

Philosophy in Practice: where we are now, where we could go

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Abstract: The first part of this paper is meant to describe the process, and its different steps, that I generally follow during a philosophical counselling session, run both with individuals and groups, as developed in the last twelve years of practical experience. A fill rouge reveals itself in the dialogic relationship with most of the counselees, and I have tried to descend this communicative thread highlighting the recurrent questions and matters. “Where we are now” indirectly explores the possibility of a guideline for philosophical practitioners aimed more as a collection of good practices than as a rigid assembly of protocols based on only one, defined method. A sort of book of instruction, a manual with an educational task, addressed to our younger colleagues who are approaching this practice. The second part tries to briefly contextualise my personal experience within the Italian context where I live and work. “Where we are now”, in this sense, describes the actual situation of Philosophical counselling in Italy with the help of some data, bringing out some weak and strong points. The final part, which poses the open question “Where could we go?”, outlines a few possible scenarios where philosophy can play a crucial role while contributing to raise a community awareness about some urgent and global matters, as well as to boost its own level of recognition.

Key-words: philosophical practice; method process; experience; need; communication; recognition;

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Introduction: will a guideline for philosophical counsellors ever be possible?

One the most frequently read objections regarding philosophical practice is that philosophical counsellors refuse to adhere to standards and protocols that may prove the validity of their practice. More than a stereotype, I consider this statement both as a sort of paradox and a challenge. A paradox, since no ultimate sentence on what defines the philosophical practice has been written so far, and will probably ever be. According to Paul Feyerabend (1924-1994), in philosophy there is no place for strict orthodoxy; neither in the field of philosophy of science, whose analysis addresses the STEM disciplines (the acronym for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics).

In “Against method” (1975), the Austrian-born contemporary epistemologist claims that scientific practices should not be subjected to any single methodological rule; on the contrary, scientists must be free to pursue whatever they discover and find promising during their research, even if this means to violate accepted rules. Feyerabend cites – among others – the case of Galileo Galilei (1564-1642); the Italian philosopher and mathematician proved Ptolemy wrong by using a telescope for the first time to observe the planet Venus, thus confirming the hypothesis of a heliocentric system put forth by Nicolaus Copernicus, with the Moon travelling around the Earth. Galileo sparked the birth of scientific cosmology and modern astronomy, moving the accepted centre of the known universe from the Earth to the Sun. When researchers open a never-seen-before perspective - a new *Weltanschauung* - they should follow their own reason, and intuition, utilizing not one, but many different methods and tools to prove their beliefs.

Later Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) considers not one method, but a variety of methods as well (Conant, 2012), while Gerd Achenbach (born 1947), the German scholar credited with starting the contemporary movement called ‘philosophical counselling’ as a profession clearly distinct from psychotherapy, claims that our practice must be based on a method “beyond-method” (Zinaich, 2004).

This assertion, apparently contradictory, is based on his approach to philosophy as a constant “commitment to skepticism” as a sort of alert

towards “everything which considers itself right, settled, conclusive, indubitable ... ‘true’.” (1) Philosophers should maintain an open-ended point of view, practicing continuous questioning, and they should pay a special attention to what is generally defined “untrue”. This attitude is reminiscent of René Descartes’ (1596-1650) First Meditation (1641) where the French philosopher invites us to call our beliefs into doubt. But, if the beginning of Descartes’ reflection may appear the same, his fundamental strategy is different: on one side we must continuously exercise our reason, our ability to think and to question everything we observe, experience, or believe; on the other side, we must pursue the truth, starting from the certainty of our own existence, our first-person experience: “I am, I exist”, and through our activity of thinking: “*Cogito, ergo sum*” (1641) (2), “*Je pense, donc je suis*” (1637) (3). The exercise of doubt must be practiced to verify our sensations, our body’s perceptions, our mental illusions and suppositions, to proceed along the pathway of gradual awareness and abstraction, towards the truth.

The attempt to harness the experience of philosophical practice into a guideline may sound paradoxical also because there are so many diverse cultural – geographical, social, anthropological, economic, linguistic – implications that make the scenario quite complex and multifaceted. According to Jon Mills (1999), “there is no unified agreement among practitioners on what constitutes the ground, scope and limits to its theory and practice... Philosophical counselling stands divided in both theory and method” (4).

Despite this, and precisely because of this, I see anyhow the possibility of a guideline as a challenge. And I tackle this challenge as a *necessary choice*, a response to the need of gathering and comparing the most significant best practices in the field of philosophical counselling, presenting the most consistent approaches and their philosophical references, while giving credit to their “travel companions” - as Alfred Whitehead (1861-1947) calls them (1978).

I may picture the guideline as a book of instruction, a manual mainly addressed to our younger colleagues. In the final part I will add some recommendations, common pitfalls, a list of tips and tricks, a few controversial issues and related open issues. Beyond or against only one-method, looking at a variety of methods with curiosity, the question “where we are now” inevitably refers to many different best practices of

philosophical counselling; they can be considered effective to the extent that such practices reach the scope of helping ordinary people in managing everyday life problems.

