

## KEY CONCEPTS IN PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELLING<sup>1</sup>

BLANKA ŠULAVÍKOVÁ

**Abstract:** This article explores various interpretations of philosophical counselling. These interpretations are determined by the nature and status of the key concepts from which they are derived. The first is “critical thinking”, which a number of authors have based their conceptions on; just two examples are mentioned in the article—Elliot D. Cohen and Tim LeBon. Many philosophical practitioners, especially those whose philosophizing is influenced by Socrates, use critical thinking, and indeed believe that it is what philosophical practice is all about. Pierre Grimes is another example of someone who has been influenced by Socrates. Eckart Ruschmann and Ran Lahav believe that interpreting world beliefs is the basis of philosophical counselling. Others think philosophical counselling stems from interpretations of the concept of “wisdom”. The article also discusses Ran Lahav’s more recent views and those of Gerald Rochelle. The concept of “virtues” is discussed in relation to the work of Arto Tukiainen, Lydia B. Amir and Jess Fleming.

**Key words:** philosophical counseling; wisdom; critical thinking; worldview; virtues.

In philosophical counselling, there are a number of concepts that play an important role in determining the interpretation of meaning in counselling. In this article we focus on some of them: “critical thinking”, “worldview”, “a Socratic perspective”, wisdom”, “good life” and “virtues”.

### “Critical thinking”<sup>2</sup>

All philosophical practitioners would agree that philosophical counselling involves philosophizing and that they do indeed philosophize with their counselees. The crucial issue is how, and to what end, the philosophizing is conducted during the counselling session. It is in answering this question that the differences start to appear. One answer that is sometimes

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<sup>2</sup> We have analyzed critical thinking concepts in the following articles: “Philosophical dialogue as a space for seeking a good life, identity and critical thinking”. In *Human Affairs*, 2011, vol. 21, no. 2, p. 157-162; “Questions for Philosophical Counselling”. In *Human Affairs* 22, 131-141, 2012 and “Philosophical Counselling based on dialogical critical thinking”. In *Human Affairs* 23, 680-688, 2013, where we analyze the views of Achenbach, G. A., Schuster, S. C., Amir, L. B., Boele, D., Curnow, T., Chamberlain, H. S., Delnoij, J., Facione, P. A., Grimes, P., LeBon, T., Prins-Bakker, A., & Tuedio, J. A.

given is that the counsellor uses philosophizing primarily to help counsees overcome their personal problems by analyzing their beliefs about, or attitudes towards, their situation (Cohen, 1995). This approach demotes philosophy to the status of a means to something else; that is, making the counselee happy. Here philosophizing is used only in ways that help the counselee feel better, regardless of how true, intellectually rich, conceptually well-founded, or spiritually deep the counselling is. Whether or not the counsellor's philosophizing with the counselee is deep or shallow, or coherent, or a collection of isolated clichés is irrelevant as long as the personal problem is resolved and the counselee becomes happier. "Such an approach, as beneficial as it may be for other purposes, betrays the distinctive nature of philosophy as a search for wisdom for its own sake. In fact, I would rather not call it philosophical counselling but instead 'philosophy-therapy'" (Lahav, 2001, p. 8).

Elliot D. Cohen's logic-based therapy is based on four assumptions: 1. Human beings logically deduce the cognitive-behavioral components of their emotions from premises. 2. Human beings are inherently fallible and the premises of their behavior and emotional reasoning tend to contain fallacies. 3. Behavioral and emotional problems tend to stem from absolutist, perfectionist constructs of reality. 4. Human beings have an inherent willpower that can be used to overcome fallacious behavioral and emotional reasoning. Thus the counselee's therapy is based on critical thinking, as are many other philosophical approaches to counseling.

Another advocate of critical thinking in counselling is Tim LeBon—a cognitive therapist and philosophical counselor, and the author of *Wise Therapy* (2007). LeBon defines philosophical counseling as a type of counseling that uses philosophical insights and methods to help people think through significant issues in their lives so they can live more wisely. He integrates this with cognitive therapy (CBT), because rational processes can sometimes become stuck because of psychological processes (such as decision paralysis) and this is where psychological therapies come into their own.

LeBon has considered the methods most used in counselling: critical thinking, conceptual analysis, phenomenology, thought experiments, and creative thinking. He writes:

Critical thinking involves testing whether arguments stand up to critical investigation and seeing whether we have good reason to accept them. We will use critical thinking to assess philosophical theories and also investigate the extent to which critical thinking can help clients toward emotional wisdom, good decisions and enlightened values (Le Bon, 2007, p. 4).

