. A formal diagnosis is not a prerequisite for clients who can maintain normal functioning but grapple with profound philosophical questions. The focus of philosophical counselling is not on curing

entrenched chronic diseases; instead, its scope encompasses individuals generally in good health. The overarching goal is to cultivate a sense of self-sufficiency.

The difference between philosophical counselling and psychotherapy could be understood by the methods adopted by some philosophical counsellors who are pioneers of the field and led the movement towards significant advancement. Prof Schuster addresses the work of the founder of the philosophical counselling movement, Achenbach, who advocates the "beyond-method," which ensures that counselling does not occur based on a single method and takes place outside any system. He describes a counselling process based on his approach to philosophical experiences. He believes that this process should take place in the context of scepticism towards "everything that can be considered to be true" to everything that is "established, clear, and indisputable" so that curiosity about everything that has been refuted, dealt with, and considered to be untrue is renewed.

He primarily focuses on

"1. Sincere communication between the philosophical practitioner (an academically trained philosopher) and the visitor or client, based on a "beyond-method" method. 2. The importance of dialogue as that which enlivens and flows from being. 3. "Auslegen" – looking for explanations – in which the practitioner becomes united with the problem, not by imparting his understanding of it, but by giving the visitor a fresh impulse to explain him or herself." (Schuster,2004)

Briefly, philosophical counselling works in two different stages. The first stage is a five-fold process of "Problem identification," "Expressing emotion," "Analysing options," "Contemplation," "Equilibrium (PEACE)" (Marinoff, 1999, p. 90), and the second stage is the stage of self-transcendence (Blass,1996, p. 277). The former seeks to clarify the misconceptions, confusions, concepts, and

outlooks that may cause hindrances to further life development. This stage helps to untangle the causes of distress arising from various interwoven factors. The latter stage is mostly concerned with the individual's growth and development after clarifying their doubts. The word transcendence is not used here regarding spirituality, but it is a guided medium to help the counselee practice their 'personal' philosophy to become a better-evolved person. Suppose the counselee has not firmly believed in any fundamental philosophies. In that case, the process of transcendence can also provide an alternative course of action that may extend beyond the network of thoughts that the counselee is currently living.

Philosophical counselling is not in competition with Psychiatry or other psychological approaches, as their purposes differ. Rather than delving into underlying psychodynamic, social, or organic processes, Philosophical Counselling focuses on the reasons behind problematic beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour. Padin highlights this distinction:

"Philosophical counselling cannot be interested in the causes of life problems if those causes are understood in terms of some underlying psychodynamic, social, or organic process. Instead, philosophical counselling must be interested in the reasons that lead to problematic beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour." (Padin,2013)

The primary aim is to make the counselee self-reliant, where the counsellor helps the counselee unravel implicit assumptions by revealing hidden patterns and structures. As a result, the client can eventually apply the different philosophical tools and methods in any situation, making him independent instead of dependent upon the counsellor. Lahav (2001) writes that.

"The success aimed at by philosophical counselling, and examined in this study, is not just that of helping to reach self-satisfaction or to alleviate a particular distress, it is a much more ambitious goal, namely, that of philo-Sophia: the development of individual's capacity to

deepen and broaden her approach to life towards a more critical, rich and comprehensive attitude, that is to say, growth in wisdom." (Lahav,2001, p-13)

Finally, philosophical counselling can provide a fresh perspective on a problem. Beyond the issue, the counsellor can assist the counsellee (client) in getting to the root of the problem. The process of philosophical counselling may expose the counsellee to a refined meaning and purpose to their own life, which may improve social and cultural issues, thereby improving the counsellee's mental health. When the counsellee becomes self-reliant rather than dependent on the counsellor, the counsellee can use the tools taught by the philosophical counsellor during the session to combat the issue.

In summary, this paper introduced Philosophical Counselling as a valuable therapeutic tool, advocating for its broader application beyond traditional academic domains. The conclusion underscores its unique focus on addressing the underlying reasons behind problematic beliefs and behaviours by emphasising the non-competitive nature of Philosophical Counselling with other psychological approaches. The paper thus integrates philosophical perspectives into contemporary discourse, positioning philosophy as a practical and therapeutic guide for navigating the complexities of post-pandemic life.

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