

# Philosophical Counselling as a Secular Approach to the Problem of Evil

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The focus of this paper will be practical, consisting of an attempt to illustrate a way in which the problem of evil could be addressed, from a secular point of view, by using philosophical counselling.

Since this issue is an unavoidable feature of the world we live in, and given the frequently disastrous effects it can have on people's lives, even when they do not face it directly (ranging from losing one's faith/moral beliefs, to embracing nihilism and justifying harming others, to trying to commit suicide), it seems more than plausible that any philosophical counsellor will have to deal with it, under various guises, at some point in their career.

The applied approach proposed in this paper consists of using bibliotherapy as a way of fostering a potential client's capacity to handle the problem of evil, both in their personal life and as a pervasive trait of the world, in a more philosophical manner likely to improve their state of discomfort or suffering caused by this issue. Ideally, the main strategies used would provide the client with a better understanding of the concept of evil, accomplished through a detailed conceptual analysis and clarification, as well as help them demystify any apparently transcendent element that this concept could contain at first glance. Thus, one of the most important points of this approach would be its secular nature, considered to be, in this case, therapeutic in itself (detailed further on).

The main challenge appears to consist of the fact that the book chosen for bibliotherapy in this illustrative case, Pierre-Henri Castel's

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“*Pervers, analyse d’un concept, suivi de Sade à Rome*”<sup>2</sup> [*Pervers, a Conceptual Analysis, Followed by Sade in Rome*], could seem, initially, to be rather technical and destined to be used mostly by specialists in furthering and refining rather subtle debates; therefore, one could think that this type of book would not necessarily be the first intuitive choice in this context. However, the clear style, the uncluttered structure, and the well-developed arguments would soon prove to be quite easy to follow even by a layperson. The author’s stated aim is that of bringing a sobering view on this concept, by appealing to an adverbial analysis which does not focus on the person of the evildoer, but on the perpetrated actions, as well as revealing their quite ordinary nature by means of the dispositional account analysis.

## I. Pierre-Henri Castel’s Position Concerning the Problem of Evil

The book under consideration pertains to the philosophical debates on the problem of evil specific to the late 20th century – that is, it deals with extreme, almost inconceivable instances of evil from a mostly secular perspective. As such, it focuses on the evildoer as a human being, rather than an embodiment of the supernatural – which could prove to be a very suitable take for therapeutic endeavours.

The author asserts his adherence to the “evil-revivalist” camp, that is, those philosophers who deem “evil” to be a useful and necessary concept that ought to be preserved or even “revived”; their opponents, the “evil-sceptics”, uphold the idea that, on the contrary, it ought to be discarded or replaced with concepts that they find less confusing or misleading, such as “badness” or “wrongdoing”<sup>3</sup>. However, he provides a balanced account of the two sides’ main arguments, while also enriching and refining the debate.

There are at least three main reasons for resorting to the measure called for by the evil-sceptics, two of which are more relevant from an epistemological point of view, whereas the third is of a more practical nature, concerning everyday life circumstances and potential outcomes. To be more specific, the first important reason for opposing the use of

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<sup>2</sup> Pierre-Henri Castel, *Pervers, analyse d’un concept* (Paris: Les Éditions d’Ithaque, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Todd Calder, “The Concept of Evil,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/concept-evil/> (accessed December 15, 2019).

“evil,” in the eyes of the evil-sceptics, is the fact that it seems to lack explanatory power. This happens because, according to them, this term cannot explain the reason for which certain agents, rather than others, perform certain actions, as well as the reason for which such actions are performed in the first place (so, the “who?” and the “why?”).

By contrast, evil-revivalists think that the concept of evil does have at least partial explanatory value (e.g., it could contain an explanation for an evil action, seen as an action arising from an evil motivation<sup>4</sup>).

Another version of this objection brought by the evil-sceptics to the necessity of keeping the term of “evil” is connected with the practice of using it as a literary device – that is, employing fictional embodiments of dark forces, such as monstrous creatures, as paradigms of evil. In the opinion of the evil-sceptics, one should only use “evil” in other contexts if one believes that such beings also have an independent existence outside fiction; if not, one ought to limit oneself to using the word within a fictional frame of reference.