A counselling session

Based on my practical experience, a philosophical counselling session unfolds across a process, which includes some levers: the few methodological tools that I use, and some recurrent questions – asked both by the client and by the counselor. These questions may, or may not, refer to some possible or impossible answers, on the client’s side. Generally, it is a need, or more than one, that moves a client to look for our help and start the process. Sometimes this need is explicitly declared at the beginning of the first session, sometimes is not. It may be the need to understand what is happening, and why. Sometimes that need is functional to the urgency of taking a decision, to choose among different options that may refer to their private or public relationships, their working sphere, their personal existence, or ‘just’ to accept life’s events. The whole process commonly helps them to see more clearly the whole situation, and has the extraordinary outcome to promote the gradual transformation of the client into a wiser and more serene person; this very often means the possibility to start a new chapter of their life, where they can play a rewarding role.

The first fundamental lever is a *live conversation*, based on listening more than on talking. For live conversation I mean a combination of *Socratic dialogue* and a sort of *communicative pragmatism*. Socrates (470-399 BC), as we know from Plato’s dialogues, incessantly encourages an open discussion about the most various themes with his pupils and friends. In *Phaedrus* (370 BC), Socrates describes himself as “sick with passion for hearing people speak” in a form of philosophical dialectic. I personally find the same “sick with passion” attitude, even amplified, in Oscar Brenifier’s (born 1954) dialogic mode to unceasingly provoke critical thinking in his interlocutors. Communicative pragmatism, as inspired by the work of Paul Watzlawick (1921-2007) and Jürgen Habermas (born 1929), implies the centrality of the Other - our client - within the communicative relationship, the connecting experience, and recognizes the value of their and our bodies, together with the acted, observed behaviors. Although being aware that in our work we mainly utilize words and thoughts (unified together in

the Greek concept of Logos), we should always pay a great attention to the body, that very often I trust more than words. Counsellor and client are together in a *founding relationship*; they are *bodily together*: not only “*what we say*” but also “*how we say it*” must be constantly taken into consideration. Conversations with our clients take place within a philosophical horizon where also the dialogues with our preferred philosophers contemporarily occur. They are companions who constantly support our efforts; their thoughts and considerations regarding life and death, happiness and sorrow, art and beauty, love and friendship, conflicts and anger, knowledge, faith, freedom and free will ... compose the warp and weft of our reciprocal questioning, as in a colorful, polyphonic frame. If, for us as counsellors, active listening and observing is critical, for our clients talking is most of the time liberating: things appear plainer when spoken than when unspoken.

An open, argumentative and free-from-prejudice Socratic dialogue which goes gradually in-depth may prove how thoughtful words often help to untangle knots and enlighten the dark corners of our client’s thoughts and beliefs. New perspectives and rational understanding may emerge. Our philosophical sessions allow clients to release their tension, cope with anxiety, build resilience; furthermore, compared to the sessions run remotely, being ‘bodily’ together – in the flesh – elevates its efficacy. I will never tire of repeating that all questions, all matters, all philosophical sources are valid as soon as they help our client to see the big picture, reason clearly, understand and accept what happened, decide and choose one option among the many, and act for a change: in the end, feel better and live more wisely.

The client’s questions

Why should we, as philosophical counsellors, be worried not to have the right answers for our clients, if we are able to share some meaningful questions and doubts with them? Which, most often, are our own doubts, our own uncertainties and concerns. It is the act of questioning that contributes to bring to light what is already within us. Socrates calls this process “*maieutics*”, from the Greek word “*Maia*”, which means midwife, that was his mother’s profession. *Maieutics (maieuesthai)*

is to act as a midwife, midwifery, to which Pierre Grimes (born 1923) directly refers when he talks about “philosophical midwifery” (1998).

Why?

We know that when human beings started questioning about the meaning of their condition, that can be recognized as the start of philosophy. When clients come to us with such a question, maybe their first question, they have already started a fruitful pathway in discovering their “inner philosopher” (Marinoff, Ikeda, 2012).

In this case, the value of our philosophical counselling is that one of never-ending research of the reason why, the sense, the logos; our role is that one of a facilitator, a travelling companion, an archeologist, a guide, a mentor: “speak *your* truth with clarity!” (as per Aristotle this is the concept of *saphêneia*, clarity, both in perception and expression).

What shall I do?

Nevertheless, most of the times it is the miserable, incomprehensible, mournful, provisional condition of our clients the driving force for seeking our help. Very frequently it is a present dilemma, a whole of upsetting emotions, an existential need, or a deep sorrow due to an illness or a loss, which affect their mental, affective and physical status, as may have affected ours. Commonly it is not (maybe not yet) an (apparently) abstract intellectual curiosity about the fundamental “high themes” of philosophy – the Existence of God, the Free Will versus the Universal Causality, the Good and the Bad, the value of Time and the role of Nature, etc. As claimed by Wittgenstein, philosophy must be brought down to earth (1953), and philosophical practice may contribute to rethink and, in some way, *resolve* (5) common, everyday life problems.

