

Askēsis and the seriousness of playing philosophically

Anca-Cornelia Tiurean¹

Abstract: Current research into philosophical practice and consultancy tends to be mostly focused on the professionalization of this activity. A large body of reference literature describes methods of working philosophically with people of various ages and belonging to various contexts. The present article brings a contribution to a less addressed field of philosophical practice: askēsis – where individuals encounter and need to respond to their own resistances, difficulties and obstacles to performing philosophical practices as a way of life. Seeking ways to sustain challenging work with ourselves, this article proposes a method of applying askēsis and the gamification of philosophical practices within groups so as to maximize the chances of transforming potentially every human hardship situation into an opportunity for growth and self-transcendence. As an illustration of this view, the specific tasks, activities and results of a play-based philosophical workshop are presented in detail, as well as the response of the participants to them, including: positive feedback, increase in motivation for participating and enjoyment of the practice despite the difficulties associated with askēsis.

Key-words: philosophical practice; *akedia*; *askēsis*; gamification; collaborative critical reflection;

¹West University of Timisoara, Romania, The Doctoral School Of Sociology And Philosophy.
Email: anca.tiurean84@e-uvv.ro

Introduction

The common experience of dread in working philosophically with ourselves and with other people often has to do with our natural tendencies to seek comfort and to avoid pain, as well as avoiding undertaking exercises that are too difficult, too soon. In athletics, trainers are there to design increasingly difficult sets of exercises, so that the muscles are not too strained and that the beginning of the experience remains motivating for continuous engagement. In philosophy and personal development, people tend to have an expectation that we're all already there: already living a philosophical life (especially if we are philosophers), already being able to cope stoically with anything coming our way and already being rid of the most common human difficulties like *akedia* (or loss of vitality and motivation).

At the 17th International Conference of Philosophical Practice which took place in Timișoara, Romania in 2023, I participated with the goal in mind that I would seek to understand what enhances people's participation in philosophical practice. Are they able to sustain their life long *askēsis* of developing and maintaining a philosophical attitude irrespective of context? I supposed it was a difficult task even for the more experienced, because perpetual contemplation, worldview review and perspective enrichment require commitment despite uneasiness and hardship.

An international philosophical practice conference is an excellent place to look for such answers: we can see passionate philosophers in workshops, in presentations and discourses, in spontaneous conversations during the breaks, in their extended discussions about philosophical and personal matters over dinner and so on. In all of these contexts, I notice *who I am*, more precisely *who I am able to be in this particular encounter*, *who they are* and *what each of us is looking to achieve* – are we all looking for our and others' provocation of thinking? Are we complacent and looking for agreements with others, in order to avoid thinking? In interpersonal encounters people can naturally find challenges posed to their worldviews and they can benefit from integrations of their internal disharmonies by accepting these challenges with a philosophical attitude, consisting primarily of engaging in collaborative critical reflection (Dewey, 1933). However, we can often find ourselves (or each other) in self-

justification, in efforts to prove ourselves worthy of the others' appreciation, to find comfort and fulfillment in the context, to improve our self-concept, to refresh our worldviews and find new interesting reasons to exist or pleasurable ways to live; we could be looking for a hassle, an opportunity for a discharge of acquired hostility, or for a skill enhancing friendly fight, etc. It is when we are provoked to think that we step outside of ourselves and our usual ways of living, we notice and consider what we're doing and regain awareness and presence – these tend to be lost, daily, because of habituation.

The ancient notion of *askēsis* – which broadly means living life as a *spiritual exercise* (Hadot, 1995) – responds to our need to improve our own attitudes, our physical and intellectual skills, our psychological integration and our wisdom in behavioral manifestations (*phronesis*), to be able to enhance the quality of our encounters and, consequently, our capacity for authentic collaborative philosophical practices in our communal living. Our reasons to seek and to maintain philosophical ways of life are numerous and it is beyond the scope of this paper to list them here. Some of these reasons however may come up along our discussion about how to make *askēsis* more appealing without sacrificing its challenging aspects. Let's just briefly remember Plato's *Laches* dialogue about courage (Cooper, 1997): a dialogue in which the protagonists contemplate what an individual should spend his life doing, so as to mature and to develop a good character. Courage is associated with wise and knowledgeable endurance and perseverance in the face of adversity - these are aspects of *askēsis* (exercise). Since the human being is motivated by comfort and fulfillment, especially comfort and fulfillment in human contact, *askēsis* has little chance of becoming a popular choice of living, precisely because it involves working with oneself and others, often apparently against ourselves and others. It also requires willfully setting ourselves up for difficulty and effort in view of training competences, restraining ourselves and postponing gratification, noticing in ourselves and others the scary or immoral aspects of being human, like the tendency to steal, to lie, to trick each other and to deceive ourselves, the greed, the life and death instincts, the laziness – and learning to live with them without being succumbed to them. How then to hack tendencies, atrophy, and human nature ought to be specifically addressed by the work of philosophers.