Critical thinking is the counsellor's most useful philosophical method. Its value lies in the fact that it enables clients to be more rational and reasonable in their decision-making, beliefs, values and emotions.

### **“Socratic perspective”**

Many philosophical practitioners, especially those whose philosophizing is influenced by Socrates, use critical thinking, and indeed believe that it is what philosophical practice is all about. The basic idea here is that Socrates demands that our views be clarified and justified so that they pass the test of critical examination. According to this view, Socrates tells us that we need to clarify the concepts we use, reveal our hidden assumptions, and give convincing

reasons in support of our views or theories. This critical reasoning vision of philosophical practice implies that the role of philosophical practice is to help counselees critically examine their worldviews, reveal their presuppositions, analyze the inner logic, and improve it in order to make it more acceptable. Ideally, the improved worldview should be a coherent body of ideas that rests upon a firm foundation of good reasoning and acceptable axiomatic assumptions. The primary aim is then to promote the counselee's self-understanding (Lahav, 2006, p.4).

From a Socratic perspective, philosophical counseling 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 turn out to be. 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).

Socrates' work was also the basis on which Pierre Grimes developed his theory of counselling called "Philosophical Midwifery". It is based on Socrates' maieutics in Plato's *Theaetetus* dialogue (Grimes, 1997; Stecker & Grimes, 1999, pp. 233-240). P. Grimes (1999) defines philosophical counselling as an adaptation of the midwife method used in Socratic dialectics as a kind of psychotherapy and as a philosophical counselling method. The dialectic lends shape to the formal development of the discussion in which the questions are formed so as to look below the surface of the unwittingly false conceptions clients have about themselves and which make it impossible for them to achieve their deepest and most meaningful goals. These false conceptions are unarticulated conclusions formed at the beginning of the client's life from critical statements made about the client in the client's environment (by parents or in institutions, for instance) at critical moments. Grimes calls these false beliefs *pathologos*. Some *pathologos* may be linked together and form the basis of the image a person has of his or herself, and can be transmitted from generation to generation. The art of surfacing these ideas, identifying the reasons they endure, observing their impact on current problems and resolving them is called philosophical counselling. Grimes believes that asking questions enables the person to go below the surface of "emotionalised behavior" and free the *pathologos* for further analysis. The *pathologos* can be effectively dealt with using this method. It is a process of exploring and discovering, giving the client a new kind of understanding about his or herself. This kind of self-exploration often challenges clients' most basic convictions and leads them to reassess their life goals.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Grimes believes that in this kind of dialogue both sides are aware that the potential for this kind of turnaround in life concerns a greater search for meaning in a Platonic context. Philosophical counseling is not therefore for everyone, but for those whose visions of their lives could benefit from studying and exploring Platonic philosophy. It is for those who wish to pursue a vision of Platonic philosophy

## “Worldview”

In the chapter on defining philosophical counselling in the first section of his book, Ran Lahav (1995) talks of a framework specific to philosophical counselling which sets out the “principle of worldview interpretation” (Lahav, 1995, p. 4). This principle is the bedrock of philosophical counselling, which determines whether the philosophical counsellor’s approach can be considered to be truly philosophical. It is about helping clients formulate their own view of the world, which affects their daily life, and critically explore the problematic aspects, mitigate and enrich or develop their view of the world as required. The counselor should help the client detect implicit assumptions and provide alternatives by clarifying the consequences, analyzing the concepts, revealing the hidden patterns and structures. The counsellor should also familiarize the client with the literature on concepts associated with human life, freedom, the meaning of life, judging good and evil, and introduce the client to the various alternative streams of thinking. The counsellor should be educated in phenomenology and should be capable of describing the aspects of subjective experience generally overlooked by the average person (*ibid.*, p. 10).

Eckart Ruschmann (2006, pp. 149-156) develops Ran Lahav’s original idea that counselling is based on interpreting worldviews. This should be achieved by following these steps: 1. enabling a reconstruction of the personal conceptions and assumptions a counselee has, where the consultant’s approach (philosophical theory, methods and approaches) is linked to the counselee’s “theories” on worldviews, concepts, assumptions, and so forth. During which the (internal) coherence of the client’s worldviews should be explored and discrepancies resolved. The consultant may try to improve the coherence and totality of the client’s worldview. 2. The client’s philosophy should be related to his or her personal experiences, given that personal conceptions and experiences (decisions and actions) are linked to the totality. It is therefore necessary to look for (or “check”) for consistency and compatibility; that is, the coherence between worldview theories and compatibility with practical life.