The evil-revivalists’ answer to both arguments made by the evil-sceptics in support of this reason for abandoning the concept of evil is that, despite the fact that one cannot deny its traditional use in fictional and religious contexts, a separate, secular concept of evil also exists, and it is just as valid, both due to its content and to the consistency of its time-sentenced use outside these two spheres.

Finally, the third main reason for which the evil-sceptics support abandoning the concept of evil is the likelihood of it posing a potential danger or having a harmful capacity, especially when used in legal, political, or moral contexts.

This position is quite easy to understand, and it seems reasonably clear that, in such situations, the use of the term “evil” would include strong connotations that might give rise to emotional reactions apt to influence important and potentially irreversible decisions. So, in this case, it is the stylistic value of the word, and the nuances with which it tinges actions and persons, that matter the most.

Probably the best example to illustrate this view is its use in courts of law – since “evil” is supposed to express the highest form of moral

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<sup>4</sup> Eve Garrard, “Evil as an Explanatory Concept,” *The Monist* 85:2 (2002): 320–336, <https://doi.org/10.5840/monist200285219>, 332; Luke Russell, “Dispositional Accounts of Evil Personhood,” *Philosophical Studies* 149:2 (2010): 231–250, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-009-9344-3>, 240.

condemnation that could be applied to a deed, it also implies the logical necessity of the highest form of punishment. Thus, some authors argue, it would cast upon the perpetrators of such acts the most unfavourable light possible, presenting them as beings possessing not only inhuman, but also immutable character traits – the existence of the latter, seen as a proven fact, would seem to indicate at least the need of perpetually isolating them from society, if not, where feasible, their execution. In any event, the evil-sceptics point out, using this word would have serious consequences, leading in the best case to the mistreatment of suspects and the worsening of their chances of a fair trial. One could say that, in a way, in such situations, “evil” has the potential to create harm (disproportionate punishments for deeds that could have benefitted from a different treatment, had a more neutral term been used).

One evil-revivalist answer to this disadvantage of the concept of evil, when used in fields where it is susceptible of generating confusion and abuse, is that this is not the only concept that can suffer such distortion – according to them, all normative concepts can share the same fate. Under these circumstances, this would raise the same previously mentioned problem for the evil-sceptics: they would have to either dispose of all such concepts, which is contrary to their position, or admit that we do not need to abandon the concept of evil for these reasons.

Given the limited dimensions of this paper, rather than insisting on further details concerning the approach to the problem of evil that Pierre-Henri Castel takes in this book, no matter how interesting, we shall move on to some main traits of philosophical counselling, in order to finally reach the specific form in which it (and mainly its contributions to the above-mentioned aspects of this philosophical debate) could be used for bibliotherapy.

## **II. Attempts at Defining Philosophical Counselling**

If there is anything constant and agreed upon by most practitioners of philosophical counselling, it is its elusive nature, mainly regarding method (after all, even the person usually mentioned for creating – or reviving, according to one’s view on it – this discipline in the early 1980s,

Gerd Achenbach, speaks about a “method beyond method”<sup>5</sup>). It seems that a lot of time will pass before some major consensus might be reached in the field, if, indeed, any is possible (and, one may ask oneself, is this really desirable or would it stifle the creativity and flexibility that have manifested themselves so far and of which the debates are a welcome reflection?).

Some authors, such as Lou Marinoff, have stated that there are as many methods as there are authors, likening philosophical counselling rather to a form of art<sup>6</sup>. This nature can prove promising in that it stimulates creative approaches that, nonetheless, still have to be rigorous and address the clients’ issues from a specific angle.

According to Peter B. Raabe, philosophical counselling rests on a special form of intersubjectivity, different from its usual manifestation among individuals interacting in any given society. This, he contends, is due to the asymmetrical relation existing between the client and the philosophical counsellor: while the latter assists the former with acquiring the tools needed for more effective reasoning, there is no reciprocity in this respect<sup>7</sup>.

