

# PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

## Journal of the APPA

Volume 20 Number 2 July 2025

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### In Memoriam, Regina Uliana

Nancy Grimes

Gaurika Madan

### Articles

Ora Gruengard

*An Adventure with "Philosophical Health"*

Rick Repetti

*An Argument for Philosophical Therapy*

Jaco Louw

*Asking "How Might One Live, Here, Today?" in Philosophical Counselling: Introducing African Philosophical Perspectives*

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*Platonomy: The Art and Science of Self-Governance on the Road to Eudaimonia*

Wang Zhiyuan

*Lead a Happy Life According to Aristotelian Thought*

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Reviewed by Kate Mehuron

*Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World*

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### Biographies of Contributors

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**Publication Details:** Published by the American Philosophical Practitioners Association. Three issues per annum. ISSN Online 1742-8181

**Subscription Rates:** Institutional and individual subscriptions are available, in either print editions or soft copy. Discounts for APPA members. Please see <https://appa.edu/journal/> for rates.

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Grimes, P., Uliana, R. (1998). *Philosophical midwifery: A new paradigm for understanding human problems*. Coast Mesa, CA: Hyparxis Press.

## Referencing Articles:

Koch, A. (2000). Absolutism and relativism: Practical implications for philosophical counseling. *Journal of Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, 7, 25-31.

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## Journal of the APPA

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### Table of Contents

#### **In Memoriam, Regina Uliana**

Nancy Grimes	3518
Gaurika Madan	3519

#### **Articles**

Ora Gruengard	3521
<i>An Adventure with "Philosophical Health"</i>	
Rick Repetti	3532
<i>An Argument for Philosophical Therapy</i>	
Jaco Louw	3547
<i>Asking "How Might One Live, Here, Today?" in Philosophical Counselling: Introducing African Philosophical Perspectives</i>	
Chester Sunde	3560
<i>Platonomy: The Art and Science of Self-Governance on the Road to Eudaimonia</i>	
Wang Zhiyuan	3572
<i>Lead a Happy Life According to Aristotelian Thought</i>	

#### **Book Reviews**

<i>Life is Hard: How Philosophy Can Help Us Find Our Way</i>	
Reviewed by Kate Mehuron	3580
<i>Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World</i>	
Reviewed by Leslie Miller	3584

<b><u>Biographies of Contributors</u></b>	3588
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## In Memoriam, Regina Uliana

NANCY GRIMES  
PRESIDENT, NOETIC SOCIETY, COSTA MESA, CA

Regina was an active member of the Noetic Society from the very beginning. She played a central role and was a driving force for several of Pierre's major projects. She encouraged him to begin teaching Philosophical Midwifery to Noetic Society members, and as a result the Philosophical Midwifery Program began. From her PhD studies in Clinical Psychology at UC Irvine she discussed with Pierre how they might design a study to test whether Pierre's method could be scientifically verified. This study was central to Pierre's major publication *Philosophical Midwifery: A New Paradigm for Understanding Human Problems*, which included the validation study by Regina.

Regina was dedicated to the highest goals of Platonic philosophy and Philosophical Midwifery. She had a deep desire and determination to understand both herself and Platonic philosophy. She attended seminars, international conferences, and study groups whenever Pierre was teaching. She joined APPA and became a certified philosophical counselor with the clear understanding that Philosophical Midwifery was philosophical in its understanding and approach, and that Philosophical Midwifery could be a mode of psychotherapy as well as a spiritual practice in the Platonic sense.

She did her best to bring Philosophical Midwifery into the areas where she worked professionally: in colleges where she worked with students who were struggling in some area of their lives, and with incarcerated youth.

**Nancy Grimes** is President and Board member of the Noetic Society. She is also a certified Philosophical Midwife of the Noetic Society. Nancy and Pierre were married for 48 years prior to his passing in 2024. She was involved in all aspects of the founding and development of the Noetic Society and worked in an editorial capacity on Pierre's published and other written works. She plans to continue efforts to get his unpublished writings out into the world.

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Regina Uliana, 1945-2025



### **In Memoriam, Regina Uliana**

GAURIKA MADAN

PHILOSOPHICAL MIDWIFE, PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELOR, INDIA

Regina L. Uliana (1945 – 2025) Regina turned 80 years old in the month of February 2025. She passed away on April 15th, 2025 due to lung cancer.

Regina L. Uliana, Ph.D., was a certified Philosophical Midwife, a certified Philosophical Counselor and a Clinical Psychologist. She received her B.A. in Philosophy from California State University at Long Beach in 1969 and her Ph.D. in Psychology from the University of California, Irvine, in 1976. She met Pierre Grimes as an undergraduate and found Platonic Philosophy and his way of teaching through dialogue brought a way of understanding she had not experienced before. She decided to change majors from Marine Biology to Philosophy. In her pursuit of graduate studies, she found that Psychology, at the time, was a more inviting path than Philosophy to continue her desire to pursue this dialogue method she experienced with Pierre Grimes that explored both philosophical ideas as well as psychological problems. However, she continued her love for Platonic thought and continued to be an active member of the Noetic Society which Pierre Grimes formalized in 1978. She practiced Philosophical Midwifery (PMW) over forty years applying its principles to dreams and daydreams and to personal problems of those striving for personal and meaningful excellence. Philosophical Midwifery in its ideal practice is a lifelong practice. As such, she continued to consult with master and founder of Philosophical Midwifery Pierre Grimes, perfecting herself personally, as well as refining her understanding in philosophical midwifery. As a Clinical Psychologist for over forty years, she has modified philosophical midwifery for a wide range of personal problems. She has worked with the severe mentally ill, imprisoned criminal youth, high school students, college students, student athletes and in private practice with individuals and couples. She called her modified approach Grimes Dialectical Rational Psychotherapy (GDRP).

She has written journal articles and presented papers at local, national, and international conferences on GDRP and/or its parent Philosophical Midwifery, covering topics that include repeated problematic thinking and behaviors, understanding recidivism, understanding dreams and fantasies in criminal youth, and the sophistry in families. In addition, as a psychologist, she published many studies analyzing psychological states in language behaviour. In Pierre's and her book, she showed the impact of philosophical midwifery on the fields of psychotherapy and psychological research. She was well known for her strictness in her pursuit of dialectic which reflected in her pursuit for excellence. She worked towards personal consultations, mentoring individuals, and providing workshops on Philosophical Midwifery. She was also guiding people and teaching Philosophical Midwifery in a book club organised globally.

Regina made me see that the questions that puzzled me about myself and the problems I have had—the answers and solutions to those lie within me. All I required was, a Philosophical Midwife, like Socrates, who assists people in bringing to birth their ideas and beliefs and examine them along with those individuals.

Regina was sincere in her pursuit of bringing one to see the false beliefs that lie behind one's blocks using the art of Philosophical Midwifery developed by Pierre Grimes. She carefully pursued this art of dialogue, bringing one to puzzle and wonder on one's journey to 'know thyself'.

Dr. Uliana co-authored with Dr. Pierre Grimes (who was principal author) of *Philosophical Midwifery: A New Paradigm for Understanding Human Problems with its Validation*.

**Gaurika Madan** received her master's degree in philosophy from Panjab University, India. She went on to pursue the certificate course by APPA where she met Regina Uliana and was introduced to Pierre Grimes' Philosophical Midwifery. She found Pierre's dialectic to explore human problems as the simplest and most profound. She has learnt the method from Regina and Pierre and continued to consult with both, working closely with them, on herself personally, as well as on her understanding of Philosophical Midwifery (PMW). She has a private practice; where she works with individuals from around the globe to bring one to uncover blocks to one's personal problems and personally significant goals using PMW. She also provides consultation and workshops at Schools and Universities. She is an active member of PPAI and provides classes on Philosophical Midwifery.

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## An Adventure with “Philosophical Health”

ORA GRUENGARD

INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR, TEL-AVIV, ISRAEL

### Abstract

The paper examines the idea of “philosophical health” from several perspectives: conceptual, historical, and practical. One’s philosophy is not parallel to one’s body and one’s mind, it is therefore a conceptual confusion to think of philosophical counseling as parallel to medicine and psychotherapy but on the “philosophical level”. Moreover, any attempt to define “philosophical health” as a combination of a certain worldview, a certain moral approach and a certain attitude to the hazards of life, not to mention God and politics, is subjective and arbitrary, and it is dangerous to “diagnose” people with other opinions as “philosophically unhealthy”. Past philosophers who used medical metaphors either spoke of philosophy as healing or attacked opinions and attitudes that they didn’t like as “sick”. Other past philosophers offered proto-psychological explanations for what is considered nowadays mental or personality disorders, they did not deal with “philosophical disorders”. The paper also examines the attempt to “diagnose” difficulties in philosophical counseling, such as a “quasi-solipsistic attitude” or “reluctance to doubt authorities” as “philosophically unhealthy” and demonstrates its futility as well as undesired practical implications. It suggests instead to develop a needed philosophical discourse about issues of health, both on the personal level and on that of public affairs.

**Keywords:** *Philosophical health, philosophical discourse about health, difficulties in philosophical counseling, medical metaphors in philosophical discourse, Hegel, Sartre, Foucault, Popper, epistemic rationality, jurisprudential rationality*

### Three “Sort of Unhealthy” Obstructions

I came across the expression “philosophical health” in a rather vague invitation to contribute to the elaboration of a concept of such health, allegedly needed for philosophical counseling, “from a phenomenological perspective”.

As I have always been interested in that perspective, and still believe that it enables counselors to better understand some of the problems encountered in counseling, I welcomed the opportunity to discuss those issues with others who share that approach.

So, I joined the project, although I never felt a need for such a concept, and have always disapproved reductions of philosophical confusions or disagreements about opinions or attitudes to *medical, quasi-medical* or just *metaphorically medical* “diagnoses”.

I sent to the initiator a paper in which I stressed my opposition to any concept of “philosophical health”, exposed its professional uselessness and insisted on the dangers of its misuse. I explained that my readiness to relate to some positions and attitudes of philosophical counselees as “un-

healthy” was just a temporary concession, and insisted that they are “sort of unhealthy”, in the sense of being obstructive, *for the counseling philosophical dialogue*.

I pointed out three “unhealthy” obstructions: the stubborn refusal to reconsider one’s position (even after the *explicit* exposition and one’s *admitted awareness* of its problematic nature); the uncritical acceptance of the opinion of “the sage” (despite its seeming absurdity, immorality and one’s recognition that it might be arbitrary); a “quasi-solipsistic” behavior<sup>1</sup>.

### “Quasi-Solipsism”

In the first version of my proposal I dealt mainly with the third obstruction, “quasi-solipsism” I meant by it the attitude of a person who is behaving as if he does not care at all about the opinions of others, even when those others can perceive, from perspectives that are inaccessible to him, and understand, by approaches that have not occurred to him, things that are relevant to his concerns. I consider it as the most basic impediment to *philosophical dialogues*<sup>2</sup>.

The counselee, who seeks assistance, is obviously not really a solipsist. Moreover, his behavior might actually hide an unjustified attention to *anything* said (or supposedly thought) by others. I leave the explanations, the search for hidden motives and the pretensions to be mind-reader to psychologists. Philosophers deal with *reasons* for claims and behaviors (Winch, 1963)<sup>3</sup>.

Philosophical counselors have to assume that the counselee is honest and rational. It is a matter of *initial* interpretative charity (Davidson, 1984). Accordingly, their conversation with counselees is about the *justifiability* of their *declared reasons*. Of course, the conversation, which should help the counselee clarify her ideas, values, wishes or emotions to herself as well as the counselor, may reveal that the first declared reasons are not the main, the most relevant, or the true ones. A suspicious counselor may sometimes think that the counselee is “playing games”, and her declared reasons are not really hers; nevertheless, he has to relate to the declared reasons<sup>4</sup>.

The declared reason of the “quasi-solipsist” for his refusal to examine this or that argument of the counselor, or think of his concerns from the perspectives of other philosophers, is that he, in principle, does not care what the others think (wish, value etc.) Such a reason calls *for anti-solipsistic challenges*. Although such challenges might not change the *declared* position of a stubborn counselee, they can at least help the counselors.

Such help may be needed if the latter grew up in light of a “self-realization” ideology or “mind your own business” ethics. Both assume that considering others’ opinions and concerns is a matter of unwisdom, inauthenticity, conformism or even cowardice. With such help those counselors may become aware of the absurdity of their teachers’ “individualistic” convictions, understand better the counselee’s position—and perhaps find ways to cope with his stubbornness.

I could have referred counselors to texts of Wittgenstein or Lévi-Strauss and their respective followers: in my doctoral dissertation, where I dealt with the problem of solipsism and its connection to the possibility of sociability, I dealt with it from the perspectives of analytical philosophers and

structuralists as well as phenomenologists. But I complied with the request of the initiator and concentrated in the latter viewpoint.<sup>5</sup>

Husserl’s difficulties to cope with the circularity of anti-solipsistic analyses on what he called the “transcendental” level (Husserl, 1960) led him to turn to the level of “*lived experience in everyday life*”, that is, analyses of experience where the analyzing subject does not “put into parentheses” his taken-for-granted conviction that his experiencing occurs in a real, *intersubjective, and therefore common* world, mostly in *social contexts* (Husserl, 1970). According to (Spielberger, 1994), Husserl’s non-Heideggerian followers dealt on that level with issues of persons’ self- and other- *subjective awareness* as well as issues of persons’ self- and other- *objective knowledge* (which they conceived as being always limited to specific practical purposes, and therefore temporary, partial and fallible). They assumed that the possibility of such knowledge of persons as persons is presupposed in social interactions, whenever one plans to induce another person to perform a certain voluntary action, seeks to interpret the behavior of another person as an action or tries to respond to it<sup>6</sup>. Although those researchers distinguished between the “intending subject” and the “intended object”, they were interested in the “subject” and “object” of *cognitive acts*<sup>7</sup>. In contrast to the claims of some confused philosophers, they did it without thereby reducing “subjects”, in the sense of “consciously experiencing and acting persons” into “objects”, in the sense of “things” or “abstract concepts”. They also did not propose to “overcome the subject-object dichotomy” in Hegelian, Heideggerian or Lacanian ways, nor tried to get rid of the “problems of subjectivity” or reducing the “subject” to a social construct, as Foucault was apparently pretending to have done, while being aware that what he was trying to reduce was the practical (in self-awareness as well as behavior) self-*image*—and the perceived (and embedded-in-behavior) *image* of another person—as a person of a certain social category. (see Oksala, 2022).<sup>8</sup>

I recommended the reading of two thinkers of that group, Schutz (1944, 1945, 1967), and Merleau-Ponty (2012), and explained why I preferred their analyses to those of Sartre (1993), his predecessor Hegel (1977) and his rebellious follower Foucault (1985): The former, interested, respectively, in sociology and psychology, were aware of the *variety* of attitudes, positions and behaviors *within* as well as between groups. The latter, who were interested in the *dialectics of power relations, sometimes* failed to really listen to the other: despite their declared concern for his “subjectivity” (under their preferred alternative term for the capacity for conscious experiencing and intentional acting), and their real care for him when they perceive him as a member of an unjustly oppressed group, they often describe him as a *type* rather than a living person. Moreover, they sometimes see him, arbitrarily, (each from the perspective of his discriminating “hegemonial group”) as *the typical case* in a group of “others” (in Foucault’s sense of ‘otherness’). Therefore, they ignore, as some progressivists nowadays do in the case of persons from “other” cultures, the *variety* of different sub-groups and individuals *within* “other” groups, and the *multiplicity* of their *possible* perspectives, concerns and intended meanings of behaviors. They also ignore the *existence within* such groups of several *different, and yet typical, that is, frequent, options*.<sup>9</sup>

I add now: The philosophical counselor should be more careful, and, unlike those intellectuals, remind himself that despite his philosophical awareness, his behavior and attitude towards conventional opinions about himself and others, his group and theirs, *is not necessarily chosen more consciously and freely than those of people who seem to lack such awareness*. He should not take

for granted that those who apparently lack it are behaving “typically”, as expected (by many in *his circle*) from one of *their* respective groups. If he aims at helping a confused counselee find *her own* philosophy of coping in *her own* situation (rather than convert her to his, the counselor’s, world-view), he should not jump into conclusions: even when the counselee’s *behavior* seems to him to be typical to the counselee’s assumed group and fits the counselor’s prejudices concerning that group, the counselor still has to learn about the place and meaning of that behavior and its context *in the subjective world of the specific counselee*. Ignoring the counselee’s perspective, and her opinion about her own behavior (as well as the counselor’s interpretation of it) is also “quasi-solipsistic”.

The counselor ought to be cautious in particular when the counselee is from an “other” group. If he is a progressivist, he should not assume dogmatically that the counselee needs to be “awakened”, or that, once “woke”, the counselee will necessarily look at the same direction as the counselor and share his progressivist *horizon* of concerns and possibilities.