According to Ruschmann, this process may function as the counselee’s initial outlook on the coherence within the framework of his or her own theoretical contexts and his or her own life in practice. The “frameworks” of personal philosophy are linked to the meaning of life and life goals. All these aspects—seeking coherence, compatibility and meaning/goals—are fundamental to achieving a “good life”. Counseling can help the counselee check his or her theories and alter those that have not been adapted to his or her actual experiences, thus helping him or her achieve greater coherence in this area. This helps the counselee improve and use his or her “epistemology”.

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and not simply learn to use it in its traditional form, but who attempt to affirm Plato’s philosophy in their own experiences and deepest thoughts. This does not mean that they are only capable of learning about dialectics and dialectical investigation, but also of embarking on the contemplative path, freeing themselves from the pilgrimage to the cave. For Platonic philosophy promotes the practice of contemplating visions of beauty and good and it is also a means of understanding and overcoming the blocks and obstacles that emerge along the pathway (Grimes, 1997).

## “Wisdom”<sup>4</sup>

According to Ran Lahav, philosophical counselling is based on having a unique subject matter and goals that are fundamentally different from those in psychologically-oriented therapies. It is aimed at the original Greek meaning of the word ‘philosophy’, ‘philo-sophia’: love of wisdom. This age-old goal of seeking wisdom has been almost forgotten in our technological, comfort-seeking, self-centered age. “Philosophical counselling is a personal journey in the world of ideas, aimed at wisdom” (Lahav, 2001, p. 7).

Lahav initially considered (1995) the goal of philosophical counselling to be to help counselees expose and clarify the network of concepts and ideas underlying the relevant aspects of their lives: to analyze the basic concepts that characterize their various attitudes, and to uncover and examine hidden presuppositions in their ways of life, explore conceptual interconnections, or in short, investigate the philosophy of the life the person is living. This clarification is intended to help the person develop a richer philosophical understanding of his or herself and the world, with the possible secondary benefit of improving their capacity to cope better with specific personal problems. However, Lahav later says (2001) that this conception of philosophical counselling falls short of the much greater potential philosophizing can achieve in our lives. Since it restricts itself to exploring the philosophy already embodied in the person, and since it focuses only on things already contained within the individual’s specific attitudes, this approach fails to explore the domains of wisdom which extend far beyond the person’s actual life. It thus fails to unfold new horizons of ideas, concepts and meanings, and to transcend the counselees’ current way of being (Lahav, 2001, p. 8). In seeking out wisdom, philosophy seeks to broaden and deepen life. Its role is not to help counselees become happier, but to become wiser; it is not intended to overcome work problems or marriage problems, but to explore domains of ideas and grow towards wisdom. Again, although seeking out wisdom is likely to empower a person to overcome personal problems; that is not its primary goal.

The role of philosophy in philosophical counselling is to open up the counsellee to the all encompassing horizons of meanings that constitute our reality, which is to say, to wisdom. To put it dramatically, in terms of Plato’s famous cave metaphor about us people who live in a dark cave and can see only shadows, the point of philosophy in counselling should not be to help those cave-dwellers explore the shadows among which they live, but rather to help them leave the cave and climb up to the greater light of the world outside (Lahav, 2001, p.10).

Lahav describes philosophical counselling as a process in which the person rises above his or her self-centered concerns and specific interests and opens his or herself up to the endless horizons of potential understanding of the nature of our being. It is a dialogue with an infinite network of ideas interwoven with life that intimate to us the fabric of its basic reality. It is here that we can see the role of philosophical counseling in the search for wisdom. The point of philosophy is to unfold the ideational foundation of our world: the various meanings, implications, and interconnections concerning the concepts of freedom or

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed the founder of modern philosophical counselling, Gerda Achenbach, believes that the goal of philosophical practice is “wisdom” (Achenbach, 1998).

the self, the moral implications of guilt, the worthwhileness or worthlessness of success, and indeed the meaning of truth and wisdom (Lahav, 2001, p.12).