This article proposes the idea that *askēsis* is efficiently promoted in individual and group settings by *gamification*. Ever since childhood we have seen that play is a serious endeavor. Children are involved in play with a dedication equal to that of the most hard working adults. Play consumes a lot of energy in a more or less intentional pursuit of competence. Cycles of psychological development take play to be the motor of discovery, of understanding and of integrating experience of who we are within this world (Levin-Landheer, 1982) Play is a psycho-therapeutic instrument for people of all ages due to its meta-cognitive properties, its coordination of cognition and motricity, its emotional-balancing properties and its symbolic-experiential aspects (Ariel, 2019). Playing and commenting about one's own play is our first meta-cognitive activity. It involves the body in the process of thinking. It anchors us perceptively in the present. Emotional wellness emerges through the symbolic-experiential aspects of play and we are prone to experience ease of being together in the *just pretending* area of social interaction, as every participant keeps a clarity in mind about the fact that there is more to each of us than the role we're playing in this particular encounter. All of these factors can help ease emotional regulation, which sets the ground for peaceful reflectivity in human interaction, as passions are no longer a hindrance, but rather an energy that can drive *askēsis*, collaborative critical reflection and meta-reflection. Gamification is a way to ease *askēsis* but also an expression of willful commitment to *askēsis*. Educators, philosophical counselors, psychotherapists and coaches but also family members and fellow friends who introduce philosophical games with rules in their daily lives and make a habit of playing together, foster social coherence among themselves and form spontaneous communities of learning and inquiry which in turn support individual *askēsis* or exercise.

Hardship and ease in *askēsis*

A brief synthetic definition of the notion of *askēsis* comprises a few basic elements drawn from the stoic reference literature and from modern and contemporary philosophers. Stoic philosophers regarded *askēsis* as reason based self-discipline, self-examination and the training of virtues - these are considered prerequisites of the human sense of freedom to live well, instead of enslaved by their emotional and instinctual reactivity.

Epictetus viewed *askēsis* as a daily exercise of will and implicitly a cultivation of self-control. Physical training such as gymnastics and combat, as well as dietary restrictions and other self-imposed hardships with a spiritual significance, have been regarded as *askēsis*. Religious philosophers translated *askēsis* as *asceticism* and they would practice specific exercises based on and according to their own cultural values. Many philosophical worldviews do not specifically use the term *askēsis*, but do formulate claims about what human self-realization means and how it is achievable.

The variety of forms *askēsis* takes can be even contradictory: for certain cultures the hardest and most valued capacity is to conform to norms, to abandon one's personal aspirations and to self-sacrifice (Confucius, Lao Tzu, etc). For other cultures, the hardest and most valued capacity is to be able to question and to challenge established norms and to actively shape one's life and values (Nietzsche, Sartre, Foucault, Stuart Mill, etc). So in defining *askēsis* we are called to look at what are the common trans-cultural elements that characterize it: the endurance through difficulty and effort is one common element, pursuit of a novel superior state of the human character is another. Meditation, self-reflection, ethical contemplation, the study of philosophical texts, the art of questioning and dialogue, self-awareness and the completion of tasks we have set out to accomplish are just a few of the most common worldwide practices that westerners have called *askēsis*. They each confront us with our limitations, feelings and predispositions.

French philosopher Michel Foucault viewed *askēsis* as a practice of self-care in the sense of self-discipline with the aim to educate our subjectivity and moral character, to improve our sense of agency and responsibility, to learn to question values in context, so as to become increasingly capable of leading an ethical life.

According to Hadot, *askēsis* can be understood as a set of spiritual exercises and practices meant to lead to inner transformation: specific attitudes, behaviors and ways of thinking that are characteristic to philosophers – people who appreciate and pursue practical wisdom (Hadot, 1995). Active engagement with various philosophical principles and their applications in daily living involves efforts to align our mental processes and actions with philosophical ideas and to learn about ourselves, the world and our place in it. What trans-cultural views of

askēsis seem to have in common are: repetition with the aim of developing new habits (for example stoic and buddhist *repetitive engagement* in meditation practices), self-regulation and intentional effort (for instance the christian and islamic *fasting*, breath regulation in yogic postures), renunciation and denial of immediate gratification (such as the christian and hindu notions of celibacy, voluntary poverty, fasting and the japanese minimalism), purification of our spirit through hardship (for example the spiritual journeys in indigenous traditions or the islamic *taqwa*) and a preoccupation with growth (as in contemporary preoccupations with self-improvement or the japanese *kaizen* philosophy).