Most often there is no Epistemology nor Scientific Reasoning; no Aesthetics, neither Moral nor Ethics, not even Politics to be initially discussed: in front of us, together with us, just a distraught individual, an ordinary person who, at present, is not able to manage their emotions or take any decision. A human being experiencing a state of malaise that affects their mind, their wellbeing, and impacts their professional, familiar and friendly relationships. Philosophical counselling, in this respect, has a transformative and a creative effect, and our role can be that one of a *provocateur*, an instigator, an inquirer, a critical thinker, an investigator, a “disturbing gadfly”, how Socrates is called in Plato’s *The Apology* (399-87 BC).

The counsellor's questions

Here following there is a brief and incomplete list of questions that I may ask my clients. They are among the most recurrent ones, as observed over the past decade of personal practice, and more than 70 people met.

Who is involved in your decision?

This is a question that goes straightly beyond the sphere of the Ego, the "I", to include the others in the decision process. It helps the client to consider who is affected by their decision, and how, to what extent, and who should know - be they family members, colleagues or friends. The conversation can also facilitate a rational evaluation of the many (practical, moral, economical, etc.) aspects relevant to the decision.

Why do you consider it so urgent?

It can lead our conversation to the question of time – so closely linked with the concepts of life and death –, and to what it might be considered important and what urgent. As the Roman Emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius wrote: "We must have a sense of urgency, not only because we are drawing closer to death at every moment, but also because our comprehension of the world and our ability to pay proper attention will fade before we do" (6). We can help our client to reflect upon the different moral and ethical aspects implicit in their sense of duty. Borrowing Seneca's words: "...Therefore, Lucilius ...hold every hour in your grasp, lay hold of today's tasks, and you will not need to depend so much upon tomorrow's...Nothing, Lucilius, is ours, except time." (7), (62 AD). When we are on our today's task, our deadlines, it is easier to focus on what really counts; that, as per Seneca, is a good, meaningful and true life.

How do you feel about it?

I use "feel" (and feeling) on purpose, with reference to the late Edmund Husserl's (1859-1938) concept of *Gemütsakte*, where the practical acts of willing, valuing and preferring are deeply entangled with the existential – personal and affective – situation of the person, which deserves to be un-covered, dis-covered, re-discovered, and affirmed.

What would you suggest to a dear friend?

This is a question that may be asked both by the client and by the counsellor. A question which, once again, involves the others in the relationship with the I, and reveals the essential inter-subjective nature of

the subject, of the individual. It helps the client to get out of their situation and use their reason, objectify their problem, and act for a solution. Doing this, they help themselves as they would help their dearest friend, as if they themselves were their best friend.

What if?

This question has been a staple in the philosophical enquiry since pre-Socratics. Thought experimentation may encourage the client to use their reasoning, their logical thinking, but also to play, invent and imagine a different scenario and role for themselves. While doing this, they can test themselves, get through the problem, and take the edge off.

Are you sure?

The client is requested to go deep inside their opinions, perceptions, impressions, and values. Our conversation may lead to the analysis of some actual or past experiences, and how prejudices can affect our present ideas. It requires analysis and deep thought, and expresses the capacity of the person to set a context, and give due weight to facts and data. It may also help to exercise critical thinking, and verify the validity of their/our sources. The dialogue may include an investigation concerning the concept of truth, with its variety of implications – historical, epistemological, ethical, and semantic – and rely on the support of many philosophers, from antiquity to modern and contemporary philosophy.

Can you try to define it better? Could you use a different word?

Could you give me an example?

These questions aim to evidence the value of clarity. The client is invited to express their thoughts with clear words and accuracy, and this reduces the possibility of misunderstanding or misinterpretation by the counsellor. This exercise also proves the value of words as a key part of our knowledge, and helps the person bringing out the problems afflicting them. “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” writes Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* (1921). The dialogue may lead them to wonder about the notions of *meaning* and *sense*, which are – according to the semiotician Algirdas Julien Greimas (1917-1992) – concepts “*in grado di mordere sulla realtà*” (“able to ‘bite’ reality”) (8), or – according to Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) – to be interpreted as “meaning of life”, that is to say *living authentically* and powerfully, in coherence with our own goals and values.

Can you tell me something more about this?

It can be read as an exhortation addressed to the client to talk more about their condition, and give voice to their thoughts, worries, desires, or dilemmas without filters. It can be helpful especially with young people, who are more used to writing things down, browsing and posting on social networks, than to speaking openly and directly; and also with older people, even more with prisoners or inmates, who quite often spend long periods of time in solitude, not speaking to anybody.

What do you think if I tell you this ... if I show you this?

