

Maxim-Based Value Elicitation in Philosophical Counseling

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Abstract: This article develops a Kant-inspired technique of value elicitation for philosophical counseling by treating maxims—self-imposed practical rules—as the primary units of ethical self-clarification. Instead of approaching clients’ dilemmas as chiefly emotional conflicts or as problems of welfare-optimization, the proposed method reconstructs deliberation in a precise form: “When C, I will do A in order to achieve E (for reason R).” Once articulated, a client’s working maxim is subjected to three Kantian “stress tests”: (i) universalizability as a check on practical coherence, (ii) the Formula of Humanity as a test of respect for persons (including self-respect), and (iii) a publicity test to distinguish defensible commitments from rationalizations. The aim is not to moralize but to make implicit values explicit, identifying internal conflicts among them, and supporting a transition from heteronomous patterns (fear, social pressure, unexamined habit) to autonomous self-legislation.

Key words: Philosophical counseling, Kantian ethics, Maxims, Autonomy, Value elicitation, Practical reasoning, Self-respect, Publicity

1. Introduction

Philosophical counseling usually begins not with an abstract puzzle, but with a lived fracture in practical life. Someone says: “I keep agreeing and then resent myself.” “I say honesty matters to me, yet I still hide what matters most.” “I know what I ought to do, but I go on doing otherwise.” Remarks of this kind need not indicate pathology. More often, they reveal a disturbance in agency: the person can no longer state with clarity the rule by which he or she is living, or can state it only in a flattering, partial, or evasive way.

This creates a methodological difficulty. Philosophical counseling is right to resist becoming psychotherapy by another name. It does

not diagnose disorders, prescribe treatment, or place the interlocutor under therapeutic authority. Yet the opposite danger is just as real. Without some disciplined unit of analysis, the conversation can drift into aspirational moral language, repeated self-descriptions, or a gentle exchange of consoling abstractions. The real question, then, is not whether philosophical counseling should become technical in any strong sense, but whether it can adopt a limited and usable structure without ceasing to be philosophical.¹

I argue that it can. More specifically, I argue that *the maxim* can function as a disciplined unit of value elicitation in philosophical counseling, provided two conditions are kept clearly in view from the start. First, a maxim should not be treated as a transparent report of an inner state. In counseling, it is better understood as a revisable reconstruction of the practical rule that makes a recurring pattern of action intelligible. Second, Kantian testing should not be used as a device for delivering moral verdicts. Its point is not to judge from above, but to ask whether the rule under which a person is already acting can be reflectively avowed as a principle of agency.

The claim I want to make is modest. I am not offering a complete theory of philosophical counseling, nor making an empirical claim about outcomes. The proposal is conceptual and methodological. My arguments are as follows: first, that maxim-work gives us a more exact unit of practical clarification than free-floating value language; second, that a Kantian framework helps explain why some modes of agency fail not only because they are ineffective, but because they cannot be owned without evasion; and third, that a carefully limited publicity heuristic can illuminate cases in which a practical rule works only by hiding its decisive reason from the very person whose cooperation it enlists.

2. Why philosophical counseling needs a unit of analysis

One of the enduring strengths of philosophical counseling, from Lahav to Raabe and Achenbach, is its refusal to reduce existential difficulty to symptom management. The interlocutor is approached as someone trying to think, judge, orient himself or herself, and live un-

¹ Lahav, R., 1996. What Is Philosophical in Philosophical Counselling? *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 13(3); Raabe, P. B., 2000. *Philosophical Counseling: Theory and Practice*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

der concepts such as truthfulness, dignity, consistency, responsibility, or meaning. That refusal matters philosophically. It preserves a space in which a life can be examined under normative concepts rather than translated too quickly into the language of pathology, adaptation, or coping alone.²

But that very strength exposes a weakness. If philosophical counseling is not to become merely inspirational or conversational, it must identify the level at which practical life becomes critically examinable. The usual answer is “values.” Yet values, when elicited as isolated nouns, are often too indeterminate to carry real analytical weight. A person may sincerely affirm honesty, care, loyalty, freedom, or dignity and still act under a rule that regularly subordinates one of these to fear, convenience, dependency, self-protection, image-management, or conflict avoidance. The problem is rarely the absence of values. More often, it is that the operative rule of action remains hidden beneath values declared at the level of endorsement.

