THE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS OF SUFFERING IN PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELLING: AN ARGUMENT ON WHY PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELLING IS INHERENTLY DIRECTIVE

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Abstract: This paper examines the ontological assumptions about suffering that underlie philosophical counselling and argues that these assumptions make the practice inherently directive. Although philosophical counselling is often presented as a non-directive dialogue aimed at clarifying clients' beliefs, the paper contends that any attempt to address suffering necessarily presupposes a philosophical model of its nature, causes, and appropriate responses. Through a comparative analysis of Stoicism and ancient Scepticism as illustrative frameworks, the study shows how different ontological conceptions of suffering generate distinct normative orientations toward change, action, and evaluation. Despite their differences, both traditions demonstrate that addressing suffering within philosophical counselling inevitably involves guiding clients toward particular attitudes, practices, or ways of understanding, based on the ontological assumptions grounding each approach. The paper concludes that fully non-directive philosophical counselling is conceptually unstable: addressing suffering inevitably introduces a directive dimension grounded in implicit ontological commitments. The analysis, primarily conceptual and interpretive, underscores the need for further empirical research and highlights the relevance of philosophical historiography for guiding counselling practice.

Keywords: Philosophical counselling, Suffering, Ontology, Directive practice, Non-directive, Stoicism, Scepticism.

Within contemporary practices of philosophical counselling, the problem of suffering – understood in the broadest possible sense, defined at the client's discretion – occupies a central place from both an existential and a methodological perspective. Most situations in which individuals seek counselling, whether psychological or philosophical, are motivated by experiences of existential discomfort, meaning crises, inner conflict, or difficulties in interpreting different aspects of life. In this context, suffering does not appear merely as a negative affective state, but as a complex phenomenon involving cognitive, axiological,

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and ontological dimensions.[1] Nevertheless, in many contemporary approaches to philosophical counselling, suffering is treated primarily at a hermeneutic or psychological level, being interpreted as the result of inadequate beliefs, interpretations, or conceptual frameworks.[2]

Such a perspective, however, has the risk of reducing the problem of suffering, as it is addressed in the philosophical counsellor's office, to a mere matter of reinterpretation. Although processes of conceptual re-signification are essential to the practice of philosophical dialogue, they do not exhaust the full dimension of suffering, and even less its ontological aspects. Even though, in most cases, the neutral and non-directive approach of the philosophical counselling is one of the counsellor's priorities[3], the position I will defend in this paper is that this becomes, in practice, almost impossible to achieve through the very conceptual apparatus and philosophical systems employed during counselling sessions, which reconfigure the ontological status of suffering. By the ontological status of suffering, I refer to the set of philosophical assumptions concerning its nature, status, and mode of existence.

From this perspective, philosophical counselling can be understood not only as an interpretative practice, but also as an implicitly ontological one. The philosophical framework employed in the dialogue of philosophical counselling offers a particular model of reality and of the relationship of the individual with the world, and this model determines how suffering is conceptualized and, implicitly, the ways in which it may be resolved. Moreover, the problem presented by the client is not merely reinterpreted within the dialogue but may acquire a different ontological status depending on the philosophical tradition mobilized. By different, I mean different from the initial ontological framework within which the client's suffering was first experienced and presented. Thus, I consider that choosing a philosophical framework is not methodologically neutral, but a decision with significant theoretical and ontological implications. If a particular form of suffering (used in this paper in the broadest possible sense, defined at the client's discretion) is what leads the client to seek the help of a philosophical counsellor, then it has emerged within the context of a certain worldview and, therefore, of an ontology tacitly or explicitly assumed by the client. Consequently, this article will argue that the choice of authors or philosophical traditions structuring the counselling process influences not only the interpretation of the client's problem but transforms the very nature of the phenomenon under discussion – it changes the ontological status

[1] Beatrice A. Popescu, "Moral Dilemmas and Existential Issues Encountered Both in Psychotherapy and Philosophical Counseling Practices", *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, vol. 11, nr. 3, 2015, pp. 509–521, doi: 10.5964/ejop.v11i3.1010.

[2] Simon Wharne, "How is distress understood in existential philosophies and can phenomenological therapeutic practices be "evidence-based"?", *Theory & Psychology*, vol. 31, nr. 2, 2021, pp. 273–289, doi: 10.1177/0959354320964586.

