



Cover Page



PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELLING: BRIDGING THOUGHT AND LIVED EXPERIENCE

Soumalya Mondal

Abstract:

Philosophical Counselling is a novel extension of philosophy that moves beyond the confines of academic discourse and engages directly with the problems of human life. Recently, there has been a growing tendency to apply philosophical thinking in solving personal, social, and ethical challenges. The present paper attempts to define Philosophical Counselling and examine its position vis-à-vis Psychological Counselling. It is viewed by many as a re-emergence of philosophy as a way of life, as reflected in Socratic dialogue, Stoic thought, and Indian traditions. As a modern movement, Philosophical Counselling developed through the efforts of thinkers such as Gerd B. Achenbach and A. Hoogendijk, who proposed an alternative approach to addressing existential confusion, anxiety, and questions concerning meaning and values of life. While Psychological Counselling primarily deals with emotional disturbances, trauma, and mental health issues, Philosophical Counselling becomes relevant where individuals suffer from lack of meaning, moral confusion, conceptual difficulty, and existential anxiety. The paper highlights that Philosophical Counselling does not aim at knowledge production but at conceptual clarification and reflective understanding. It emphasizes dialogue, autonomy, and the development of a philosophical attitude, rather than prescribing solutions. It is also distinguished from applied philosophy, scientific enquiry, and philosophical cafés, showing that it begins from lived experience rather than theoretical application.

Thus, Philosophical Counselling emerges as an independent and significant practice that seeks to restore philosophy to its original therapeutic and practical function, bridging philosophical thought with lived experience.

Keywords: Philosophical Counselling, Psychological Counselling, Dialogue, Conceptual Clarity, Existential Problems.

Introduction:

Philosophical Counselling is a novel extension of philosophy itself. Recently, there has been a growing tendency to apply philosophy in solving personal, social, and ethical challenges. Coming out of the confines of academic discourse, philosophy is now expressing itself in various practical forms. Philosophical Counselling is one such form that seeks to apply philosophical insight to different aspects of human life. Philosophical insight may help human beings to understand and address many problems of life. The present discussion aims to define Philosophical Counselling and examine its position vis-à-vis Psychological Counselling. Philosophical Counselling is viewed by many as a re-emergence of the conception of philosophy as a way of life, as found in Socratic dialogues, Stoic thought, and various Indian traditions. However, as a modern movement, it is relatively new in the history of counselling. It is generally recognised that in 1978 the book *“The New Image of the Person: The Theory and Practice of Clinical Philosophy”* initiated this movement. Later, philosophers such as Gerd B. Achenbach and A. Hoogendijk described themselves as consultant philosophers and inspired many others to contribute to this field. They proposed an alternative to the continuing practice of Psychological Counselling, especially in areas such as existential confusion, anxiety, and questions regarding meaning and values of life. When a person suffers from lack of meaning, moral confusion, or existential anxiety, Psychological Counselling may offer only limited help. Philosophical Counselling becomes relevant precisely in this space. It is important to note that Philosophical Counselling is rooted in classical philosophy itself. From Socrates onward, philosophers were concerned not only with theoretical inquiry but also with the problems of life. The Socratic method aimed at self-examination. However, in the post-Socratic period, philosophy gradually became detached from lived experience, while psychology assumed the role of practical guidance. Philosophical Counselling makes a conscious effort to restore philosophy to its original therapeutic and practical function without medicalizing human experience.



Cover Page



Nature of Philosophical Counselling:

Philosophical Counselling employs philosophical arguments, concepts, and methods, yet it is clearly distinct from academic philosophy. Academic philosophy is primarily concerned with the production, interpretation, and evaluation of knowledge. Philosophical Counselling, on the other hand, is not aimed at knowledge production or scholarly contribution. It aims to help individuals clarify beliefs, resolve value conflicts, confront dilemmas, and develop reflective ways of thinking and living. The criterion of success here is the clarity and relief experienced by the client. The subject matter of Philosophical Counselling also differs from that of academic philosophy. It does not primarily deal with thinkers such as Plato, Kant, or Shankara. Rather, its focus is the mind of the client along with their problems and questions. Philosophical ideas are used as instruments to provide insight and understanding. There is also a methodological difference. Academic philosophy emphasizes argumentation, textual interpretation, and logical analysis. Philosophical Counselling, however, is based on dialogue, and this dialogue is guided by the needs of the client rather than academic norms. An institutional difference is also evident. Academic philosophy operates within universities and research institutions, whereas Philosophical Counselling takes place outside formal institutional structures. Finally, the standards of evaluation differ. Academic philosophy is judged by originality and argumentative strength, while Philosophical Counselling is evaluated in terms of existential relevance, coherence, and respect for the autonomy of the client.