Obviously *askēsis* involves willing endurance of specific hardship due to its privative aspects, due to common resistances to self-transformation and due to inherent pains of growth, understood as an expansion or stretching of our limits. Various degrees of ease that can balance *askēsis* related hardships, without diminishing them, but rather providing the individual with some anchors to help moving forward through them, could be achieved through the aesthetic aspects of *askēsis*. For instance, *askēsis* involves contemplation, it engenders astonishment and revelation, as well as beauty stemming from noticing patterns, clarity and order in nature, in phenomena and in oneself. Some ease to carry on despite hardship comes from the characteristically ludic aspect of any training process. Preparative activities involve repetition of certain actions and a subsequent improvement of skill, within the safety of a rule based interaction, that differentiates the training situation from the harsh circumstances in which learning happens sometimes by traumatization. Other factors of motivation to draw oneself out of *akedia* involve the joy of achievement and the sense of freedom obtained by developing mastery, the implicit reduction of one's worry or fear and their increase of trust in the processes they've grown accustomed to dealing with. Finally, considering that it is generally the love of wisdom, of beauty, of goodness, of God, of others and so forth that motivates *askēsis*, some of the ease in moving on despite the drag comes from the happiness associated with being in service of the good, of the truth and of those we love or value. In this sense, *askēsis* becomes an expression of generosity and love.

As a general conclusion, *askēsis* tends to be and to further become enjoyable despite its inherent hardships because it is motivated by love and because it fosters an increase in the easiness of living philosophically,

as it is systematically practiced and becomes a habit. It therefore follows that pursuing development of *askēsis*, and exploring hacks in order to support that development, are worthy tasks of individuals who wish to live philosophically.

Gamification

The term *gamification* has been defined in 2011 by Deterding (apud Dicheva et al, 2015) as “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts” and the interest in it has been rising ever since especially in marketing, but most recently as well in fitness, ecology and education, because of “its potential to shape users’ behavior in a desirable direction”. The effectiveness it’s recorded in the business sectors where it has been employed has motivated education specialists to consider it for pedagogical purposes, assuming it would increase motivation for learning due to the specific dynamics, the mechanics, the aesthetics and the enjoyment associated with game elements. Resistance to training is reduced while involvement in learning activities tend to increase as the learner’s wellbeing is facilitated by gamification. When symbolic-experiential elements of play are involved in the gamification design, the activity can even have beneficial psychotherapeutic effects (Ariel, 2019).

In a recent research review on gamification, Dicheva et al (2015) describes a number of elements that are considered and investigated in reference literature and found to account for the documented gamification’s positive impact on the maintenance and revitalisation of motivation. Some of these elements can be used in a gamified philosophical activity designed to support the *askēsis* of training thinking faculties.

- (1) *Goals* that are specific, clear and moderately difficult to reach.
- (2) *Challenges* that are formulated as clear tasks, often increasingly complex.
- (3) *Customization* or personalization of experience to the learner’s level of stimulative difficulty and content based preferences and interests.
- (4) *Progress* being visible, thus allowing the participant to self-assess along the way to increased mastery of the skills that are developed through the activity.

- (5) *Feedback* along the way, to allow the participant to gain something (insight, reward, reputation, recognition, appreciation, criticism or stimulation, etc).
- (6) *Competition and cooperation*, preferably both, in participants' social engagement.
- (7) *Access*, usually understood as obtaining access to new and unforeseen contents.
- (8) *Freedom* to choose and to fail, often by the provision or existence of multiple routes to the same goal and experiencing the permission and the enjoyment of trying again.
- (9) *Storylines* which satisfy the human drive to explore new areas, roles and meanings.

Philosophical practice can be gamified to some extent. Gamification can involve the designing of an activity beforehand or it can consist of simply maintaining an attitude of leisurely play in response to the unpredictability of the philosophical encounter.

Playing philosophically

What distinguishes a philosophical game from a non-philosophical game could be the structure and contents of the activity; the rules of conduct that are based on the task of provoking participants to think; the likely use of socratic dialogue and stimuli such as aphorisms, folk tales, popular pieces of advice, works of art, etc; and the underlying reasoning practice that fosters the development of second-order thinking capacities (such as argumentation, conceptualization, interpretation, problematization, exemplification, etc). And nonetheless - the presence of relevant and interesting philosophical topics that participants relate with and formulate by themselves so as to develop their worldviews in the process.