### Yet “Quasi-Solipsism” is not a Pathology

My assumption that the initiator of the project referred to phenomenology as I remembered it was as wrong as the assumption that he was acquainted with the Husserlian insistence on the importance of perspectives and horizons. His ignorance was betrayed by his “editing” comments and endless demands for clarifications. Moreover, the papers of the other participants in the projects, and their comments to mine, revealed that many of that extremely heterogeneous group were interested neither in phenomenological perspectives nor in difficulties in philosophical counseling dialogues. Only few among those who did consider themselves phenomenologists shared my conception of that approach, and still fewer were interested in the questions that intrigued Husserl and his non-Heideggerian followers. However, those who were inspired by either Husserl or thinkers in cognate intellectual circles, liked my paper, yet claimed, justly, that it was not well-focused. In fact, my attempts to comply with the nagging exigences of the “editor” and yet say what I wanted to say left me neither time nor space to re-compose a well-structured paper. While some readers, living in the West but belonging to “other”, “non hegemonial”, groups, liked my comments about analyses of the “others” which actually ignore their multiplicity and variety of perspectives. One reader contested my attribution of such an attitude to Sartre.

So, I started writing a better focused version, with a better explanation of my critical comments. However. I soon realized that the claim that a *part* of a philosopher’s *analysis* of some theme is “quasi-solipsistic” in a paper that describes “quasi-solipsism” as a behavior which is “unhealthy” *for philosophy*, might be easily misinterpreted, and be read as a claim that the philosopher himself is, philosophically, “unhealthy”. I am far from thinking that Hegel, Sartre or Foucault were spiritually or mentally ill. I do not maintain that their influential though sometimes controversial *approaches* and *ideas*, are “unhealthy” *for philosophy*: Controversies are essential to philosophy. Moreover, even when one thinks that some of the ideas of any other thinker might have undesirable impact on his or others’ personal lives or the public climate of opinions, one should not think that one’s own counter-position, that is, another *subjective opinion*, can be used as an *objective criterion* for *any kind of health*. It became clearer to me that writing against the dangers of an elaboration of a concept of “philosophical health”, and exposition of the confusions of those who want such a concept, is more important than convincing some critics that my personal opinion about those philosophers’ specific analyses is justified.

## A Second Version

I regretted my temporary concession to speak in medical metaphors about obstructions to philosophical dialogues. So, instead of re-editing the first version I wrote a new one.

That version had three themes. The first was an analysis of some of the confusions and deceptions with regards to the notion of *philosophical* health. Its presentation by the initiator as “parallel to physical health and mental health but on a different (higher?) level” (which would have been wrong even if it the initiator had spoken about *spiritual* health, but at least would have made some sense); the failure to distinguish between, on the one hand, the spiritual *strength* to endure difficulties but, *for the same reasons, prefer death to life* when some red line is reached, and, on the other hand, *resilience* in the *medical* and *psychotherapeutic* sense, which is about *staying alive* more or less *sane* and *functioning*, despite some somatic or mental disabilities or strains; the failure to understand that philosophy’s role is not to care for its own health or strength, but examine whether, for example, the endurance or the suicidal preference of the “spiritually strong” are sometimes also rational and/or moral (and inquire the rationality or morality of neglecting or scarifying thereby the “weak”); ignoring the contrast between modern medicine and psychotherapy, which treat mainly the “weak”, whose *functioning* is *under* some “normal”, and the traditional philosophical promises, traditionally given to “the strong”—an elite minority of those whose wisdom, courage, piety or authenticity is supposed to be far *above* some “normal”; ignoring the difference between the philosophical promise of *healing* by alleviating *suffering* (or, in newer versions, curing *meaninglessness*), and the medical interest in functioning abilities.

I also stressed that the initiator’s attempt to rely on past philosophers was deceptive: his taking literally their medical *metaphors* in criticizing their opponents, the Zeitgeist, or human defects in general; his blending together the *psychological* assumptions of some of them with regards to *mental* health problems, the *philosophical* discourse of others *about health and illness* and the support, wished by the initiator but offered by none of them, for a *concept* of “philosophical health”.

I discussed in more detail some of those confusions in my book about philosophical counseling (Gruengard, 2023b, 110-113) and presented my criticism of most of them, in my paper “Do we need a concept of philosophical health?”, presented in Rome, at the 26th WCP (section: practical philosophy) 2024.

## Proper Attitude to Black Holes

The second theme of the second version was the danger of the possible misuses of a *concept* of “philosophical health”. The initiator’s proposed list of principles of philosophical health justify the claim that besides “philosophical resilience” (apparently to *all* hazards of life) the initiator has in mind also “healthy” metaphysical positions and somewhat religious beliefs and attitudes (compare: De Miranda, 2021). I explained that such a concept might be easily misused by totalitarian authorities, which might try to punish dissidents under a new version of the excuses for “curing” treatments or means for “preventing contamination”.

I, for example, think that the proposed metaphysical position (elaborated by philosophers who were aware of the conceptions of modern physics and evolutionary biology) is acceptable, yet it is

certainly not “sick” to have alternative metaphysical positions (as, *most philosophers* did in the past). It is certainly not “philosophically ill” not to share the initiator’s semi-religious feelings. Moreover, it is meaningless to recommend “being care-full” to others, as even Hitler was “care-full” for others, for some of them he was “full” with one kind of “care”, for others—with another. The most confusing was the recommendation to “love the universe”. I see the logic of Spinoza’s *amor dei intellectualis* (Spinoza, 2018) and feel empathy with Bergson’s love for the “creative energy”, “which loves all those who are able to love” (Bergson, 1977). (Both do not seem to include wicked politicians and I among the loveable objects.) I somehow understand how love can be expanded not only to trees but also to all the rocks and some of the gazes. But can one honestly love the “universe” if one has not yet decided about the proper attitude to black holes?

### **Another Obstruction that is not “Philosophically Unhealthy”**

In the third part of the second version, I tried to explain that the concept might be misused not only by evil politicians, who persecutes those who do not share their opinions, but also by liberal and democratic philosophical counselors. I demonstrated it by describing the possible attitude of a counselor with Popperian conceptions to a religious counselee who is not ready to call into question the validity of claims made by her local religious guide, claims which obstruct her possibilities to cope satisfactorily with her problem.

I spoke there of two Popperian biases: reducing critical rationality to *epistemic* rationality and conceiving Christianity (allegedly following Saint Paul) as a religion that relies on universal love, and does not need laws. To Popper’s mind, both have roots in the legacy of Greek philosophers, which were adopted, or rightly elaborated, only by the “Western tradition”. Such biases might blind one to the *jurisprudential* rationality of *institutionalized* religions, (including not only Judaism and Islam but even the most anti-authoritarian versions of Christianity, where the instructed norms of one’s religious “community” rather than the “canonical laws” of one’s “church” are supposed to direct one’s ways of thinking and behaving.)

The roots of that rationality, developed by Roman jurists, are also Greek, and Hellenic and Roman conquerors, who spread the Greco-Roman influence in their empires, and brought it to the cultural centers in Middle Eastern and Mediterranean lands (where the Abrahamic religions were evolving) centuries before it arrived at Popper’s proper “West”. Its Socratic and Platonic *epistemological* aspects *perhaps* eventually enabled modern approaches to knowledge; its Aristotelian *practical reasoning*, and especially its application in politics and jurisprudence, *certainly* influenced the modern secular and mainly political discourse about laws, their justifications, the duty to obey them—as well as the right to disobey. They actually prepared the ground for the idea of an “open society”, in which, according to Popper himself, the modern “Greek-inspired” approaches to knowledge would be able to flourish<sup>10</sup>.

The above-mentioned biases might cause misunderstanding of the role, the status and the privileges of the *religious* “sages”, who, like modern Western judges, formally just instruct and judge, but actually, by deciding which interpretations of laws prevail and thereby creating precedents, also legislate. Like the modern judges, they are allegedly relying only on their “*erudite knowledge*” of canonical texts and precedents (Weber, 2019, Pérelman, 1978) although actually they are relying

on *agreed procedures* for arriving at an *agreed decision* with regards to the preference of a certain *interpretation* of the *meaning* of a *past general prescription* and its *application* to specific cases *in the present situation*. Such decisions are arrived at after a process of arguing not only for or against the acceptance of a proposed *re-interpretation of former interpretations of old documents* and traditions, but also for or against proposed *principles* that should direct the choice and the *practical considerations* that should be taken into account (Goldziher 1981, Leibowitz, 2002, Brown, 2023, Hamdeh, 2024). Unless they are completely subjugated to the whims of a totalitarian ruler, those venerated “sages” enjoy at their closed circles, even in the most oppressive religious regime, a higher degree of freedom of thought and expression, have more space for rational debates, and, despite hierarchies, more freedom of voting than the respective “laity”.

When I was writing the second version my own perspective was still somewhat Popperian. I saw the reluctance of the religious counselee to call into question the validity of the claims of her spiritual guide as a “sort of unhealthy” obstruction to our philosophical dialogue. I also saw it, like many secular liberals, as a barrier to her critical rational thinking, and, like many “enlightened” thinkers, as a culturally-dependent *failure to evolve towards full autonomy*. I believed that I could help her “become a little more autonomous” by reminding her that at least her local spiritual guide is just a human—neither necessarily inspired by God, nor normally one of the authorized “sages” of her religion—and “inviting” her, who (as a woman) is normally excluded *a priori* from “sage” circles, to take part in a hypothetical debate in such a circle. I considered myself modest in admitting that I must first learn a thing or two about her religious tradition—from her as well as other, more academic, sources.

The initiator, who was furious about my writing a second version, made new demands. He probably did not understand what I was talking about. I could not understand from his comments whether he himself or the expected readers of the book he was planning to edit might suspect that I was a covert fascist. I quit the project before being discovered.

Independently, I gradually realized that I was not modest at all. I took it for granted that I, as a liberal-democratic non-religious philosopher, am aware of what the religious “laity” is supposedly not: the human imperfection of local spiritual guides. Moreover, I ignored the possibility that the religious “laity” may hesitate to call into question the validity of their instructions for other reasons beside the fear of sin<sup>11</sup>. I failed to see the *variety* of considerations of “lay” persons in regimes in which doubting the validity of instructions and disobeying is considered “disloyal”; for example, their worry for others who might pay the price for their rebellion, or their sense of responsibility for their community as a whole. Probably, some of them follow instructions conformingly or even admire blindly a “charismatic” guide, but such believers, even when they get stuck in dilemmas and conflicts, rely on their religious guide and do not seek the assistance of non-religious *philosophical* counselors...<sup>12</sup>

I elaborated the theme in a paper against “diagnoses” in philosophical counseling, (Gruengard, 2025) which I presented in Zagreb, at the 18th ICPP.

### **A Philosophical Discourse About Health**

At a later stage I realized that the initially suggested “principles” as well as the initiator’s suggested improvement (“philosophical health” should be a matter of practical resilience rather than opin-

ions and attitudes, while the issue is not precisely “philosophical health” but philosophical *healing*) were just attempts to examine under which description the book he intended to edit under the title “philosophical health” would be more marketable. The unsuspecting participants in the projects were philosophers interested, from a variety of standpoints, in the *healing* contribution of philosophizing. In contrast, the intended readers were non-philosophers who might be tempted by the title “philosophical health”.

I do not know whether the physician who welcomed the propagated idea of “philosophical health” (Loughlin, 2023) will find in the book answers to the questions that bother him. The vague utterance of the initiator, according to which philosophical health is “a state of fruitful coherence between a person’s ways of thinking and speaking and their ways of acting, such that the possibilities for a sublime life are increased and the needs for self- and intersubjective flourishing satisfied” (ibid, 50) encouraged him to write an article for his book, but it certainly does not answer any of those questions.

That practitioner of person-centered medicine believes that medicine should not be concentrated only in “solving problems” (that is, curing diseases and/or alleviating physical suffering), but in the quality of life of the treated persons, and their ability to realize their potential capacities. I guess that he has in mind patients whose physical condition seriously limits some of their capacities, yet they still have other, perhaps ignored, abilities, whose realization may enable them to live a meaningful life and have satisfying social contacts. Whether his questions regard the encouragements of such patients, the education of physicians towards person-centered thinking, or the general attitude to sick or handicapped persons, what he is actually expecting is a helpful *philosophical discourse about health*, not a *concept* of “philosophical health”.

Such a discourse is indeed important. It is needed not only by philosophical counselors whose counselees cope with their own or their relatives’ handicapping condition. It is relevant to any practical philosopher who is aware (or more aware since the last pandemia), that issues of health often raise philosophical questions. Those questions regard not only the role of physicians and the life that is worth living for a certain individual, but also its cost in terms of the life, or the quality of living, of others. None of the involved conflicts and moral dilemmas is overcome by a “concept” that mixes the ideals of self-integrity and self-realization with a vague religiosity and an unsatisfied need for “self- and intersubjective flourishing”.

## Notes

1. I am relating only to positions that seem relevant to the dialogue with counselees about their concerns. We all tend to stick rigidly to some beliefs, rely uncritically on some experts and sometimes behave “quasi-solip-sistically”. It does not mean that all of us are “somewhat philosophically unhealthy”.
2. Many philosophical texts and lectures are presented as monologues; yet even when the author does not seem to care about the opinions of his present colleagues, he is usually in dialogue with absent partners.
3. Winch argues that that is also what psychologists are actually doing, their speaking of motive just sounds causal.
4. The dialogue “by proxy”, the *persona* that the counselee chooses to present, can still be challenging and instructive: after all, one can re-think his own position even by just listening to a dialogue between others about their views, let alone when one takes an active part in such a dialogue. However, if “game-playing”

counsees learn nothing, the responsibility is theirs. Nevertheless there are some inquisitive counselors, who believe that their role is to induce counsees to answer questions against their will. They declare that they are exposing thereby the counsees’ “philosophical pathologies”. To my mind, they have first to justify that use of a medical language, and remember that such pretension may be incompatible with medical ethics. In any case, I would recommend leaving the “art of questioning” (or interrogating?) to journalists, spies and security services.

5. By ‘phenomenological’ I understood the approach that was inspired by Husserl’s rather than Hegel’s phenomenology and referred the readers to the relevant Hegelian analyses of “the unhappy consciousness” only because of my critique of it.

6. This does not mean that they assumed that every social interaction is based on a causal-final schema. Yet they did not shared Arndt’s etc. assumption (Arndt, 1958) that other kinds of social interactions are necessarily less “instrumental” and necessarily on a higher moral level.

7. If those “acts” in the “intending subject”’s mind were verbalized in English that would mean that the *first person* personal *pronouns* have a different *syntactic role* than such pronouns in the *second* (or *third*) person. The “object” of the “intending subject” can be a specific other person (‘he’) or an anonymous (‘someone’), general (‘everyone’) or hypothetical or even abstract (‘anyone’, ‘one’, ‘they’, ‘people’), and of course, the :subject” can refer to himself as ‘one’, that is, as one of a certain group. The form is language-and social-context-dependent, and, *pace* Heidegger, it normally does not betray an attempt to flee from existential anxieties...

8. Foucault’s analyses of the dynamics between knowledge and power presuppose the existence of “subjects” in the phenomenological sense. Moreover, his claim that “Selves” can somehow overcome the social constructions and *create* themselves clearly assumes the pre-existence of Husserlian “subjects”, who are supposed to be primarily aware of themselves not in the mode of “I am (so and so)” but in the mode of “I can...”

9. Sartre’s famous *garçon de café*, for example, is a caricature of a waiter, who is eager to serve, whose “entire behavior seems to us [the observing intellectuals who are served by him] as a game which he enjoys playing... like all those merchants who try to sell us something... instead of being themselves...” (Sartre, 1976, 95-96). Well, perhaps that not so young “garçon” would like to “be himself”, and is actually thinking (like the soldier in Prévert’s song *Quartier libre*): “[I would have liked to] put my cap in the cage and [come] out with the bird on my head”...(Prévert, 1946, 6) but his big family depends on his support, and, afraid of unemployment, he behaves as he does in attempt to keep his unpleasant job... or perhaps he is an active member of a workers’ union, who jokes with his comrades about the funny behavior of their clients in *their* intellectual cage... *Mutatis mutandi* this apply also to other Sartrean (Hegelian, Nietzschean, Heideggerian...) descriptions of typical “funny” behaviors, and to Foucault’s “socially-constructed subjects”.

10. Lydia Amir inspired me unknowingly by asking me to write comments to Agassi’s book on practical philosophy (Agassi, 2023) and an article in Agassi’s memory. Agassi, Popper’s student and rebellious follower, insisted that his roots, as a former religious *Yeshiva* student, were not only Western. He disagreed with Popper’s one-sided conception of Christianity, but shared his opinion about the Western heritage. I tried to understand what was the contribution of Agassi’s jurisprudential Talmudic studies at a Yeshiva and wrote about its possible relevance to philosophical counseling (Gruengard, 2023a) I am also relying on readings about Roman, Canonic and Islamic jurisprudence as well as articles in philosophy and sociology of law, theories about charisma and social contracts. All are relevant to the attempt to understand better the concerns of religious counsees.

11. In the Abrahamic religions the faithful are not supposed to doubt the veracity of Holy Scriptures, disobey Divine commandments or fail to follow examples of Divine Will or Love. Their respective “sages” find sometimes ways to by-pass ancient claims and instructions by re-interpretation of texts and traditions. Yet they often try to indoctrinate, at least the less erudite part of the “laity”, to the belief that doubting or disobeying the “sages” themselves, or their local representatives, is a *sin*.

