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# TOWARDS A NEO-ARISTOTELIAN ACCOUNT OF PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELING

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## ABSTRACT

At present, there is no generally accepted account of what philosophical counselling is or why we should practice it. The aim of this article is to propose an account of philosophical counselling in terms of an Aristotelian concept of *Eudaimonia*. I argue that this concept provides an apt description of what philosophical counselling, in many cases, consists in. One benefit of construing philosophical counselling in terms of *Eudaimonia* is that it provides a natural *justification* for the practice: since it is plausible that *Eudaimonia* is a desirable state to be in, philosophical counselling is worth engaging in inasmuch as it promotes that state.

**Keywords:** Philosophical Counseling, Aristotle, Eudaimonia.

## Introduction

Philosophical counselling is a kind of psychological therapy that aims to promote happiness and mental wellbeing by engaging the patient in broadly philosophical dialogue and inquiry. The main aim of this paper is to show the effectiveness of this kind of counselling when considered from Aristotle's idea of *Eudaimonia*.

This paper is structured as follows. In section one, I will explain the Aristotelian concept of *Eudaimonia* how such a state is achieved. In section two, I will show how *Eudaimonia* can be considered as the aim of philosophical counseling. Lastly in section three, I will provide recommendations for future studies on this topic.

### **Aristotle's concept of *Eudaimonia***

Aristotle begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* by stating that “Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good”<sup>2</sup> After pointing out that these goods are sometimes subordinate to others, he seems to adopt the working hypothesis that there is a *fundamental* good: a good that is intrinsically desirable (at least, for humans) and relative to which all other goods that we might aim at are subordinate, and from which they derive their meaning and value. He labels this ultimate good *Eudaimonia* and proceeds to defend a number of substantive claims about its nature. According to Aristotle, the practical benefit derived from discussing the nature of *Eudaimonia* is that, like archers who know the nature and location of their target, we are more likely to achieve our goals.

We can, perhaps, all agree that *happiness* or *well-being* is ultimately what is desirable in life. But in what do these states consist? Aristotle dismisses several candidate conceptions of happiness, as being identical with *pleasure*<sup>3</sup>, *wealth*<sup>4</sup>, and *honor*<sup>5</sup>. A more plausible account, Aristotle suggests, will be grounded in mankind’s distinctive nature, which gives rise to “the characteristic function of man.”<sup>6</sup> He includes, quite plausibly, the ability to reason as part of mankind’s distinctive nature. And he also connects happiness to moral virtue. *Eudaimonia*, for Aristotle, involves the use of reason in accordance with the virtues. To fail to use ones reason, or to live without virtue, is to fail to live in the distinctively human state of well-being – it is to fail to *do well*, as a human being.

Aristotle went on to explain that moral virtue is developed through habituation. And for Aristotle the process of habituation is beyond mere imitation<sup>7</sup> and was very similar to the psychological process called

*reinforcement*.<sup>8</sup> This is a process by which the contents of a person's character – consisting, in part, of their reflective judgements, their desires, and their emotional responses - is gradually modified and brought into a kind of internal harmony.

For example, suppose that a person decides to become kinder, or to learn to appreciate opera. At first, he might encounter dissonance between these decisions and his unconscious responses. He might still feel amused when he sees a stranger slip on ice, and bored at a performance of Don Giovanni. But, by scrutinizing these unconscious responses, and trying to modify *how he sees* their objects, over time he might come to *feel* that other people's suffering is not funny, and that Don Giovanni is an entertaining and profound piece of art. Through this process he gains a kind of rational control over his inner life. This is something that humans are, perhaps, uniquely capable of. We can *decide* not to give in to temptation by resisting the second helping of cake – perhaps because we want to lose weight, or in order to leave enough for everybody else. This capacity to regulate our desires in light of our goals and values is essential to our status as persons. For Aristotle, if we want to live well as a person then we have to *exercise* this capacity.

*Eudaimonia*, then, involves the achievement of an inner harmony between a person's consciously acknowledged decisions and plans, their desires, and their emotional responses. Philosophical counselling, I want to suggest, can help us overcome certain kinds of disharmony and thereby help bring us to *Eudaimonia*. I will illustrate this by considering several kinds of disharmony.

## ***Eudaimonia* and Philosophical Counseling**

So what is philosophical counseling? A rough working definition of philosophical counseling extracted from the specific practices in South Africa<sup>9</sup> describes philosophical counseling that includes a trained philosophical counselor who dealt with problems related to “reasoning or conceiving”, as opposed to “physiological or neuropsychiatric

dysfunction.” The processes used were interactive, bilateral, “dialogical”, and the use of mutual probing and questioning to resolve “the problem in question.”<sup>10</sup>

Philosophical counselors often deal with problems related to moral reasoning and moral dilemmas which were in line with the concept of *Eudaimonia*. Consider cases of *Akrasia*, or *incontinence*. Aristotle posed the question,

“But in what sense, it may be objected, can a man judge rightly when he acts incontinently?”<sup>11</sup>

In other words, how is it possible for a man to act against what he judges, all things considered, to be best? Yet incontinence seems an everyday phenomenon, involving an inner disharmony where ones’ beliefs and explicitly avowed values are in conflict with what one desires and ultimately chooses.

