

THE INTERSECTION OF PHILOSOPHY AND THERAPY: GERD ACHENBACH'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELLING

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Abstract

In the early 1980s, Gerd B. Achenbach pioneered what became known as modern philosophical counselling by establishing the first philosophical practice in Germany. He sought to distinguish this new approach from psychotherapy and was critical of academic philosophy's tendency to be overly theoretical and disconnected from practical concerns. Achenbach advocated a return to the Socratic method, where philosophy directly engages with personal and existential concerns.

This paper explores the role of philosophical counselling, as developed by Gerd Achenbach, in addressing personal and existential dilemmas through philosophical dialogue. His Philosophical counselling, distinct from traditional psychological therapies, uses philosophical concepts and methods to help individuals, address personal issues and life challenges. It also emphasizes clarification of values, reflection on life's meaning, and the application of various philosophical methodologies to improve self-understanding. The paper tries to investigate Achenbach's methods, comparing them with psychological counselling, and assesses the benefits and limitations of integrating philosophy into therapeutic practice.

Keywords: Philosophical counselling, insights, rationality, Dialectical Method, midwifery method, thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, phenomenological method, Psychological counselling, Reflective dialogue method

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Introduction

The practice of philosophical counselling, founded by Gerd B. Achenbach, a German philosopher, offers an alternative approach to traditional therapy by focusing on philosophical reflection rather than psychological diagnosis. Achenbach's focus was on the application of philosophical essence and reflections to solve the problems and remedy in everyday life rather than in purely academic. It acts as a remedy for the problems of human life through the integration of philosophy and psychotherapy. He established the first philosophical practice in Germany in 1981, marking the beginning of the modern philosophical counselling movement.

This paper examines Achenbach's contributions to the field, exploring how his approach intersects with therapy, providing individuals with tools to navigate life's existential questions. Unlike conventional psychological counselling, which targets mental health disorders, philosophical counselling aims to facilitate self-exploration and clarify values. His approach was counselling through philosophical tools rather than psychotherapy's medicalized approach to solve human problems. *"Philosophical counselling is not about solving problems, but about clarifying and changing perspectives."* (Achenbach 92.)

Evolution of Philosophical Counselling

Socrates is best known for philosophical counselling in classical western philosophy and often regarded as the first philosophical counsellor. His approach, often referred to as the dialectical or Socratic method, seeks to uncover genuine self-knowledge by guiding individuals through a structured process of questioning and dialogue. It is also known as the conversation method, to examine their beliefs and encourage self-knowledge. It is sometimes referred to as the 'midwifery method' because, just as a midwife assists in the safe delivery of a child, Socrates helped individuals bring forth the true knowledge already within them through reasoned dialogue. According to Socrates the real knowledge and rational thinking is already within an individual and by skilful and trained questioning we can realize what is inside the mind of an individual. This method is very useful in counselling process as it helps to realize the problem by self-examination.

Philosophers such as Plato and Hegel employed the dialectical method to engage in self-reflection and to explore and resolve

contradictions. Plato, in particular, used this approach to highlight the value of deep questioning, encouraging individuals to critically examine their beliefs and shift their perspectives. For example, sometime the client may have doubts or have less clarity about life's meaning. The philosophical counsellor uses Socratic questioning to explore what the client means by "meaning" and whether this belief holds up. Hegelian dialectics emphasizes the importance of a triad process - thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis. In the counselling process, a counsellor uses this method as a tool for resolving the problem of the client, which will help in identifying their conflict in life and then gradually attain some type of growth. In most cases the client holds conflicting beliefs, cannot identify and resolve the problem themselves. Hegel's dialectical method embraces these conflicts and contradictions, and helps the client to resolve and reach a higher realm – this is known as synthesis in Hegelian philosophy. This is a saturated stage to identify what exactly the problems or concerns are; after that, identify what are the things to be eliminated and what are the things to hold on to.