Lahav eventually gravitated towards a model of philosophical counseling based on contemplation, where it is not critical thinking that is central, but meditation techniques. He called it moving “towards a wisdom-inspired vision of philosophical practice”.

Wisdom, then, implies being open to a wider world beyond one’s narrow self. It is a way of understanding that opens us to realities beyond our ordinary self-centred worldview. It is not a tool for analysing and simplifying and solving problems, but on the contrary, an openness to the complexity of human reality, to richer horizons of meanings, of facets, of perspectives. This is the source of the lure of wisdom, but also of the difficulty in walking its path (Lahav, 2006, p. 4).

Lahav is convinced that self-transformation towards a new self-understanding requires more than just critical analysis. The goal of philosophizing is to arouse in us the yearning for wisdom, to pull us out of our limited, superficial self-understanding—and thus our needs and concerns, and to help us live a greater vision of life.

Gerald Rochelle (2008) states that wisdom is the process not the product—it is the transaction, not the acquisition. Wisdom is our involvement in working towards an increased openness. Wisdom is not the object which draws us for it is within us even if it is not known or not recognized. In seeking wisdom, our focus should be on the process which leads towards it and not its attainment or specific nature. Wisdom is a task—perhaps an unending Sisyphean task—but it is the product of being involved in the task which is our focus, not the product the task may bring about. And the state of ‘opening up’ is the state of making oneself ready for change, to be available, free in the face of novelty and creativity, directed only by the pull of better judgment, wisdom or clarity.

... wisdom is within each of us - attainable and realisable within a lifetime. It can be exposed, not by focusing upon ‘objects’ beyond our knowledge - for anything beyond our knowledge may always remain so - but on that which, although beyond our present realisation, abides within us. Such realisation is connected to everyday life - to others, the world and all things which form our worldview. Wisdom is a process of becoming more ‘available’ to the world, letting go of the hindrance of pre-conception and dogma, and instead opening up to the novelty of creation, freedom, action and change. Openness is essential to the process of questing for wisdom, for without it there can be no discovery. We have to be open to the creative novelty and be prepared to act upon it freely and with meaning if we are to make any progress within the general ‘process of wisdom’. From the ‘process of wisdom’ comes good judgments and these react together with what it means to us to lead a good life. Making judgments like this does not prohibit our discovery of what is presently ‘beyond’, indeed it makes clearer the direction we must follow, for no route can be followed without judgments. As wisdom increases on the basis of openness to the potential of the individual it both utilises and produces qualities of wisdom and good judgment, qualities of what it is we consider elements of the good living individual - caution, modesty, balance and assuredness... Opening up the possibilities for wisdom is an active, risk-taking process... (Rochelle, 2008, p. 45).

Practical philosophy, then, as an exchange of words, can expose wisdom as part of the growing clarity within an individual whose reduced anxiety and increased openness is fostered by stepping away from philosophy itself and the utilitarian gains available in the neoliberal world.

## “Virtues”

Arto Tukiainen also suggests that the concept of wisdom is key to understanding the specific nature of philosophical counselling. He sees wisdom as being associated with an awareness of how to live well; a wise person must understand many things: the most important of which include life's goals and values, and when and how to satisfactorily achieve the important goals in one's life (2010, p.1). The assertion that wisdom is approached with the knowledge that how to live well is linked to the belief that all attempts at living well depend primarily on virtue, since: “virtues are the essence of wisdom” (*ibid.*). Philosophical counseling is therefore “a process of fostering virtues” (*ibid.*). Virtues are associated with self-understanding and Tukiainen distinguishes between cognitive and practical virtues, although the distinction is not clear-cut. Cognitive virtues include self-knowledge, which is very important and enables a person to follow their own goals, and understand their own 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” (2010, p. 2), for sometimes we have to adopt radically new perspectives and concepts that cannot be derived from our ideas thus far. Changes such as these may lead to a changed assessment of our situation and may affect our feelings and behavior. Cognitive virtues, such as knowledge, good judgment and openness to new concepts make up only part of wisdom. Wisdom also requires virtues such as honesty, patience, kind-heartedness and justice and rules out cruelty, ruthlessness, thoughtlessness, manipulateness, betrayal, neglect, obstinacy, ingratitude, bitterness, dishonesty, anger, avarice, greed and arrogance. Amongst the moral and existential virtues we can also include the practical virtue of objectivity, which means distancing oneself from immediate fears and looking at them in relation to human life and from the perspective of the surrounding and wider world, even from a cosmic viewpoint. A philosophical approach includes impartial perceptions of life and the cosmos.