[3] Ora Gruengard, *Philosophy in Philosophical Counseling*, London, Lexington Books, 2023, pp. 49–67.

of suffering. Consequently, I consider that this is the reason why philosophical counselling becomes inherently directive.

Based on these considerations, this article aims to present a brief example of how the choice of philosophical framework influences the ontological status of suffering in the context of philosophical counselling. This objective will be achieved by comparing two ancient philosophical systems from the Hellenistic period: Stoicism and Scepticism. The comparison, though limited, is an example that can be extended to other positions found throughout the history of philosophy. The difference between these two traditions lies not only in the strategies proposed for managing suffering, but also in how the phenomenon itself is understood. Thus, if the client is not already either a Stoic or a Sceptic, I believe that reinterpreting suffering based on the conceptual framework of one of these two philosophical schools (used only as a limited example) will not result in a mere rethinking of the problem, but in a fundamental change of its nature and, thus, directive.

Different philosophical traditions that address suffering assume distinct ontological statuses for it. Within Stoicism, suffering is primarily the result of an error of judgment and can be corrected through rational discipline. In Scepticism, it arises rather as an effect of the problematic relationship between the individual and a purported dogmatic knowledge of reality. Thus, what appears in Stoicism as a problem requiring the correction of thought becomes, in Scepticism, becomes a problem which requires the suspension of epistemic claims and attachments. The examples extend further and differences can be traced throughout the history of philosophy: in Plato, suffering appears as the result of a disordered soul; in Aristotle, it becomes the consequence of a life lacking virtue and moderation; existentialism, as seen in Søren Kierkegaard or Jean-Paul Sartre, considers suffering as a phenomenon inherent to the human condition. It is evident that suffering *is not* the same across different philosophical schools.

The aim of this paper is not to conduct a historiographical comparison between Stoicism and Scepticism, but rather to investigate the implications these traditions have for how client issues are addressed in philosophical counselling. The hypothesis, as previously stated, is that the selection of a particular philosophical framework not only generates alternative interpretations of the same situation but also transforms the client's problem itself. Methodologically, the analysis will combine a conceptual examination of philosophical doctrines with reflection on the practice of philosophical counselling, highlighting the fact that this practice involves the implicit adoption of certain ontological positions regarding the nature of suffering.

In the academic literature, the status of philosophical counselling as a neutral and non-directive practice is intensely debated, with no clear consensus or universally agreed-upon program among counsellors. Gerd B. Achenbach, the founder of modern philosophical counselling, advocates an open dialogic model, in which the

counsellor avoids imposing rigid ideas, encouraging the free exploration of the client's issues. He states that:

> To speak correctly, philosophy works not with, but at best upon methods. Obedience to method is the pride of the sciences, not the point of philosophy. Philosophical thinking does not move along ready-made paths; it looks anew in each case for the 'right way.' Rather than deploy well-worn thought-routines, it sabotages them to clarify itself.[4]

In a similar vein, Peter B. Raabe argues that the practice should remain, as much as possible, non-directive to preserve individual reflection. He critically examines various counselling approaches and, in the chapter *Philosophical Counselling in Brief*, he explicitly states that "philosophical counsellors are not restricted to following any particular school or method"[5] and goes on to adopt an attitude that generally condemns the rigidity of a specific psychotherapeutic method or of the methods originally described by Sigmund Freud or Carl Jung.

However, other authors disagree with the possibility of genuine neutrality. Lou Marinoff tends to side with those who favour orienting the discourse toward a particular system of thought:

> The counselor can offer a particular philosophical position that suits his or her client's needs, relying on sources ranging from Aristotle to Ayn Rand. Or the counselor can employ a specific philosophical counseling method, examples of which have been published in Plato Not Prozac.[6]

Also, in his well-known work *Plato Not Prozac*, he proposes a method called PEACE, which structures the dialogue into stages: Problems, Emotions, Analysis, Contemplation, and Equilibrium.

Tim LeBon, taking a balanced approach, writes in his book:

> Philosophy can help counsellors not so much by providing pre-packaged answers to the traditional questions of philosophy, but by suggesting methods that can be used collaboratively with clients.[7]

He goes on to describe reasoning methods based on logic, including truth criteria, inductive arguments, and so on. While this approach may seem prudent, different

[4] Gerd B. Acenbach, *Philosophical Praxis: Origin, Relations, and Legacy*, translated by Michael Picard, Lanham, Maryalnd, Lexington Books, 2024, p. 22.