Sharing pictures, photos, reproductions of works of art, and actually any kind of images (people, animals, plants, landscapes, etc.), even if expressed with words – philosophical quotations, poems, metaphors –, can be an effective way to help the client to get out of an eventual momentary *impasse*, to break their temporary mental deadlock. As per Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) and Henry Bergson (1859-1941), images are synonyms of movement, some sort of equivalent to a passing reality, with which human beings have to confront essentially.

The client's need: a change of perspective

I have mentioned the importance I give to the observation (and trust) of the client's body. They may appear with tiredness, irritation, disappointment, anxiety, sadness, apathy, impatience etc. A wide variety of different emotional and mental status can be read through their demeanor, and their body: all of it speaks to us – glance, shoulders, back, hands' position, restless legs, finger or foot tapping ...– and this can be expressed with words of dissatisfaction, criticism, confusion, disillusion, or cynicism. If this is the case, it may help to *propose an aesthetic experience* to our client. The aim is to make them test the extraordinary power of art (and beauty) for their own wellbeing, for reconciling with themselves and with the world. We may invite our client to enjoy an exhibition, a live show, a concert, or to participate in a practical art workshop, which is often more effective: painting, crafting, singing, creative writing; anything in order to learn and practice new or forgotten abilities that may help our client to refocus their thoughts using their hands, their body, their sensitivity and imagination. Furthermore, philosophers have always practiced art, to enjoy themselves and others, or release and recover their mental energies. Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) used to write poems, Feyerabend loved to

sing in a chorus; Nietzsche was a self-taught piano player and a decent composer, quite appreciated by Franz Liszt, but unfortunately disliked by Richard Wagner (Nietzsche composed the opera “Sylvesterklänge” for his wife Cosima’s birthday) and by Hans von Bülow. Lou Marinoff (born 1951) plays classical guitar, and enjoys writing historical novels.

It may also help to propose to our client to *go walking*: while staying in touch with nature, an individual can find the true oneself, and slow down the daily pace of life. A long, free walk through a wood, alone, is an extreme philosophical act. Walking permits us to hear the silence and connect with the sublime, as the French philosopher Frédéric Gros (born 1965) writes: “By walking, you escape from the very idea of identity, the temptation to be someone, to have a name and a history...the freedom of walking lies in not being anyone; for the walking body has no history, it is just an eddy in a stream of immemorial life.” (9) Walking is a very simple, down to earth kind of living, and for many philosophers this was strictly connected with their work. In 335 BC, in Athens, Aristotle founded the Peripatetic school where pupils and scholars could think, discuss, talk, and laugh while walking together. Nietzsche walked to focus his mind and work better. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) walked to get distracted from work. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) used to travel on foot in the fashion of Thales, Plato and Pythagoras, convinced that his mind worked better when walking. (10)

Sometimes it can be helpful for our client *practicing some sport*. Sport has rules, and requires discipline and labor, but it also deeply linked with the vital, primitive elements of play, entertainment, and competition. As per Plato, sport is the fulfilment of the self - a healthy body and a healthy mind together, which recalls the “*Mens sana in corpore sano*” of the Roman poet Juvenal, while for Aristotle sport practice makes a citizen’s excellence. Or we can suggest them to *learn cooking*. We can find a great deal of philosophical topics inherent the history of food. Among the many, food’s availability for the entire population; the methods of cultivation - today so deeply connected with the concept of sustainability and earth preservation; the culture contained in any recipe, and in the varieties of ways of preparation; the ingredients, and the spices, allowed or used by people from different places and times. There are so many ethical, political, historical, economic and aesthetic elements present in the history of food. Nevertheless, here, once again, I wish just to point out the benefits deriving

from using our hands. The possibility for the client to decrease their stress, obtain relief and improve self-esteem. Cutting vegetables, choosing different ingredients, taking care of the kitchen and the table's set up, concretely help ward off apathy, depression or irritation. Philosophical literature is really reach of references regarding food, from which we can trace examples, experiences, and useful reflections to share. We all remember the famous affirmation by Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872): "we are what we eat" (1871) and, going back in time, let us think about the dialogues *Timaeus* and *Gorgias* by Plato, where Socrates praises the virtues of a plain and simple diet, and considers the food central to the body health for the sake of one's soul. Or let us recall Ovidius' (43 BC-17AD) *Metamorphoses*, where the Roman poet describes Pythagoras's teaching on vegetarianism: "...There are crops; there are apples weighing down the branches; and ripening grapes on the vines; there are flavorsome herbs, and those that can be rendered mild and gentle over the flame; and you do not lack flowing milk; or honey from the flowering thyme. The earth, prodigal of its wealth, supplies you with gentle sustenance, and offers you food without killing or shedding blood." (11)

Maybe our client can also be encouraged to *learn more about wine*, a good antidote to skeptical melancholy, according to David Hume (1711-1776). Biographers tells us that Kant used to appreciate wine so much that sometimes – after completing his daily walk – he could not find his way back home. Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and Nobody* (1883-85) writes: "O my soul, to thy domain gave I all wisdom to drink, all new wines." (12) Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), inspired by the *Symposium* by Plato, wrote a whole text on wine, *In vino veritas* (1845), that he considered as "a defense of the truth, and the truth a defense of wine". As per Roger Scruton (1944-2020), the British philosopher, wine is a means to reach an inward transformation.