Yet another view, also maintained by Peter B. Raabe and illustrated by the following two sections of this paper, is that, given the remarkable array of controversies and possible nuances surrounding the attempts at defining philosophical counselling, the best approach leading to a tangible result might be an antinomical one<sup>8</sup>. This would lead to a gradual peeling of the layers of mystery surrounding this discipline, helping one finally acquire a clearer view of its true shape – which, according to both this author and to other practitioners, such as Lou Marinoff, might prove revealing of the fact that philosophical counselling is also the field of significant consensus. The tool used in this case would be to contrast it with other related fields, for instance with psychiatry and psychology (a detailed outline of finer similarities with and distinctions from philosophical practice and academic philosophy would be worth

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<sup>5</sup> Peter B. Raabe, *Philosophical Counseling: Theory and Practice* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2001), 6. The other main view is that philosophical counselling is largely akin to philosophical practice, so that we can trace its known origins at least back to Socrates.

<sup>6</sup> Lou Marinoff, *Plato, Not Prozac!* (New York; London: HarperCollins World; Hi Marketing, 2001), 52.

<sup>7</sup> Peter B. Raabe, *Philosophical Counseling*, 208.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, xvi.

undertaking, but this would overreach by far the limitations of this paper).

### *A. Philosophical Counselling and Psychiatry*

One of the main traits which differentiate philosophical counselling from other disciplines in the field of helping professions dedicated to mental health concerns the position of the practitioner compared with that of the client or patient. Namely, in this case, there is no disparity in power or authority (or, at least, this ought to be the norm – we cannot completely exclude the more subtle ways in which the client could be influenced by or still view the counsellor as an authority, for instance, due to the possible discrepancy in philosophical training, at least initially; or, quite simply, because the latter is a therapist and, thus, not just about any interlocutor. Hopefully, the practitioner would notice this attitude and do the best in their power to help the client overcome it, if not instruct them in this sense from the very beginning; however, even then, I tend to think that it would be hard to dispel entirely).

This type of relationship seems to be quite fundamental to philosophical counselling, authors like Oscar Brenifier stressing the fact that the client ought to represent the exact opposite of the patient: they are seen as autonomous and rather strong individuals that take the greatest share of effort and responsibility in their therapeutic journey. They cannot be imposed upon by the counsellor, but they are, instead, encouraged to fully assume the consequences of their choices, which they ought to become able to see in a much clearer light thanks to the thinking tools placed at their disposal by the practitioner<sup>9</sup>.

The second distinction much insisted upon not only by Oscar Brenifier, but also by Lou Marinoff, for instance<sup>10</sup>, is that philosophical counselling ought to never try and address pathological issues. He favours a clear division of categories and further nuances the discussion, bringing to the fore other problematic aspects of psychiatry – the non-negligible possibility of abuse, the likelihood of overmedicalization, the

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<sup>9</sup> Oscar Brenifier, *La Consultation philosophique* (Asnières-sur-Seine: Éditions Alcofribas, 2018), 104.

<sup>10</sup> Lou Marinoff, *The Big Questions: Therapy for the Sane or How Philosophy Can Change Your Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), 12.

unwarranted expansion of the scope of psychiatrists' competency (for instance, as experts in courts of law)<sup>11</sup>.

### *B. Philosophical Counselling and Psychology*

Apart from the already mentioned issue of asymmetrical relations that are most likely to arise in therapeutic settings, and which is common to both psychiatry and psychology, but expected to be absent in the case of philosophical counselling, there are several important points that ought to be specified. A clear and comprehensive synthesis of these aspects can be found in one of Ran Lahav's books<sup>12</sup>.

The first distinction that could be considered is that of temporal orientation: while psychotherapy, especially that of a psychoanalytic persuasion, would tend to focus on the past, philosophical counselling would be concerned with the present and the future, for, on the one hand, the past might become easier to deal with, but it cannot be altered, and on the other hand, not being able to change the outcome of a past cause and dwelling excessively on it could prove to be rather damaging<sup>13</sup>.