Gamified philosophical activities are not mere pastimes or rituals. They involve the whole psychological make-up of the participants. Among their benefits we can observe the development of critical reflection, collaboration, the ability to postpone gratification, the training of perception and attention focus, the sharing and learning of old revised and possibly new philosophical ideas (depending on the philosophical and cultural background of each participant).

Illustration of method

The workshop I delivered in the 17th International Conference of Philosophical Practice, in Timisoara 2023 was called “*Developing habits of living philosophically through askēsis*”. It was designed partly as a game, for participants to explore and reflect critically about their ideas of “living well”, to reflect about the extent to which they live up to their own philosophies, to notice the ways in which they could unveil their own philosophies by consultative and self-consultative practices and to identify and manage their main obstacles to continuing their philosophical practice in daily life. We were going to discuss in a manner organized as a group game, starting from participants’ questions about *askēsis* and then to explore a variety of possible answers to each question by arbitrary concepts and pictures that were going to be formulated as hypotheses. In order to try different ways of approaching each initial question, I prepared a cube with six different instructions on how to respond. Each challenge was going to take place within a consultative orderly group dialogue. The choice of gamifying the workshop activity relied on two main reasons: to organize contributions in the discussion so as to facilitate everyone’s sustained attention and participation, without falling into heated debates, and to keep the group energized at the end of a long and tiring day, when most of them were already considering an early withdrawal to dinner and relaxation.

A few days before I had just read the introduction to the *Testament of Beauty* and I was under the influence of this aphorism through the whole workshop which mostly did not go as I had planned, due to various unexpected factors interfering with it: “*wisdom is the masterful administration of the unforeseen*” (Bridges, 1929) There was a significant delay to manage in the start of the workshop, which required us to begin by renewing our agreement about the time boundary – which we renewed a second time during the workshop when we were informed that we were due to finish in 15 minutes when we had been expecting to be able to enjoy at least 45 more minutes together. The presentation of my work on *askēsis* had to be reduced to only presenting the title and not explaining what *askēsis* was, but some participants had some ideas about it, as I would later discover. Two participants arrived late and without intending to attend the workshop, but merely wished to speak to one of the other participants

about arranging to depart sooner. Although we were clearly back to an administrative stage of our discussions, I related to the disruption as if it were just another one of the contents to be dealt with by philosophical practice, so I pursued brief spontaneous consultations with each of our two hurrying guests – a move that resulted in their joining our session and participation until the end.

The group managed to go through five of the gamified stages of our collaborative consultation, as follows: (1) *Advice* - each participant was asked to write a piece of advice on a piece of paper after thinking of a moment in their lives which they experienced as worth living. All pieces of advice were collected in a wisdom box. (2) *Question* - each participant was asked to formulate a philosophical question containing the essence of their motivation to participate in a workshop on *askēsis*. Participants held onto their question until their turn, when they shared it with the group. (3) *Specification* - when dictating their leading question, each participant was asked to specify the main word in their formulation, as a way to show us their main focus or interest; in this way a list of concepts emerged that was available for the upcoming philosophical activity. (4) *Course of action* - as each volunteering participant brought up his or her leading question, they were asked to throw the dice that would indicate how to approach it. The dice facets contained six possible approaches to each leading question: take advice from the wisdom jar, formulate three hypotheses to your own question, pick a concept from the recently generated list, take a picture from the deck, explain why your question can be seen as ridiculous, and be questioned by someone from the group. (5) *Volunteer* - at this stage we started taking participants' questions one by one and working in the direction proposed by the thrown dice, listening to explanations from the group members about possible alternative interpretations or responses, exploring various perspectives on how we could use what *contingency* or *fate* has just given us.

The unfolding of such a contingency-based game enabled participants to pay attention to each other, verify their ideas and open up possibilities and options for the one who asked the initial question. The philosopher's main task was to address the group process first, the attitude of the current participant and of his inquiry fellows as a second priority, to attend to the quality of cooperation within the group and to confront the fallacious strays from tasks that participants would sometimes do either

deliberately or without being aware of it. These rules were rather organic than articulated, following from the structure introduced at the beginning. Let's consider an example:

One of the participants offered to start with his leading question which was "*What's the role of askēsis in philosophy?*" He threw the dice and was prompted by it to extract a piece of advice from the *wisdom box*. This piece of advice was: "*Find your passion and follow it through!*" The participant was asked if the extracted proposition provided a clear or rather cryptic answer to his leading question. It was hard for him to establish a link between his question and the answer he'd drawn, as he believed that the pursuit of passions was in opposition with the stoic doctrine of *askēsis* that mostly regarded passions as detrimental to one's training. Since he could not see how the drawn claim was explaining the role of *askēsis* in philosophy, the group was asked to help with attempts to conceptualize and explain the connection. A few other participants made their contributions. One of them proposed to distinguish between passions in a cartesian sense (by which they would be understood as intrusive and disruptive to *askēsis*) and the nietzschean sense (by which passions were seen as the drives to live authentically, working with oneself and self-regulating so as to reach one's self-elected higher pursuits in the realm of self-actualisation. To find one's authentic passion and to follow it through did make sense to be called *askēsis*.