Tukiainen does not claim that virtues suffice in the pursuit of happiness but that they improve the likelihood of attaining an acceptable and perhaps even contented life. Philosophical counselling, he believes, is an invitation to a philosophical way of life with its inevitable emphasis on virtue. Although the counselor should adopt an impartial position, he or she should be capable of offering advice from the “wisdom” point of view. He or she may note which virtues the counselee should explore and be encouraged to develop. If the person has no clear virtues that does not mean that he or she is incapable of understanding their significance. If the counselee starts hoping that these virtues will help him or her find peace of mind, he or she may wish to confer a greater role on them in life. Seeing philosophical counselling as a means of fostering virtues has led Tukiainen to the conclusion that virtues enable us to deal with current and future problems in life.

Lydia B. Amir (2006) also emphasizes virtues in her approach to philosophical counselling and sees counseling's mission as consisting of three parts: 1. To improve abstract thinking in moving from the abstract to the concrete and back. 2. To promote intellectual

virtues with the ultimate goal of deepening intellectual courage and autonomy, since the essence of philosophy is found in intellectual virtues. To accept different viewpoints and other cognitive virtues such as impartiality, openness to the thinking of others, critical assessment of differing opinions, spiritual sobriety, and make careful judgments based on evidence, and develop intellectual courage including the stamina and determination that go with it. 3. To foster moral virtues with the ultimate goal of encouraging the developing thoughts and feelings needed to acquire the wisdom which promotes pluralism, tolerance, solidarity towards other human beings.

One of the important goals of philosophical counseling according to L. B. Amir is to strengthen the counselee's autonomy, where autonomy is defined as relying on one's own powers to choose and form opinions. The concept of autonomy is closely linked to courage, and also humility, highlighting the link between cognitive and volitional processes, which presume a spiritual ability to judge whether someone can make better judgments than we can and the ability to control the emotions that prevent these skills from being applied. Gaining greater autonomy helps the counselee minimize the tension between freedom and equality, which is the ultimate goal of democratic philosophical practice.

Jess Fleming formulates her own list of virtues which may prove useful or essential to the counselor and/or client: "courage, moral and psychological stability (or equilibrium), listening, patience, humility, timing, irony and humor (especially the ability to laugh at oneself, and not take oneself too seriously), warmth and friendliness, honesty, sincerity, empathy, non-judgmental acceptance, authenticity, epoche (i.e. suspension of judgement), moderation (*sophrosyne*), equanimity (*ataraxia*), confrontation (*agon*), self-confidence, creativity, spontaneity and wisdom" (Fleming, 2000, p. 14).

## Conclusions

As LeBon has stated critical thinking is the most useful philosophical method for the counsellor. Its value lies in the fact that it enables counselees to become more rational and reasonable in their decision-making, beliefs, values and emotions. Critical thinking is appropriate for the many philosophical practitioners, who use Socrates as a paradigm for philosophizing, or indeed consider it to be what philosophical practice is all about. The basic idea here is that Socrates demands that our views be clarified and supported by reason so that they pass the test of critical examination. According to this view, Socrates tells us that we need to clarify the concepts we use, expose our hidden assumptions, and give convincing reasons that support our views or theories. The principle behind the worldview interpretation is that it aims to help the counselee formulate his or her own opinions on the world that affects his everyday life, critically explore its problematic aspects, and soften, enrich or develop opinions on the world as required. The counselor should help the counselee unravel implicit assumptions and offer alternatives by identifying the consequences, analyzing the concepts and revealing hidden patterns and structures. Some authors stress that philosophical counselling is a search for wisdom. It is a search for a means of broadening and deepening life. Its role is not to help counselees become happier, but wiser; its role is not to overcome problems in the workplace or in marriage, but to explore the domain of ideas and grow towards wisdom. Again, although the search for wisdom is likely to empower a person so

they can overcome personal problems; that is not its primary goal. Virtues have an important role to play in the acquisition of wisdom and greatly assist in the process of coming to terms with the problems of life.

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Institute for Research in Social Communication,  
Slovak Academy of Sciences,  
Dubravska cesta 9,  
841 04 Bratislava 4,  
Slovakia  
E-mail: ksbkblan@savba.sk