

Research Article

The Examined Life in Practice: A Genealogy of Philosophical Self-Care

Mohammed Zeinu Hassen* 

Department of Social Sciences, Addis Ababa Science and Technology University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Abstract

Philosophical counseling is a contemporary practice that applies philosophy to personal dilemmas. Many people perceive it as a modern invention, but this article challenges that perception by tracing the history of philosophy as a practical art of living. The central thesis is that philosophical counseling is not a new field but a revival of philosophy's original purpose, which was largely eclipsed by the professionalization of academia and the rise of psychology. This history begins with Socrates, who positioned self-examination as the key to a worthwhile life. The article then explores the Hellenistic schools, Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Skepticism, which explicitly functioned as therapies for the soul, offering frameworks to achieve tranquility and human flourishing. The article follows this tradition into the Middle Ages, where it was sublimated into theology, with figures like Boethius using philosophy as a consolation for suffering. A humanistic revival occurred in the Renaissance with thinkers like Montaigne. The Modern Era saw a great divergence, as philosophy became an increasingly abstract academic discipline, ceding personal problems to the burgeoning field of psychology. The 20th century, however, saw seeds of a revival. Existentialism and logotherapy refocused on issues of meaning, freedom, and anxiety. Finally, the article details the formal re-emergence of the practice in the late 20th century, as pioneers like Gerd Achenbach and Lou Marinoff re-established philosophy as a direct service to the public. The article concludes that philosophical counseling is a return to its roots, reasserting philosophy's enduring value as a guide for addressing the fundamental challenges of human existence.

Keywords

Philosophical Counseling, Stoicism, Eudaimonia, Existentialism, Socratic Method, Gerd Achenbach, Lou Marinoff, Practical Philosophy

1. Introduction

In an era marked by unprecedented technological advancement, societies experience what the philosopher Charles Taylor calls a change in the "conditions of belief," leading to a potential crisis of meaning for many individuals who feel adrift, questioning their purpose, values, and place in the world [1]. The dominant response to this suffering has been psychotherapeutic and pharmacological, framed within

a medical model that pathologizes distress. While these approaches provide relief for many, they often fall short when the problem is not one of brain chemistry or cognitive distortion, but one of existential angst or ethical confusion. Philosophical counseling has re-emerged into this gap as a vital resource. The idea of consulting a philosopher for personal problems strikes many as a novelty [2]. The modern image

*Corresponding author: mozhassen@gmail.com (Mohammed Zeinu Hassen)

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of a philosopher is typically that of a cloistered academic engaged in technical debates far removed from daily life. This article argues that this image is a historical aberration. The central thesis is that philosophical counseling is a rediscovery, a return to the original mission of philosophy as an art of living. As the scholar Pierre Hadot has documented extensively, ancient philosophy was never merely a theoretical discourse but was first and foremost a “way of life”, a mode of existing that required “spiritual exercises” aimed at self-transformation [3]. The goal was not simply to know the world, but to live well within it. This paper will trace the historical arc of this therapeutic tradition, demonstrating its persistent presence throughout Western thought. This journey will begin with the origins of Western philosophy in ancient Greece, where Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle laid the foundations for an examined life. The Hellenistic schools like Stoicism and Epicureanism functioned as therapies for the soul. We will then follow this therapeutic impulse as it was absorbed by Christian theology in the Middle Ages, surviving in works like Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, and was later revived in a secular form by Renaissance thinkers like Montaigne. Subsequently, the article will chart the “Great Divergence” of the Modern Era, where philosophy’s professionalization and the birth of psychology led to its estrangement from personal concerns. Even during this period, seeds of a revival were sown, as movements like existentialism and Viktor Frankl’s logotherapy brought questions of meaning back to the forefront. Finally, we will arrive at the present day, detailing the formal establishment of the modern philosophical counseling movement by pioneers like Gerd Achenbach in Germany and Lou Marinoff in the United States. Understanding this rich history helps us appreciate that philosophical counseling is not an “alternative” therapy but is the restoration of philosophy to its most vital role: a guide for the human search for a flourishing life.