The whole group was thinking about connections and when an idea arose, everyone was trying to understand it. When someone proposed a new explanation we would as well check to see if it was actually different from what had been proposed before. In this way participants' attention was constantly required, otherwise they would lose track of the process and they were aware of that. We managed to work with three volunteers on their leading questions before the workshop reached its surprise-announcement that we would have to end in 15 minutes. So we performed a closure of the ongoing task and allowed for 10 minutes of feedback about the group process. The participants had a lively energy and were keen on continuing, to the extent that some of them proposed we would go on with the activity over dinner. Can we take this as an indicator that the gamified philosophical activity works well to raise and maintain participants' enjoyable involvement in a practice that's likely to stimulate their thinking and their consideration of previously unconsidered ideas?

Although the workshop was reduced to merely three quarters of its initially allocated time by unpredictable events, the essence of the work had been performed and experienced by the participants. Their response to the philosophical group facilitation was cooperative, they experienced the workshop as lively, their attention was focused. Participants reported having earned some new ideas and perspectives they had not considered and being impressed by how the unpredictable events were used as context and opportunity for philosophical practice.

Results

Let us briefly look at a list of the most important results obtained through this gamified philosophical group activity:

(1) *Expansion* - participants understand and accept views that are in opposition with what they were inclined to believe at first. This openness allows for their worldview expansion and implicitly for their discovery of new options.

(2) *Collaboration* – the group performed collaborative consultative questioning of one of its members and, by functioning like a consultative team, they formed a more inspired social brain than what each of them could have formulated by themselves in such a brief time. There was a sense of cohesion between participants since they were led to work together. According to their feedback at the end they rather enjoyed each other's company, they thought the workshop was lively and attractive because of the dynamism and the curiosity they had about each other throughout the whole hour of working together. There was a perceptible sense of community even if many of the participants had not known each other from before. Through this type of organized, yet enjoyable socialization, participants were moving from subjective to intersubjective views on the topics raised.

(3) *Awareness* - participants gained awareness of various assumptions embedded in their questions.

(4) *Evaluation* – participants could practice the evaluation of a consultation's efficiency by comparing what was intended by a question and what was actually obtained with it.

(5) *Philosophy* – there was at least one opportunity to learn about philosophers and their contributions to the history of ideas (the example of Descartes versus Nietzsche on the notion of passions).

(6) *Motivation* – the gamified philosophical activity and its extension beyond the imaginary borders of the exercise encompassed the apparent moments of pause and managed to stimulate the motivation and involvement of tired participants and even of people who hadn't come to the meeting with an intent to participate. Gamified *askēsis* is obviously attractive.

(7) *Immediacy* – gamified *askēsis* allows the facilitator to experience a leisurely play-like atmosphere within and without the boundaries of an exercise or designed game. Despite interruptions and unpredictability, the practice was spontaneous and adapted to the circumstances of here and now. Use was made of each unforeseen event and everyone was treated consultatively, even when discussions were not about philosophy but based on the philosophical idea that *askēsis* can be perpetual, as it relies on the preparation of the facilitator to use each life event as a spiritual exercise and facilitate the same for others, as well as it inspiring work in participants when they see how joyful and enriching it can be.

Discussion

The gamification elements specified by Dicheva et al (2015) were present in the illustrative aforementioned philosophical workshop activity as follows. Included is consideration of how the consultative activity worked, considering a few notions from *transactional analysis* (a theoretical model of personality and human interaction), in order to highlight a few useful aspects of the practice to keep in focus when working with groups, distinguishing psychological from philosophical practice.

Contracting is one aspect of psychological practice, defined in transactional analysis as an *explicit and bilateral commitment to a well-defined course of action* (Berne, apud Stewart & Joines, 1987). Contracting has various therapeutic purposes like: protection, co-responsibilization and empowerment, trust through transparency, acceptance of collaboration and commitment, etc. In philosophical practice (especially with groups) the course of action is strictly emergent, it cannot be explicit or well-defined in advance. The goal of philosophical practice is to provoke

thinking and to sharpen reason, to the extent that reason can overtake the cortisol-based rush of instinctual responses when stressed. So any lack of clarity, momentary confusions, surprising twists that force a change of mind and possible sense of threat and loss that may emerge with them are useful. The overall atmosphere of playfulness and leisurely activity as well as the clarity of the tasks in the gamified structure of the discussion load a positive connotation to these efforts and so the stress experienced is not distress but eustress: enthusiasm, wonder, expectation of surprise.