Through the counselling process, we can also use the phenomenological method of Husserl and Heidegger, which focuses on the conscious experience of the individual, and the client can explore how they perceive and interpret their world. In Analytic Philosophy – Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein use logical analysis and logical structure to shape their thought. It helps the individual to break down language and arguments to clarify thinking and identify flawed reasoning or misuse of concepts. Through the existential analysis of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre, there is a focus on individual concerns like freedom, anxiety, meaning and authenticity. Using this method, the counselling process encourages and develops personal responsibility, to realise one's own values. In the modern counselling process, the psycho- therapist uses the same method to analyse the problem of the client and examine its true nature. But unlike this, philosophical counselling seeks the help of various philosophical theories and concepts to cultivate a deep rooted analytical thinking process inside the mind of the client.

Philosophical counselling emerged as a new trend in the 1980's and it acts as a new way of therapy used with the tools of philosophy in solving the problems. *"Philosophical counselling aims at enabling people to live more consciously and more rationally by examining their beliefs and values."* (Lahav and Tillmanns 4.) There are a lot of limitations in psychological therapy that have existed since the early times. Some of the philosophical self-exploration tools used

along with psychotherapy are very useful for identifying oneself and fostering self-reflection in thought. These philosophical methods were first used by German thinker Achenbach, who realised that many people try to seek answers to existential questions that do not require medicine or psychological intervention. So philosophical counselling tries to engage individuals in reflective dialogue to help them better understand their worldview, values, and life purpose etc. *“Philosophical counselling is about helping people redefine their values, recognize the complexity of life’s issues, and find clarity in uncertain situations.”* (Achenbach 58.)

Philosophical Counselling vs. Psychological Counselling

Philosophical counselling aids and supports psychological therapy to bring about an awareness of the existential problems of human beings. Philosophical counselling focuses on existential, ethical, and conceptual issues, which seeks clarity and wisdom within lifestyle problems, and focuses on the emotional, mental health, and behavioural issues of the individual. The fundamental goal of philosophical counselling is to help clients examine their beliefs, identify their values, and life-meaning, using philosophical inquiry and insightful thinking. On the other side of the psychological path is the improvement of emotional well-being and mental functioning using different methods and psychological tools. In philosophy, different methods and strategies are used for the process of counselling such as dialogue, conversation, logic, thought experiments, and reasoning. Common methods used in psychological techniques like CBT, psychoanalysis, talk therapy, etc. are related to life problems to be addressed by philosophy such as finding life’s meaning, ethical dilemmas, identity, decision-making. Along with one to one talk, psychological counselling addresses the problem of anxiety, depression, trauma, relationship issues, etc. Psychological approaches are typically interventionist, aiming for symptomatic relief, whereas philosophical counselling is more about dialogue and the exploration of life's deeper questions.

Philosophical counselling, as developed by Achenbach, focuses on helping individuals reflect on their beliefs, values, and life choices through thoughtful dialogue. Rather than diagnosing mental disorders, this approach encourages clients to explore the philosophical dimensions of their personal concerns, aiming to achieve clarity, self-understanding, and ethical insight. In contrast, psychological counselling is generally rooted in clinical models

that address emotional distress, mental health conditions, and behavioral issues. Therapists often use established techniques, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy or psychoanalysis, to help clients manage symptoms, heal from trauma, and develop coping strategies.

Ultimately, Achenbach's approach views life problems as philosophical in nature, requiring reflection and reasoning, whereas psychological counselling treats them as emotional or mental challenges that benefit from therapeutic treatment. Both are essential for healing and retrieving mental stability. They act as the two sides of the same coin. Philosophical counselling helps people think clearly about life's big questions and psychological counselling helps people heal or manage mental health and emotional problems.

