

On the professionalization of philosophical counselling in a world dominated by the pandemic crisis¹

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Abstract: Having been invented in ancient Greece especially as a way of coping with, and even gaining advantage of, personal and collective crises faced by people, philosophical counselling seen as *phronesis* – practical wisdom – has been relaunched four decades ago under the need of philosophy to retrieve, in modern form, its original social utility. The current pandemic represents a time of multiple distress and unease that philosophy under the diverse facets of its counselling potential, is fully capable of addressing in complementarity with other forms of help.

Keywords: philosophical practice; philosophical counselling; philosophy's social utility; *phronesis*

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Introduction

West University of Timisoara is the host and promoter of the first professional training program in the field of philosophical counselling in Romania. This is a pioneering approach (not only in this country, but internationally), which comes, unfortunately, quite late, as such projects of relaunching applied philosophy take time to reach some maturity, consecration and popularity, alongside (not in competition with!) existing academic philosophy programs. We used the usual channels to promote it (social media, websites, conferences and publications, articles in the press), but more must be done to bring the existence and offer of this international master's degree (conducted entirely in English) to the knowledge to all those interested. Indeed, it is the first program of this kind carried out at university level in Romania, but also in Central and Eastern Europe, and the only one conducted in English in Europe. In these first years, the effort to establish and consolidate the program was largely focused on establishing external partnerships that ensure the collaboration of as many well-known specialists as we could gather around this idea and on the acquisition, by students, of best specific skills possible.

The premises of training in philosophical counselling

Thus, following initial contacts, correspondence, mutual visits and discussions, the list of our collaborators and partners came to include institutions and associations (or members thereof) that carry out similar activities, such as Institut de Pratiques Philosophiques (Argenteuil), American Philosophical Practitioners Association, SAPERE (England), Universities including Ca 'Foscari (Venice), Quincy, Purdue, Catholic-Washington (United States), Amsterdam, Sorbonne, Lyon, John Cabot (Rome), Azores, Beira Interior, Bangkok and others. To these we added a number of specialist practitioners from Romania, especially from West University of Timișoara, Babes-Bolyai, and the University of Bucharest. The program provides applied theoretical knowledge and skills enabling the trained people to use appropriate philosophy-based tools and methodologies to support individuals or groups facing existential, relational, ethical, and decision-making issues in their individual

experience or in social and professional contexts. The skills acquired (and already used by some graduates in their professions) apply to a wider range of issues, from business consultation to strictly individual client issues, most often involving a rethinking of their values and beliefs, and resorting to methods of rational conflict resolution based on critical-analytical, argumentative and dialogical tools specific to philosophy.

Preliminary research in the new field

Many people have expressed doubts about the ability of philosophical counselling to legitimize itself sufficiently in relation to psychological counselling. As conceived by our program, this set of skills subsumed to philosophical and ethical counselling and consultancy is designed as an alternative to psychological counselling for those who want to avoid medicalizing life problems – yet not in opposition, but in complementarity with specializations offered by the fields of psychology, neuroscience and psychiatry, and in collaboration with specialists from these fields. The competencies of professionals in this field include the assimilation and operationalization in philosophical and ethical counselling of particular aspects of practical philosophy and related forms of counselling and intervention methodologies designed to help clients. Well-trained professionals in this field acquire the theoretical foundations, techniques and practical skills enabling them to listen, understand and accept, from a philosophy-based – mostly dialogical – perspective, the views presented by clients, depending on personal dynamics, family, social and work circumstances in which they live, aiming to help them identify and formulate their problems and solutions. Therefore, philosophical counselling does not address issues related to diseases in the spectrum of physiological or mental pathology, but disorders of emotional homeostasis as one of the collaborators of the program, the American professor and philosophical practitioner Lou Marinoff, would say. Therefore, philosophical expertise is not compatible with imposing or contradicting clinical diagnoses. Its purposes are only subsidiarily “therapeutic”, owing to the fact that it aims (with specific means) to reduce anxiety and increase well-being, without aiming to replace any form of psychotherapeutic or psychiatric practice. Therefore, we believe that the skills of applied

philosophical thinking must be complemented with a basic training in psychological assessment and counselling techniques.

Adaptations of philosophical counseling to times of crisis

From Socrates – one of the fathers and inspirers of philosophy as a tool for analysis and guidance of daily life – to this day philosophical counselling or practice has been a means of solving individual and collective crises of existential nature, meaning, ethical, identity, relational, in which the current pandemic crisis falls in countless ways. Although not the only form of philosophy, philosophy seen as *phronesis* - practical wisdom – was conceived from the beginning as a dialogue guided by dialectical reasoning, meant to reflect on the concerns and concrete problems that arise during the life of the seeker, and on the meaning of life as a whole. Philosophical practice undertakes this exploration, in a friendly manner and with sympathy and openness towards the client, proposing itself as a modality of support in the discovery, assumption and practice of the truth (especially about oneself) – as the main component of self-knowledge – to which it adds the practice of virtue in relation to oneself and others. In this way, the philosophical analysis of one's own life can help the client to live a better, more productive, more meaningful and, therefore, happier life.