Structure. In psychotherapy practice, the beginning and the end of the workshop are thought to be the minimal important details to agree about because then all participants as well as the facilitator can decide a time structure, defining which tasks are going to be performed, by when, in which order and so on. Then performing them becomes a ritual of demonstrating trustworthiness and goodwill, that help for instance to restore people's lost faith in humanity. Human agreements and settlements bear a risk of engendering disappointment, complacency and confirmation biases. A common criticism of clear time structure and use of boundaries is that they seem to restrict human expression, but *askēsis* is also about learning to live with restriction and purposelessness. Practice is more important than outcomes, in philosophical practice - we can find support for this idea in the Apology of Socrates, who sees philosophy as a way of living and not as a way to a purpose (Plato, translated by Jowett, 1892). When he was asked: „*And are you not ashamed, Socrates, of a course of life which is likely to bring you to an untimely end?*” he replied: „*a man who is good for anything ought not to calculate the chance of living or dying; he ought only to consider whether in doing anything he is doing right or wrong*”. The practice of constantly examining one's life is a form of *askēsis* – he who practices it is accepting of the fact that situational factors of daily life can mess with our agreements and deter us from preset goals, thus contracting remains optional and not necessary. Philosophical practice can be practiced perhaps anywhere and anytime and agreement-based time structuring is merely another gamification technique: we play within an established time, with awareness that it can be disturbed and with determination to include that possible disturbance in our perpetual *askēsis*. Psychologists usually take it as their responsibility to maintain the time boundaries and to stick to the agreed agenda. For philosophers, knowing that circumstances may change and impede us to carry out our

agreements, continuous contracting practice remains a regular aspect of philosophical workshops. Interruptions and changes are allowed and used as opportunities to practice a number of essential skills in *askēsis*: commitment to the practice, rigor in thinking, attention, flexibility, renunciation, self-discipline, cooperation and so forth. Since *askēsis* is focused on practice, not outcomes, flexibility enriches the experience.

Another criticism to the idea of agreeing to session structure is that the attempt by people to control their lives and to foster predictability in a naturally entropic world is ridiculous. However, biologists such as Maturana and Varela regard structuring (called *autopoiesis*) as a response of living systems to entropy and to disorganization. The living system has semi-permeable boundaries: openness is required for intake of resources (having temporary disorganization as a side effect), whereas closedness is required for organizing internally. In the systemic metaphor, individuals as well as small social groups are healthiest when their boundaries are clear, not when they are rigidly closed or fusionally open. Structural systemic therapy theories (Minuchin & Nichols, 1998) opine that any organism has to change itself, to accept input and to produce output for remaining connected to the environment from which it has separated itself, like any other living organism. Group contracts will then include a recognition of their own fragility, inviting each participant into *askēsis* in each moment of the encounter, to take interruptions as the normal flow of life, a contact and an invitation to dance.

Roles. Another common proposal in group work is to clarify role expectations. Role theory (Schmid, 1994) suggests that whilst everyone knows what a group facilitator is, every participant may have a different view of what the facilitator is supposed to be doing and what the complementary role of the participants may be. Therefore, according to role theory we constantly need to make our tacit contracts explicit to be on the same page, otherwise we risk playing psychosocial games (Berne, 1968). For philosophical practice this is not an issue because psychological games are taken as arenas for high demand from our sense, reason and intellect to be sharp and ready. As we are in *askēsis*, we do not want to blame the circumstances for our lack of well being or for the disturbances we are co-creating as human interlocutors with inevitable subjective issues brought to the table. We take it upon ourselves as individuals to navigate them reasonably, which implies we constantly examine our

reasoning capacity along the way. The person involved in *askēsis* is provoked by human drama and tempted to enter it in specific positions that open up spontaneously for social-actors. They are positions or attitudes that naturally contribute to restoring and maintaining the homeostasis of the ad-hoc social group to which we belong. Group level *askēsis* can be seen as the work of the group as an organism that is tempted to function naturally for the preservation of its own integrity, to the detriment of its members. The group is in *askēsis* when the group tolerates the distress and engages its members to reach a group structure that doesn't merely function, but does so consciously and promotes ethical reasoning among its members. The group can function like an organism if it has clear internal and external boundaries. Members' agreements about time structure and roles create and recreate these boundaries as necessary.