2. The Ancient Roots: Philosophy as Therapy for the Soul

In the ancient Greco-Roman world, the distinction between philosophy and therapy was nonexistent. Philosophers were considered physicians of the soul, and their schools were like clinics where individuals could learn to diagnose and treat the passions and false beliefs that caused suffering. This therapeutic function was the essence of the philosophical enterprise. The practice of philosophical healing begins with Socrates. As depicted in Plato’s dialogues, Socrates was on a divine mission to awaken his fellow Athenians. He did not lecture; his laboratory was the public square and his method was dialogue. This Socratic *elenchus* was a rigorous cross-examination designed to expose the ignorance of his interlocutors. As their beliefs

crumbled under logical scrutiny, the goal was to induce *aporia*, a painful state of perplexity. This was not destructive but a necessary therapeutic act. Socrates explained in Plato’s *Theaetetus* that he acted as a “midwife of the soul,” helping others give birth to their own ideas [4]. *Aporia* was the catharsis required to clear the ground of false certainties and create space for genuine inquiry. Socrates believed all wrongdoing stems from ignorance; we pursue what we believe to be good, so if we are miserable, our beliefs about the good are mistaken. The cure is knowledge, specifically self-knowledge. His assertion that “the unexamined life is not worth living” is the foundational charter for philosophical counseling, establishing that flourishing is impossible without continuous examination of one’s own beliefs [5].

Plato, Socrates’s student, systemized these insights. In *The Republic*, he outlined his theory of the tripartite soul, composed of reason, spirit, and appetite. A healthy soul exists in harmony, with reason guiding the other parts. Distress and vice are symptoms of a psychic civil war, where unruly parts have overthrown reason [6]. Philosophy was the ultimate therapeutic regimen for Plato. Aristotle developed an equally practical ethical system aimed at *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing. For Aristotle, *eudaimonia* is the supreme purpose of human life, an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue [7]. Virtues are character traits cultivated through practice, and his doctrine of the Golden Mean provides a practical tool, defining each virtue as a state between two vices. After the death of Alexander the Great, political instability created widespread anxiety, and the major philosophical schools marketed themselves as paths to peace of mind. Martha Nussbaum argues these philosophers saw passions as cognitive errors that could be corrected [8]. Stoicism was arguably the most influential therapeutic philosophy. Its power rested on the dichotomy of control: as Epictetus taught, some things are up to us (our judgments) and some are not (health, wealth, reputation) [9]. The Stoics argued that suffering arises from desiring what is not up to us. The cure is to train oneself to desire only a virtuous character and accept external events with equanimity. The Stoics developed a toolkit of spiritual exercises for this purpose, a fact that has led modern psychotherapists to identify Stoicism as a key philosophical origin of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) [10]. Epicureanism offered a different path to *ataraxia*, or freedom from disturbance. Epicurus identified fear of the gods and fear of death as the greatest sources of anxiety, contending that death is “nothing to us” [11]. The good life was one of modest, sustainable pleasure, best achieved by living simply and cherishing friendship. Skepticism proposed the most radical therapy: the suspension of all judgment to liberate individuals from dogmatic beliefs that cause anxiety. For all these ancient thinkers, philosophy was a life to be lived, a set of practices designed to heal the human condition.

3. The Middle Ages and Renaissance: Sublimation and Revival

As Christianity became the dominant force in Europe, the focus of life shifted to eternal salvation, and philosophy was largely demoted to the “handmaiden of theology.” Its therapeutic impulse was not extinguished but integrated into new religious frameworks. Early Christian thinkers like Augustine of Hippo drew on Neoplatonism; the Platonic ascent to the Good became the soul’s journey toward God, and the Socratic “know thyself” was transformed into a search for God within the soul. The most powerful example of philosophy’s therapeutic role is Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius. Unjustly imprisoned, he wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy*, a dialogue between himself and Lady Philosophy. She administers a philosophical cure, dismantling his attachment to the “gifts of Fortune” by reminding him that external goods are fickle and worthless [12]. The only true good is virtue, which resides within. The Renaissance marked a rebirth of classical learning and a renewed focus on human experience. No one embodies this revival more completely than Michel de Montaigne. After retiring, Montaigne dedicated himself to his *Essays*, taking himself as his primary subject in the belief that “every man bears the whole stamp of the human condition” [13]. His method was to test his own thoughts against the wisdom of the ancients, not to construct a system but to learn how to live. His motto, “What do I know?” reflects a deep skepticism that bred humility and a resistance to dogma. The *Essays* are a masterpiece of philosophical self-counseling, relocating the subject of philosophy from the abstract back to the concrete reality of the individual self.