The philosophical counsellor deals with such issues by guiding clients through their state of disharmony. She does so by asking them to explicitly formulate their goals, the reasons that favor them, and the sources of their countervailing desires. By doing this, the patient can either modify their goals or better understand and regulate their desires. Hopefully, this will result in improved happiness and mental wellbeing, and bring them closer to *Eudaimonia*. It is crucial to note that one’s explicit beliefs and goals do not enjoy a *carte blanche* in cases of *akrasia*: sometimes these need modifying, and one’s immediate emotional responses and desires actually better represent ones character. This is the lesson to take from the literature on inverse *akrasia*. For instance, in ethical studies of Mark Twain’s work *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Bennett. considers the kind of emotional distress felt by Huck Finn concerning the conflicts of his moral beliefs.<sup>12</sup> Huck considered his attempts to help the escaped slave Jim. as morally wrong from the standpoint of social beliefs. And yet this deeper sense of morality and loyalty to Jim was what was truly right. This would be one of the purposes of philosophical counseling: to make

one see the rightness or wrongness of ones internalized moral beliefs.

### **Scenario 1: Political Decision Making**

Mr. A who is a newly elected member of parliament comes in for counseling. His problem is, he must vote for a race-based matriculation system bill that is going to be tabled in parliament by the ruling party of his country. Now, the political whip of his party had already forewarned all party MPs that they must show collective political support by giving their affirmative vote regardless of their personal feelings. This is to show political solidarity with the ruling party which will ensure the votes from the majority ethnic group in the next general election. Personally, he does not approve of racial discriminations as his moral beliefs is in the values of meritocracy. Though he and his family would benefit by his affirmative vote as they are from the majority ethnic group, he still cannot support such a bill. But he knows that if he doesn't cast his affirmative vote then he will be losing favor with his political party and its leadership. That would put his political career into jeopardy. At home, his wife thinks that he should cast his affirmative vote, as they as family would benefit economically. This creates an inner conflict (moral dilemmas) between his moral beliefs and values and what is expected of him resulting in unhappiness, stress and mentally strained. How can I help Mr. A through philosophical counseling? Here is a proposed approach.

As a philosophical counselor, I am merely a moderator who is there to guide Mr. A to bring about inner harmony by synchronizing his moral beliefs and values with his political decision making and actions that would bring inner moral harmony of his inner conflicts. So I would begin by asking him to assert what his beliefs and values for the purpose of vocalizing and reinforcing what he already holds and what he wants for the future. questions like, "What is your considered moral belief about the affirmative vote that is expected of you." or, "Since it is *expected* of you to give an affirmative vote, what would you *really* like to do?" If he insist upon his moral beliefs and values and resists is against the affirmative vote, then I will raise his fears of the possibility of his political

career loss and the blame that might come from his wife for not doing what was expected of him. The purpose of raising such fears is to prepare him to face his fears even before it happens, and to assist him with the necessary justifications for his eventual decisions and actions. So I will ask, "Since you already know the expectations of your party and your wife, do you agree with them?" If he says, "no" then I will ask him what your justifications are for saying no to them. I will then assist him to think and write down all possible justifications he can use to support his rejection of the affirmative vote. But at the same time I would again remind him that there are realistic consequences of career loss and blame from his wife that might result. I will then assist him to think and prepare for such results. The counseling principle is to assist the client to understand his own justifications for his own decisions and actions, as was the case of the Huck Finn example. And at the same time to prepare him to have his own contingency plans to face the consequences of his decisions and actions. If Mr. A has both his own justifications and his own contingency plans, he can then proceed and act in accordance to his deeper moral beliefs and values thereby bringing inner moral harmony that leads to happiness, and mentally wellbeing. Overall, it would lead Mr. A closer to *Eudaimonia*.

On the other hand, if his response is, "Well! It is better I do what my party and wife expects and avoid the negative consequences," I will counter and ask him the following questions. Firstly, "how will you justify your response that is in contradiction to your moral beliefs and values." Secondly, "How can you justify decision to the minority constituents who also voted for you?" Thirdly, "what will you do if there is a public backlash against your party and you for racial discrimination?" Fourthly, "are you ready to lose your personal moral credibility to do what is merely expected of you?" Now, the above questions are meant to counter Mr. A's rationalization that disregard his deeper moral reasoning. It is to alert him to long-term moral distress and moral residue of such a decision. The counseling principle is to work with his original desire for inner moral harmony and his desire to attend counseling in order to resolve his moral conflicts and lead him closer to *Eudaimonia*. The next case

study I would like to discuss involves a tragic moral dilemma in medical decision making.