12. I owe the recently added modesty not only to personal counsees but to the courageous “apostates” and “converts”, out of religious (Muslim, Jewish and Christian) communities, dissident members of leftists,

rightists and other oppressive states, parties, faculties and sects as well as their enraged critics. Thanks to you-tube etc., they are sharing nowadays their experiences, concerns, thoughts and disagreements in videoed conversations.

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## An Argument for Philosophical Therapy

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### Abstract

I argue for expanding the philosophical counseling scope of practice to include what I describe as “philosophical therapy”, which may be initially construed to blend already-overlapping elements of philosophical counseling and psychotherapy, and which expanded practice may or may not require expanded training, depending on the qualifications and competencies of the individual philosophical counselor. Thus, to the extent that a given philosophical counselor is trained in a variety of modalities that are themselves philosophical in origin and employed in psychotherapy, such as mindfulness, cognitive behavioral therapy, existentialism, logotherapy, Stoicism, etc., and to the extent that a large number of patients in psychotherapy seek assistance from their counselors for a number of issues that philosophical counselors address on their own terms, I think it is reasonable for our discipline to expand the scope of practice accordingly. I will develop and explore the pros and cons of this idea.

**Keywords:** *philosophical counseling training, philosophical counseling scope of practice, philosophical critique of psychotherapy, philosophical therapy, philosophical counseling, sanity, therapy for the sane*

### Philosophical Counseling and Professional Ethical Boundaries

As a Level 2 Philosophical Counselor certified by the American Philosophical Practitioners Association (APPA),<sup>1</sup> I was trained to preserve the professional ethical boundary between the medical-model-based field of psychotherapy and the education-model-based field of philosophical counseling. The medical model is and has been the dominant one in the field of mental health. According to this model, “patients” (which includes people who need marital counseling, for example, among other issues that do not appear to be appropriately classified as “mental disorders”) must be “diagnosed” with a pathological mental or neurological condition that is recognized and listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (the “DSM”) in order for insurance companies to pay for their mental health services. Given this medical model, it is perhaps not surprising that early on in the life of the APPA, philosophical counselors were accused by members of the mental health profession of *practicing medicine without a license*. Perhaps in anticipation of this sort of charge, or simply in appropriately defending against such accusations and/or simply in defining itself, which the latter is, after all, a prime imperative among philosophers, the APPA formed itself as an *educational* organization, as evident in its web address, APPA.edu, and APPA-certified philosophical counselors are taught to list themselves as educational counselors or consultants when they seek and acquire professional liability insurance. We are certainly, it should be clear, educators, and when we engage in philosophical dialogue with our “client” interlocutors, or, as some European philosophical counselors prefer to call them, our “guests”, we are engaging in the Socratic method of *elenchus*, cross-examination, of their claims, beliefs, perspectives, orientations, underlying assumptions, values, intentions, and so on, just as Socrates did, in order to *educe*, to draw out, to help them “give birth to” or midwife, as Socrates put it, their tacit knowledge. While

individual philosophical counselors, not unlike individual therapists, have divergent tools in their professional toolkits, Socratic inquiry is the primary, foundational, and virtually universally shared method of philosophical counseling. This is not practicing medicine, in the sense of diagnosing patients' mental health disorders, in which case philosophical counselors rightly proceed to do what we do without any need for a medical license.

To the contrary, the APPA strictly requires APPA-certified philosophical counselors to refrain from taking on clients whose presenting problems do not fit our IRB-approved scope of philosophical practice, and to refer them out for mental health counseling, unless a potential client's mental health professional explicitly asserts that they think additional work with a philosophical counselor would be beneficial for a particular client at a particular time. In my role as Co-Chair of the APPA Board of Examiners of APPA, I assess whether applicants for APPA's Adjunct membership (which entails eligibility to enroll in our philosophical counseling certification program) possess the appropriate philosophical credentials, which minimally require a Master's degree or higher in philosophy. The justification for this level of philosophical credentials as a prerequisite to taking the certification program is fairly straightforward: by the time anyone has earned a Master's degree or higher in philosophy, they have engaged in thousands of hours of philosophical inquiry, Socratic dialogue, and cross-examination of the major thinkers, ideas, theories, arguments, thought experiments, and conceptual frameworks of the history of philosophy, in which case they have the basic skills and knowledge necessary to engage in this work, and to employ another useful skill of philosophical counseling, namely, bibliotherapy—directing clients to any texts that may be relevant to their interests, not only within the philosophical corpus, but within the broader corpus of human knowledge, since philosophers are, both by nature and by training, generalists.

At the same time, APPA's Board of Examiners routinely admits co-professionals in other recognized helping professions—e.g. physicians, psychologists, social workers, lawyers, pastoral counselors—as Affiliate members, enabling their enrollment and recognizing them as Certified Affiliates upon completion of our philosophical counseling training program. This demarcation between the fields of philosophical counseling and mental health is a two-way distinction.

### **Spurious Critiques**

Critics of the APPA certification program for philosophical counselors have objected that a mere three-day training is insufficient. But this objection would only begin to make sense if either of the following three conditions were satisfied:

- a. if the above description of what knowledge and skills one acquires upon the attainment of advanced degrees in philosophy—basically, Socratic inquiry and philosophical bibliotherapy—were inaccurate;
- b. if philosophical counseling were not a purely educational service, or,
- c. if philosophical counseling were engaged as a form of psychotherapy, that is, as a modality in which philosophical counselors diagnosed and treated patients' mental disorders.

But none of these conditions holds.

It may appear, *prima facie*, as if satisfaction of condition (b) above entails satisfaction of condition (c) above. However, whereas satisfaction of condition (c) above would entail satisfaction of condi-

tion (b) above, the converse does not necessarily follow. In what follows, I will make a case for the claim that philosophical counseling may be extended to function as therapy, which would satisfy condition (b) above, but not condition (c) above: it would, in short, go beyond being purely educational, as it would become therapeutic, but it would not diagnose or treat mental disorders.

### **Unethical and Fraudulent Practices in the Mental Health Industry**

As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> there are many issues that bring “patients” to mental health workers, who are inappropriately “diagnosed” in accordance with the DSM for insurance purposes, whose false, economically-motivated diagnoses are patently unethical, such as “diagnosing” someone who goes in for marital counseling as if they were suffering from the “mental health disorder” of “generalized anxiety disorder” (or “GAD”), among many other non-disorders, who could just as well if not better address their concerns through dialogue with a philosophical counselor. Why might that be so? There are a number of good reasons.

For starters, by analogy, if a dentist knows that a patient’s insurance will only pay so much for, say, a needed crown, but it will pay the equivalent for another unneeded procedure, it would be unethical—if not illegal—for the dentist to submit false documentation to the insurance company in order to enable the patient to have the insurance company pay for the crown, and it would be unethical for the patient to knowingly assent to such fraudulent shenanigans. Similarly, for a psychologist to submit a diagnosis of GAD for a “patient” who simply needs to speak to an intelligent neutral party about their marriage is clearly unethical—if not illegal—and ought to be illegal if it is not. One of the three common core features of psychotherapeutic work that seems universally necessary for there to be any positive outcomes in psychotherapy is the establishment of trust between the therapist and patient. It is not an unreasonable hypothesis to suppose that the reason most psychotherapeutic methods are relatively empirically invalid could be that most of the reasons that move people to seek therapy are not in the mental illness category, but are submitted to insurance companies fraudulently as if they were. How helpful could such putative therapy be when it is predicated on economically-motivated falsehood? How helpful could it be for a would-be therapist to encourage their “patient” to assent to such fraud as the basis for their economic relationship? What sort of message of trust could that send, in both directions?

Unfortunately, if marital counseling, to stick with that representative example, is not covered by insurance, there seems to be a collective conspiracy—regardless of whether or not it is tacit, unconscious, or intentional—among the insurance companies, the mental health profession, and “patients” to enable these services to be paid for by the insurance companies. But that is a rationalization, not a justification, and the industry that governs the economics that determine the distribution of services and fees encourages this fraud, which arguably completely undermines what little effect so-called “talk therapies” have been shown to have.

The three common features of talk therapies universally acknowledged as explaining whatever effectiveness such therapies possess are: (i) the primacy of trust in the therapist/patient relationship; (ii) the development of mutual understanding about the nature of the problem or issue and the sorts of things that need to be altered in connection with it, and (iii) willing experimentation with therapist-suggested interventions that seem appropriate as remedies.<sup>3</sup> Building economically-motivated fraud into the foundation of the therapeutic relationship clearly threatens to contaminate

any potential for genuine trust in the relationship, in both directions. The Procrustean distortion of DSM- and insurance-codes-based diagnoses also threatens to distort the development of mutual understanding of the nature of the problem or issue that brought the person in for counseling, as if, say, the need for marital counseling constitutes a medical diagnosis of anxiety, which misdiagnosis would also negatively influence the sorts of interventions the therapist would be rational to suggest.

Additionally, trust here includes belief in the authority of the therapist, as societally conferred upon the therapist through the degree-granting institution of academia and related professional licensing bodies. But in light of the obviously unethical practices of economically-motivated bogus diagnoses, the legitimacy of those credentials is not so different from lawyers' licenses to commit immoral acts under the cover of the letter but not the spirit of the law, or the facades of recognized members of the clergy who abuse members of their flock. More damagingly, however, studies show that neither the more professional credentials and training a therapist has, nor the more years of experience that the therapist has, nor both, make any difference at all in terms of positive patient outcomes, in which case the credentials that otherwise would ground the necessary trust are effectively meaningless before the therapist even engages in trust-undermining unethical diagnosis behaviors. Effectively useless licenses to engage in economically motivated unethical behaviors in collusion with patients cannot afford genuine trust, the first and foremost necessary ingredient in any positive therapeutic relationship.

Second, one would not go to a podiatrist to request a dental exam. In other words, to stick with one example for now, since the desire to seek marital advice does not entail a "mental disorder" nor thus any "diagnosis", there is no objectively valid reason to think it is appropriate to seek treatment for a mental disorder that one does not have, and thus no reason to even seek assistance from someone whose professional work specializes in "diagnosing" and treating "mental disorders". Needless to say, genuine mental disorders are better treated by psychiatrists, and few of them are ameliorated at all by mere talking therapies—yet another major flaw in the idea that psychotherapists are the appropriate dispensers of mental health counseling. Marital counseling is just one of a host of issues that people bring to psychologists or psychiatrists which do not involve "mental disorders", but which wind up being "diagnosed" as GAD or given other equally false and unethical diagnoses. Some of these include a great variety of relationship challenges, such as between parents and their children or vice versa, siblings, friends, romantic partners, co-workers or colleagues, supervisors or employers, etc. Others involve mid-life uncertainty, which need not be considered "crises". Others involve dealing with loss, disappointment, failure, death of a loved one, grieving, changing careers, existential exploration, faith or loss of faith, spiritual transformation, and so many other ordinary life issues that do not constitute "mental disorders" and thus would not rightly be given any "diagnosis" whatsoever.

These are all the sorts of issues that philosophical counselors appear more broadly qualified to deal with comprehensively, given our ability to get to the underlying premises, beliefs, values, assumptions, frameworks, and cognitive orientations that define and structure these issues, and to entertain multiple perspectives that might enable a client to shift the ways in which they have been conceptualizing their issues. While there are three core or common features of talk therapy that are virtually universally agreed upon by those who deliver and theorize about talk therapies, as mentioned above, even these are not significantly empirically validated, but rather are simply shared by practitioners regardless of different forms of training.

## **Memory Reconsolidation and Frame Shifting as Philosophical Therapy**

To the contrary, studies have shown, for decades now, that talk therapies are generally no better than placebos, and one of the primary factors even in terms of the consensually-believed effectiveness of the establishment of the positive therapeutic relationship is simply the fact that talk therapists are licensed as professionals in ways that are recognized by societal institutions that appear appropriately situated to confer such credentials, on the one hand, but, as mentioned above, studies do not support the idea that the greater degree of training nor the greater number of years of experience make any difference to therapeutic outcomes, on the other hand.<sup>4</sup> The one thing that has been empirically shown to be effective and potentially very effective as a “mechanism of change”, that is, as therapeutically effective as a psychotherapeutic intervention, is “memory reconsolidation”, which involves calling forth a memory emotionally connected with a problem and leading the person to see or conceive it from its different components, such as its various episodic, semantic, affective, psychological, and narrative elements, and entertaining it from different perspectives, which changes the framing of the memory, and enables a gestalt type shift that alters the dynamic around the problem.<sup>5</sup>

Another way of describing memory reconsolidation that will better serve our purposes here is to understand it as frame-shifting. Almost all philosophers with Master’s degrees or higher have developed a number of skills that enable them to be expert frame-shifters: in addition to our facility with thought experiments and intuition pumps, we share a general instinct to look at almost any concept, thought, perception, claim, fact, issue, problem, argument, theory, principle, data, model, schema, belief system, philosophy, religion, ideology, political system, conceptual framework, or paradigm from multiple perspectives, and to construct alternatives, to conceive counterexamples, to simulate relevant and counterfactual states of affairs, to reverse figure and ground, to explain complex chains of thought in intuitive, heuristic terms, and to elicit any and all of the above from each other and from our students, through Socratic dialogue and midwifery. Thus, even philosophers who are not trained explicitly as philosophical counselors generally automatically have orders of magnitude of competence relative to those of the average talk therapist to bring about the one most empirically promising talk therapy cure, memory reconsolidation. That’s virtually almost all that we do—frameshifting—and we have the entire history of philosophy in our memory reconsolidation toolkits, not merely the tools of a handful of psychology theorists, like Freud, Jung, James, Adler, Piaget, and so on, however brilliant they may be.

Thus, if we imagine a Venn diagram with two circles, one that represents the sort of issues that people often bring to talk therapists but which do not constitute mental disorders, and one that represents the sorts of things that genuinely count as mental disorders, there may be some overlapping gray area in which it is not clear whether the issue belongs only in the one circle or the other. For example, a person may be experiencing significant anxiety, nervousness, and insomnia, but it is not initially clear whether these symptoms are caused by (a) uncertainty about how to respond to an external challenge, dilemma, or conflict, or by (b) some condition appropriately considered biomedical, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder or agoraphobia. If these symptoms are caused by (a), then they would be appropriately addressed by philosophical therapy; if these symptoms are caused by (b), then they would be appropriately addressed by psychiatry or some other form of mental health counseling. It is not always initially clear what the underlying causes of such symptoms are, but upon closer examination they will become clear.

I think philosophical counselors are already addressing many if not most or all of the sorts of issues that people often bring to talk therapists but which do not constitute or involve mental disorders, but we generally do not view the sort of work that we do as “therapy”, despite the fact that we may or may not notice that our counseling work has a therapeutic effect in any given case. When the same topics or issues occur within an explicitly therapeutic context, to the extent that they are resolved to any significant degree, they are standardly treated as if they are therapeutic. What I am proposing is that we philosophical counselors embrace the fact that a good amount of what we do, at least in cases such as the sort we are discussing, counts as therapy, but therapy done through a Socratic, philosophical inquiry lens or approach, and thus we ought to allow ourselves to call it “philosophical therapy”. I think it is more often the case that what we wind up doing in our practice is rightly called philosophical therapy, rather than philosophical counseling, anyway.

### **Purely Philosophical Discussions**

In my own practice as a philosophical counselor, for example, the percentage of clients that come to me for purely philosophical discussions is very small. By “purely philosophical discussions” I mean the sort of philosophical discussions that normally occur in a philosophy class, on a philosophy podcast, or in a philosophy café, on any of the following sorts of topics:

- What is reality?
- What is truth?
- What is goodness?
- What is beauty?
- What is love?
- What is time?
- Do we have free will?
- Is there a God?
- Do we have a soul?
- Is faith valid?
- Is there life after death?
- Is reality entirely physical?
- Are we living in a simulation?
- Do we really know anything, and if so, how?
- Is the mind a powerless shadow of the brain?
- What is the nature of the self?
- Why is there something rather than nothing?
- Was there a beginning?
- Why do we exist?
- What is the meaning of life?
- What really matters?
- What is happiness?
- How should one live?
- What is the nature of values?
- What is friendship?
- What is the nature of morals?

- What attributes must a being possess to count morally?
- What makes a being a person?
- Is abortion immoral?
- What is justice?
- Should we be altruistic?
- Are all public officials, political systems, and policies really just about power relations?
- Should wealth be redistributed?
- Should there be nations and borders or just one world government?
- Should we eat animals?
- Are keeping animals as pets and in zoos immoral practices?
- Do we have obligations to the environment?
- Do we have obligations to future generations?
- Should physician assisted suicide be legal?
- Should recreational marijuana be legal?
- Should same sex marriage be legal?
- Should children be allowed to undergo gender transitioning?
- Should transwomen be allowed to compete in female sports?
- Should hate speech be illegal?
- Should Creationism be allowed to be taught in school?

I have only had a few clients whose primary interactions with me involve them asking any of the above sorts of questions, among the dozens of clients I've had since I began philosophical counseling in 2017. Literally, I've had exactly three such clients.