4. The Modern Era: The Great Divergence

The period from the 17th to the 19th century witnessed an unprecedented flowering of philosophical genius, but it was also the period in which philosophy became estranged from its therapeutic mission. Two developments drove this divergence: the reorientation of philosophy toward epistemology and its professionalization, and the birth of psychology as an independent science. The dawn of the modern era is often associated with René Descartes, whose quest for an indubitable foundation for knowledge shifted philosophy’s center from ethics to epistemology. While thinkers like Baruch Spinoza still presented grand ethical systems, the overarching trend was toward greater abstraction, a trend cemented by Immanuel Kant. His works’ technical density made them inaccessible to a lay audience, and philosophy became a highly specialized academic discipline—a subject studied in universities, not a way of life lived outside them. The philosopher was no longer a soul-guide but a professor [3]. As philosophy vacated the realm of personal problems, a new discipline claimed the territory. The late 19th century saw the

formal birth of psychology as the scientific study of the mind and behavior. As historian Thomas Leahey notes, psychology was one of the last special sciences to separate from its parent, philosophy [14]. With figures like Wilhelm Wundt and Sigmund Freud, psychology differentiated itself by claiming to be a science, adopting a medical model that framed distress as symptoms of an underlying disorder. For most of the 20th century, the cultural script was clear: if you had a problem, you consulted a professional trained in this medical-scientific paradigm. The ancient art of caring for the soul had been split: philosophy took the abstract concepts, and psychology took the concrete person.

5. The 20th Century: Seeds of a Philosophical Revival

Despite the dominance of academic philosophy and scientific psychology, powerful philosophical currents emerged in the 20th century that kept the therapeutic tradition alive. These movements laid the groundwork for the revival of philosophical practice. Even in the 19th century, Søren Kierkegaard had explored anxiety not as a pathology but as the “dizziness of freedom,” an unavoidable consequence of human choice, thus prefiguring existentialism’s therapeutic concerns [15]. Existentialism flowered after two world wars, resonating with a generation grappling with the collapse of traditional values. Thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus turned philosophy’s attention back to the lived reality of the individual. Its core themes—the burden of radical freedom, pervasive anxiety, and the search for meaning in a meaningless universe—are the very material of personal crisis. Sartre’s famous dictum, “existence precedes essence,” meant we are not born with a predefined purpose; we are “condemned to be free” to create our own values through our choices [16]. This philosophy was profoundly prescriptive, a call to forge an authentic self, and its ideas were so therapeutically potent they gave rise to existential psychotherapy, championed by figures like Rollo May and Irvin Yalom [17]. Another vital bridge was forged by Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor who developed logotherapy. From his experiences in concentration camps, detailed in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Frankl posited that the primary human motivation is a “will to meaning” [18]. He argued that many modern problems stem from an “existential vacuum”—a feeling of emptiness. Logotherapy is a therapy focused on helping individuals discover unique meaning in their lives through creative work, love, or the attitude they choose toward unavoidable suffering. Though developed by a medical doctor, logotherapy is fundamentally a philosophical practice, engaging directly with timeless questions of purpose, value, and responsibility.

6. The Re-Emergence: The Modern Philosophical Counseling Movement

By the final decades of the 20th century, conditions were ripe for the formal re-emergence of philosophy as a public service. The formal beginning of this revival is widely credited to Gerd B. Achenbach, a German philosopher who opened his philosophical practice near Cologne in 1981 [19]. Achenbach championed a "methodless method" of open-ended, Socratic dialogue, viewing the practitioner not as an expert with answers but as a skilled conversational partner who helps the "visitor" see their situation from multiple perspectives. While Achenbach laid the groundwork, the movement gained public recognition through American philosophers in the 1990s. The most prominent was Lou Marinoff, whose bestseller *Plato, Not Prozac!* introduced philosophical counseling to the mainstream [2]. In contrast to Achenbach, Marinoff proposed a structured method called

the PEACE process (Problem, Emotion, Analysis, Contemplation, Equilibrium). Another key figure is Elliot D. Cohen, who developed Logic-Based Therapy (LBT), which argues that much emotional suffering is rooted in irrational thinking [20]. LBT provides a method for clients to identify fallacies in their thinking and construct a philosophical "antidote." These different approaches, while sharing a common heritage, offer distinct models for practice (see Table 1).