[5] Peter B. Raabe, *Issues in Philosophical Counseling*, Westport, CT, Praeger Publishers, 2002, p. 16.

[6] Lou Marinoff, "Inducing wisdom: philosophical counseling for HIV-positive clients", *Focus*, vol. 15, nr. 5, 2000, pp. 1–5.

[7] Tim LeBon, *Wise Therapy: Philosophy for Counsellors*, London, SAGE Publications Ltd, 2007.

logical principles are shaped by underlying ontological worldviews. For example, Aristotelian logic assumes that a statement cannot be both true and false at the same time, whereas there are worldviews (such as Daoist philosophy) in which this assumption does not hold.

Speaking about the *The Impact of the Philosophical Counselor*, Ora Gruengard argues the following:

> They influence the conversation even if the questions are just a trigger to the counselee's independent reflections and explorations. Perhaps most important, they indicate directions; different questions could have led the counselee to another place. This gives the counselor a substantial responsibility. He should be aware of this responsibility even if he does his best to encourage the counselee, from the boldest to the most timid, to express objections to what he, as counselor, is saying, to consider alternative options and to decide for himself. The counselor should be aware of it although he does not control, nor can he predict the counselee's later development. I therefore disagree with philosophical counselors who believe that the counselor can stay neutral.[8]

From a critical perspective, it can be argued that any act of philosophical counselling already presupposes a certain implicit ontology, making absolute neutrality more of a methodological ideal than an attainable reality. This is also my position, which I aim to illustrate in what follows.

The problem of suffering has occupied a central place in philosophical reflection since antiquity, being analysed from metaphysical, ethical, epistemological, anthropological, and often religious perspectives. In the Western tradition, suffering has been conceptualized not merely as a negative (or, in some cases, positive or redemptive) affective experience, but as a phenomenon revealing specific features of the human condition and of the relationship between the individual and reality. Such an analysis goes beyond the phenomenological description of what the client calls suffering and addresses the very nature of suffering: what it is, whether it is a property of reality or a construct of mind, whether it is inherent to human existence or contingent. The answers vary according to the philosophical traditions employed, and they directly shape how suffering is approached in philosophical counselling, as well as the types of solutions that may be proposed, if any.

By examining the two positions mentioned above, Stoicism and Scepticism, we can identify two distinct conceptual approaches: on one hand, suffering is seen as the result of an irrational relationship between the subject and the world; on the other hand, suffering is understood as an effect of the individual's epistemic and axiological attachments. The first approach is primarily associated with Stoicism, while the second is more characteristic of Scepticism. These models are not always neatly separated within the specific philosophical traditions invoked, yet they provide a useful analytical framework for understanding how different doctrines are ontologically positioning what we broadly call suffering.

[8] Ora Gruengard, *Philosophy in Philosophical Counseling*, p. 50.

In the Stoic perspective, external events or situations are not considered direct causes of suffering. Rather, they become sources of suffering through the judgments and interpretations that the individual formulates about them. An account of the founder of Stoicism describes the goal of his philosophy as follows: “Zeno represented the end as: ‘living in agreement’. This is living in accordance with one concordant reason, since those who live in conflict are unhappy.”[9] The central idea is that suffering arises when our thoughts about external events are not in agreement with the structure of reality or with the limits of human control (and thus, implicitly, with the ontological relationship between the individual and external nature).

In the well-known *Handbook*, Epictetus states from the very first chapter that it is our thinking about things that makes us miserable or happy: “So remember, if you think that things naturally enslaved are free or that things not your own are your own, you will be thwarted, miserable, and upset, and will blame both gods and men. But if you think that only what is yours is yours.”[10] This point is reiterated even more clearly in chapter 5, from which we understand that it is our wrong thinking that troubles us. “It is not circumstances themselves that trouble people, but their judgements about those circumstances.”[11] It goes on to say that the solution is to examine and analyse our thoughts according to the principles outlined earlier: “From the start, then, work on saying to each harsh appearance, "You are an appearance, and not at all the thing that has the appearance." Then examine it and assess it by these yardsticks that you have [...].”[12] Seneca also writes on the relation of suffering („misery”) with the way we think (wrongly or not) about it, in his letters to Lucilius. “If you ask me, I think that for a man there is no misery unless there is something in the universe which he thinks miserable.”[13] Whether one thinks correctly or incorrectly about something is directly linked to the ontology adopted by a Stoic such as Seneca, and this is evident in Letter 57, *On the Hardships of Travel*. Using the metaphor of fearing something while traveling, he draws a parallel to the soul’s journey: “And I began to muse and think how foolish we are to fear certain objects to a greater or less degree, since all of them end in the same way.”[14]