For that reason, I propose the maxim, rather than the value list, as the primary unit of clarification. This does not abandon the language of values; it re-situates it. Values are not discarded, but drawn out of the rule under which the person acts. What end is being secured? What reason is being invoked? What competing considerations are being muted, deferred, or sacrificed? On this approach, values no longer remain admirable labels. They appear as tensions and fault lines internal to practical reasoning itself.

This also differentiates the present proposal from more therapeutic forms of values clarification. Those approaches have shown, and rightly so, that human suffering often involves disordered action in relation to what one takes to matter. That insight is important. My claim, however, is that philosophical counseling needs a more explicitly normative and interpretive unit than a list of values or a structure of preferences. The maxim matters because it makes visible not only what a person says matters, but also the practical rule that organizes recurrent choice. In that sense, the proposal is narrower than a full therapeutic model and more exacting than ordinary value elicitation.³

² Achenbach, G. B., 1995. Philosophy, Philosophical Practice, and Psychotherapy. In: Lahav, R. – Tillmanns, M., eds. *Essays on Philosophical Counseling*. Lanham: University Press of America; Lahav, R., 1996. What Is Philosophical in Philosophical Counseling?, *ibid.*; Raabe, P. B., 2000. *Philosophical Counseling: Theory and Practice*, *ibid.*

³ Raabe, P. B., 2000. *Philosophical Counseling: Theory and Practice*, *ibid.*

3. Kantian foundations and the article's normative commitment

In Kantian ethics, a maxim is the subjective principle on which an agent acts. That familiar definition becomes methodologically useful only once we stop assuming that such a principle is always readily available to introspection in finished form. In many cases, people do not clearly know what rule best describes their conduct. They act under principles they would not spontaneously formulate, or would formulate only in softened, euphemized, or self-protective terms. Counseling should therefore not ask for the maxim as if it were simply waiting intact in consciousness. It should reconstruct a working maxim dialogically and test whether that reconstruction makes the pattern of action more intelligible to the interlocutor.

This reconstructive approach avoids two symmetrical errors. The first is naive introspectionism: whatever the client says first is treated as the maxim. The second is counselor authoritarianism: the counselor claims privileged access to the “real” principle behind the client’s conduct. Maxim-work should do neither. It treats the practical rule as a hypothesis that can be proposed, refined, resisted, corrected, and reformulated until it becomes both interpretively illuminating and recognizably the client’s own.

At this point, the normative commitment of the method should be stated openly. It is not neutral among all moral vocabularies. It is shaped by a Kantian conception of autonomy as reflective self-legislation, and by a corresponding concern for self-respect, dignity, and accountability to reasons one can avow. That commitment should not be hidden behind procedural language. If maxim-work deserves a place in philosophical counseling, it is because it helps distinguish between merely being moved by pressures and acting from a rule one can own. I therefore do not deny the method’s normativity. I make it explicit, because philosophical counseling is better served by transparent commitments than by a pretense of neutrality.

This matters especially because Kantian language is often mistrusted in counseling contexts. It can sound juridical, overly abstract, or insensitive to dependence, attachment, and care. That objection is serious. It cannot be brushed aside by the easy reply that care, too, can be autonomously chosen. The deeper worry is that an autonomy-centered framework may fail to register the extent to which persons are formed through relations of vulnerability, attachment, and responsibility. Yet the present

method asks a narrower question. It does not equate autonomy with self-sufficiency or emotional distance. It asks: what rule am I giving myself, and can I avow that rule without self-deception? That question leaves open the possibility that a demanding maxim of care is fully avowable. It also leaves open the possibility that what presents itself as care may conceal fear, dependency, appeasement, or self-erasure. Precisely because care is morally serious, it should not be placed beyond examination.⁴

