

On Ethical Counseling

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Abstract: Philosophical counseling became a topic of particular interest in recent years. More than ever, our world in disarray, with the moral crisis deepening the human alienation phenomenon, seems to call for the philosophical practice that provides a fulcrum to wisely coping with many and various challenges. Seeing that dilemmatic experiences mostly depend on morality, we aim to highlight the importance of the *ethical counseling* as the core of the philosophical practice. We take ‘ethics’ as ‘moral philosophy’ able to offer paths of a robust learning and of exercising a necessary wisdom in life. Grounded on moral philosophical teachings from ancient times to the present, the *ethical counseling* proves valences for guiding, managing and solving personal and social everyday problems. It gives us pivots to facing and overcoming inevitable trials and setbacks. The aim of this paper is to emphasize *ethical counseling* as an axis in the endeavour to find a propitious vision of life in its entirety, to reach and cultivate human well-being. Ethical counselors can enlighten and support persons to decipher and improve their moral potential for succeeding to deal with difficult existential situations, and eventually to experience a balanced and meaningful life.

Keywords: ethical counseling, moral philosophy, wisdom, moral health, well-being

Established since the 1990s as a profession in many countries, philosophical counseling became a domain of interest for more and more practitioners having expertise in philosophy. In this field, the *ethical counseling* gets a central place.

The practical philosophy is at stake, respectively the practical science according to Aristotle’s view on ethics (unfolded in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Eudemian Ethics*, and the *Politics*), governed by the “final cause,” dealing with the good man as individual and participant at the city’s order alike. So, ethics comes to the fore. Our approach is developed in terms of a hermeneutic analysis, which

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facilitates the call for wisdom in life and, by priority, the call for moral health; sustaining the idea that *ethical counseling* constitutes the core of philosophical counseling at large.

Tackling *ethics* in its most accurate meaning and functionality, as moral philosophy, and bringing into the foreground our own assumption about the nucleus place of *ethical counseling* within the philosophical counseling, we follow to explain the significance of this kind of activity in nowadays and its role in contributing to both a moral prophylaxis and therapy, eventually in supporting the protection and the improvement of human well-being.

Professional ethicists have already imposed themselves like consultants in business companies, social organizations and medical institutions, focusing especially on the deontological dimension of moral philosophy and offering their expertise as concerns the contents and techniques to apply codes of ethical conduct for different domains of activity. Beyond this, we have to recognize that there is an important part of *ethics* – taken in its holistic meaning, as moral philosophy - to be explored in the basic aretaic articulations; and merely thus, to assure the use of the entire potential of such a practical philosophy, leading towards a *balanced life* for human being.

We feature the fundamental teaching of *wisdom* – both speculative and practical, respectively *sophía* / σοφία and *phrónēsis* / φρόνησις from the Hellenistic philosophy, which activate the ability to judge well and to choose among a plurality of possibilities, bestowing a clear knowledge and a proper understanding, the endowment of establishing good ends and of reflecting on them, the capacity of making (the) right decisions, the ability of learning from experience, etc. - that ethics offers for a healthy and secure life, for a worthwhile and happy life, finally.

Ethics is herein approached in its functionality to provide a general moral vision upon life and, no less, to give some tools of grasping the great importance of developing our *character excellence* (the Greek *areté* / ἀρετή) that sustains us in enlightening and carrying toward the highest goal, that of human fulfillment or well-being, the *eudaimonía* / εὐδαιμονία. The reference is to the supreme purpose in life towards which a rational being directs all the efforts of self-fulfillment; it means happiness, living well, flourishing, prosperity, or well-being; *eudaimonía* is close related to *areté*, the excellence of character, and to *phrónēsis*, the practical rationality, implying a healthy judgment and,

no less, a good and beautiful character (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095a17 – 1098a20).

Ethical counseling deserves to be largely promoted like a *propaideia* to unceasingly think about our lifestyle, to filling it with the valences of moral ideal and values; helping us to face unavoidable difficulties and dilemmas, to questioning and activating our very own human potential in experiencing a good life.

At the same time, we consider *ethical counseling* as one of the most efficient modalities to assure the prophylaxis and therapy in the nowadays unbalanced style of living, under the auspices of the artificialization of life and the human alienation under the influences of the “fourth industrial revolution”, which “[It] is characterized by a fusion of technologies that is blurring the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres” (Schwab 2016), and the effects of the materialistic consumerism emphasizing an excessive consumption of ‘goods’ and services that are lack of any spiritual dimension, marked by a “new market ideology” in a globalizing world (Steger 2002). In such a troublesome context, *ethical counseling* could offer us a robust pathway to re-discover the fragile but so much necessary optimal equilibrium of life; and thus to avoid the threat of being transformed from consumers to consumed beings in the present and future world, and also to not falling into an artificial trap, of moving away from the very own human nature and from a life in harmony with the natural environment.