Counselling Methods and Techniques of Achenbach: Reflective dialogue method

Philosophical counsellors engage clients by asking questions that provoke reflection on personal beliefs, values, and assumptions. *"Through dialogue, individuals can clarify and redefine their values, providing them with a clearer perspective on life."* (Achenbach 86). The reflective dialogue method was used by Achenbach in his practice sessions. The fundamental elements of this method include an open ended conversation where the counsellor does not offer solutions but poses philosophical questions aimed at creating a space of doubt, reflective thinking etc. The client becomes aware of hidden assumptions behind his belief and actions, which is a personal involvement reflecting the various hidden meanings that are unique to each individual. It emphasises reflective and philosophical insight of self-understanding and existential clarity. So, his philosophy is capable of understanding and addressing the real life problems of the client. The goal is not to give advice but to help clients achieve clarity about their worldview and the choices they make. He developed a unique method focused on dialogue and critical reflection rather than diagnosis or therapy. His approach is flexible, person-centered, and deeply rooted in philosophical traditions.

Implications of Philosophical Counselling

Philosophical counselling has wide-ranging applications and a growing relevance in today's complex world. It is particularly effective in helping individuals navigate existential questions, ethical dilemmas, and crises of meaning without resorting to

psychological diagnoses. By fostering reflective dialogue and value clarification, it enables people to make thoughtful life choices and better understand themselves. In non-clinical settings, it serves as a meaningful alternative for those experiencing emotional distress rooted in philosophical confusion rather than mental illness. Philosophical counselling is also applied in professional contexts such as education, leadership, and healthcare, where ethical decision-making and moral responsibility are critical. In today's fast-changing and often fragmented society, where individuals frequently struggle with identity, purpose, and ethical clarity, philosophical counselling offers a grounded, rational, and humanistic approach to personal and social challenges.

Conclusion

Philosophical counselling offers a valuable tool to individuals seeking to explore human existential questions, clarify their life values, and reflect on the essence and meaning of their lives. By integrating philosophical methods and tools with therapeutic practice in psychological problems, philosophical counselling provides a unique approach to personal development especially one-to-one attention and caring. *"Philosophical practice is not a therapy, but a dialogue aimed at clarifying thought and resolving confusion."* (Marinoff 5) While it is not a replacement for traditional psychological therapy, it serves as an important support tool for individual problems, and also to aid in self-understanding and bringing clarity to their lives.

Philosophical counselling is a contemporary practice that applies philosophical methods and insights to help individuals address personal and existential issues. Unlike traditional psychological counselling, it does not treat clients as patients with mental disorders, but as rational agents capable of self-reflection and growth. It is especially relevant in today's world where many face crises of meaning, identity, and values. By encouraging individuals to practise critical thinking, indulge in self-inquiry and dialogue, philosophical counselling helps individuals clarify their beliefs, resolve moral dilemmas, and find purpose and direction in life. It is particularly effective for those struggling with ethical decisions, life transitions, or existential anxiety. *"The philosopher does not heal the soul as a physician does the body, but rather helps it to achieve clarity through rational discourse."* (Achenbach 35.)

The scope of philosophical counselling is broad, with an interdisciplinary approach. It is used for solving the problems of an

individual in counselling sessions, educational institutions, corporate settings, and healthcare environments, particularly in palliative care and end-of-life decision-making. Overall, we can say that client in front of the counsellor is treated as a human being rather than a patient. In philosophical counselling, the counsellor can help the individual to develop insights, think and solve problems themselves. Philosophical counsellors also work in areas like leadership coaching, legal ethics, and interfaith dialogue. Group workshops and seminars further extend its reach by fostering collective philosophical inquiry. With its emphasis on dialogue, reasoning, and ethical reflection, philosophical counselling provides a meaningful alternative to purely clinical or behavioural approaches, contributing to personal well-being and social harmony.

Thus, the notable aspect of Achenbach's work is his creation of a reflective dialogue method that helps individuals to explore their values, beliefs, and life decisions. He emphasizes the importance of allowing people to express their inner thoughts and emotions, which can lead to deeper self-understanding and insight. His practice often involves drawing on philosophical ideas and texts to support clients in addressing their personal concerns. For example, he might use existentialist thought to guide someone dealing with questions about meaning and life purpose. This approach not only supports personal growth but also nurtures critical reflection and ethical awareness. Achenbach's work underscores how philosophical reflection can serve a therapeutic function, offering meaningful guidance through life's complex challenges.

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