Starting from the teachings of ancient philosophers and sages and adapting them to our times, the strategies of contemporary philosophical counsellors are diverse (and we try to present as many of them as possible in our master's program), sometimes eclectic (depending on the openings and dispositions of their clients), even combining, for example, the Socratic dialogue, the principles of Stoic morality (centred on *apathea*) as well as the practice of the three "gems" of Taoism (compassion, simplicity and patience, sometimes translated as love, moderation and resilience). All these are especially useful in times of crisis like the one we are going through today on a global scale. The sick and suffering need our help; loneliness and depression and other illnesses are exacerbated by the restrictions imposed during this pandemic. If for some people the stoic *apathea* can constitute a way out of the impasse, for many others only the genuine exercise of our compassion, which goes beyond self-interest, will be of real help. Also, the impetus of simplicity and joy of simple life away

from consumerist culture can provide clients with the necessary break to realize the beauty of pure and simple life, by reaping the benefit of this interval of reflection and regeneration. Finally, the learning of another virtue, patience, will nullify the harmful effects of anxiety caused by the impatience to return to life full of previous superficial overstimulations. Patience as a stoic ability to postpone gratification and endure difficulties becomes a virtue that can be used for the rest of one's life. Philosophical practice is closest to offering these forms of help. Beyond the rigor and discipline of the analysis with which it identifies the nature, scope and consequences of problems at individual or group level, each future practitioner is free to build – for full employment, in the service of clients, his qualities – his/her "personal signature", their own style of working with customers, given that there is no specific theoretical framework imposed on all.

Forms of intervention by the philosophical practitioner

Personally, I have assumed first of all the task of construction at the conceptual-"institutional" level (even if the latter sounds inappropriate) of this occupation (which I regard, as I mentioned, primarily as a set of skills and competencies of the mind, applicable in many professions) by forming these groups and networks of scholars and specialists, of whom only some manage – the road being long and difficult – to reach disciple-mentor relation level, which go beyond the acquisition of techniques, at a degree that we could describe (even in a "weak" sense) as "initiatory". The types of activities we support within the masters include practicing and consolidating specific skills of students and graduates in the discussion groups (still closed for the time being); and encouraging and facilitating supervision sessions (some of which have been running regularly for several years) with internationally recognized practitioners (from France, Italy, the United States, Spain, Russia, etc.). What we seek, together with the latter, is to reach the daily practice of reflection and clarification applied to values, beliefs, ideas, judgments, desires, emotions, intuitions, goals, commitments, relationships and, in general, to all (or at least the majority) actions and experiences that make up the lives of those who train to facilitate this process for their clients.

Ideally, for the philosophical practitioner (the preferred name among philosophical counselling and consultancy professionals) philosophy should become a way of life, not a sum of analyses and precepts practiced exclusively in the counselling practice or in forums for philosophical debate on current life issues (which is even more difficult to achieve in the compartmentalized type of existence of modern contemporary life).

Interventions specific to these philosophy-based approaches are primarily a form of praxis (more specifically a practice based on the ability of an initial ethical response) of interaction made, as mentioned above, with openness, compassion, and care for truth seekers (in open, never fixed ways). They are rather loosely circumscribed to at least one philosophical theory, doctrine, or school from which they „extract” the philosophical “anchors” that resonate with them and ground their attitudinal and action changes. This is also one of the main elements that differentiates philosophical counselling from all other forms of counselling in psychology and psychotherapeutic practices, which operate within precise theoretical frameworks.

About the first practitioners in Romania

I can only speak on behalf of our master's program and the network of practitioners (consecrated, involved in the training of master students, or graduates of the program, participants in various continuing education schemes with the former) formed around it. The number of these practitioners at different levels of training and experience is constantly increasing, which can only be gratifying; but even more gratifying would be the increase in the number of these long-term, serious training programs carried out at university level. The diversity and dynamics of this "structure" has not yet allowed the establishment of a single platform able to uniquely promote philosophical and ethical counselling and consultancy services.

Among the services offered by established practitioners are individual counseling (Prof. Laurențiu Staicu, Dr. Annalisa Rossi, Dr. Oscar Brenifier, Viktoria Chernenko, Alexandru Cosmescu, Maria Volodina, Isabelle Millon, Jerome Lecoq, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Claudiu Mesaroș, Dr. Ionuț

Mladin); master's degree graduates (Anca Tiurean, Veronica Bâtcă, Diana Panța); organizational counseling (Diana Panța, Mihail Pricop, Andrew Keltner); philosophy with children (Manuela Anghelescu, Mihaela Mănoiu, Anca Tiurean, Diana Panța); work with small groups and families (Anca Tiurean); or that intended for detainees, people released from prison and prison workers (Dr. Annalisa Rossi, Dr. Rupali Jeswal, Gary Hill, Aladin Tataru).

Instead of conclusion

Through the work of philosophical practitioners (which the present and future world need in the greatest possible number), philosophy is just beginning to resume its daily role and assume the social utility for which it was conceived, so wisely and visionary, two and a half millennia ago.

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