The term counselling derives from the Latin word “*Consilium*” meaning advice, deliberation, or consultation. It indicates a process involving thoughtful consideration and guided understanding. Modern counselling developed in the early twentieth century, particularly in the United States. Frank Parsons, often regarded as the founder of guidance counselling, established the Vocational Bureau of Boston to assist individuals in career selection through a systematic process. A major development occurred in 1942 with the publication of Carl Rogers’ *Counselling and Psychotherapy*, which emphasized a client-centred approach. He presented the counsellor as a helper rather than an authority giving advice. After the Second World War, counselling expanded significantly in the United States. The government-initiated training programmes for counsellors to assist returning veterans and supported the development of the profession. The American Counselling Association was later formed to standardize ethical practices. Today, Psychological Counselling has developed into a complex and multifaceted field. It includes various formats such as individual counselling, group counselling, family counselling, couple counselling, online counselling, and crisis counselling. Each format addresses different needs and situations. Individual counselling allows deep personal exploration in a confidential setting. Group counselling emphasizes interaction and shared experience among individuals facing similar problems. Family and couple counselling address relational conflicts, while online counselling has increased accessibility, especially in recent times. Crisis counselling provides immediate support during acute psychological distress. Various therapeutic approaches have also developed, including humanistic therapy, existential therapy, Gestalt therapy, trauma therapy, psychodynamic therapy, and cognitive behavioural therapy. These approaches aim to improve mental well-being and help individuals lead meaningful lives. Ethical considerations such as informed consent and professional competence are now essential components of counselling practice.

Relation between Philosophical and Psychological Counselling:

The emergence of Philosophical Counselling does not indicate the failure of Psychological Counselling. Psychological approaches were never intended to address every aspect of human experience. While Psychological Counselling focuses on emotional disturbances, trauma, and mental health issues, Philosophical Counselling addresses conceptual confusion, existential questioning, and moral conflict. Thus, the two approaches are complementary rather than contradictory. A person may be psychologically healthy yet philosophically confused, or philosophically clear yet emotionally distressed. Both approaches address different dimensions of human life and may work together in helping individuals understand and deal with their problems.

Conceptual Clarifications:

Philosophical Counselling is often confused with applied philosophy, but they differ fundamentally. Applied philosophy follows a theory-to-practice model, beginning with established philosophical theories and applying them to



Cover Page



practical problems. Philosophical Counselling, however, begins from the lived experience of the client and moves toward conceptual clarification. It does not prescribe ready-made solutions but encourages independent thinking and reflection. It must also be distinguished from philosophical cafés. Philosophical Counselling is a one-to-one engagement focused on personal problems, where the aim is to clarify the client's inner conflicts and life questions. In contrast, philosophical cafés involve group discussions that encourage collective reflection on general philosophical issues such as justice, freedom, or the meaning of life. Furthermore, Philosophical Counselling cannot be considered a scientific endeavour. Science relies on empirical verification, experimentation, and measurable data. Philosophical Counselling, however, deals with interpretive and normative questions. It seeks understanding rather than empirical proof, and its outcomes—such as insight and clarity—cannot be measured scientifically.

Philosophical Counselling is grounded in dialogue, which serves as a disciplined and reflective method of engaging with the client's problems. This dialogue helps individuals examine their beliefs, assumptions, and values in a systematic way. It emphasizes conceptual clarity, working on the assumption that many problems arise from confusion in thinking. By clarifying concepts and meanings, it enables individuals to understand their situations more deeply. Philosophical Counselling adopts a non-pathologizing approach. It does not treat individuals as patients but as rational beings capable of reflection and self-understanding. It promotes autonomy and encourages individuals to think independently rather than depend on prescribed solutions. It also focuses on transforming the individual's worldview. Instead of merely reducing symptoms, it seeks a deeper change in perspective, as many difficulties arise from unexamined assumptions about life. Ethical reflection is another important aspect, as it helps individuals deal with conflicts involving values, duties, and responsibilities. At the same time, Philosophical Counselling remains non-dogmatic, allowing individuals to explore different philosophical perspectives freely.

Conclusion:

Philosophical Counselling represents a unique and independent form of philosophical practice. By emphasizing dialogue, conceptual clarity, and autonomy, it restores philosophy to its original role as a guide for human life. It complements Psychological Counselling by addressing aspects of human experience that lie beyond the scope of psychological methods.

Thus, Philosophical Counselling emerges as an important practice for understanding and navigating the deeper questions of human existence, bridging the gap between philosophical thought and lived experience.

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