Secondly, the matter of technique is also worth mentioning: while psychology espouses the narrative approach, philosophical counselling tends to discourage it or, at best, allow it only marginally, encouraging in exchange a brief and exact way of speech (especially since, quite often, philosophical counsellors are able to identify the clients' using digressions, explanations, and developments as strategies destined to abate disagreeable questions)<sup>14</sup>.

Another important difference is that between the two disciplines' positions on the prominence and treatment of emotions. If psychology considers them to be an essential feature and the main point worth addressing, to the philosophical counsellor, they are not an object of interest *per se* (which does not mean that they ought to be ignored), but rather a possible impediment to the reasoning process, and they ought to be dealt with accordingly. Therefore, the focus is not on interpreting or trying to change them in a positive way by acting directly on them, but

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<sup>11</sup> Lou Marinoff, *Philosophical Practice* (San Diego: Academic Press, 2002), 327.

<sup>12</sup> Ran Lahav and Maria da Venza Tillmanns, eds., *Essays on Philosophical Counseling* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995), 12.

<sup>13</sup> Lou Marinoff, *Plato, Not Prozac!*, 40.

<sup>14</sup> Jérôme Lecoq, *La pratique philosophique* (Paris: Éditions Eyrolles, 2014), 108.

on preventing them from clouding the clients' reason and, on the contrary, using the latter in such a way that the client's feelings are usually, in the end, positively impacted by it<sup>15</sup>.

Given the vivid, rich controversies surrounding and fuelling the field of philosophical counselling, an overview of all of these features would certainly overcome the scope of the present paper. In order to move on to the applied illustration of the way in which the problem of evil could be handled during a series of sessions, we will only address two main dimensions of this discipline, namely the therapeutic and the pedagogical one.

### **III. A. The Therapeutic Dimension of Philosophical Counselling**

Deriving from the Greek word “therapeia” (healing), “therapy”, according to the Oxford Dictionary of English, signifies the “treatment of mental or psychological disorders by psychological means”. This would already limit its scope in a way that seems to exclude philosophical counselling. However, its etymological root, “therapeuein”, meaning “to minister to” or “to treat medically”<sup>16</sup>, shows that it could be seen in a more general way. This view is also supported by another possible translation, namely “to attend to”<sup>17</sup> or “to be of service”<sup>18</sup>, which enables us to drift away from the medicalized meaning and which could, for instance, illustrate Peter B. Raabe's contention that “therapy”, in the context of philosophical counselling, can designate the very collaboration between the counsellor and the client. Thus, while not therapeutic in the strong sense – that is, addressing a specific pathology according to a clearly outlined treatment plan and producing palpable results in a definite period of time – philosophical counselling could be said to be therapeutic in a weaker sense, that is, enhancing the clients' resilience and overall sense of well-being on the long term<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, 104.

<sup>16</sup> Angus Stevenson, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of English*. 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Lou Marinoff, *Plato, Not Prozac!*, 49.

<sup>18</sup> Peter B. Raabe, *Philosophical Counseling*, 205.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, 205.

### *B. The Pedagogical Dimension of Philosophical Counselling*

As the same author states, there are three main dimensions of philosophical counselling, to wit, the phenomenological, the hermeneutical, and the pedagogical. The last one is not meant in the sense of a teacher-student relationship, if only for reasons having to do with the more balanced distribution of authority in the case of philosophical counselling. Also, there is, most likely, no clearly organized teaching setting, with specific goals, contents, and deadlines. Rather, this dimension arises in a natural way during the counselling process, on the one hand, due to the unavoidable, if not necessarily intentional, transmission of philosophical concepts, theories, and skills that can prove useful in addressing the clients' needs, and, on the other hand, due to the accumulation of practical experience in applying the tools of reasoning to various issues over time<sup>20</sup>.