Ethical counseling would be(come) a work field of assisting the contemporary man in his endeavour to surmount the plurality of problems he has to manage in times of complex crises. The present situation claims responses to our serious need of finding viable routes to overcoming the various risks of alienation in the “society of neo-tribes” within a kind of “world re-enchantment” (Maffesoli 2007), in the frame of ‘consumerist’, ‘entertainment’ and ‘marketing society’, and no less in a more and more artificial environment of the emerging technologies.

We fully trust that *ethical counseling* practiced by competent agents in moral philosophy can confer a decisive plus to the restoration of the entire existence, to the cultivation of an ecological and sustainable living, to the disclosure and, certainly, the protection and advancement of a meaningful life.

Questioning: What is our ultimate goal, for mostly the answer would lead to the achieving, protecting and improving the human well-

being, the so much-needed *eudaimonía*. Undoubtedly, this is important not only for the individuals we are, but also for the entire social and natural environment in which we are just a part - but the one responsible towards the All-is-alive.

Well-being covers the dynamic (fragile and yet so wanted) *equilibrium* between the personal health - physical and mental, engaging the moral harmony of the self-*in-and-with-itself*, respectively the strength of character -, on the one side, and the optimal participation and integration in the complex web of social relationships, on the other. Actually, well-being represents the ground on which the human self-fulfillment and the evolution of society become a secure reality, because it eventually directs the cohesion, cooperation, mutual comprehension and respect, bringing closer together and progressing thanks to a high quality work for the personal and common good alike.

Being aware of this, we are interested about the paths moral philosophy can offer to living and cultivating a balanced healthy life. It is the frame in which the *philosophical counseling* and particularly the *ethical counseling* impose their role, for persons and communities.

Generally, a *moral philosophical counseling* attempts to give professional consultation in looking for a philosophical understanding of clients' lives, of social and/or mental problems, finally putting the moral philosophy in act to search ways for a good and fruitful life.

It is and it is not a novelty, seeing that we can find the roots of moral philosophical counseling in the Socratic tradition, as a culture of *dialogue* by exploring the opportunities of the 'maieutic method'. Basically, it is all about a form of cooperative argumentative talking that challenges the interlocutors to dig deeper in themselves and to unveil *fundamental values* that make life worth living; precisely, the *virtues* that govern the ethical comprehension and behaviour, and that have been enshrined by the Greek philosophers as: *dike* (justice), *andreia* (courage), *sophia* and *phronesis* (theoretical and practical wisdom), *sophrosyne* (temperance), etc.

Everything runs to the *human excellence*, the Greek *àreté*: the mastery in any thing, whatever it be (Laërtius 1963, 520). The reference heads us to the moral integrity that is, with no doubt, *a* (if not even *the*) pivot of human flourishing or well-being. After all, the ethical human status facilitates, maintains and develops the frame for a good (the *eudaimon*) life.

Far from being something new, as part of the philosophical practice, the *ethical / moral philosophical counseling* makes the core of it. *Ethical counseling* can help anyone to philosophically manage the everyday complicate problems (as regards family, social relationships, work, job, medical worries, stress, etc.), to wisely face, to overcome, to prevent and/or solve them, by exercising “new uses for ancient wisdom” (Marinoff 1999). As a central component – in our opinion, the kernel - of the philosophical practitioners’ activity, *ethical counseling* gives a “sort of therapy through *dialogue* aiming to examine and clarify problems linked to existential crisis caused by a meaninglessness of life and/or to ethical conflicts at work, to moral dilemmas, to facing the idea of death, etc.” (Ibid, 16-36). The fundamental value is precisely *wisdom* that is drawn out the history of philosophical ideas, being which does matter and can help us in managing daily problems. On the priceless philosophy giving us some of the “wisdom in life,” Arthur Schopenhauer (1992, 42) baldly noticed: “My philosophy, for instance, has never brought me in a six-pence; but it has spared me many an expense.”

As the nucleus of the philosophical counseling - taking into account that the key and most difficult questions are mainly the *moral* ones -, the *ethical counseling* is a work in progress. The focus is on unfolding skillfully conducted (by a moral philosopher counselor) conversation; the purpose being to supply a competent service able to support people in confronting their problems of living; and to help them in the attempt of bearing the quite often experienced burdens of life, each of them being caused by or/and causing moral stances.

Using a kind of Socratic dialogue, the moral philosophical counselor may awaken the conscience of people within a stimulated critical thinking, which vivifies self-knowledge in their mind; heading the counselees to disclose and comprehend the causes and sources of their difficulties. By its proper nature, as “a human interaction centering on help-oriented dialogue,” philosophical counseling focuses around the “reasoning about how to solve problems”, too (Martin 2001, 14-17). Certainly, it is far away of pretending that philosophical counselors could solve all or any kind of problems, or to cure diverse types of disorders. But, in general, they can essentially contribute in recovering and maintaining the optimal health state, and in developing the human well-being.