### **Ed: A Purely Philosophical Client**

One such (initially) purely philosophical client, whom I'll call Ed, contacted me because he wanted to discuss free will—after listening to Sam Harris on a podcast presenting it as a fact that there not only is no free will, but even the illusion that there is free will is itself an illusion—and he chose me because I've published on the topic fairly extensively. Ed was inclined as an engineer to believe in determinism, the view that everything is mechanically determined by its physical constitution in accordance with natural laws and the previous state of the world, but he found the implications unsettling. (A number of my other, already-existing clients have approached me with worries about free will, thanks to Sam Harris, and more recently, thanks to Robert Sapolsky.) After a handful of discussions on that topic, Ed began to venture into other purely philosophical topics, and then after months of such exchanges he began to feel quite comfortable with me and began to bring in some of his personal relationship challenges. This shift reflects the first of the above-mentioned three core ingredients in successful therapy, the establishment of a supporting therapeutic relationship, for by then Ed developed a sense of what sort of person I am in the role of philosophical counselor: I'm honest, rational, intelligent, broadly knowledgeable, discriminative, understanding, insightful, friendly, empathic, cognitively flexible, creative, imaginative, and so on. Our relationship has clearly shifted to the point where more often than not I am in the role of philosophical therapist, if not also occasionally life coach, pragmatic *consiglieri*, and even mediator (we brought in someone with whom Ed trusted that I could be a wise, neutral third party, despite my history with Ed).

**Chris: A Purely Philosophical Client**

Another client approached me to discuss his personal philosophical/existential dilemma revolving around a dream he had in which he found himself in a scenario that resembled the famous Trolley Problem in ethics:

Suppose you are standing at a switching station of a train track, you see a trolley coming down one track approaching you, there is a fork in the track where you stand, and on the track the trolley is on you see five people tied to the track who will be killed, but if you divert the trolley by pulling the switch, the trolley will go down the other track where it will kill only one person. To the best of your knowledge, you have no further information about the identities of any of the people involved, who we may suppose for the sake of this thought experiment are otherwise morally indistinguishable. Should you pull the switch and be responsible for killing one person, or do nothing to prevent the death of five people?

This client, whom I'll call Chris, explained to me that in his dream, his own life was part of an analogous equation—not involving a trolley, but nonetheless involving a similar decision about his life versus the lives of a number of people who were innocent strangers to him. The dream dilemma, as I'll refer to it, had a profoundly troubling effect on Chris, calling into question the relative value of his own life versus the lives of anyone else, raising the question for him: Why should I matter more than others? This philosophically, morally, psychologically, and emotionally charged uncertainty led him to examine the bases of his knowledge altogether: How do I really know anything at all? Chris is a very intelligent, and very naturally philosophically oriented young man. The sorts of skeptical arguments that might come up in a philosophy class on the nature, criteria, and limits of knowledge in a purely intellectual discussion were emerging out of his psyche in an existentially genuine, organismic manner. Chris was dead serious about not wanting to make any decisions, apart from eating, sleeping, and maintaining hygiene, until he developed some clarity about these questions.

Chris was living with his parents, who were understanding and supportive, so it was not like he would wind up homeless through inaction. In René Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in his first meditation (chapter), "On the Things That May Be Called into Doubt", he entertains the possibility that a being like God in all respects but who is evil has possessed his mind, as a thought experiment testing the possibility that we may be massively deceived in our putative knowledge of even the simplest of things. Descartes explicitly sets forth a disclaimer, perhaps for people like Chris, pointing out that it is not imprudent to engage in such considerations because he has the leisure to be disengaged from the domain of action: in other words, he is not doing anything that might be undermined by such thoughts, such as operating machinery. Rather, he is simply engaging in contemplation. Chris was removing himself from the domain of the sorts of activities for which Descartes was implying that they ought to be avoided during such challenging contemplations. It seemed to me that this retreat from the realm of action reflected an organismic—and thus healthy—monastic inclination, but it was an open question whether it may reveal itself to be something more like the beginnings of a slippery slope into some sort of volitional paralysis or anhedonia. Chris seemed rationally responsive to some of the arguments I engaged with him against skepticism, however, and so, without any concrete evidence that he was experiencing some sort of mental illness, I continued to work with him, although I did recommend that he discuss his situation with a psychologist, which he did.

A psychologist might be inclined to “diagnose” Chris as having some sort of psychotic episode or break from reality, since he was relatively withdrawn from the world of action. If Pythagoras were alive today, and if the story about his refusing to speak after attaining certain philosophical insights is true, then he might also be “diagnosed”, and probably so would Diogenes the Cynic, who lived in a barrel and barked insults at people, and Pyrrho the Sceptic, who refused to assent to any claims while walking barefoot through the marketplace, and the Buddha, who went from being a prince, to being emaciated from severe fasting, to vowing not to get up from his seated meditation under a tree until he attained freedom from the cycle of birth and death. Saul of Tarsus would probably have been diagnosed with psychosis when, traveling through the desert on the road to Damascus, he was thrown from his horse by a vision of Jesus. I’m not claiming that Chris is in a league with these philosophical luminaries, but I do think sometimes individuals have deeply transformative philosophical episodes that may superficially resemble psychotic breaks from reality. If the public optics of reality are bogus, however, then those who break from it are the few sane ones in an insane world, like the freed prisoner in Plato’s allegorical cave.

In his *Republic*, Plato argued that the person emerging from the cave of ignorance, or returning to it in order to enlighten others, might appear insane to those still in the cave, for on the way out of the cave the novelty of the light can be disorienting, and on the way into the cave the darkness may be equally challenging. One of things that differentiates a good bit of psychotherapy from philosophical counseling is the fact that, to keep with Plato’s cave allegory, most psychotherapists’ primary task seems to be to help the cave dwellers accept, adjust to, fit within, and function better within the reality of the cave, that is, to fit them back into their roles and relationships in the current society as normally functioning human beings (i.e., to treat them for, if not cure them of, their DSM-approved diagnoses), whereas most philosophical counselors’ primary task is to interrogate their clients’ metaphysics (assumptions and conceptions of reality), epistemology (assumptions and conceptions of knowledge), and axiology (assumptions and conceptions of value), in the same way that Socrates interrogated the metaphysics, epistemology, and axiology of his interlocutors, be they nature philosophers (proto-scientists), Sophists (proto-social scientists), statesmen, members of the clergy, poets (considered divinely inspired), craftsmen, members of the military, other philosophers, or otherwise ordinary people. As I’ve argued elsewhere, a psychotherapist in Nazi Germany or during the Chinese cultural revolution would primarily be tasked with churning out better-adjusted Nazis or communists, respectively, whereas if there were philosophical counselors during these times, they probably would have been arrested—or worse—for challenging the foundational premises of these ideologies.

Of course, there may have been individual psychologists who did what they could, without risking their own lives, to help people in ways that would be similar to the ways philosophical counselors would try to help their clients under such circumstances, but the larger point remains: The DSM defines mental illnesses in ways that uncritically presuppose that the norms of society are appropriately guiding. The latest version of the DSM, for example, reflects its uncritical acceptance of changing societal norms around traditional masculinity, earlier on diagnosing homosexuality as mental illness, and more recently identifying previously accepted elements of masculinity as “toxic” and “pathological”, on the one hand, while treating “gender-affirming surgery” as an appropriate treatment response to gender dysphoria, while treating “survivors” of female genital mutilation—internationally recognized as a violation of human or women’s rights—with trauma-informed care, on the other hand, apparently oblivious to the patent contradiction in the two cases of otherwise

similar genital surgery. It is the professional duty of philosophers to critically challenge contradictions, particularly when they are unrecognized as such and either contradictory conjunct is guiding important elements of people's behavior, and especially when the same threatens harm.

Changes in the DSM, moreover, are arrived at through consensus, which although not a matter of a simple vote, is nonetheless functionally similar to a democratic process or majoritarianism, also known as group think—virtually the diametrical opposite of the scientific method. However, even mere reading of—if not discussion of—the examples and considerations raised in the previous paragraph is likely to trigger fear, avoidance, and self-censorship in the average person, as well as even in academics in general, as my personal experience of attempts to have such discussions with my academic colleagues tends to reveal. Thus, the processes leading to consensus among academic psychologists and psychiatrists are not immune from such contaminating influences, which social-conformity-type pressures would explain the patently absurd contradiction between even the descriptive titles for female genital *mutilation* and gender-*affirming* surgery, both of which are typically voluntary cases of genitalia-removing surgery.

I am not speaking here to the moral merits or demerits of either type of surgery, but rather to the theoretical and more broadly philosophical bankruptcy of the DSM and the mental health professions it guides. The mental health professions lack an integrated, coherent, philosophically informed theoretical framework,<sup>6</sup> and in the absence thereof the diverse schools—such as the Freudians, Jungians, Rogerians, Adlerians, and so on, together with the more recent competing modalities, such as CBT (cognitive behavioral therapy), MBCT (mindfulness-based cognitive therapy), DBT (dialectical behavior therapy), IFS (internal family systems), REBT (rational emotive behavior therapy), existential therapy, logotherapy, etc.—amount to a mental health flea market. This mental health flea market is not very unlike what spiritual seekers confront when exploring their options—yoga (and its many types), meditation (and its many types), Hinduism (and its many flavors), Daoism, Buddhism (its many flavors), Alan Watts, Ram Dass, the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, Krishnamurti, Ken Wilbur, Don Miguel Ruiz, Deepak Chopra, Eckhart Tolle, Jordan Peterson, Carlos Castaneda, shamanism, ayahuasca, mushrooms, the power of positive thinking, countless life coaching gurus, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, *A Course in Miracles*, *The Secret*, *Conversations with God*, *The Celestine Prophecies*, *Many Lives: Many Masters*, and dozens of other options, all of which philosophers typically encounter in the classroom on a fairly regular basis when their students bring up their own beliefs and philosophies, if not also through their own explorations. Versions of all these things constitute a few proverbial drops in the bucket of ideas philosophers have entertained throughout the history of philosophy.

### **Matteo: A Purely Philosophical Client**

One more client anecdote is in order. This client, Matteo,<sup>7</sup> approached me because he was practicing mindfulness meditation and struggling to understand whether his mindfulness meditation practice was revealing or causing increased anxiety, at first, and later on with related questions about his own agency, which, again with thanks to Sam Harris for another client, he came to doubt upon hearing Harris and others argue against free will. Matteo found me when searching online for “meditation and free will”, since I've published a lot on the combined topics. Let me first explain what many practitioners of mindfulness meditation are instructed to cultivate, then what Sam Harris argues against free will, and then why Matteo found the combination problematic enough to contact me for assistance in understanding or appropriately responding to their conjunction.

Mindfulness meditation instructions often direct practitioners to observe their thoughts without identifying with them or getting caught up in them, but instead to detach from them and adopt a “witness” vantage toward them, simply observing them as they arise, dance about, and fade away. They are taught that this introspective process will reveal certain liberating insights, the same three insights that the Buddha allegedly experienced on the eve of his enlightenment as he sat under the subsequently named Bodhi tree for many hours, determined to attain enlightenment and freedom from the cycle of suffering through birth, death, and rebirth, which the Buddha named the “three marks of existence”: (i) all sentient existence is suffering or unsatisfactory, (ii) everything is impermanent, changing, ephemeral, transient, and (iii) the self is an insubstantial process, not an enduring, separate substance, object, or thing. These insights are asserted to be natural outcomes of careful introspective analysis: in each moment, the witness sees that mental contents, bodily sensations, and all experiential phenomena are constantly in flux, that attaching to them and identifying with them is ultimately unsatisfactory and does not yield contentment, and because nothing is constant holding this stream of ephemeral sensations and experiential atoms together, there is nothing that is a self to be found in them.

Among other arguments he makes, Sam Harris, in a very short book (I’ve published longer articles), *Free Will*, uses a similar approach regarding looking at thoughts as they arise, and noticing that they arise in ways we do not understand or control, unprompted, and he argues that because we do not control or understand how our thoughts arise, but our thoughts determine what we do, we cannot have free will. As for his other arguments, they are variations on the same theme, but any differences between them need not concern us here, as our focus is on Matteo’s case. Matteo began to experience the sort of meditative detachment that arises in meditation whenever he was not otherwise engaged in some task-oriented activity, which task-orientation would normally occupy his attention. This meditative witnessing of thoughts was arising in ways that Sam Harris described the ways our thoughts arise from unknown, not understood, and uncontrolled sources, and Matteo began to experience some anxiety about his meditative versus non-meditative agency, or rather the lack thereof. During mindfulness practice, Matteo asked, who is doing the witnessing? If there is no free will, then there is no real self, but then how is it that I’m practicing or not practicing this? Matteo seemed to be uncovering the performative contradictions in these teachings, phenomenologically, experiencing anxiety and uncertainty about himself and his behavior, especially as these meditative depersonalizing processes were spilling over outside his meditation cushion into his otherwise engaged life, those practical aspects of which, by contrast, Chris was avoiding during his exploration of skepticism and values.

Jared Lindhal et al. (2021) have researched the negative experiences some meditation practitioners undergo, as have Bryce Huebner and Genevieve Hayman (2022). The topic is too complex for further elaboration here, but as a long-term practitioner and scholar of meditation, I am aware that practitioners may experience adverse effects from the practice. Sometimes individuals turn to meditation as a form of “spiritual bypassing”, a putatively healthy way to address what may well be problems requiring psychotherapeutic treatment, unprocessed traumas, and so on. Sometimes, although this is more rare, individuals have more powerful, but latent, forms of mental health fragility or mental illness, and looking deeply within their own minds, if not tinkering with them, reveals these issues. Most of the time, however, meditators encountering many of these off-putting or unpleasant experiences are simply undergoing part of the process of coming to grips with what I like to describe as “undigested experiences” or “existential indigestion”, a term inspired by Ram

Dass, who was once asked, during an interview,<sup>8</sup> what he valued most about meditation after decades of practicing and teaching it, to which he replied that he appreciated its value most by contrast with those times in which he lost the daily practice, at which times he said he found himself “walking around with a lot of undigested experiences”—the implication being that meditation is a practice of *existential digestion*, which at times involves some awakening of, and thus inviting some, existential *indigestion*, so to speak.

Most of us develop various forms of psychological armor, coping strategies, defense mechanisms, or, to use the Gestalt psychotherapy term I prefer, “creative adjustments”, to the stresses of life—ways of managing stress that enable us to remain functionally engaged in our relationships and commitments, without necessarily pausing to dwell on the sorts of things that might be fruitfully addressed in any kind of therapeutic context, when we have the leisure and luxury of what Descartes referred to as time for contemplative reflection, divorced from what R.D. Laing described as the (hustle and bustle of the) “having mode” (as opposed to the “being mode”). This is like ignoring a pain in the knee while happily engaged in some absorbing activity, like the sorts of activities that enabled Matteo not to experience the sort of existential anxiety that arose when he was in what neuroscientists describe as the default mode network (the “DMN”), that is, the state that arises when not engaged in outer-oriented activities (such as, e.g., reading, watching Netflix, making dinner, washing dishes, going for a jog, etc.).

Neuroscientists refer to the DMN as a network of brain regions that are active when the mind is at rest and not focused on the external world. The DMN is associated with self-referential thoughts, introspection, and mind-wandering. On the other hand, the opposite of the default mode network is often referred to as the task-positive network or the central-executive network. This network is engaged when individuals are actively focused on and engaged in tasks that require attention, goal-directed behavior, and cognitive control. The task-positive network is involved in cognitive processes such as decision-making, problem-solving, and attention to external stimuli (such as, e.g., reading, watching Netflix, making dinner, washing dishes, going for a jog, etc.). Matteo’s meditation practice, together with his ingestion of Harris-style free will skepticism, seems to have had the undesirable effect of shining a skeptical light on his DMN.

My responses to Matteo are not relevant to the larger point of bringing up his case, which is that he is but one of only three clients among my dozens of clients over the past eight years of seeing philosophical counseling clients who approached me for what appear to be primarily purely philosophical issues, although Matteo’s initial approach did involve a question about his increased anxiety, but it was my judgment that it was not the sort of anxiety that lay outside the existential angst of philosophy’s scope of practice. The fact that he wound up seeing a psychotherapist eventually does not entail that he would have been better served by being redirected to one either, nor does it entail that he was being better served by seeing one. For all I know, he may have been seeking some sort of therapeutic support that I would not have offered by way of philosophical counseling. At the time, which was early on in my practice as a philosophical counselor, I was more strict about the demarcation between philosophical counseling and psychotherapy.

### **Legitimizing “Philosophical Therapy”**

The whole point of this article is to argue in favor of modifying that binary or dichotomy between psychotherapy and philosophical counseling to allow for a third component, forming a trinary or

trichotomy that includes philosophical therapy. For, unlike Ed, Chris, and Matteo, most of my clients are coming to me for what they expect will be a philosophically-informed therapy, and which I conceive similarly as philosophical therapy. Many of them have tried traditional psychotherapy, and find it limited. One client, who prefers the pseudonym “Sophia”,<sup>9</sup> is a licensed clinical psychologist who has tried most of the other forms of therapy she herself is an authority on, but wanted something different. She and most of these philosophical therapy clients of mine are approaching me for what I like to construe as my role in functioning as a philosophical prosthesis that assists them in applying the tools of philosophical inquiry to their personal lives.