The same is true of self-respect. In counseling, a recurrent practical difficulty is not sheer weakness of will, but self-subordination: the repeated treatment of one's own standpoint as dispensable in order to preserve an external good such as approval, attachment, calm, or security. Kantian ethics is useful here not because it supplies a quick charge of servility, but because it offers a language for why some forms of self-dispossession matter morally. A person may keep complying, smoothing over conflict, omitting one's own judgment, or styling oneself for another's comfort, while still describing one's conduct in flattering moral terms. Maxim-work helps test whether the rule involved can genuinely be owned rather than merely endured.⁵

4. The protocol of maxim-work

The protocol proposed here is intentionally simple. A working maxim is formulated according to the following schema:

When C, I will do A in order to achieve E, because R.

The four elements are condition, action, end, and reason. The schema is not meant to offer an exhaustive theory of action, still less a piece of strict Kant exegesis. It is a practical device for making a recurrent rule discussable. Its adequacy is therefore not metaphysical but dialogical: if a formulation does not help the interlocutor recognize a real pattern in his or her conduct, it needs to be revised.

⁴ O'Neill, O., 1990. *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Gilligan, C., 1982. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Noddings, N., 1984. *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Held, V., 2005. *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁵ Hill, T. E. Jr., 1973. Servility and Self-Respect. *The Monist*, 57(1); Hill, T. E. Jr., 1991. *Autonomy and Self-Respect*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Baron, M. W., 1995. *Kantian Ethics Almost Without Apology*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

The advantages of this schema are fairly direct. First, it slows down self-description. Clients often move too quickly from conduct to moralized summary: “I stayed quiet because I care.” “I lied because I had no choice.” “I agreed because I wanted peace.” The schema forces distinctions. Under what condition did you act? What exactly did you do? What good were you trying to secure? What reason seemed to justify that end? These questions often reveal a gap between what the action in fact secures and the moral vocabulary by which it is defended.

Second, the distinction between E and R is diagnostically useful. The end may be approval, safety, image-control, relief from tension, or the preservation of a valued attachment. The reason may be expressed in nobler terms: loyalty, realism, kindness, generosity, responsibility. Sometimes these really do coincide. Sometimes they do not. The point is not to accuse the interlocutor of bad faith whenever a divergence appears, but to identify the exact point at which philosophical work begins: the place where justificatory language and operative purpose no longer sit easily together.

Third, the schema allows values to emerge from action rather than precede it as slogans. The end reveals what good is being pursued. The reason reveals the justificatory vocabulary that authorizes the pursuit of that good. The threatened counter-values reveal what must be muted or sacrificed for the rule to function. In this way, the method yields a value-profile out of the maxim itself.

A workable maxim should meet three conditions. It should be recurrent rather than merely episodic, action-guiding rather than a name for a mood, and close enough to the client’s own practical language to remain recognizable. Because counseling always risks colonizing the other’s speech with a more polished vocabulary, proposed formulations should be offered only as trial reconstructions: “Let me see whether this is close.” “What in this sentence sounds false to you?” “Where is this wording mine rather than yours?” The client’s correction is not a secondary matter. It is often the first moment of practical ownership.

5. Three Kantian tests and one auxiliary heuristic

Once a working maxim has been formulated, the conversation moves from description to assessment. The question is no longer simply whether this is the rule under which I act, but whether it can be my rule in a reflectively defensible sense.

The first test is universalizability. In counseling, this should not be staged as an abstract exercise in world-design. Its more practical function is to ask whether the rule depends on background conditions that its own generalization would erode or destroy. This is where parasitic maxims often come into view: deception that depends on trust, selective omission that depends on norms of sincerity, emotional concealment that depends on another person's continuing to relate to a managed falsehood. Universalizability matters here because it reveals a practical incoherence internal to the rule itself, not merely an unfortunate consequence.⁶