## **IV. Using Bibliotherapy in Philosophical Counselling Sessions Addressing the Problem of Evil**

If one were to try and argue in favour of philosophical counselling as therapy through tangible examples, this would probably provide an excellent illustration of the types of problems for which it is best suited. The definition of the role of philosophical counselling that most practitioners seem to agree upon is that it deals with life problems. It would be extremely hard to identify an issue that could prove to be more harmful and more widespread as a cause of physical, moral, and mental suffering than the problem of evil, even when acting in an indirect fashion. This view is supported by the vastly damaging effects that it can have on people's existence, going from a very noticeable lowering of their quality of life up to an incapacity to function or even, in the most extreme – but, sadly, far from being rare – cases, spiritual disintegration translated into a loss of faith, embracing nihilism, or radically harmful acts directed against themselves or other people. These traits make it, arguably, the most suitable example of a life problem worth being addressed through philosophical counselling.

The book chosen for bibliotherapy in this case, Pierre-Henri Castel's "*Pervers, analyse d'un concept, suivi de Sade à Rome*" [Pervers, a Conceptual

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<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, 214.

Analysis, Followed by Sade in Rome], represents, according to its author, “an anthropology of evil consistent with the birth and development of individualism”<sup>21</sup>. Of the two essays forming it, the first one, consisting mainly of an adverbial analysis of the French term “*pervers*”, translated as “worse than evil”, could prove to be the most effective for a reasonably short series of philosophical counselling sessions (depending on the client’s feedback and interest, the second essay could also be used for a deeper and more refined analysis of the issue). This essay represents, according to me, an excellent example of conceptual elucidation, carried out in an informative and accessible way. Thus, it would provide the clients at the same time with an overview of the recent debates on the problem of evil, as well as with an exemplification of an effective conceptual analysis. The essay, adopting a secular perspective, furnishes us with a sobering angle from which we can assess evil; by using “*pervers*” as an adverb, rather than a noun or an adjective, we shift the focus from the evildoer’s person to their actions. Also, the author contends that evildoing, rather than being an intrinsic disposition, is an extrinsic one, depending on the existence and accessibility of vulnerable individuals in order to be fulfilled, regardless of the evildoer’s desires, propensities, or willpower.

Secondly, and fully in line with the aims of philosophical counselling, it is to be expected that the very process of following a rigorous demonstration and of trying to grasp properly the way in which the author’s thought unfolds would have a salutary effect on the clients’ state of mind, by helping them avoid being absorbed by the maelstrom of confusion and suffering brought about by contemplating the inscrutability of evil. The simple fact of acquiring a better understanding of the issue, in a way that brings the evildoer down to the level of an ordinary human being – someone depending on external circumstances in order to actualize their harmful designs and being as far from reaching perfection as any other mere mortal, since the “horizon of evil” is by definition unattainable – would most likely help the clients feel more in control and, as a result, enhance their general psychological well-being.

Several specific situations where this approach to evil could prove useful in order to defuse the influence of extreme evil on clients’ minds, drawing on three aspects of the debate on evil mentioned in part I of this

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<sup>21</sup> Castel, *Pervers, analyse d’un concept*, 11.

paper, could be described. The first of them is directed at the imagination, but it can easily be seen how it could then lead to a healthier view on actual evildoers. One interesting observation made by Castel, concerning fictional embodiments of evil – not as supernatural creatures, but as epitomes of human-faced malignancy – is that, despite the fact of their having been used by a certain scientific discourse as faithful descriptions of real deviant beings, there is no strong evidence in favor of their existence as such, namely that they actually have counterparts outside the fictional realm. What he emphasizes is that, even though such literary characters have the potential of being taken seriously both by people studying the phenomenon and by evildoers themselves, in their striving towards achieving higher and higher “excellence” in evil, as well as by the audience exposed to their image, it cannot be stated with full certainty that flesh-and-bone authentic equivalents of those literary depictions of evil actually exist, beyond what they want to make everybody else believe.