Dynamics. How the group works is partly emergent and partly organized for a particular goal. Psychological practice shares the goal of philosophical practice to foster collaborative critical reflection, but aims leading to *corrective emotional experiences for the participants*, so a psychologist would watch out for how group dynamics may trigger familiar emotional experiences for the participants and take the opportunity to support understanding and integrating them. Philosophical practice groups view group dynamics in other terms – what goes on in the group may *provoke participants to think outside of their routine experiences*. In this way they become aware of their own structure and mentality and how these interfere with their perception of reality. The differences in frames of reference between psychology and philosophy accounts for the difference in goals and approaches of *askēsis*.

Of the gamification elements specified by Dicheva et al (2015), our philosophical workshop provided goals, challenges, cooperation and constant feedback from the group, opportunities to contribute creatively, freedom to explore and let go of diverse ideas and implicit access to the interesting ideas and perspectives of the other group members. Storylines were not developed in this particular exercise because it was designed to approach participants' diverse interests, formulated through their initial leading questions. The practice was designed as a succession of various exercises, as it was meant to demonstrate several gamified approaches.

Conclusion

This article was intended to bring a facilitative contribution to the commonly harder aspects of working with oneself philosophically (*askēsis*). A common problem encountered by people who set out to do any form of systematic practice is that they soon lose motivation to continue, because of the difficulties, challenges and interruptions they come across along the way. Such obstacles whether external (circumstantial) or internal (psychological) can be responded to with willpower, according to the stoics and various religious approaches in history. When we gamify philosophical practice, we decrease some of the difficulty the work presupposes, particularly the difficulty to remain motivated in the beginning of one's transformation of the way of life, before habituation has set in. This is not to suggest that willpower is not important and that *askēsis* should not aim to work on its strengthening, but only that gamified versions of the practice can be reduced progressively until they can be abandoned and the individual is rather able to self-support his practice and able to keep up the wrestle with the fluctuations of his levels of experienced commitment. *Akedia* can be a powerful factor of premature renunciation of *askēsis*, especially to beginners, since it poses enough problems to advanced practitioners as well. To be able to welcome and to transform any human hardship into an opportunity for growth and self-transcendence is not an easy endeavor and it requires various forms of psychological training of one's emotional maturation and philosophical attitude.

It is important that facilitators of philosophy workshops work with themselves (*askēsis*) so that they can pass on an exemplary model of interaction with various aspects of their psychology, which in group consultations are represented by the diversity of participants who pose specific challenges to the process. Each participant is like a part of ourselves we might address during *askēsis*. Each unforeseen event or factor of interruption is like a part of ourselves or of our environment that we might interact with during *askēsis*. It is important that facilitators incorporate collaborative critical reflection in their sets of habits in order to assume philosophical practice as a way of life. Life happens not just during but also before and after exercises, before and after the conference, before and after academic presentations or reading relevant literature. A

philosophical way of life implies we commit to live philosophically in every aspect of our lives, even when circumstances seem unfavorable to collaborative critical reflection. When the group facilitator notices that group members face interruption and difficulty in pursuing philosophical practice, they may use creativity and inspiration from games in order to support (that is to *facilitate*) commitment, when willpower is not ready or not strong enough to keep the participants involved in the practice. Ease and hardship in the practice of *askēsis* are indicators of one's working around one's limits or *liminal* stages of their development. Liminality is a term from anthropology that describes a transitional phase, sometimes manifested as a rite of passage from one maturity stage to another. For the early stages, gamification increases interest and love for wisdom and for developing a philosophical way of life that engenders cognitive and emotional development of individuals and groups. Even if playing philosophically may seem like a ridiculous activity because of the vitality of the process, the positive energy, the humor, the leisurely walking through the unpredictable and so on, playing philosophically remains a serious practice considering all the benefits it produces in terms of stadial education and development of reasoning skills, philosophical attitude and capacity for collaboration with diverse others.

A beautiful synthesis of the philosophical attitude (also described by the aristotelian golden mean) is that in self-education we have to be strict with bad habits and indulgent with harmless ones, considering that philosophical education is at its best when it relies on sense, reason and *tranquil enjoyment of the effortful process*. Too strict *askesis* is perceivable like a sort of harsh punishment – the education becomes merely a form of rather ineffective behavioral conditioning that is even likely to work *against* its very aims. Too much indulgence (complacency, procrastination) in *askesis* may interrupt and corrupt the forming of a good habit and of the strengths it is supposed to rely on. Therefore we need to find specific ways to combine our vitality with the perennial ideas and values that have proved their worth across time, space and culture and to develop our particular spirit on this individualized path.