Since in modal logic, the logic about the modes in which propositions may be true or false, such as *possibly*, *possibly not*, *not possibly*, and *not possibly not*, it seems to be a tautology that if proposition P is true, then P is possible: whatever is actual must be possible, for if it were impossible, it could never be actual. Since I’m actually doing most of my successful philosophical counseling as philosophical therapy, it seems that it must be possible for there to be such a thing as philosophical therapy. I would bet good money that many if not most of us philosophical counselors are already doing philosophical therapy, but just not calling it that. I propose an empirical study to answer that question.

After all, one thing I learned when I was admitted into the post-graduate program for psychotherapists at the Gestalt Center for Psychotherapy and Training in New York City was that almost everyone else studying there was already a licensed psychologist or psychotherapist with either a PhD in clinical psychology or an MSW. They were “green”, however, when it came to how to actually do clinical work, that is, how to relate to clients, how to be good therapists. What attracted them to such programs or other institutes was the fact that they were focused on *practica*, actual therapy session practice, with each other and with the faculty. Those *practica* sessions constituted the bulk of the program. Thus, whatever they learned in college or university was primarily theoretical, not unlike what most philosophers learn in the Academy, although the breadth of philosophical knowledge is clearly greater than that of psychological knowledge. That, together with the studies that show that very few things are effective in psychotherapy apart from the establishment of the relationship and memory reconsolidation, supports the at-least-equal if not greater validity of philosophical therapy relative to psychotherapy. Further, among forms of psychotherapy, those with greater empirical validation, however small it all may be overall, are all forms of therapy derived from philosophies, like Stoicism, Buddhism, existentialism, and so on.

However, while my optimistic attitude arguably borders on the Panglossian, and to some that may seem an understatement, I would advise any philosophical counselor who is not already doing philosophical therapy, but who wishes to do it, if not also those who are already doing it, to educate themselves on the relative ineffectiveness of psychotherapeutic training, in order to come to more fully appreciate that we are quite qualified to do at least as well as they are doing, if not better, and to begin to call themselves philosophical therapists, and to advocate for it explicitly. I’d also advise them to educate themselves about psychological diagnoses—not in order to begin diagnosing clients, but rather to be able to better spot any who might be better served by being redirected to mental health professionals. I would also suggest that future programs to train and certify philosophical therapists should include that knowledge in their curricula, as well as more *practica*, along the lines seen in post-graduate programs like the Gestalt institutes. With the proper training and the proper advocacy,<sup>10</sup> eventually we might get insurance companies to pay for philosophical therapy as a form

of preventative mental health. Since insurance companies are essentially all about risk reduction and predictive markets, it seems to me a sure bet that philosophical therapy could save insurance companies billions in the stead of decades of useless talking therapies and even more billions for medications like Prozac and ADHD drugs that only undermine human health and well-being.

## Notes

1. A version of this paper (Repetti 2024a) was given at the 2024 APPA Annual Meeting and at the 18th ICPP (2025). I should emphasize that the views that I express in this paper are my own, and that it is an entirely independent matter whether the APPA or any of its members would assent to or dissent from any of my claims herein that extend on or otherwise diverge from any of the official positions of the APPA on the subject.
2. Repetti (2023, 2024b, 2025).
3. Henriques and Gralha (2024); see also Henriques (2023).
4. Henriques (2023) and Marquis, Anchin, Bacon, and Henriques (2024).
5. Ecker, Ticic, and Hulley (2013).
6. For an excellent critique of the failure of the field of psychology to be included within an integrated, coherent, philosophically informed theoretical framework, as well as a robust proposal for such a framework, see Henriques (2023).
7. Matteo Liberatore approached me online through my “Ask a Philosophical Counselor” function on my website in 2017, where I offered free philosophical counseling under the condition that the client agrees to let me publish the exchange, which I published as a blog (Repetti 2018a), and then again (Repetti 2018b). Liberatore eventually began psychotherapy with a psychologist who is also a meditation instructor, as he reported in an interview with *Vice* journalist Shayla Love (2021)
8. I cannot find the interview, but I recall it was in a magazine, and I think the title had the word “Sun” in it, perhaps “The New Sun”.
9. “Sophia” approached me through my ad in Psychology Today’s “Find a Therapist” function online (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists/rick-repetti-brooklyn-ny/351135>). Sophia was also interviewed by journalist Shayla Love of *Vice* magazine, in “The Philosopher Will See You Now”, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/qjbdvx/why-some-people-are-talking-to-philosophers-instead-of-therapists>.
10. Two groups of philosophical counselors that I am supervising, Socratic Counseling LLP (<https://socraticcounseling.com>) and the Philosophical Counseling Working Group (<https://pcwg.craft.me/pcwg>), are developing various practices that could double for such training programs. I presented some of these practices at the 18th ICPP in Zagreb, Croatia (Repetti 2025).

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## Asking “How Might One Live, Here, Today?” in Philosophical Counselling: Introducing African Philosophical Perspectives

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### Abstract

“How might one live?” is one of the most important questions for philosophical counselling. The reason being that in this collaborative undertaking with the counselee, the philosophical counsellor will consider, experiment with, and create alternative ways of being becoming and thinking/living. However, this explicit Deleuzian question—“How might one live?”—even if crucial as I maintain, lacks important contextualising factors and situating questions. That is, explicit situating and contextual factors are not immediately interrogated, incorporated, and taken seriously. Contemporary African philosophers explicitly think from and through these situating questions—*From where does one write?; In what language does one think/speak?*. Turning to these African philosophers, I want to positively expand the Deleuzian question by adding two crucial situating elements, viz., *here, today*. The expanded question thus reads “How might one live, here, today?”. Asking the question in this manner and speaking/writing from a (South) African perspective necessitates serious consideration of these perspectives from African philosophy.

**Keywords:** *philosophical counselling; African philosophy; Gilles Deleuze; “How might one live”; praxis; philosophy as a way of life*

### Introduction

Voices and perspectives emerging from African philosophy have yet to be sufficiently discussed in the philosophical counselling (henceforth PC) discourse. Some efforts have been made to incorporate these discussions (see, e.g., Louw, 2024; Sivil, 2024); however, this area remains fertile soil waiting to be tapped for its rich perspectives and ways of meaning- and sense-making. One way of doing this, is to consider alternative ways of living and thinking, thus taking seriously Gerd Achenbach’s proclamation that philosophy itself is “the courage to think differently” (2024, p. 26). In the following article, I turn to the Deleuzian question of “How might one live?” (May, 2005, p. 1-25)—Deleuzian because it captures the call to experiment and affirm life, core tenets of Deleuze’s body of work. I explicitly turn to this question because of its inherent creative praxis, and that it captures Achenbach’s ethos of having the courage to think alternatively. Nonetheless, I argue that this question is incomplete, neglecting what I call situating questions—questions that lead one to take seriously from where one is speaking, that is, from where one is asking this question, and the myriad issues to follow. African philosophical perspectives, sometimes critical yet with the prospect of creative reconstruction/rethinking, is invaluable in this regard by helping me positively expand the incomplete question.

In the first section of this article, I briefly explain each individual component of this important question before I suggest in the second section that this question should be amended to read, “How

might one live, *here, today?*” In the subsequent two sections, I briefly consider two shortcomings stemming from not asking the question in this expanded manner, necessitating the contributions of, in this case, African philosophers. In the last section, I ask the question, how might one then begin to live and practice PC in (South) Africa. But importantly, I aim to begin what some African philosophers have been calling the “hard work” of “turning over a new leaf” and to “working out new concepts” (Fanon as quoted by Serequeberhan, 1994, p. 9). Even though this article still remains in a somewhat meta-philosophical realm, it nonetheless metaphorically begins to lay the foundation blocks from which fellow (African) philosophers/philosophical counsellors can begin to experiment with African philosophical ways of thinking. Or at least, it begins to ask critical questions that might lead others to take up the “hard work” of thinking through the lived actuality of African philosophical perspectives.

### 1. Raising the question “How might one live?”: *Techne* vs. *Praxis*

Through a lack of engagement with situating questions—i.e., by not asking explicitly from where one is speaking from, in what language this discussion is happening, and so on—the philosophical counsellor might forfeit a position of humility and possibly reproduce philosophy in a supposed value neutral manner (Mehuron, 2015, p. 1559, 1568). This might inadvertently leave the philosophical counsellor in the position of the “expert”, that is, a position which might be foreclosed to openness to difference and alterity. Using the idea of a toolbox, the philosophical counsellor as “expert” knows her tools intimately regarding where and how to use them expertly; dangerous yet beneficial detours might become a serious problem for her. As each counselee demands from the philosophical counsellor something different and unique, this might trouble predetermined and time-honoured theories and methods (Tukiainen, 2012, p. 112; Achenbach, 2024, p. 51-54).

Using the distinction between *techne* and *praxis* provided by Aristotle, this image of the expert, I argue, becomes especially problematic in a PC framework. In the sixth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (EN VI.3, 1139b; 2004, p. 105) distinguishes between what he calls five intellectual virtues. Of importance here is the two virtues corresponding to variable things (read: ethics), namely, *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and *techne* (craftmanship or skill). A growing body of literature addresses PC’s close association with *phronesis* or practical wisdom and *praxis* or action/doing/practice (Weiss, 2018; Walsh, 2005). In fact, Walsh states that one begins to think about PC as *techne* as soon as one disregards philosophy as a way of living, or when one sees PC as something “objective” that the “disinterested knower” can grasp and understand (2005, p. 500).

Aristotle’s differentiation between *phronesis* and *techne* holds significant relevance for the way in which I understand the practice of PC. According to Aristotle, *techne* is underpinned by the production of something (*poiesis*) with the subsequent goal of transcending the means of achieving the goal, while *phronesis* is underpinned by action (*praxis*), the doing of something for the sake of doing said thing. Aristotle states that “[f]or while production [*poiesis*] has an end distinct from itself, this could not be so with action [*praxis*], since the end here is acting well itself” (EN VI.5, 1140b; 2004, p. 107). The *praxis* of PC lies in its ability to enhance a way of life through philosophising with its goal being, I argue, to live more *philosophically*. There is thus no goal beyond the act of philosophising as such. The philosophical counsellor, in this understanding, does not philosophise collaboratively with the counselee to ameliorate or resolve a problem, akin to a sort of *techne* or skill in Aristotle’s terminology. Instead, focus is on the session organically developing without a predefined and transparent goal. PC becomes an event of sort. Herein then the rationale for prob-

lematising the idea of the philosophical counsellor being an expert, especially linked to the notion of having a toolbox. In this image—which I want to move away from—philosophy becomes a tool the philosophical counsellor uses in order to attain a goal that transcends the means of achieving the goal. Philosophy is no longer seen as a way of living, a process, an event; it becomes a mere tool. In contrast to this idea, I want to align PC as a guiding praxis regarding living philosophically.

Aligning philosophising with *phronesis*, however, still allows for amelioration and resolution of problems and questions. According to the likes of philosophical counsellors Lou Marinoff (1999, p. 9-10), Shlomit Schuster (1999, p. 19), and Ran Lahav (2016, p. 17-18), philosophising without a predefined goal can still have ameliorative and resolute by-products that emerge along the way, but one does not philosophise in order to exclusively resolve a problem or question. Hence the reason why some philosophical counsellors state that this understanding of philosophy preoccupies one's whole life and becomes a way of being (e.g., Tukiainen, 2012, p. 126). Consequently, the philosophical counsellor aids the counselee in recognising the potential for living otherwise, alternatively, experimentally; or to gain the "courage to think differently" (Achenbach, 2024, p. 26). This then gives way to the significant Deleuzian question of "How might one live?" (May, 2005, p. 1-25). This is one of the most important questions the philosophical counsellor must grapple with, whether explicitly or implicitly (Louw, 2022, p. 66-67; Achenbach, 2024, p. 28, 103, 124). This is due to the counselee seeking guidance from the philosophical counsellor precisely because they perceive a problem with their present way of being or living. On its own, the question "How might one live?" might look like a rather innocuous question, however, if each word/element is separately discussed, the complexity of this question might be illuminated. I briefly explicate this question.

"How might one live?" consists of five words/elements. I begin with "how". Much of philosophy is plagued with "what is" type questions—*What is philosophy?*; *What constitutes a good life?*; *What is justice?*. Even though these "what is" type questions are important to guide our thinking, they are only preliminary or gateways, so as to open us for further and more important questions such as "how?", "why?", "what might we do with X?"—*How do we understand or define philosophy?*; *Why understand philosophy as X?*; *What can we do with philosophy understood as X?*. Deleuze, for example, warns us of the problems and forfeited potential of richer conversations when we do not move beyond "What is" type questions as they are only preliminary questions (2019, p. 247-248). Moreover, if one follows Deleuze and Guattari (1994, p. 2), philosophy is about concept creation rather than concept elucidation. "What is" type questions remain at the elucidation phase of what there is; "how" type questions lead one to experiment with, which in turn leads one to create new concepts or new ways of being becoming (Janz, 2001, p. 400). Gerd Achenbach in the PC context notes following the exclamation that PC constitutes *phronesis* that to "master life" one does not ask "*what* should you think", one instead asks "*how* should you think" (1997, p. 4; emphasis mine).

Moving onto the second element, "might", an important difference between morality and ethics can be identified. Morality deals with issues of "should" and "ought". "Might", in contrast, is more experimental and open to different ways of being becoming and may therefore according to the view I follow here, be aligned with ethics rather than morality. May (2005, p. 4-5) notes the change after Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God in which modes of being did not seek authentication from outside/transcendental elements. This is important for Deleuze reading Spinoza as promoting an experimental ethics rather than a fixed moral "ought". Adkins (2015, p. 96), in his turn explaining the difference between morality and ethics, highlights the creative experimentation and action required in ethics whilst morality functions or relies on fixed principles. Ethics does not have fixed rules, instead, it asks of one to be creative or experimental. Moreover, "might" implies "and". That

is, one “might” always seek other options, “and this... and this...”, ad infinitum. The image of a rhizome, put forward by Deleuze and Guattari, is important: “the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, ‘and ... and ... and ...’” (2019, p. 27). Massumi writing about Deleuze and Guattari’s usage of the schizophrenic notes similarly, “From one to another (and another ...). From one noun or book or author to another (and another...). Not aimlessly. Experimentally,” (1996, p. 1). Experimentation requires one to always have more options available, to always be open to thinking anew, hence the perpetual “and”. This also reminds one of Friedrich Nietzsche writing (in book V aphorism 432) that “[w]e have to tackle things experimentally” and that there are no scientific methods, i.e., pre-defined and predictable pathways, to achieving wisdom and knowledge (1997, p. 185).

“One”, the third word in the question, is not singular but many. Grammatically, “one” is an impersonal pronoun that can signify a myriad of objects. “One’s arm,” “one’s body”, and so on. It is also not limited to humans as this would already commit one to “the error of believing that the proper perspective for understanding the world is centered on the viewpoint of the human subject” (May, 2005, p. 24). Rather paradoxically, “one” also does not refer to a universalised singularity, but a myriad of options at hand. Inherent plurality and interchangeability are already present. Achenbach in the PC discourse also notes that “the philosopher in practice takes visitors seriously [...] not as a mere ‘instance of a rule,’ but *as this very one*,” (2024, p. 3). One, thus additionally, signifies that *this very life I am living* is taken seriously.

Philosophy that is not preoccupied with life or living might not be beneficial (outside of the halls of academia). Hence, the “live” component seeks ways of improving how one might live in one’s immediate lifeworld. If philosophy is about concept creation, it is about the creation of how one views, understands, and experiences the world. Concept creation helps one construct different ways of being becoming, which is contextually relevant to one’s concrete lifeworld. Again, it is about living, life, which is situated in a specific context.

The question mark, “?”, is probably the most important element in this question. It leaves an open space, one that does not provide readymade answers. It captures the openness of the question in its entirety. There can be an infinite number of answers; the question mark is not interested in discovering/uncovering but rather in creating and experimenting. Todd May notes that “problems (at least the worthwhile ones) present themselves as ‘open fields’ or ‘gaps’ or ‘ontological folds,’” (2005, p. 84). These gaps, signified by the question mark, becomes even more important in terms of African philosophy. I return to this in the subsequent sections. But in short, the felt experiences of the postcolonial present by Africans are, according to some African philosophers, situated within this question mark, this painful gap, or liminal in-betweenness (Serequeberhan, 2009, p. 44). The goal of the African philosopher is to think *from here* to get through this blockage, to re-assert their historicity so that they can freely think about what they might become, and how to think/live.

Having now unpacked the question “How might one live?” and thereby illustrating its complexity but also worth in a PC framework, I claim that by asking the question in its current formulation still lacks the much-needed nuance called for. To formulate and substantiate the addition of additional components, I turn to the writings of various African philosophers and authors.

## 2. Considering “How might one live?” as an Incomplete Question

In asking the question “How might one live?” without engaging with a praxis that takes seriously situating questions, the question can be read as somewhat incomplete. It might thus be received or

treated as speaking from a flawed value neutral or quasi-universal perspective. I want to expansively rephrase the question by adding two additional elements, so that it might read as follows: “How might one live, *here, today?*” I briefly discuss what each of these two additional elements might look like, especially from a (South) African context.