In the second place, the author deals with the relevance of the criminological expertise of the evildoer, initially distinguishing him from the insane criminal through the observation that, even though both of them can commit extremely destructive and cruel actions, the main difference between them lies in the fact that the crime of the insane individual lacks the intersubjective dimension that is the mark of the consciously, willingly evil action. That is, he does not aim at “desubjectivizing” the victim, no matter how much harm he would otherwise cause. By contrast, to the evildoer, even his own trial could represent an excellent opportunity for advancing even further in evil, by manipulating the audience’s emotions and, in a way, reenacting on it the harm done to the victim. This is practically illustrated by the manner in which many serial killers tend to behave when provided a “stage” in court, displaying a grandiose and scheming behavior aimed at showing their perceived superiority to the rest of mankind. Here, Castel emphasizes the usefulness of the experts’ and audience’s embracing a measured, rational approach to such attempts and denying the evildoer the possibility of being taken for a supernatural being or even as an exceptional human being, deflating his hopes by means of a “salutary humiliation.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Castel, *Pervers, analyse d'un concept*, 74.

Another aspect that, according to the author, the evildoer could exploit in circumstances such as the one described above is the atmosphere of inextricable ambiguity suffusing the possible interpretations of the evil act – or, in such situations, of the evildoer’s very person. The latter could, in contrast to the previous possibility, choose to give off a commonplace, ordinary image, clashing with the audience’s expectations of seeing an exceptional-looking being, matching the gravity of the deeds (the “banality of evil”<sup>23</sup>). This could cast doubts upon the reality of his connection to the extreme actions that are imputed him. The disconcerting confusion and the ensuing long-lasting ambiguity in the minds of the audience would be precisely what the evildoer needs in order to achieve his goals, by persistently taking away their peace of mind. Not only will they never be able to be entirely sure of his guilt, but they could also feel guilty or even evil themselves for overinterpreting the facts and attributing to the evildoer evil intentions that they cannot prove beyond any doubt – which could mean that the source of evil lies within their own minds.

Finally, a potential cause for concern and/or suffering for some clients might be the issue of “evil institutions”, both under their historical or their present-day guise. Here, an important remark made by Castel regards the uselessness of looking for individual perpetrators in such cases. A better approach would be, in his view, that of focusing on the evil action seen as the result of a global intentionality to magnify evil that pervades the evil institution, and reversing the tables: it is the very existence of the evil institution that gives the individuals composing it the means and opportunities to commit evil actions. This way of looking at things also leads to an unexpected effect that can be quite significant for a different understanding of the evildoer: what seems to be the main trait of evil institutions is, in fact, the impersonal nature of evildoing, not depending on the will of the agent as the cause of the evil action, but, on the contrary, being determined by an institutional intentionality that is transmitted to the individual and guides his action. This can have important reverberations on the way of looking at evildoers, by shedding light on and helping us grasp the sway that the impersonal character of the will to cause evil can hold over an individual.

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<sup>23</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann and the Holocaust* (London: Penguin, 2005), 292.

The clients most likely to benefit from philosophical counselling sessions of the type described above would probably be people interested in the phenomenon of evil and in possible ways of limiting its seemingly uncontrollable reach and spread. They could also be dealing, personally or vicariously, with various issues deriving from it that might be circumvented by adopting a more informed and clearheaded standpoint, such as attempts at manipulation destined to increase their suffering.

Last, but not least, given its specific object, this kind of therapeutic approach could also be used during group counselling sessions taking place in prisons. In this case, the main point would be placing emphasis on the rather weak and not-so-glamorous nature of the evildoer. Far from appearing as supernatural beings endowed with life and death powers over others, they would be revealed as mere human beings, whose actions, however shocking to most people, are no marks of a transcendent essence, but only grotesque attempts at conjuring it up. Most importantly, this approach could point out the fundamentally flawed nature of evil action itself, not only from a moral perspective that could be of no interest to certain people, but from a strictly practical perspective: since the scale of evil has no upper limit, any such action can be overcome at any time, becoming instantly irrelevant as an “achievement”. Therefore, any candidate to the status of an “ideal” evildoer would be condemned to perpetually strive towards the unreachable, essentially squandering their efforts into eternal insignificance.

In the light of the above, it could be stated that, in this type of contexts, bibliotherapy based on this book would, in all likelihood, provide various types of clients with a rather versatile range of tools that they could use in order to improve the course of their predicaments.

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