In this point such an argument can resist only if we agree with the nature (and by this, I mean the ontology) of the human soul and of the destiny that Seneca assumes. Such positions are common throughout every Stoic philosopher. Like this

[9] Stobaeus, *Ecl*. II, 75, 11, translated by A. A Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic philosophers*, vol. I, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 394.

[10] Epictetus, *Handbook*, translated by Nicholas Whte, Cambridge, Hackett Publishing House, 1983, p. 11.

[11] *Ibidem*, p. 15.

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 12.

[13] Seneca, “Moral letters to Lucilius”, translated by Richard Mott Gummere, in *Wikisource*, https://w.wiki/KEtR (accessed March 24, 2026).

[14] *Ibidem*, https://w.wiki/KEuG (accessed March 24, 2026).

one, by Marcus Aurelius, used in a paper debating the problems of overthinking: “Therefore, never blame the changing nature, but look at the human himself, whether he can draw the conclusions and the teachings of the nature change.”[15]

In this sense, suffering is not a property of events, but the result of a cognitive positioning between the subject and the world. The ontological implication reflected in the philosophical counselling that uses such a Stoic position is that suffering can, at least in principle, be diminished through the transformation of the individual’s way of thinking in relation to the specific way the world is. If suffering is generated by erroneous or unjustified judgments, then, by logical consequence, these judgments are erroneous or unjustified in relation to that specific way in which world is and which cannot be changed. Philosophical practice thus becomes a form of intellectual and moral exercise aimed at clarifying one’s stance toward nature, rather than focusing on the stance of external nature or on changing it. In other words, the focus is on how one thinks and how one should adjust oneself in order to get rid of suffering, rather than on what nature is and what we can change in it in order to eliminate suffering. And this is the case not from a pragmatic point of view – such as because it is easier, more common, or faster – but because this how *the nature of suffering is*.

The interpretive model of ancient Scepticism holds that suffering arises primarily from an individual’s belief in some epistemic principles and the axiological attachments that derives from it. From this perspective, the fundamental problem lies not (only) in the fact that some judgments are erroneous, but in the tendency to formulate positions regarding reality, to assume conditions of epistemic possibility, and to cling rigidly to them. From the perspective of ancient Scepticism, suffering thus arises when reality contradicts the beliefs resulting from such epistemic principles, or when the individual attempts to maintain certainties in a domain where knowledge is inevitably limited or even impossible. This interpretation shifts the emphasis from the error of judgment to a problem of ontological dogmatism.

The position is clear throughout Sextus Empiricus’ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, and a prime example is the following:

> And when we question whether the external object is such as it appears, we grant that it does appear, and we are not raising a question about the appearance but rather about what is said about the appearance; this is different from raising a question about the appearance itself. For example, the honey appears to us to be sweet. This we grant, for we sense the sweetness. But whether it *is* sweet we question insofar as this has to do with the [philosophical] theory […].[16]

[15] *Saptura et al.*, “Marcus Aurelius’ Stoicism and its Solution to Overthinking”, *Islamic Thought Review*, nr. 1, 2023, pp. 43–51, https://doi.org/10.30983/itr.v1i1.6422.

[16] Sextus Empiricus, “Outlines of Phyrrhonism”, *The Skeptic Way*, translated by Benson Mates, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 92.

A little later, this description is repeated, so we can be sure that we are not dealing with an isolated statement taken out of context:

> Accordingly, we say that the criterion of the Sceptic Way is the appearance – in effect using that term here for the *phantasia* – for since this appearance lies in feeling and involuntary pathos it is not open to question. Thus nobody, I think, disputes about whether the external object appears this way or that, but rather about whether it is such as it appears to be.[17]

From an ontological perspective, this view suggests that suffering is not just the result of false judgments, but of the way the subject apprehends the external world. Reducing suffering therefore requires a change in the individual's approach to knowledge: letting go of the need for certainty and taking a more cautious stance or even suspending judgment about the external world. Not changing one's opinion because the previous one got the description of the external world wrong. This solution is already explained by Sextus Empiricus at the very start of his work, as follows:

> The Sceptic Way is a disposition to oppose phenomena and noumena to one another in any way whatever, with the result that, owing to the equipollence among the things and statements thus opposed, we are brought first to *epochē* and then to ataraxia. […] By 'equipollence' we mean equality as regards credibility and the lack of it, that is, that no one of the inconsistent statements takes precedence over any other as being more credible. *Epochē* is a state of the intellect on account of which we neither deny nor affirm anything.[18]

Regarding the Sceptical method for eliminating suffering (*ataraxia*), Sextus Empiricus shows that it begins by examining the facts – not to choose among them, but to find equally compelling statements about those real facts (and not about our perceptions of them): "But the main origin of Scepticism is the practice of opposing to each statement an equal statement; it seems to us that doing this brings an end to dogmatizing."[19]

The fact that no statement can take precedence over another is exactly because we cannot have a definite statement about external world. If this is the case, the Stoic strategy, employed in philosophical counselling, of accepting the ontological nature of suffering as an erroneous judgment about reality becomes obsolete. Such a strategy will work only if we accept the ontology that presupposes it. But I doubt that there are many people who live their lives in accordance to Stoic physics and are as serene as Epictetus when someone is breaking their leg. Thus, using such a strategy in a counselling session is going to be very directive in regard to other fundamental beliefs – the ontological ones, in this case.

[17] *Ibidem.*
[18] *Ibidem*, p. 90.
[19] *Ibidem.*

After reviewing the examples, it is clear that the difference between Stoicism and Scepticism lies not only in their strategies for addressing suffering but also in the epistemic and ontological status of their premises. Stoicism rests on a strong view of reality: the distinction between what depends on us and what does not, and the ideal of life, are not mere methodological assumptions but claims about reality's structure. Stoic philosophical guidance thus requires acceptance of a predetermined ontology and an epistemology that affirms access to this rational order. This stance involves a form of dogmatism: accepting positive claims about reality and the human place within it. Such dogmatism makes philosophical counselling directive when using these approaches. Practices like correcting judgments and cultivating imperturbability derive their normative force from these claims. Without these ontological assumptions, Stoic reasoning loses its foundation. Its effectiveness depends on embracing the metaphysical and axiological framework in which it makes sense. In contrast, ancient Scepticism avoids strong ontological claims and bases its approach to alleviating suffering on suspending judgment about reality's ultimate nature. Here, relief from suffering comes not from following a doctrine but from relinquishing certainty. This comparison shows a clear methodological contrast: Stoicism grounds philosophical guidance in a dogmatic ontology, while Scepticism enables it through suspending any affirmative ontology.

The first conclusion we can draw is that this difference has direct implications for philosophical counselling: applying different philosophical frameworks implicitly requires, in most cases, accepting a determined view of reality. Philosophical counselling faces a fundamental choice: it is either directive or, if it attempts to be non-directive, it resembles pure Scepticism. In the directive case, it implicitly or explicitly adopts an ontology of reality and a view of suffering, guiding the client toward a way of thinking that reduces suffering. If it avoids this, aiming to remain totally neutral and non-directive, it offers no concrete solution; it merely instructs the client to suspend judgment or cease reflecting on the issue, without providing any method for addressing or resolving suffering.

This conclusion should be considered alongside the study's limitations. Focusing on Stoicism and ancient Scepticism provides useful insights into the relationship between philosophical systems, ontological assumptions, and approaches to suffering, but it does not cover the full range of the traditions used in philosophical counselling. Also, the analysis is primarily conceptual and interpretive, based on textual sources, and further empirical research could help broaden and deepen these observations.

A second conclusion is that examining the relationship between philosophical systems, the ontologies they assume, and their conceptualization of suffering can deepen our understanding of the role of philosophical historiography and theoretical philosophy in counselling. The comparative analysis of Stoicism and Scepticism – although limited, and yet arguably analogous to other philosophical currents or systems – highlights how different traditions not only interpret the experience of

suffering but also reconfigure it at an ontological level. In this sense, philosophical counselling can be understood as a space in which the individual's suffering-inducing problems are transformed through different philosophical frameworks, each offering a distinct perspective on the relationship between human beings, knowledge, reality. While this aspect is most valuable, we hope to have shown that it carries the risk of compromising the non-directive and neutral character of philosophical counselling.