It is not the place to much more advocate for the importance of admitting the offer of various alternatives that could be efficacious in

our endeavour towards living a good life and achieving well-being or *eudaimonía*. For this reason we greatly draw attention to the significance and value of *morality* in grounding, safeguarding, improving and cultivating human health; promoting and nurturing the physical, mental and social equilibrium, and assuring the personal growth and affirmative manifestation within community; the all, through the in-depth understanding and responsible assumption that *character virtue* - respectively, *ēthikḗ àreté* / ἠθικὴ ἀρετὴ of the old Greeks - really matters for a healthy and happy life. It is *ēthikḗ àreté* explained by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1106b36 – 1107a2): “a formed state of deliberate decision (a formed habit of deliberately deciding), showing its nature in being a mean *relative to us*, but a mean which is determined according to the principle, which the *phronimos* would use to determine the mean.”

In terms of a “positive” and not a “negative” conception of health – that gets health as “the mere absence of major maladies (sickness, disease, injury, and infirmity)” -, well-being implies something “beyond the mere absence of disease. Lacking major maladies, one can still be less than optimally healthy”; for example, the problems connected to “instances of significant depression, anxiety, rage, difficulties in relating to people, and lack of self-control.” Indeed, we must agree that the “persons engaging in these risky behaviors might not be sick but nor are they optimally healthy.” (Martin 2001, 8-9)

Wisely activating moral values and principles - such as the ‘golden rule’; the fair measure or mean (also, coming from the ancient Greek philosophy¹); the respect for autonomy and the Kantian “categorical imperative”; the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence, of caring, decency, confidentiality, loving-kindness, compassion, responsibility, etc. -, an *ethical counselor* is the one who can guide the client to handle self-help activities. He/She gives competence to encourage and serve people to discover healthy routes of self-helping themselves. The philosophical counselor should therefore be a strong and equilibrated moral character; so, making meaningless a kind of

¹ Just remember a saying of one of the Seven Sages, the Cleobulus’ *pan metron ariston* / πάν μέτρον ἀριστον: “moderation is best in all things” or “all in good measure” (See “Cleobulus”. In Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, I. 89-93). And, certainly, consider the explanation of *virtue* established by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1106a20): a *mean* state between a too much and a too little that being considered relatively to ourselves “will be such a moral state as makes a man good and able to perform his proper function well.”

buzzword about “the man who saved the world but could not save himself” (Raabe 2002, 1). Guided and supported in their struggle to reach the very own moral potential, the counsees succeed to decypher the power of moving step by step from counseling to self-counseling, and to (re)discover the meaning of life.

The *ethical / moral philosophical counseling* can favour the counselee’s need of self-knowledge and self-understanding. Thus, the counselee becomes increasingly aware of his/her inner strengths to work for the own health and happiness. Through the *ethical counseling* process, individuals are helped to become their own philosophical counselors and to get the living state in which they are able to help themselves. The autonomy and dignity of personal identity are fully respected, and a ‘window’ is opening toward the experience of well-being.

Thanks to the *ethical counseling*, a person can find the support of (re)learning to self-govern by a better self-knowledge and comprehension of his/her needs, desires and abilities; first and foremost, activating and developing his/her *moral character*, and using it in addressing serious problems of living. It follows that the person gets the own fit-for-purpose philosophy and sense of well-being, taking into account that ‘the chief source of human happiness is internal’, and the most important is the mental and *moral* strength built on the acquired and internalized *wisdom in life* – for which a long history of moral-philosophical teachings testifies.

Raising awareness leads to understand that human well-being depends on the state of health, which is intimately linked to the mind; and the latter depends to a large extent upon one’s *morality*. This is the reason we consider the *ethical counseling* have a knot position within the philosophical practice. Before offering some therapeutic trails, it offers a needed prophylaxis for the counsees, preparing them to avoid risks of being trapped in or to be(come) able to managing and resolving their troubles (everyday stress, career changes, frequent moral dilemmas, doubts regarding the meaning of life, suffering, illness, aging, death and dying, etc.).

Through a prophylactic and therapeutic *dialogue* – in Socratic manner, as we find in Plato’s Dialogues -, people can be helped to explore and modulate their style of thinking and conduct, valuating the potential of *wisdom* in coping with life’s worries, difficulties and perplexities; encouraging them to put in act self-control, moderation - the Greek *sophrosyne* / *σωφροσύνη*; namely the value Heraclitus (DK

B112) has considered to be the “greatest virtue” / *sophrosin àreté megisté*, and Plato (*Cratylus*, 411e) has seen in it even the “moral sanity”; the all, in dealing with the inevitable struggles and challenges of real life.

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