The second test is the Formula of Humanity. The question here is whether the maxim treats a person, whether another person or oneself, merely as a means. In counseling, this point needs to be put carefully. Social life constantly involves making use of one another in a minimal and unobjectionable sense. The problem arises when a maxim bypasses the conditions under which a person could participate as a rational agent in what is being done. Manipulation, strategic opacity, and the management of another person's deliberative situation are the clearest examples. But the test is equally important in self-relations. Many clients are not mainly exploiting others. They are participating in their own reduction by silencing, stylizing, or erasing themselves in order to preserve some external good.⁷

The third device has to be introduced more cautiously. I call it a publicity heuristic rather than a third strict Kantian formula. Its guiding question is this: could the decisive reason of this maxim be disclosed, at least in principle, to the person whose agency it recruits, without the strategy collapsing? A negative answer does not by itself prove wrongdoing. Privacy is not manipulation, and not every undisclosed reason is owed to every other person. But the question is philosophically revealing in a limited class of cases, namely those in which a maxim secures cooperation by withholding from the other the very consideration that makes the strategy effective.⁸ The method should not claim a textual authority it does not actually possess. The heuristic is auxiliary. It is meant for cases

⁶ Kant, I., 1998. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Ed. and transl. by Gregor, M. Introduction by Korsgaard, C. M. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Herman, B., 1993. *The Practice of Moral Judgment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Wood, A. W., 1999. *Kant's Ethical Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁷ Kant, I., 1998. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, *ibid.*; Hill, T. E. Jr., 1973. *Servility and Self-Respect*, *ibid.*; Baron, M. W., 1995. *Kantian Ethics Almost Without Apology*, *ibid.*

⁸ Luban, D., 1996. The Publicity Principle. In: Goodin, R. E., ed. *The Theory of Institutional Design*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 154–165.

of strategic opacity, not for all morally serious conduct. Used in that limited way, it can bring into view a practical asymmetry that neither universalizability nor the humanity formula always captures with sufficient phenomenological sharpness.

Because these tests are normatively demanding, safeguards are essential. At a minimum, the method requires explicit consent to the procedure, role clarity, and reversibility. The interlocutor should know that the conversation is not psychotherapy, not diagnosis, and not a demand for confession. The counselor's formulations must remain contestable. And the client must be able to withdraw, suspend, or revise the inquiry without the suggestion that resistance itself proves the point. Philosophical counseling does not escape influence merely because it works through reflection. If anything, the clearer it becomes about reasons, the more careful it must be about the authority it exercises.

6. Three analytical vignettes

The following vignettes are analytical rather than empirical. Their purpose is to show what the method can illuminate and where its limits become visible.

The first case concerns strategic omission. A client seeking an important professional opportunity says, "I am not lying. I am simply not mentioning the parts that would make them reject me." A plausible maxim is reconstructed as follows: When an important opportunity depends on how I am perceived, I will omit relevant information in order to secure the opportunity, because another loss would be intolerable. Universalizability reveals the parasitic structure fairly quickly. The strategy depends on a background practice of credible representation while covertly exploiting that very practice. The humanity test sharpens the problem: the decision-maker is invited to choose, but not under conditions that respect his or her deliberation. The publicity heuristic then shows why the rule is unstable as a principle of agency: the client cannot avow to the other person the reason that makes concealment useful.

The second case concerns chronic self-suppression in an intimate relationship. A client says, "I keep the peace, but then I feel invisible." An initial reconstruction might be: When disagreement threatens someone I love, I will suppress my preference in order to preserve harmony, because conflict risks abandonment. The client resists that formulation: "That is not all it is. I really think love means putting the other first."

This resistance is philosophically important. It shows that fear is not the whole story; it is entangled with a serious moral ideal. A revised maxim follows: When my partner is distressed, I will prioritize his wellbeing over my preference, because love requires generosity and I can bear the loss more easily.

This second version does not simply collapse under universalizability. A caring rule of this sort can be intelligible, and sometimes admirable. But the humanity test complicates the picture. If the partner never encounters the disagreement being withheld, he is not relating to her actual standpoint but to a managed relationship. The publicity heuristic adds a second layer of scrutiny: could she disclose, at least in principle, that what appears as spontaneous agreement is partly a standing policy of self-suppression? At that point another maxim often comes into view beneath the first: When disagreement risks destabilizing attachment, I will conceal my difference in order to avoid loss. The result is not a dramatic moral verdict. It is a more exact map of the conflict between care and fear.