## **Scenario 2: Medical Decision Making**

Ms. J who works as an emergency room doctor in a local hospital comes for counseling. She recently underwent the traumatic experience of having to decide to save a mother's life over the life of her child who were accident victims. She is suffering from moral distress and carries with her moral guilt after making a life and death decision. What makes her moral guilt unavoidable was whichever person she decides to save, she would lose the other. How can I help Ms. J through philosophical counseling? Here is a proposed approach.

I would begin by asking her to recount and relive her experience. The purpose is to journey with her through traumatic experience in a supportive but objective manner so that she can reflect on her decision making, her present feelings, her responsibilities and accountability. It is also to assist her to overcome her 'moral residue' of guilt. As she recounts her experience, I will ask her probing questions. I would begin by asking, "On the day of case, how you were physically, emotionally and mentally feeling?" This question was to establish her prior physical, emotional and mental states. The reason being her state of being would directly affect her decision makings. I would probe about her professional views concerning dealing with patients. This is to remind her of her professionalism. Based on her diagnosis, it is obvious that both mother and child were in danger based on the fact that she decided to save the mother rather than her child. I would then probe her justifications of why she chose the mother's live over the child. This is to ascertain whether she had an option to save both mother *and* child. Again, in this case scenario, she did not have that option judging by her choice to save the mother. Next, I will ask her, "If in your professional assessment you decided to save the mother because you assessed that medically she had the best chance of survival, why do you feel guilty? Are you having doubts that both patients could have been saved?" This is to ascertain whether her feelings of guilt were due to her

doubts in her medical assessment. If she has no doubts in her professional medical decision, then it is clear that her feelings the preciousness of life are overwhelming her correct medical decision.

Finally, I would then ask a rhetorical question, “Are not glad that you managed to save the mother’s life?” Though her answer of “yes” was expected it was deliberately asked to highlight the fact that she was successful in saving a life thereby cementing her belief in the value of the preciousness of life. By this strategy, I would able to guide Ms. J to regain her inner harmony by dispelling her moral guilt and to have resilience for future similar traumatic experiences

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The above scenarios dealt with moral reasoning and moral dilemmas and which created various states of inner disharmony. *Eudaimonia* therefore became useful as an end goal in philosophical counseling which attempts to resolve these issues. The key is to understand ones deeper moral reason and find ways of justifying it in the face of more superficial circumstances like the expectations of society or family, or professional expectations. Especially important is the idea that morality is something habitual, something which needs to be practices. Philosophical counseling can resolve conflicts and train one to cultivate one’s inner virtue. Aristotle’s concept of *Eudaimonia*. continues to be an important guide in resolving mental conflicts among patients. My recommendations for the future based on this study are:

1. There be more philosophical counseling studies based on the psychological concepts found in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.
2. There be more researches done on the correlation between moral reasoning and erroneous thinking.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> F. H. Peters, *The Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle*. (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd, Deyden House, Gerrard Street, W.1906)
- <sup>2</sup> Peters, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, I.1.
- <sup>3</sup> Peters, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, I.5.3.
- <sup>4</sup> Peters, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, I.4.3.
- <sup>5</sup> Peters, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, I.5.4-6.
- <sup>6</sup> Peters, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, I.7.9-8.
- <sup>7</sup> Peters, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, II.1.1.
- <sup>8</sup> Santi Lisnawati, "The Habituation of Behavior as Students' Character Reinforcement in Global Era" *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*. 2, 2016, 413-428. 10.15575/jpi.v2i3.852, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321964888\\_The\\_Habituation\\_of\\_Behavior\\_as\\_Students'\\_Character\\_Reinforcement\\_in\\_Global\\_Era](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321964888_The_Habituation_of_Behavior_as_Students'_Character_Reinforcement_in_Global_Era).
- <sup>9</sup> Dirk Jacobus Louw, "Towards A Definition Of Philosophical Counselling In South Africa." University of South Africa, 2-8, 2009, [http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/2949/dissertation\\_louw\\_%20dj.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/2949/dissertation_louw_%20dj.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y), pp. 2-8.
- <sup>10</sup> Louw, "Towards A Definition Of Philosophical Counselling In South Africa" 35-37.
- <sup>11</sup> Peters, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 7.2.1
- <sup>12</sup> Jonathan Bennett, *The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn* (Philosophy 49, 1974), 123-134.

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