In analysing the component “here”, one is quickly struck with how it is not simply about locality, even though speaking from a specific place is always already an expression, a declaration, or an enunciation that one is speaking from “here” (read: from wherever one is speaking or standing). Decolonial African psychologist Kopano Ratele writes rather poetically that ...

African in African psychology [or philosophy] is, therefore, an enunciation. A situated practice. *A wordless act involving the whole of your being.* It articulates and enacts your position in the world. It is an act that reads, *the world looks like this from here.* (2019, p. 8; emphasis mine)

In contrast to the “whole of your being”, as Ratele writes, the *fractured* self cannot be fully *here*. We need to, as Ratele continues, “look with the whole of our selves” (2019, p. 9), which already takes us beyond only the visual, into the other senses that characterise human embodiment. The whole self or the full human being needs to be present but more importantly *represented*; not a self with pieces missing, not a self that still experiences erasures. A philosophy that takes the point of view of only a small portion of philosophers, whilst neglecting different languages and varied embodied *ways of seeing* or rather *perceiving from here*, cannot represent the marginalised and excluded. A philosopher that does not speak *from* a specific place to the fullness of the counselee’s being cannot edify the counselee’s life beyond the scope of this position-less philosophy. It might merely be interesting or exotic. However, as African philosopher Tsenay Serequeberhan writes, “[i]n Africa, as elsewhere, philosophy has never been concerned with ‘the interesting’ and/or ‘the exotic’ as such—but with the concrete problems or exigencies of its time,” (2021, p. 39). The merely exotic and interesting does not immediately help the counselee come to grips with her current situation, nor does it represent her being in its entirety from that concrete lifeworld. Our understanding of *here* thus needs to represent the self fully, i.e., not as a fractured self that is reduced to a cerebral or even a viewing self.

This also leads to the idea that ways of living in the past might not immediately be applicable in the present. African philosophers have been dealing with what some have termed “the return to the source” (Serequeberhan, 1994, p. 109). This signifies not a literal return to some untouched situation in the past. Instead, it marks a moment in the present of African philosophy in which a disposition in which the “vigor, vitality (life), and ebullience of African existence” is adopted (Serequeberhan, 1994, p. 126). Therefore, a philosophy without temporal awareness might be interesting at best but not edifying or beneficial to deal with current problems/issues/questions if it is used in a decontextualised or value neutral manner. It might also be harmful by trying to return to an ossified time or culture in the past. The act of becoming aware that we are speaking *today*, functions to contrast with “eternal” and universalised philosophy/answers by situating the question in the present, subsequently becoming more aware of the current situation which needs attention. For example, addressing the issues leading from the contemporary neo-colonial situation in the postcolonial present moment of (South) Africa necessitates radically different discussions. The problems and questions that emerge from this situation cannot be meaningfully approached only with ideas and concepts that either originated from different contexts discussing different sets of questions and

problems, or that they were erroneously formulated in isolation or from “nowhere”. Philosophical activities from different contexts and periods might elucidate some aspect of a counselee’s life but practicing a philosophy emanating from and in response to a concrete lifeworld “today”, i.e., with the present situation in mind, might be better suited to deal with ways of being becoming in that lifeworld. It makes sense to incorporate and add voices speaking from here, and today, that discuss relevant and timely issues. This is by no means a call to reject *in toto* everything that does not emerge or originate from one’s own specific lifeworld. It is, however, a nuanced call to organically appropriate and indigenise (Serequeberhan, 1994, p. 2-4), sift and sieve (Serequeberhan, 2021, p. 38), filter and fertilise (Serequeberhan, 1994, p. 109), or make relevant to a specific context (Chimakonam, 2019, p. 183) works that emerge from elsewhere and works that are in the philosopher’s own history/past/tradition. Or to embrace an open (porous) disposition so that what one brings back can transform and challenge one’s own culture in productive and creative ways.

I now turn to two additional problems leading from a lack of situational awareness when asking “How might one live?”, that is, without the *here* and *today* element. Currently, I argue, the PC discourse insufficiently deals with counselees from (South) African contexts. This stems partly from the lack of acknowledgment and discussion of, amongst others, the socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds of potential (South) African counselees. I thus turn to the issues of different ways of living and thinking (section 3) and that of counselees with different linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds (section 4).

### **3. African Philosophical Perspectives on Embracing Multiple “Centres” of Ways of Living and Thinking**

The current PC discourse runs the risks of perpetuating a privileging of certain inherited categories and concepts while occluding alternative ways of experiencing and making sense of the world (Louw, 2023, p. 28-32). While the PC discourse has slowly been incorporating various other traditions beyond just Western philosophy, African philosophical perspectives are, as mentioned, not yet engaged with in any sufficient way. This arbitrary limit, or blockage, not only disregards indigenous knowledge systems and different conceptual frameworks, but it also forecloses opportunities for experimentation and the creation of new philosophical concepts. While a certain “normativity” of specific modes of being is still left unquestioned, the metaphorical playing fields remain unequal (Sands, 2019, p. 371). Marginalisation, Edwin Etieyibo aptly writes, “starves [philosophy] of some important perspectives and tradition(s)” (2016, p. 377). Situated philosophers and philosophical counsellors are cut off and excluded from speaking from their concrete lifeworlds, starving philosophy and PC from organically growing. Following Olivier, different contexts can itself “induce the introduction of new concepts of thinking,” (2015, p. 240). The contemporary African philosopher writing about their experiences of neo-colonialism in the postcolonial present might not share the same philosophical views as someone writing from other parts of the world. However, this view does not maintain hierarchies in terms of which perspective is better or worse. Instead, one is reminded by African philosopher and poet Aimé Césaire, writing his resignation letter to the communist party, that his “conception of the universal is that of a universal enriched by all that is particular, a universal enriched by every particular: the deepening and coexistence of all particulars,” (2010, p. 152).

African conversational philosopher, Jonathan Chimakonam (2015, p. 462-463), concretises this imperative—that the particular expands and enriches the universal—with his idea of the global

expansion of thought. Simply put, various particular and embedded voices, writing from and about their philosophical lifeworlds, enter a sort of “universal” conversation or marketplace of ideas. Here, participants can learn from each other, enriching both particular points of views. This need for a pluralism or a “universal enriched by every particular” accords with Zondi when he writes that ...

... [h]aving *many centres* of knowledge, of human civilisation, of cultural expression, of managing global power and of interaction means that we might soon have ways of solving the intractable problems of humanity, using many real options that a single centre cannot offer. (2021, p. 234; emphasis mine)

By embracing this sentiment of having many “centres” opposed to only having one centre, for example, Western-centrism dominating others, multiplicity becomes a valuable contributor to the cultivation of better and improved ways of living. The subsequent refreshed impetus for new research into particular problems that are more applicable to those embedded in an African lifeworld without uncritically reproducing, for example, Euro-/Westerncentrism, can further disenclose, i.e., open up, the practice of philosophy (Lamola, 2016, p. 510). This reality, where few investigate ways of being and philosophising beyond the confines of specific paradigms, presents philosophers qua philosophical counsellors embedded in African contexts with unique and creative opportunities to collaboratively investigate with the counselee different approaches to living philosophically, or to create novel conceptual frameworks through which they can understand and relate to their situated realities.

Various African philosophers or scholars on African philosophy have made similar arguments. Justin Sands (2019, p. 375) argues that there is tremendous value in adopting an approach that underscores the need of the philosopher to seek out the inherent limitations and constraints of their own positions whilst going into conversation with other philosophical traditions, like African philosophy. In other words, by becoming cognisant of these constraints when engaging with different philosophical traditions, such as African philosophy, can enable the philosopher qua philosophical counsellor to “present new ideas, concepts, and critiques to their own, Western discourse” (Sands, 2019, p. 375). African philosopher Oludamini Ogunnaike also writes about this when he notes that engaging, for example, African philosophy from a Western perspective, “we must allow [Western philosophy] to be transformed, reshaped, expanded, deepened, or even discarded,” (2017, p. 209). It thus becomes problematic to try and understand other perspectives from one’s own limited perspective; that is, with one’s own conceptual frameworks which are foreclosed, and resists change. Of importance then is remaining open, or porous, so that one’s own conceptual framework might be positively transformed from the fruitful encounter with other traditions. Here then is an explicit “effort to learn about, learn from, [and] learn with” different traditions (Ogunnaike, 2020, p. 3)

If then the philosophical counsellor in a PC framework opens her own practice to be influenced by different philosophical traditions, she might adequately incorporate and organically appropriate new knowledge that might subsequently help different groups of counselees cultivate more beneficial ways of living. Without the philosophical counsellor’s engagement in this practice of reciprocal influence, meaningful exploration of diverse ways of being becoming may lack sufficient collaborative and open inquiry, especially when they are unnecessarily foreclosed. When the philosophical counsellor is not aware of the situatedness and rootedness of the philosophies used in her practice, she may unintentionally revert to using philosophy in a way that hides its positionality. As Zondi aptly notes, the neglect of a “collective cultivation of knowledge” for the common good of all, re-

sulting from an almost exclusive adherence to hegemonic and universalised notions of philosophy, cannot even begin to divulge what it means to live “here”—as “here” signifies particularity, difference, multiplicity (2021, p. 239).

Two further important aspects that struggle to be meaningfully explored in PC with an unmarked philosophy attempting to speak universally from nowhere (everywhere), pertains to linguistic and socio-economic factors.

#### 4. Linguistic and Socio-Economic Barriers: The Problem of Language in African Philosophy

African philosophers have been writing about how language can be used to marginalise, exclude, occlude, or simply erase differences for many years, but especially in the postcolonial present. African philosopher Kwasi Wiredu is most vocal about this issue when he writes that ...

... the African who has learned philosophy in English, for example, has most likely become conceptually westernized [...]. To that same extent he [or she] may have become de-Africanized. It does not matter if the philosophy learned was African philosophy. If that philosophy was academically formulated in English and articulated therein, the message was already substantially westernized. (1998, p. 17)

Language is thus not a value neutral vehicle regarding the communication of meaning. To philosophise is to always philosophise *in* and *through* a specific language. If African philosophy is practiced in and through English, as Wiredu tells us, it is already conceptually Westernised. Concepts are transformed as they are translated. Following the likes of Wiredu, practicing African philosophy in English is highly problematic because of the conceptual framework it relies on is fundamentally different. The African philosopher and writer, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, took this idea even further, writing in the preface of his most important work, *Decolonising the mind*, that he will no longer be writing in English, only writing in Gĩkũyũ and Kiswahili, and that he will rely on the medium of translation to converse with others in the discourse (wa Thiong’o, 1986, p. xiv).

Brian Sibanda in reading wa Thiong’o provides a powerful metaphor that might help with explicating this position of returning to one’s home language as a form of linguistic decolonisation or a form of political-linguistic resistance. Through the erasure of, inter alia, various indigenous languages, colonialism created “dismembered” beings (Sibanda, 2021, p. 144). The double play on the word “dismembered” is striking. On the one hand, dismembering conjures up the physical violence of losing a limb, on the other hand, dismembering relates to losing one’s membership to tradition, history, heritage, and the past. The violent act of losing one’s membership that is offered through language is equated to that of losing a limb. Remembering one’s home language through the act of speaking it, writing in it, and thinking through it thus becomes a political act that might “re-member” one. Again, the double meaning of the word “re-member” should be noted. Through the act of remembering erased languages, on the one hand, the speaker is re-membered in terms of regaining a membership to a history and tradition from which they were cut off, and on the other hand, one regains the limb that was cut off. Sibanda in following the tradition that links one’s very being through speaking a language, contends that in resisting the force of speaking colonial languages helps with “restoring the being of those who exist in the margins of modernity”, and thus becomes “an act of re-membering” (2021, p. 147). This follows the framework in which “language is being”, and that ceasing to speak one’s language is akin to a state of “non-being” (Sibanda, 2021,

p. 143, 146). Being cut off from a language thus involves a physical severance from the links to one's history, past, and culture.

Equally important, by continuing to speak “colonial languages” the speakers of indigenous languages promote, maintain, and continue on “cultural level” the “slavish and cringing” of the neo-colonial situation (wa Thiong'o, 1986, p. 26). Kopano Ratele expresses a similar concern when he writes that ...

... [m]eaning resides in words. Without the right words we are really lying to each other. *Without knowing what the other person could have said if given a chance to speak in his or her language, you are being dishonest about what relief you can bring. You are deluding yourself. You are not being honest.* (2019, p. 70; emphasis mine)

This becomes especially pertinent in a PC session, as philosophising involves articulating and enunciating words that carry significant meaning. Here, the act of translation might entail an incredibly important philosophical moment, one in which new concepts might be created (Janz, 2015, p. 488). But as per the quote above, when this option is not available and by foreclosing the opportunity to speak one's mind, a PC session might not help with the creation of beneficial ways of living and thinking. To my knowledge, there are few mentions of the language in which a PC session is conducted in the PC discourse. It is mostly assumed that the session is conducted in the dominant language of that specific lifeworld. In fact, I take this as a tell-tale sign of who the normal counselee in PC is assumed and implied to be, viz., someone educated in the dominant language of that context and who has a relatively comfortable socio-economic status. This is especially the case in South Africa where most if not all universities almost exclusively provide philosophy courses, modules, and degrees in English. This effectively “produces” English philosophers and by implication philosophical counsellors.

Authors from other fields have brought this issue to light, i.e., who the usual subject of treatment is. Zelda Knight writing from a South African psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic perspective calls, for example, black educated and affluent clients who speak English “black diamonds” (2013, p. 20), whilst Ratele refers to the same group as “traditional clients” (2019, p. 69). These are the “usual patients” who seek out therapy/counselling. Ratele, however, makes an important distinction between the “traditional” and what he calls “non-traditional clients” when he writes that:

‘Traditional clients’ in this case refers to middle-class persons seeking therapy, usually speaking *English* and *able to pay for their treatment*. ‘Non-traditional client’ is therefore a misnomer, when *the majority of people cannot pay and cannot speak English*. (2019, p. 69; emphasis mine)

This is because the subject or counselee in psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, or in PC, in a South African context, is mostly already conceptualised as speaking English, well educated, able to understand some philosophical/psychological jargon, and pay the sometimes-enormous fees associated with psychological or talk therapies and PC sessions. What I want to highlight here, following Ratele but in the context of PC, is that because the African subject is not necessarily centred in contemporary PC she is already excluded if she does not conform to the usual conception of the counselee. That is, few if any theorising, happening from South African philosophical counsellors, takes these factors and questions seriously into account. Perspectives from “peripheries” or “cracks”—based on a problematic and unjustified centre—are thus currently not discussed in enough detail.

The philosophical counsellor, as mentioned above, will most likely be a trained philosopher, i.e., English speaking and of a certain socio-economic status. This is especially the case in South Africa. If a philosophical counsellor from this context cannot speak any other language than English, or if she is conceptually tied only to Western philosophy, she cannot fully respond to and cater to the needs of those who do not conform to the usual counselee. If we use the terminology provided by Wiredu, we can comfortably state that current forms of PC (in South Africa) are conceptually Western even if some forms of African philosophy would be introduced. If a PC session is conducted in English and this is not the counselee's home language, one forfeits the opportunity to give the counselee chance to *speak their mind*.

### 5. How Might one then Live and Practice PC in (South) Africa Today?

Reading the question “How might one live, here, today?” as a transparent blueprint that a philosophical counsellor can universally apply would profoundly miss the creative and experimental potential inherent in this inquiry. The exclusion of philosophical traditions radically different from one's own not only limits but impoverishes what could have been beneficial to both the counselee and philosophical counsellor, while simultaneously depriving the broader and global PC discourse – that is, it does not allow for a “universal enriched by every particular” (Césaire, 2010, p. 152). Two contemporary authors, Richard Sivil (2024) and Jaco Louw (2024) writing from South African contexts, have begun demonstrating explicit efforts towards expanding the PC discourse with their respective work on Ubuntu philosophy as a way of life, and African conversational and hermeneutic philosophy as a way of life. While the argument presented in this paper begins to do some of the “hard work” called for by many African philosophers, it remains fundamentally meta-philosophical in nature, as it pertains to establishing the foundational ground from which one might begin to speak. That is, posing the question “How might one live, here, today?” is not aimed at extracting concrete answers. Rather, it should initiate a collaborative process of experimentation and a “*rethink-through together*” with the counselee about what might emerge from a space that embraces multiple ways of knowing/thinking and which does not attempt to “understand” (Achenbach, 2024, p. 37).