I would like to end this article with a few words about my personal relation to *askēsis* or what seems to be my individualized path. To me love of reason appeared in life in primary school, as a necessity to face my fear of eternal violence which was spoken about in terms of hell, where

everyone was said to be sent by God for having disturbed Him or others. I became a very dedicated student of everything scientific, in order to be rid of such a threatening god and the gruesome stories about him. So my cognitive training has mostly had an emotionally-regulative purpose. When I reached adulthood I realized something was off – my hard work and love for reason was somehow tightly bound to my emotional turmoil and I experienced an inability to move past certain boundaries of thinking, where provocations began to be painful. There is where I realized I (had) needed an upbringing that required more play and less drama associated with the learning process. Hadot's terms "spiritual exercise" suggested I might be in need of spiritual development, understandable as a transformation in how I relate with myself, with life, with others, with the world, because at some levels my relating patterns remained too much defined by my initial fearful relationship with a hateful and vengeful god. So my philosophical training required a stronger focus on working reasonably with my attitude, subjectivity, emotional reactivity and instinctual make up – the vengefulness, the violence, the fears and other spiritual turmoil that interfered with my adult thinking, are not provocative of thinking, but provocative of sophisticated survival-bound defenses. Thinking was employed in the same function. The freeing of thinking required a particular configuration of *askēsis*: that I receive regular philosophical consultations, that I approach philosophical texts to be transformed by, rather than using them for self-confirmatory biases and that I learn to self-consult (that is to examine my life) on a daily basis, as if a benevolent and wise parent were present next to my infantile soul, so that it can grow up in a philosophical environment, where thinking is rather an enjoyable leisurely activity than a desperately necessary one.

My involvement in doctoral research on this topic forces me to be in *askēsis* practically, while I learn about it theoretically. I experience hardship and a simultaneous sense of tranquility while going through it. This research is a journey which I compare with the *camino* of pilgrims to some sacred place – in order to complete the journey, one has to find meaning in it, to learn to keep going, to learn to rest, to learn to balance being by oneself and being with others in a meaningful way, to give up unnecessary burdens and to make sure to equip oneself with the essential and equally important, to find those little things that are momentarily revitalizing, so that we do not need to abandon it. *Askēsis* should be hard,

but not to the extent that it breaks our integrity. *Askēsis* should be easy, but not to the extent that it reinforces our complacency.

For each of us there is an optimal way to be found, one step at a time, with faith in the process. In my facilitator role in this workshop I struggled with the unpredictability, with the interruptions, with the tiredness I had acquired through the day and I could tell that it had been a difficult day for others as well and that the participants who showed up for the last workshop were going to see how I position myself facing these challenges. I was later told that my attitude was *psychologically encouraging* and that I set the tone by personal example, which is a way of *defining* the universal notion of *askēsis* through a particular and concrete set of manifestations in responding to the adverse situational factors. This attitude was described by one of the participants as the “*key success of the workshop, where philosophy became personal*”. The demonstrative workshop and its subsequent presentation as an illustration of this method have revealed that gamification or play-based philosophical practice can be a powerful instrument for increasing motivation, participation, enjoyment and commitment to the practice despite the various increasingly challenging difficulties associated with *askēsis*.

References

- Ariel, S (2019). *Integrative Play Therapy with Individuals, Families and Groups*. First Edition. Routledge.
- Bridges, R.S. (1929). *The Testament of Beauty: a poem in four books*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Cooper, J.M. (1997). *Plato. Complete Works*. Hackett Publishing Company.
- Confucius. (2007). *The Book of Rites*. (Chinese and English, James Legge's 1885 translation) retrieved at Chinese Text Project.
- Dewey, J. (1933). *How We Think. A Restatement Of The Relation of Reflective Thinking To The Educative Process*. Published by D.C. Heath and Company.
- Dicheva, D., Dichev C., Agre G., & Angelova G. (2015). Gamification in Education: A Systematic Mapping Study. *Educational Technology & Society*, 18(3), 75–88.

- Hadot, P. (1995). *Philosophy as a Way of Life. Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Jowett, B. (1892) *Apology of Socrates*, from *Dialogues of Plato*, volume II, Oxford University Press
- Kempler, W. (1981). *Experiential Psychotherapy Within Families*. Brunner/Mazel.
- Levin-Landheer, P. (1982). The Cycle of Development. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 12(2), 129–139.
- Minuchin, S., & Nichols, M. P. (1998). *Family Healing: Strategies for Hope and Understanding*. The Free Press.
- Schmid, B. (1994). *Transactional Analysis and Social Roles*. The Maastricht Papers, Selection from the 20th EATA Conference. 10.-14. July 1994. Maastricht, the Netherlands, S. 30-44.
- Stewart, I. & Joines, V. (1987). *TA Today: A New Introduction to Transactional Analysis*. Lifespace Pub.