The client's need: recognition

Longing for existential recognition is one of the structural, deepest, and universal needs of human beings. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) calls it *Anerkennung*, a condition that characterizes the master-slave dialectic in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), in the chapter entitled *Lordship and Bondage*, where the German philosopher

describes the development of self-consciousness through the encounter and the relationships of two beings. As per Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005), this is the first step of a human relationship: I-You, oneself as another (1990). Self-consciousness and self-identity as pre-conditions to recognize other's identity, other's value. Who are you for yourself? Who am I for you? Who are you for me? are three fundamental questions that can start an interesting and fruitful investigation. *Anerkennung* can be considered the engine of knowledge as well. If re-cognition, from the Latin *cognoscere*, cognition, means to know, then re-cognition is to know twice, to go deep into the others, to see, to ground, and to value.

In our client this need may manifest, occur as a continuous demand of approval, an insatiable search of power-fame-celebrity, self-centeredness, egotism, not leadership but dictatorship; often shown with aggressivity, refusal, and a bullying behavior. It recalls us the concept of *Übermensch* in Nietzsche, and Hannah Arendt's (1906-1975) banality of evil (1971), or even the power of the powerless by Václav Havel (1936-2011). In this case it may help a healthy, polite communication: a caring dialogue, active listening, kindness, confidence, acceptance, respect, forgiveness. Once again, the counsellor's body counts as well: not only what we say, and the words we use, but also how we say it – our tone, voice, glance, posture, demeanor.

The client's need: narration

Some of our clients simply need to narrate, to speak their Logos: about themselves, their biography and familiar story, their passions, their sorrows, their problems, their secrets, their memories or wishes.

They like to share their storytelling – firstly to be listened, and then to listen to. They enjoy having a space just for themselves inside a relationship where they feel free to talk and tell stories without being judged. Maybe our clients are looking for a direction, a sort of Ariadne's thread, to get out of their labyrinth. Occasionally I show them the image of Notre-Dame de Chartres gothic cathedral's labyrinth which metaphorically evokes human life - its evolution, joys and trials - and it is open for meditative walking. Built in 13th century, made of white stones, almost 13 meters of diameter, it invited the pilgrims to live a spiritual and heart-to-heart experience, looking for God, and discovering themselves. It is a

labyrinth where you cannot get lost, if you follow your path patiently. (Fig. 1)

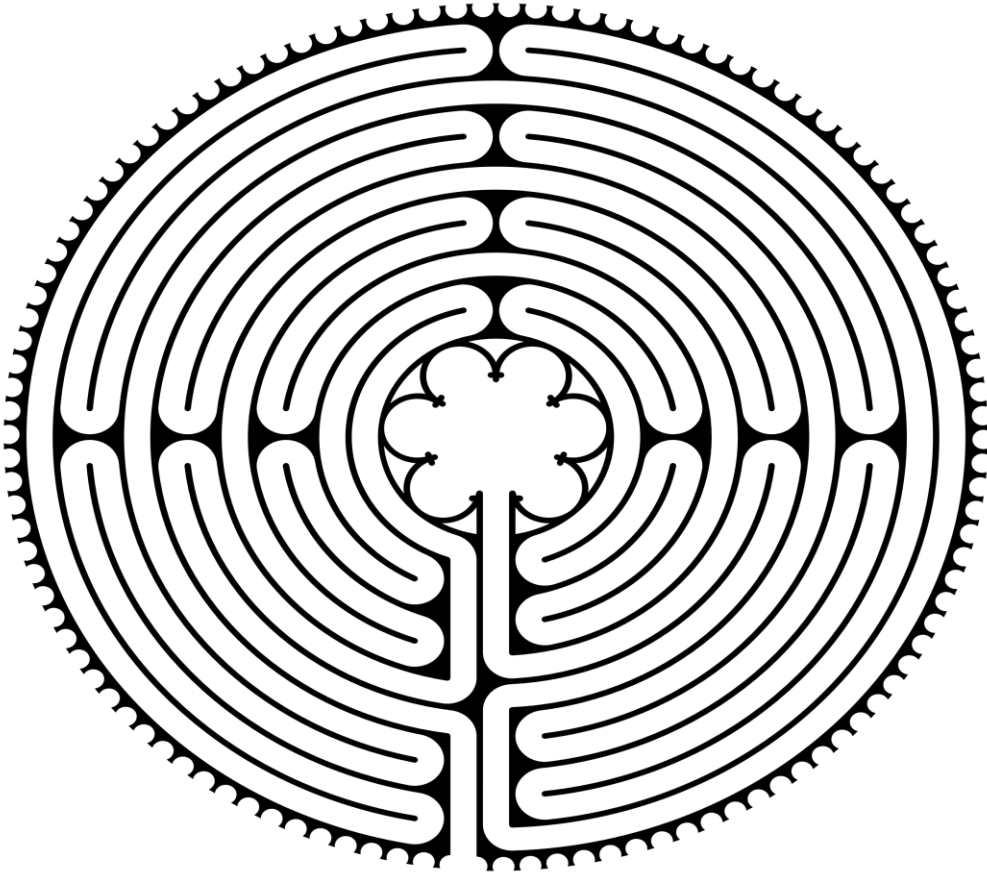


Fig. 1: The labyrinth of Chartres Cathedral. Source: Ssolebergj, Wikimedia Commons.