Today, philosophical counseling is a diverse global field, further theorized by thinkers like Peter Raabe who work to synthesize its various models [21]. The practice is united by key distinctions from psychotherapy: its goal is not to cure a mental illness but to help individuals achieve self-understanding through philosophical dialogue, operating on an educational model, not a medical one. It addresses problems of worldview, meaning, and value, offering a vital complement to a mental healthcare system that can struggle with the deepest questions of the human spirit.

Table 1. Comparison of Modern Philosophical Counseling Approaches.

Feature	Gerd Achenbach	Lou Marinoff (APPA)	Elliot Cohen (LBT)
Core Method	"Method less method"; open-ended Socratic dialogue. Emphasis on "understanding" over "solving."	PEACE Process: Problem, Emotion, Analysis, Contemplation, Equilibrium.	Logic-Based Therapy; identifying logical fallacies in self-talk and applying philosophical antidotes.
Practitioner's Role	Conversational partner; co-philosopher who helps broaden the visitor's perspective.	Philosophical consultant; provides wisdom from philosophical traditions to help resolve the problem.	Philosophical teacher; instructs the client irrational thinking and virtuous principles.
Primary Goal	To "go beyond" the problem by gaining deeper, more profound understanding of it and oneself.	To achieve "equilibrium" by finding a workable solution to a stated problem.	To overcome self-defeating emotions and habits by cultivating rational thinking and virtuous behavior.
Stance on Psychotherapy	Strongly distinguished from psychotherapy; avoids diagnosis and treatment models entirely.	Presented as an alternative to psychotherapy for problems of living, not mental illness [2].	Can be seen as a philosophical counterpart to Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) [20].

7. Conclusion

The history of philosophy as a guide for living is a story of a cyclical homecoming. The practice began in the agora of Athens with Socrates urging citizens to examine their lives; after a long journey, it has returned to the public sphere as modern philosophical counseling. The therapeutic impulse of philosophy was vibrant in the Hellenistic schools, preserved within Christian theology by figures like Boethius, and reborn in the humanism of Montaigne. Even during its exile in the university, the spirit of practical philosophy was kept alive by existentialists and innovators like Viktor Frankl. The formal

re-emergence of philosophical practice in the late 20th century, through the work of Achenbach, Marinoff, and Cohen, has reconnected philosophical traditions with their original purpose: to serve not just as academic subjects, but as living resources. In a 21st-century world fraught with uncertainty and alienation, the need for this ancient practice is acute. The problems clients bring to counselors today—a search for purpose, a moral dilemma, a feeling of burnout, or the pain of loss—are not primarily medical issues; they are philosophical ones. The return of the philosopher-counselor reaffirms a timeless truth: the rigorous and clarifying power of philosophical inquiry is one of our most essential tools not only to think better, but ultimately, to live better.

Abbreviations

APPA	American Philosophical Practitioners Association
CBT	Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy
LBT	Logic-Based Therapy
PEACE	Problem, Emotion, Analysis, Contemplation, Equilibrium

Author Contributions

Mohammed Zeinu Hassen is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Biography



Mohammed Zeinu Hassen is an Ethiopian philosopher and academic who earned both his Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts degrees in philosophy from Addis Ababa University. He has taught at Aksum University and currently serves as a senior researcher at Addis Ababa Science and Technology University. Presently, he is pursuing a PhD in philosophy at the University of South Africa. His research interests encompass ethics, consciousness, human purpose, analytical philosophy, axiology, and the philosophy of science, with a strong emphasis on intercultural dialogue. Among his notable publications are "John Dewey's Philosophy of Education: A Critical Reflection" (2023), and "Cartesian Methodological Doubt Vis-à-Vis Pragmatism: An Approach to Epistemological Predicament" (2020).

Research Field

Mohammed Zeinu Hassen: Consciousness, Human purpose, Analytical philosophy, Axiology, Indigenous knowledge, Philosophy of science, Epistemology, Intercultural dialogue, Philosophy of education, AI and Public policy, Social and political philosophy.