In this sense, PC becomes fundamentally *translational*; the philosophical counsellor engages not only in translating philosophical jargon or technical/academic language, but potentially in translating ideas and concepts across different languages themselves. The former represents inter-translation occurring within one language, while the latter constitutes intra-translation happening outside or beyond a single linguistic framework. In South Africa, where isiZulu, isiXhosa, and Afrikaans are the three most spoken languages (Lehohla, 2012, p. 24), the dominance of English in academic discourse (Madadzhe, 2019, p. 211) effectively “produces” (conceptually) English philosophers and subsequently (conceptually) English philosophical counsellors. As noted above, for certain African philosophers, like Wiredu, thinking about African philosophy in English is to already conceptually ground it in a foreign framework. The high likelihood of a philosophical counsellor encountering a counselee who primarily speaks one of these dominant languages in South Africa creates a tremendously important philosophical moment characterised by a bi-directional flow and cultivation of knowledge and ways of thinking. That is, while the counselee can learn from the philosophical counsellor, the philosophical counsellor can equally learn from the counselee, creating a space where novel concepts can emerge and be sculpted as both participants engage in philosophising from their respective linguistic and conceptual positions.

The most obvious limitation to this argument is that the philosophical counsellor is bound by the number of languages she can speak. If she can only speak English, she will necessarily forfeit the opportunity to engage with counselees whose first language is, for example, isiZulu, isiXhosa, or Afrikaans. Moreover, if her education is conceptually limited to only one tradition, such as Western philosophy, she might not be adequately prepared to engage with different concepts and ways of living that emerge from other philosophical traditions, such as African philosophy.

These perceived limitations, however, might become fundamentally creative philosophical moments—continual and critical conversations that could lead to new questions, concepts, and ways of thinking that are more rooted in a specific lifeworld. Within a network of philosophers qua philosophical counsellors, broader and more urgent issues related to educational and curricular reform can, or better yet, must be addressed. These include the languages in which philosophy is taught at (South) African universities, the content of the curricula, and who will teach at these reformed universities (Chimakonam, 2016, p. 515; Etieyibo, 2016, p. 380; Nyoni, 2023, p. 551). Philosophers engaged in these decolonial and Africanising conversations must also influence and reshape the discourse of PC. By taking seriously alternative conceptual frameworks and localised practices, it will enable (aspiring) philosophical counsellors—not just in South Africa but also elsewhere—to think, speak, and practice in philosophical languages that resonate with the lived experiences of a more diverse group of counselees. Such philosophical languages might concretely mean speaking in the counselee's home language—an issue that is more prevalent in places such as South Africa. But also, then, to collaboratively develop, use, and engage concepts and ideas rooted in and emerging from these lifeworlds—where such alternatives can be beneficial to counselees and philosophical counsellors not just from (South) African lifeworlds.

### Concluding Remarks

If the arguments in this paper are to be taken seriously, they should be regarded as open ended invitations to collaboratively carry on with the “hard work” of writing anew, writing differently, and speaking in a language that might disturb and unsettle. That is, the goal of asking the question “How might one live, here, today?” in its expanded form, I argued in this paper, is to challenge settled ways of thinking through the call to introduce, in this case, African philosophical perspectives. Some important work has been done in this area, but the PC discourse still severely lacks rigorous and lively discussions emerging from here, and in this case, South Africa. Therefore, the arguments in this paper can be reduced to a rather humble invitation to take voices speaking from these lifeworlds seriously, and to engage with them in a manner that can create new concepts, novel ways of thinking/living, and continuous conversations. This approach embraces a radical reciprocity wherein those philosophical counsellors from and beyond African lifeworlds can mutually benefit from, enrich, and co-create across open-ended conversations.

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## **Platonomy: The Art and Science of Self-Governance on the Road to Eudaimonia**

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### **Abstract**

This article presents “Platonomy,” a systematic framework derived from Plato’s *Politeia* that re-frames the dialogue as primarily concerned with psychological self-governance rather than political theory. The study introduces a tetradic model of the psyche extending beyond the traditional tripartite division to include constitutional governance (*auto politeia*) that determines how psychological faculties relate to one another.

The work develops practical applications through the COLA epistemological framework and SELF psychological model, along with techniques including psychagogy (soul-guidance) and counter-charms for constitutional protection. The conclusion demonstrates that genuine well-being emerges from developing internal constitutional order that enables flourishing regardless of external circumstances, offering a practical ancient path to psychological integration and sustained happiness.

**Keywords:** *Platonomy, constitutional psychology, auto politeia, tetradic model, self-governance, eudaimonia, psychagogy, platonic psychology, self-friendship, psychological integration, well-being, ancient philosophy*

### **Introduction: Recovering a Lost Science**

Plato never wrote a dialogue called “The Republic.” The work we know by this title was actually called “*Politeia*” in Greek, which more accurately translates to “constitution” or “governance” (Ferrari & Griffith, 2000). This consequential mistranslation originated with Cicero, who referred to it as “*de res publica*,” meaning “concerning public matters” (Wikipedia, 2025). This seemingly minor linguistic choice has profoundly shaped how we understand one of philosophy’s most influential works for over two millennia.

By framing Plato’s *Politeia* as primarily political, readers throughout history have sought blueprints for ideal states rather than guidance for internal self-governance. This misinterpretation continues to influence political theory and civic education today, where the dialogue is often presented primarily as a political treatise rather than an exploration of psychological constitution.

In 1715, the philosopher Leibniz made a remarkable observation: “If someone were to reduce Plato to a system, he would render a great service to mankind.” The challenge was significant - Plato deliberately wrote in dialogues that resist systematic interpretation. Yet within his works, particularly the *Politeia*, lies a sophisticated framework for understanding human psychology and achieving genuine well-being.

The word “Platonomy” represents this systematic approach—a deliberate fusion of “Plato” and “nomos” (law or governance), suggesting both “Plato’s understanding of natural law” and the “science of self-governance.” This isn’t mere wordplay. The Latin term for autonomy, “auto-nomia,” combines “self” (autos) and “law” (nomos)—literally meaning self-governance. This relates directly to Plato’s concept of “auto politeia”—one’s internal constitution that determines how all parts of the self relate and function together.

What makes this recovery particularly valuable is recognizing that Plato’s *Republic* is fundamentally misunderstood. Throughout the dialogue, Socrates repeatedly emphasizes that their goal is not primarily political but psychological, stating explicitly that they are discussing “the right conduct of life” and that one should “keep his eyes fixed on the constitution in his soul” (Plato, *Republic* 591e).

### **The Road Metaphor: Two Lanes of Life**

The development of Platonomy begins with a powerful metaphor drawn from ancient Greek traveling experience. Unlike the Roman Empire with its paved highways, ancient Greece had rudimentary paths connecting city-states, often through rocky, mountainous terrain. A common question when meeting travelers was: “How is the road—rough and difficult, or smooth and easy to travel?”

Socrates employs this familiar metaphor when asking Cephalus about old age: “Is it rough and hard going or easy and pleasant to travel (trakheia kai khalepē, ē rhadia kai euporos)?” This question introduces the foundational framework of my analysis: two complementary pairs of concepts that help clarify what we can and cannot control:

**Tyche/Psyche (chance-soul):** This distinguishes between external fortune (tyche)—the circumstances beyond our control—and internal character (psyche)—how we respond to whatever fortune brings.

**Hodos/Tropos (road-turn):** This pair captures a similar distinction. Hodos refers to the road or path itself—the external conditions we must travel through. Tropos, meaning a “turn” or “way of being,” refers to how we choose to walk that path—our internal character and approach to life.

In our daily lives, we travel a road with two lanes running side by side:

- The left lane (Trakheia Way) is consistently jagged and rough, though its difficulty varies
- The right lane (Eudaimonia Way) is generally smoother, though not perfect

Just as “right” in many languages refers to both direction and correctness, the right-hand path represents the healthier, more balanced approach to life. Yet importantly, these aren’t separate roads but lanes of the same road—we can shift between them through our choices and character.

This distinction helps explain why people experiencing similar external circumstances often report dramatically different levels of well-being. Research on subjective well-being consistently finds that external circumstances explain surprisingly little variance in reported happiness, while psychological factors explain considerably more.

As Heraclitus observed, “The road up and the road down is one and the same.” This metaphorical framework establishes the dialogue’s central concern: not how to avoid life’s inevitable challenges,

but how to develop the character and soul-governance that allows us to navigate them with greater ease.

### The Tetradic Model: Beyond the Traditional Triad

For over two millennia, scholars have generally recognized Plato's model of the soul as tripartite—consisting of reason, spirit, and appetite (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2023). However, a careful examination reveals a more sophisticated four-part structure with the addition of a governing constitutional element that has largely gone unnoticed.

Cephalus's response to Socrates' question about old age reveals a profound truth: the smoothness or roughness of life's path depends primarily on one's character (*tropos*). As he explains, "If men are orderly and easily satisfied (*kosmioi kai eukoloi*), even old age is only moderately burdensome. But if the reverse, old age, Socrates, and youth are hard for such dispositions."

His description of good character includes four key qualities that prefigure the more developed tetradic model that emerges later:

- **Eukoloi** (329a) - "Easily satisfied" → Appetitive faculty
- **Kosmioi** (329a) - "Well-ordered" → Spirited faculty
- **Epieikēs** (Well-ordered) - Maintains proper social conduct and courage in facing challenges
- **Just & Pious** - (331a-b) - Constitutional integration → Auto politeia

This pattern becomes more explicit when Socrates analyzes the concept of function (*ergon*) and virtue. He identifies four distinct functions of the soul that correspond to the tetradic model.

The complete tetradic model includes:

1. **Auto Politeia (Constitutional Governance)** - The overall governance structure that determines how the other parts relate to each other. This isn't just another part alongside the others but represents the constitutional framework that enables proper integration.
2. **Logistikon (Reasoning Faculty)** - The rational, calculating part that seeks knowledge and understanding through logical analysis and conceptual thinking.
3. **Thymos (Spirited/Emotional Faculty)** - The emotional, honor-loving part that responds to value and drives motivation, recognizing what matters and why.
4. **Epithymetikon (Appetitive Faculty)** - The desiring part that seeks basic satisfactions and pleasures, handling survival and physiological needs.

This four-part structure appears consistently throughout the *Politeia*, from Cephalus's early speech to the culminating image of the composite creature in Book IX, where the three inner parts are wrapped with an outer human form that unifies them (Plato, Republic 588c-e).

The most direct statement appears when Socrates explicitly uses the term *auto politeia*: "This is the purpose of the law, which is the ally of all classes in the state, and this is the aim of our control of

children, our not leaving them free before we have established, so to speak, a constitutional government within them [*auto politeia*]” (Plato, *Republic* 590e).

### **The City as Psychological Metaphor**

When Socrates suggests examining justice in the city before looking for it in the individual, he’s not changing the subject but employing a crucial methodological approach. As he explains: “If our argument should observe the origin of a state, we should see also the origin of justice and injustice in it... And if this is done, we may expect to find more easily what we are seeking” (Plato, *Republic* 369a).

The city becomes a magnified image of the soul’s structure, making its complexities easier to discern. Socrates describes three classes in the ideal city: the guardians (philosophers) characterized by wisdom, the auxiliaries (warriors) marked by courage, and the producers driven by material needs. Each class has its proper function and corresponding virtue (Morganic Books, 2021).

Significantly, justice in this city isn’t a property of any single class but the principle of “doing one’s own work” without interfering in others’ domains. This constitutional principle that determines how each class relates to the others corresponds to the fourth element of the psyche that governs the relationship between its parts. The political analysis thus serves as an extended metaphor for understanding proper self-governance within the individual psyche.

### **Justice as Constitutional Relationship**

The pivotal moment in the development of Platonomy comes when Socrates defines justice in the soul. Rather than identifying it with any specific activity or part, he describes it as a constitutional principle of proper relationship:

“Justice is with regard to that which is within and in the true sense concerns one’s self, and the things of one’s self—it means that a man must not suffer the principles in his soul to do each the work of some other and interfere and meddle with one another, but that he should dispose well of what in the true sense of the word is properly his own, and having first attained to self-mastery and beautiful order, become a friend to himself” (Plato, *Republic* 443d).

This definition reveals several crucial insights:

1. Justice isn’t reducible to any single faculty but emerges from their proper constitutional relationship
2. Proper self-governance leads to “becoming a friend to oneself” (*philon genomenon heauto*)
3. Psychological health doesn’t require suppressing any part but organizing all parts so each fulfills its natural function without interference

This constitutional conception of justice confirms the presence of a fourth element—not another part alongside the others but the governance structure that determines their relationships.

### The COLA Framework: Four Levels of Knowledge

To understand how we develop knowledge within this constitutional framework, I've developed the "COLA" framework that aligns with Plato's divided line:

- **Conjecture (Eikasia)** - Dealing with shadows, reflections, images
- **Opinion (Pistis)** - Belief based on the visible world and conventional understanding
- **Logical reasoning (Dianoia)** - Methodical thinking using hypothesis and deduction
- **Abstract understanding (Noesis)** - Direct intellectual intuition of the Forms and first principles

What makes this framework particularly valuable is understanding how each level of knowledge corresponds to a specific aspect of our psychological constitution:

<b>Divided Line (COLA)</b>	<b>Objects of Knowledge</b>	<b>Tetradic Psyche</b>	<b>Instruments of Knowledge (Seventh Letter)</b>	<b>Function</b>
<b>Abstract understanding (Noesis/Episteme)</b>	The Forms themselves	<b>Constitutional Governance</b> (Auto Politeia)	<b>Knowledge Itself</b>	Integration and direct apprehension of truth
<b>Logical reasoning (Dianoia)</b>	Mathematical objects, hypotheses	<b>Reasoning Faculty</b> (Logistikon)	<b>Definition</b>	Analysis and logical examination
<b>Opinion (Pistis)</b>	Physical objects, living things	<b>Spirited/Emotional Faculty</b> (Thymos)	<b>Name</b>	Conventional designation and value recognition
<b>Conjecture (Eikasia)</b>	Images, shadows, reflections	<b>Appetitive Faculty</b> (Epithymetikon)	<b>Image</b>	Basic sensory representation and immediate response

It's crucial to note that in his Seventh Letter, Plato acknowledges profound limitations in our instruments of knowledge. He warns that names, definitions, and images are all inadequate to fully capture reality. As he writes: "Every existing object has three things which are the necessary means by which knowledge of that object is acquired; and the knowledge itself is a fourth thing; and as a fifth one must postulate the object itself which is cognizable and true" (342b).

This "fifth element"—the object itself—represents ultimate reality which we approach through the progressive development of understanding but never fully grasp through human faculties alone.

### **Illumination: The Cave Allegory**

The famous allegory of the cave vividly illustrates the path of constitutional transformation. The prisoner's journey from shadows to reality represents not merely intellectual enlightenment but comprehensive psychological reordering (Britannica, 2022). Several aspects of this allegory reveal its constitutional significance:

The painful process of turning—Socrates emphasizes that education involves “turning the whole soul” rather than putting sight into blind eyes. This holistic turning involves the entire constitutional structure, not just intellectual capacity.

The process of adaptation—The prisoner must gradually acclimate to each new level of reality, suggesting that constitutional transformation requires incremental development rather than sudden change.

The return to the cave—The philosopher who returns to help others faces danger precisely because his constitutional ordering differs from theirs. His challenge is not merely intellectual disagreement but fundamentally different internal governance.

Socrates explicitly states that “education is not what some people declare it to be, namely, putting knowledge into souls that lack it... The instrument with which each learns is like an eye that cannot be turned around from darkness to light without turning the whole body.” This emphasis on turning the “whole body” of the psyche reinforces the constitutional nature of true education.

### **Constitutional Decline: The Five Regimes**

In Books VIII and IX, Socrates examines how constitutions deteriorate in both cities and souls, providing crucial insights into the nature of the *auto politeia*. He describes a “psyche’s throne” that can be occupied by different faculties:

“The son...thrusts headlong from his psyche’s throne that principle of love of honor and that high spirit, and being humbled by poverty turns to the getting of money... Do you not suppose that such a one will then establish on that throne the principle of appetite and avarice, and set it up as the great king in his soul?” (Plato, Republic 553c-d)

This metaphor reveals several crucial aspects of constitutional psychology:

1. The throne itself is distinct from the faculties that might occupy it
2. Constitutional change involves a formal restructuring of authority
3. When one part gains the throne, it actively subordinates the other parts to its purposes
4. The *auto politeia* determines not just which part rules but the entire pattern of relationships between parts

The progression through five regimes—aristocracy (reason rules), timocracy (spirit rules), oligarchy (necessary appetites rule), democracy (unnecessary appetites join in), and tyranny (lawless desires dominate)—demonstrates how constitutional changes create corresponding changes in character and behavior (Jorgenson, 2021).

## **The Complete Tetradic Model Visualized**

In Book IX, Socrates offers a vivid image of the soul as a composite creature:

“By fashioning in our discourse a symbolic image of the soul... One of those natures that the ancient fables tell of, as that of the Chimaera or Scylla or Cerberus... Then fashion one other form of a lion and one of a man... Join the three in one, then, so as in some sort to grow together... Then mould about them outside the likeness of one, that of the man” (Plato, Republic 588c-d).

In this striking metaphor, the multi-headed beast represents the appetites, the lion represents the spirited element, and the inner human form represents reason. Crucially, these three are then wrapped with an outer sheath that has the “likeness of one, that of the man.” This outer human form—distinct from the inner human form representing reason—constitutes a fourth component that unifies and contains the other three.

This metaphor provides one of the clearest illustrations of the tetradic model. The outer human form represents the constitutional governance that integrates the three inner components into a unified whole, making them appear to others as a single being.