Sharing tales, tragedies, fables and mythic narratives can have a symbolic and cathartic function, helping our clients to see their situation more clearly and, when needed, come to a just decision. The word myth comes from the ancient Greek *mûthos*, the Homeric correspondent for *logos*, and essentially means a narration made of words that all together express a story with characters, scenes, events and actions reflecting our own existence as human beings. In Plato myths are strictly bound to a philosophical discourse, and they are used as a means of persuasion. For Aristotle myths are functional to a philosophical education as well, while

tragedies aim to purify emotions, passing through fear, pity, and catharsis (Poetics, 335 BC).

During a practical session, live oral narration and reading aloud can be a refreshing, unexpected change of pace, particularly when dealing with young clients, in a time when generally teens prefer short texting to talking. How many times do we observe our kids sitting in couple or group, leaning over a small screen, with nobody speaking to each other, or looking at each other, but rather using their smartphones to communicate to each other? After a clarifying conversation, they may need silence: this may take a significant contour, as sitting in silence does not necessary means empty gaps to be filled, an uneasy vacuum between detached individuals, but can be read as a precious moment of reflection and self-growth, within an honest, meaningful, empathetic relationship.

Where we are now: a glimpse of the Italian context

My personal view of the Italian situation regarding philosophical practice's state of art is that one of a work in progress. On one side it reflects a condition similar to the rest of Europe, and of the globe, with a profound crisis regarding humanistic culture and education, in a world running too fast and substantially managed by technology and technical know-hows. On the other side, philosophical practice is still considered a controversial specialism within the more traditional philosophical academia, despite some valuable experiences and innovative attempts developed in the last 20 years. As in the rest of the world, a great variety of disciplines, different activities and not-one-only methodology pertain to the so-called *pratiche filosofiche*: e.g., philosophy for children, philosophical counselling in health structures and deprived environments or prisons, café philo, philosophical counselling for managers and enterprises, private practice, counselling for public services, philosophical coaching and consulting, etc.: they are all grouped under the same label.

Compared to the rest of Europe and most of the English-speaking countries, Italy started a couple of decades later. In USA, the Belgian-American philosopher Pierre Grimes (born 1923) was an absolute pioneer with his Noetic Society founded in 1967; the first works of the German-American philosopher Peter Koestenbaum (born 1928) date back to 1978. The international movement and the profession began in Germany with

Gerd Achenbach in 1981. In 1990, two American philosophers, Elliot D. Cohen (born 1951) and Paul W. Sharkey (born 1945), established ASCPC (now NPCA, National Philosophical Counseling Association). Other pioneers were the Israeli-American philosopher Ran Lahav, who, in 1993, created the first university course on philosophical counselling in the world; the German-Canadian scholar Peter Raabe (born 1949) in 1994; the Peruvian philosopher Carmen Zavala with her *Buho Rojo*, founded in 1997 in Lima; the Israeli philosopher Shlomit Schuster (1951-2016) in 1999; the Canadian-American philosopher Lou Marinoff, who co-founded APPA (American Philosophical Practitioners Association) in 1999, which today counts members from all over the world.

Here following an incomplete list of the first and/or major and/or most consolidated Italian associations, that have a stronger reputation and/or a longer history, with a significant number of associates.

AICF (Associazione Italiana Consulenza Filosofica) was the first Italian association of philosophical counsellors, founded in 1999 in Turin by Lodovico Berra, a philosopher and a psychiatrist. The association gave birth to a school named SSCF (Scuola Superiore di Counseling Filosofico), which, in turn, is part of the ISFiPP (Istituto Superiore di Filosofia, Psicologia e Psichiatria), and of IUS (Università Pontificia Salesiana, the Salesian Pontifical University). They organize one master course, now in its 25th edition, which lasts three years. SSCF publishes one journal: *Nuova Rivista di Counseling Filosofico*, while ISFiPP is the publisher of a journal entitled *Dasein - Filosofia e psicoterapia esistenziale*.

Then came SICoF (Società Italiana di Counseling Filosofico), which was founded in 2001 in Turin, two years after the dissolution of AICF. It publishes one journal, *Maieusis*. On their official website's home page (<https://www.sicof.it>) they call themselves: "The one and only association".