The third case concerns protective deception under coercion. A client preparing to leave an abusive partner asks whether concealment makes her dishonest in a morally condemning sense. The maxim is formulated narrowly: When a coercive partner asks whether I am preparing to leave, I will conceal the truth in order to protect my safety and preserve the possibility of leaving, because truthful disclosure would expose me to harm. Here the method must be handled with particular care. Universalizability has to be indexed not to the banal rule “lie when useful,” but to the specific condition of coercive domination. The humanity test becomes two-sided: concealment is present, but so is the protection of one’s own rational agency against weaponized disclosure. The publicity heuristic must also be re-indexed. The relevant audience is not the abuser, but a reasonable third party to whom the client could avow her reason without contradiction. In such a case, the method does not deliver moral purity. It clarifies why ordinary truthfulness norms are strained under domination and why self-protective concealment may be the more avowable rule.

7. Objections and limits

The strongest objection is that the method covertly moralizes. In one sense, that objection is correct. Maxim-work is not normatively neutral. It is guided by a Kantian concern for avowability, respect for agency, and

accountability to reasons. The answer, however, is not to deny normativity but to discipline it. The method should be presented as one explicit normative practice among others. Its tests must remain contestable in dialogue, and success should never be identified with the client's agreement with the counselor. The standard is clarity, not submission.

A second objection is that the article overstates the Kantian status of the publicity element. That criticism would be justified if the claim were that publicity functions here as a third formula of the categorical imperative. That is not the claim. The more limited point is that, in counseling contexts marked by strategic opacity, a publicity heuristic can reveal whether a practical rule depends for its success on managing another person's deliberative situation from behind a veil. The heuristic is therefore philosophically associated with Kantian concerns, but methodologically secondary.

A third objection concerns relational and cultural thickness. The article remains agent-centered insofar as it takes the person's operative rule as its basic unit of analysis. That focus may understate the extent to which agency is itself formed through social roles, histories of dependence, and unequal structures of recognition. The limitation is real. Maxim-work should not be treated as the universal core of philosophical counseling, but as a method especially suited to cases in which the practical difficulty turns on the tension between avowed commitments and recurrent rules of action.

A fourth limitation is evidential. This is a conceptual article, not an empirical study. The vignettes are analytical constructions, not case data. Nothing here establishes clinical effectiveness, comparative superiority, or generalizability across populations and settings. Those are important questions, but they are not the ones answered here. The narrower claim is that maxim-work yields a clearer philosophical picture of certain forms of practical conflict, and that Kantian tools illuminate why some rules fail not only strategically but as candidates for reflective ownership.

8. Conclusion

Philosophical counseling gains little by becoming a softened copy of psychotherapy. But it also gains little by treating ethical self-description as sufficient simply because it is sincere. What it needs is a disciplined point at which practical life can be made answerable to examination without being reduced to diagnosis. The maxim provides such a point.

The central claim of this article has been that maxim-work helps philosophical counseling move from abstract value language to the practical rule under which a person is actually living. Once reconstructed, that rule can be tested for coherence, for respect toward agency, and, in a narrower class of cases, for the strategic opacity on which it may depend. Used carefully, this is not moralizing from outside. It is an inquiry into whether a person can own the rule by which he or she is already acting.

That is the real aim of the method. Not purity, not control, and not quick behavioral correction. Its aim is avowable agency: the capacity to state one's rule more plainly, to see what it serves, to recognize what it costs, and to decide whether it can be lived by without evasion.⁹

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⁹ For recent discussions of Kantian ethics in applied contexts, see: Fišerová, M., 2024. Perpetual Peace Today: Ethics and Politics of Sustainability. *Studia Philosophica Kantiana*, 13(2), pp. 87–100; Miškocová, A., 2024. Moral Formation in Kant's Philosophy. *Studia Philosophica Kantiana*, 13(2), pp. 227–238.

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