Phronesis (Associazione Italiana per la Consulenza Filosofica) was founded in 2003 in Florence by Neri Pollastri and Umberto Galimberti, a wellknown philosopher and psychoanalyst. It is affiliate with IGPP the *Internationale Gesellschaft für Philosophische Praxis*, and adheres to CoLAP, a national organization which supports freelance professionals (according to the Italian law, n. 4/2013). The Association publishes one journal, *Phronesis*, and it is accredited by the Italian Ministries of Justice and Research.

Metis ETS was founded in 2007 in Naples by Giovanna Borrello, who will be the chairperson of the session dedicated to the “Philosophical Counseling and Practices” at the 25th World Congress of Philosophy, which will take place in August 2024 in Rome. The Association is recognized by AssoISUE, credited by SICo, and certified by the Italian Ministry of Economic Development. It organizes a three years Master course. On their official website they call themselves “The one and only in the central southern Italy”.

AiCoFi (Associazione Italiana Consulenza Filosofica) was founded by Nicoletta Poli et al. in 2009 in Bologna and Rome. The association organizes a two-year Master course named “PARRESIA”, now in its 11th edition.

PHILO Pratiche Filosofiche was founded in 2010 in Milan. It includes one school, ABOF, which organizes a four-year master course, and one professional association, SABOF (according to the law n.4/2013). SABOF’s members call themselves “Philosophical Analyst”.

PRAGMA (Società professionisti pratiche filosofiche) was founded in 2017 in Turin by Luca Nave and Maddalena Bisollo; today the association is also active in Milan. It publishes one journal, the *Rivista Italiana di Counselling Filosofico* (established in 2005), as well as books concerning the philosophical practice, and organizes a two- or three-year master course. It adheres to Fedpro and Unicounseling, two societies representing free-lance professionals (according to the law n.4/2013); besides, it is a member of ICPIC (International Council of Philosophical Inquiry with Children). In 2022 the association obtained the official recognition of philosophical counselling as a profession, in the field of the “helping relationships category” by the Italian Ministry of Economic Development.

In addition to the associations named above (without forgetting the other numerous smaller groups spread throughout the country, more active on a local basis - such as *L’Albero filosofico*, a Sicilian association), there are a few Italian universities, both public and private, that organize advanced training and master degrees in philosophical counselling, theory and practice. Here following the best known: the “Università Ca’ Foscari” of Venice (a public university) through its Challenge School offers a one-year master course in Philosophical Counseling; the “Ateneo Pontificio Regina Apostolorum” (a private university) of Rome, in collaboration with

the European University of Rome (a private university) organizes a one-year master course in Philosophical Counseling and Existential Anthropology, now in its 14th editions; the “Università degli Studi Roma Tre” of Rome (a public university), offers a two-year master course in Philosophical Practices and Philosophical Counselling; the “Università degli Studi of Naples” (a public university) together with the “Università degli Studi of Pisa” (a public university) and the “Università degli Studi of Cagliari” (a public university) organize a one-year master course in Philosophical Counseling; the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore of Milan (a private university) organizes a one-year master course in Philosophical Competences for Economic Decisions.

It should also be acknowledged a stronger and more consistent media, and social media presence of philosophical counselling and Italian philosophical practitioners. All of this proves a slow but robust interest from the public, and a growing enthusiasm for the profession by young philosophers. Nevertheless, in spite of the evidence of this encouraging growth of the movement based on data – number of associations and societies, university master courses, qualified professionals practicing philosophical counselling, media’s attention – looking at our Italian community as a whole, philosophical practice remains, contradictorily, *more theoretical than practical*.

The several independent, singular experiences do not reach critical mass yet. Some associations seem to be more focused on affirming their uniqueness, instead of “lobbying” together in favor of philosophical practice, aiming to enhance academically respect and public recognition.

Where could we go? Some actual and global matters

As practical philosophers, I firmly believe we can effectively contribute to raise a community awareness about some urgent and global matters. Critical and free thinking, moderate judging, never-ending questioning, meaning and scope enquiry, research of the truth, focus on the relationship between nature and human beings as a unique eco-system: these are some fields of the philosophical analysis that may match with many of the today’s hottest matters. That is why we should make our voice be heard more frequently.

Shall we consider, for instance, the *climate change* and all related environmental issues? From 2019 to 2021, I participated in a project called Nature4Cities, supported by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program, and involving 4 countries in Europe – Italy, Hungary, Spain, and Turkey. The initiative looked into some sustainable nature-based solutions (NBS), and that could be implemented to make our cities less hot and polluted, more beautiful and welcoming.

The voice of a philosophical counsellor was fundamental to make the group evaluate the diverse possibilities with a wider perspective, where all involved subjects could be recognized and play a fundamental role. Exploring the ethical issues that could underlie the different NBS solutions for re-naturing our cities, while anticipating the eventual political, economic, health or social issues, resulted extremely useful in the end. There are other controversial issues such as *immigration*, asylum and statehood that present numerous philosophical aspects worthy to be deepened. Growing nationalist sentiments are sometimes resulting from daily pressure of hundreds, thousands of entering immigrants, seeking for a better life; here we have the Kantian theory of a cosmopolitan society on one side, and the Hobbesian idea of sovereignty on the other. Border controls and detection raise many political, ethical, moral, and educational issues, and call into question our idea of justice and human rights, with its principles and limits.

Another topic, among others of extreme relevance and actuality (*e.g.*, bioethics, or surveillance), is the *Artificial Intelligence* (AI). By many people, even specialists from different fields, AI has come to be seen as an existential threat, “a kind of Frankenstein as imagined by Mary Shelley”, the British writer who, in 1818, invented the modern Prometheus, that one of “a human creation that threatens to become our master” (McLellan, 2023) (13). More or less like nuclear power, a super-powerful human invention that can potentially destroy its human inventors.

We do not know yet how it could evolve to gain mastery over us, but we know that AI is *a tool* invented by us, and maybe it can be helpful to know what it can do and cannot do. For instance, the bot ChatGPT (Chat Generative Pre-Trained Transformer) is based on machine learning natural language processing models; developed by OpenAi, it was launched on the market last November 2022. Similar products are Bing, produced by Microsoft, and Bard by Google. An AI can: produce languages – words,

sounds, images – in a mimic way (although a very good mimic), and through plagiarizing behaviors. It can read some emotions through the words, the tone of a text, the facial expressions. It can write new texts in the style and the mode of the author. (14) It can produce political, scientific, legal and media contents, so it can generate false information, often based on fake news taken from the internet.

Many philosophical matters, regarding issues such as Subject, Truth, Purpose, Consciousness, Freedom of acting, may arise. In front of any text, any content, we should always know who is the author, who or what produced it, and which was the scope for producing it (Inform? Manipulate? Influence? Convince? Copy? Sell something to us?).

In a next future, an AI could even start some sort of relationships. Could we ever conceive the idea of an AI philosophical counsellor working remotely, instead of a human one, with a client maybe not knowing that they are not human? This hypothesis should worry us.

According to Yuval N. Harari (2023), an AI can be influential. It may seriously violate our human cultural artifacts – principles, values, human rights, democracies – if it is able to produce better and most convincing texts and conversations than our human ones. According to Harari, storytelling computers have hacked the operating system of our civilization and can potentially change the course of human history. The scholar mentions the case of Blake Lemoine, a Google software engineer, who in 2022 said that the chatbot LaMDA was developing a sort of self-consciousness, and for this affirmation he lost his job; this proves that he himself was influenced by an AI.

But what cannot an AI do? Maybe it can seem human, but *it is not*, it is artificial. It cannot feel emotions, neither experience pleasure and wonder, or anger, or love, nor suffer or being hurt. It cannot lose control, which is so deeply and miserably human, as Seneca thought (45AD). It cannot craft an unusual, original, unexpected work of art, and it cannot invent a limerick. It cannot improvise, and it cannot reason logically or by analogies; *e.g.*, it could not even answer the question: “What is the first name of the father of Sebastian’s children?” in a test recently run by the journal *Scientific American*. An AI is a super intelligence tool, an intelligence without reason. But, above all, an AI has no body – no blood, no veins, no flesh, no *elan vital: an AI is No-body*.

For understanding and managing all the complexity implied by the AI, trying to use our reason and knowledge, we human beings should reduce the speed. As per the sociologist Harmut Rosa (born 1965), we are constantly under pressure for acceleration and optimization, but we need to slow-down (Rosa, 2023), in order to think critically, define the problem, and discuss about it. If we consider the future application of an AI, there are lots of moral, ethical, legal, political, social and education problems implied, together with changes that will involve labor and economic policies, transparency and privacy, royalties and intellectual property issues. Therefore, safety protocols are needed, as the one issued by the European Commission in 2022, *The Artificial Intelligence Act*. According to the Swedish philosopher Nick Bostrom (2023), above all the AI presents problems of governance, that we should approach in a broadly cooperative way, since the problem is bigger and more complex than any one of us, or any one company, or any country even.

Conclusion

Most actual and global issues may benefit from a philosophy which has rediscovered its practical role within the international community. The nature, the dimension and the complexity of many of those issues transcend the individual dimension and require a cooperative, reasonable and open approach.

As philosophical counsellors, we are able to address the malaise of individuals, groups, or societies, with our bag of philosophical tools. Scientists, politicians, and economists need philosophers to dialogue, deepen, question, evaluate, and negotiate, in order to take the best possible decisions. As in the case of the AI, which is a significant example, we can seriously contribute to research, identify and “build” the right way to limit and benefit from the use of this new and powerful tool. In the end, we must not forget that the meaning of the language is all in our human eyes, not in any AI that can generate it.

Author’s note: This article is based on the presentation that I shared with an audience of colleagues and PhD students at the 17th International Conference of Philosophical Practice 2023 (www.icpp2023.ro).

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