## **The Clear vs. Anxious Emotional System**

One of my most valuable discoveries concerns the distinction between genuine emotions and anxiety-based reactions. While often conflated in both ancient and modern discussions, these represent fundamentally different psychological phenomena with distinct constitutional implications.

A genuine emotion includes three essential components:

1. **Cognitive awareness** of the emotion
2. The **physiological experience** - specific physical sensations in the body
3. An **action tendency** - a natural impulse toward meaningful action

When experienced fully, genuine emotions follow a natural resolution process, rising and falling like a wave. They provide valuable information about what matters to us and motivate meaningful action.

Anxiety, despite often being labeled as an emotion, functions very differently. While emotions mobilize us for purposeful action, anxiety often paralyzes or creates unfocused reactivity. It represents a constitutional disruption where the survival system overrides both emotional and rational functioning.

This distinction helps explain why some approaches to emotions work for anxiety but interfere with processing genuine emotions. From a constitutional perspective, the goal isn't emotional control but proper integration that allows emotions to provide their valuable contributions while maintaining overall constitutional order.

Plato doesn't advocate apatheia (absence of emotion) but metriopatheia (measured emotion)—emotions experienced in appropriate measure and directed toward worthy objects. Through a

well-functioning thymos, emotions aren't eliminated but integrated—experienced in appropriate measure and directed toward worthy objects.

### **The Power of Habit in Constitutional Development**

Habits shape our constitutional development over time. As Plato states in the *Politeia*: “The habit and practice of one's own and what belongs to oneself would admittedly be justice” (434a). This *hexis*—a permanent condition produced through practice—shapes who we become.

Plato's approach to habit differs subtly but significantly from Aristotle's later virtue ethics. Where Aristotle would make habit the centerpiece, Plato embeds habit within his constitutional model. For Aristotle, virtuous habits directly create good character. For Plato, habits either reinforce or undermine proper constitutional order.

This insight appears vividly in the Myth of Er at the **Politeia's** conclusion. Plato describes a soul who had “participated in virtue by habit and not by philosophy” (619d). This person had lived well but hadn't internalized the understanding of why certain habits were good. When faced with new circumstances, they chose poorly. Habits alone aren't enough—they must be anchored in philosophical understanding and proper constitutional order.

### **Practical Techniques for Platonomy Practice**

Plato offers several specific techniques for developing and maintaining proper constitutional order. These are not merely theoretical constructs but practical approaches to strengthening psychological governance in everyday life.

### **The Art of Psychagogy: Guiding the Soul**

Central to Platonic practice is *psychagogy* (psychagogia)—the art of guiding the soul. As Plato explains in the *Phaedrus* (271d), “it is the function of speech to lead souls by persuasion” (*epeidē logou dunamis tugkhanei psukhagōgia ousa*). This isn't manipulation but a therapeutic approach to orienting the soul toward truth and health.

Psychagogy works through three primary tools:

1. **Beautiful Words (Kalos Logoi)** - Language that inspires and elevates, connecting us to higher values
2. **Counter-Charms (Epode)** - Protective thoughts that shield us from harmful influences
3. **Therapeutic Dialogue** - Conversation that builds understanding and constitutional order

Plato describes this process as *periagōgē*—a “turning around” or conversion of the soul from disordered to properly ordered functioning.

### **Counter-Charms for Constitutional Protection**

One of the most practical techniques Plato offers is the use of counter-charms (*epode*) to protect constitutional order. In the *Politeia* (608a-b), he advises that “we should chant to ourselves the

reasons (logoi) that we have given as a counter-charm to protect the constitution in our soul from unjust temptations.”

Similarly, in the *Charmides* (157a), he explains that “therapy of the soul is by means of certain charms (epodas) which are beautiful words (kalos logoi) by which temperance is engendered in our souls.”

These counter-charms function as what Plato calls a “pharmakon” (remedy or antidote) against harmful influences. At *Politeia* 595b, he warns that certain kinds of art can corrupt the mind of listeners “who do not possess, as an antidote (pharmakon), a knowledge of its real nature.”

Here are specific counter-charms from Plato’s works that can be used in daily practice:

#### **For Constitutional Protection:**

- “Keep your eyes fixed on the constitution in your soul, and taking care and watching lest you disturb anything there either by excess or deficiency of wealth.” (*Politeia* 591e)

#### **Against Anxiety:**

- “It is best to keep quiet as far as possible in misfortune, because we cannot know what is really good or bad in such things.” (*Politeia* 604b)

#### **For Maintaining Balance:**

- “Choose the life that is seated in the mean and shun the excess in either direction, both in this world so far as may be and in all the life to come; for this is the greatest happiness for man.” (*Politeia* 619a-b)

#### **Responding to Fortune’s Dice**

Plato offers specific guidance for handling life’s ups and downs. At *Politeia* 604b-c, he advises: “It is best to keep quiet as far as possible in misfortune, because we cannot know what is really good or bad in such things... Instead we should deliberate about the fall of the dice (kubos) and determine the movements of our affairs in the way that reason (logos) indicates would be the best.”

This practice involves four steps:

1. **Pause** - When fortune changes (for better or worse), take time for reflection before responding
2. **Question Assumptions** - Ask whether what seems good or bad truly is so
3. **Deliberate** - Use reason to determine the wisest response to the situation
4. **Act Wisely** - Take action based on constitutional wisdom rather than impulsive reaction

This approach helps maintain constitutional order even when external circumstances change dramatically.

## Becoming a Friend to Oneself

Perhaps the most profound concept in Plato's framework is the idea of "becoming a friend to oneself" (*philon genomenon heauto*), which appears at a crucial moment when Socrates defines justice:

Justice is with regard to that which is within and in the true sense concerns one's self, and the things of one's self—it means that a man must not suffer the principles in his soul to do each the work of some other and interfere and meddle with one another, but that he should dispose well of what in the true sense of the word is properly his own, and having first attained to self-mastery and beautiful order, become a friend to himself [*philon genomenon heauto*] (Plato, *Republic* 443d).

This self-friendship isn't narcissistic self-adoration but the natural outcome of constitutional health. Like friendship between persons, it involves specific qualities that emerge from proper constitutional relationships:

1. **Self-Knowledge:** Seeing ourselves clearly, including both strengths and limitations, without defensive distortion.
2. **Self-Care:** Proper attention to all aspects of our nature—physical needs, emotional well-being, intellectual development, and constitutional integration.
3. **Self-Trust:** Trusting our constitutional wisdom—recognizing that when properly integrated, our psychological faculties naturally guide us toward flourishing.
4. **Self-Compassion:** Responding to our own struggles and failures with understanding rather than harsh judgment.

These qualities emerge naturally from proper constitutional order, where each psychological faculty fulfills its proper function under good governance.

### The SELF Model: A Practical Framework

To make these insights accessible for modern application, I've developed the SELF model that translates Plato's tetradic framework into contemporary psychological language:

- **S** - Soma (Body) / Survival System - Corresponding to Plato's appetitive faculty (*epithymetikon*)
- **E** - Emotional System - Corresponding to Plato's spirited faculty (*thymos*)
- **L** - Logical System - Corresponding to Plato's reasoning faculty (*logistikon*)
- **F** - Fundamental Rules - Corresponding to Plato's constitutional governance (*auto politeia*)

Complementing this structural framework, the RULE process model guides practical application:

#### R - Relationship with SELF

- Notice how you're treating each part of yourself
- Observe your current constitutional patterns
- Respond to your needs with care

### U - Unmanaged Anxiety

- Notice when you're experiencing physiological tension
- Use breathing and relaxation to regulate the survival system
- Address what's causing the anxiety directly when possible

### L - Label Emotions

- Identify what you're feeling with specific emotion words
- Notice physical sensations and action urges
- Allow emotions to complete their natural cycle

### E - Examine Options

- Consider the situation from different perspectives
- Identify possible responses and likely outcomes
- Choose constructive actions based on values and goals

This process naturally guides individuals through restoring constitutional order—beginning with overall awareness, addressing anxiety disruption, integrating emotional information, and then engaging rational faculties for constructive action.

### Conclusion: The Formula for Flourishing

We can now refine our understanding of the formula for well-being: H[4(PKIV)GM]. This means that genuine well-being emerges from habits (H) that support four parts of the psyche (P), each with its knowledge (K), instruments (I), and virtues (V), all guided by the Good (G) and the Mean (M).

In practice, success in this approach manifests not in perfect control but in navigating life more smoothly, handling fortune's ups and downs with grace, maintaining internal harmony, and growing steadily over time. The goal isn't to eliminate challenges but to develop the kind of internal constitution that can handle whatever life brings.

As Socrates concludes at the end of the *Politeia*, by following this constitutional path, “we shall hold ever to the upward way and pursue righteousness with wisdom always and ever, that we may be dear to ourselves [autois philo] and to the gods” (621c). This self-friendship through proper constitutional ordering represents the essence of eudaimonia—a form of flourishing that transcends changing circumstances through the enduring harmony of a well-governed soul.

In our age of anxiety and fragmentation, this ancient system offers something precious: a practical path to genuine well-being through proper self-governance. It shows us that while we can't control fortune, we can develop the kind of internal constitution that enables us to flourish regardless of circumstances.

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## Lead a Happy Life According to Aristotelian Thought

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### Abstract

Generally, motion refers to the change of an object (with an unchanging underlying substance) from one state to another. In essence, it is the actualization of potential. Since all things inherently possess privation, their forms undergo perpetual transformation. Practice aims at and is directed towards goodness; happiness is a natural goal or aim of life and also the highest goodness. Compared with ordinary matter, humans are not only just a kind of material being, but also importantly active agents. Guided by rationality, under theoretical and practical wisdom, the form of something about us (human beings) will become more and more salutary if motion is ongoing. Thus, happiness will be achieved. This paper presents a revised model for realizing Aristotelian goodness, defines the concept of 'goodness realization,' and briefly discusses a case study.

**Keywords:** *Aristotle, happy life, happiness, rationality, the good*

**Water:** Hi, Miss Fish, good afternoon.

**Fish:** Good afternoon, Mr. Water, how are you feeling today?

**Water:** Very well, it is sunny after several days of rain, the sky is clear and blue, the air is fresh and sweet, and I feel relaxed because I just finished my work. More importantly, we are sitting at this lovely window table in this Philosophers Café, with an amazing view outside. Through the window, we see spring flowers in full bloom, hear all kinds of birds singing, and even catch a glimpse of the little stream winding behind the café. And the most wonderful part is sipping coffee while freely discussing philosophy. How about you?

**Fish:** I agree with you entirely. Regarding philosophy, I've spent about a week reading Aristotle's works, since you mentioned last time that we could live a truly happy life or achieve goodness to a great extent. So far, I've only covered the main ideas of his philosophy, but I'm really enjoying it!

**Water:** Oh, good, so shall we begin our conversation with Aristotle this afternoon?

**Fish:** Sure. Bertrand Russell observed that while Aristotle's merits were enormous compared to his predecessors, his shortcomings were equally significant when measured against later thinkers. For two thousand years after his death, no philosopher could even approach his stature. His authority in nearly every field—from science to philosophy—stood unquestioned, much like that of the Church. Yet ironically, nearly every major intellectual breakthrough that followed began with challenging one or more aspects of Aristotelian doctrine.

**Water:** Right, I think he was great because of his merits and demerits. In either case, he had had thought deeply and seriously.

**Fish:** Yes. Aristotle was born around 384 B.C. in Thrace, where his father served as physician to the Macedonian king. At approximately age 18, he was sent to the Academy in Athens, where he studied under Plato for nearly twenty years until the latter's death in 348 or 347 B.C. In 343 B.C., Aristotle assumed the role of tutor to young Alexander, a relationship that lasted about three years.

This pairing of two great historical figures has led many to speculate about their intellectual influence. Some scholars maintain that the philosopher profoundly shaped his royal pupil's development. Hegel, for instance, argued that Alexander's remarkable career demonstrates philosophy's practical value when applied to statecraft.

However, I agree with Russell that Aristotle hardly influenced the future Emperor at all.

**Water:** I agree with Russell too, I think that Aristotle and Alexander inhabited two completely different worlds, so Aristotle's tutoring in philosophy was unfruitful. But Alexander helped Aristotle a lot, directly or indirectly.

**Fish:** Right, I think so. During twelve years starting from 335 BCE, Aristotle lived in Athens, where he founded his school, the Lyceum, and wrote most of his books. When Alexander died in 323 B.C., anti-Macedonian sentiment led to rebellion in Athens, and Aristotle was charged with impiety. Unlike Socrates, who chose to stay and face execution, Aristotle fled the city. He famously justified his decision by saying he wished to prevent the Athenians from "sinning twice against philosophy" (by killing another philosopher). He died the following year on an island in the Aegean Sea.

**Water:** Killing philosophers again? They had had killed Socrates many years prior.

**Fish:** Right. After knowing something about his whole life, I've been reading some of Aristotle's works (translated versions, of course). Now I'd like to share what I've understood with you—discussing these ideas together might help us gain deeper insights.

**Water:** Sure, go ahead.

**Fish:** In his physics which is called "natural philosophy", he presented a concept called Nature. Nature for him is far different from our usage today. To him, it is the "nature" (*physis*) of an apple seed to grow into an apple tree. Once one grasps this, they understand his concept of "nature": the end (*telos*) of a thing is its nature. A thing exists precisely to fulfill this end. And just like the seed, we human beings have our own nature—an ultimate purpose we are meant to realize.

**Water:** Good, you understand it well. Maybe all of us exist for our own ends.

**Fish:** Maybe. Aristotle classified things into two fundamental categories: those that exist by nature and those that exist by other causes (e.g., human artifice). The former includes living organisms (animals and plants) and elemental bodies (earth, air, fire, water), while the latter comprises man-made artifacts.

This distinction reveals that "nature" signifies an inner essence—the intrinsic principle governing a thing's movement and development. As Bertrand Russell aptly noted, "Nature belongs to the class

of causes which operate for the sake of something”—a teleological view where a thing’s nature is its immanent purpose.

Aristotle held that motion has three properties: change (from potential to actual, in three principles), causality (that which moves something, of four kinds) and typology (various categories of causal change). Matter is the carrier of motion; form determines the state of a moving thing; while categories determine specific properties of the motion. The three principles (or elements) of change are matter (or substratum), form and privation. Privation is the absence of a particular material form. It refers to a form that a thing could or should have, but doesn’t have presently. Generally, motion is change of one thing, with an invariable carrier, from one state to another.

**Water:** Right. For example, when the form of water is cool, its privation is cold. When the form becomes cold enough, water changes to ice. And vice-versa, when the form of ice is cold, its privation is heat. Ice would be changed back into water, and eventually into steam, if the form becomes hot.

**Fish:** So Aristotle told us further that motion is fulfillment of what exists potentially.

**Water:** Yes. From the above examples and a given motion’s definition, we can know further that its privation determines its trajectory of change. Fulfillment is transient, because a new privation will arise when any fulfillment is completed or achieved. So fulfillment is also relative, because there will always be privation in any state of motion, while a carrier itself remains invariant. For Aristotle, all natural processes, whether bodily movements or intellectual activities, are manifestations of this fundamental dynamic: the actualization (*energeia*) of potential (*dynamis*) into reality (*entelecheia*).

**Fish:** Understood. Later, he discussed the reasons why things move, and he presented four causes. But change itself can also be treated in terms of two elements: form and matter. Aristotle also held that everything has its own natural position which is exactly right for its nature.

**Water:** Correct. When you push or pull an object, it moves away from its natural position. But inside that moving object, there’s a built-in force trying to bring it back to where it started. Scientists call this built-in “returning force” the restoring force. Ancient philosophers like Aristotle might have called it the object’s natural motion. Let me explain why this idea really matters. I’ll save the deeper implications for later.

**Fish:** Ok. His treatise *On the Heavens* divided things into two categories: things below the moon can be generated and decay, but from the moon upwards, which is called “heaven”, everything is ungenerated and indestructible. Earth, on which we human beings live, belongs to the former; the moon and above to the latter, and ultimately to God. The first mover, which can also be called the highest principle of metaphysics, moves heaven.

**Water:** Yes.

**Fish:** As far as Aristotle’s metaphysics are concerned, he opposed Plato’s theory of universals, and argued that the first philosophy should study is “being”. Based on logical analysis, he concluded that the Primary Substance is form. Then he added that Substance is inherent form; form and matter are sources of actual Substance. Actual substances belong to empirical world; they are in motion and in the process of fulfillment.

**Water:** Right. Actual substances exist at different hierarchical levels. The greater their material composition, the less defined their form, placing them at a lower level; conversely, those with less matter but more refined form occupy higher levels. There are three tiers of actual substances: perishable and in motion (e.g., earthly objects); eternal yet still in motion (e.g., celestial bodies), eternal and completely unchanging (transcending the empirical world, termed “God”). The first two levels combine matter and form, while the third—existing beyond physical reality—has no matter and is pure form.

**Fish:** Yes. As far as his “God” was concerned, there are three meanings: it is the first mover, it is pure form, and it is pure thought or thought about thought. Therefore, God is a thought entity, thinking itself eternally. Its action is thinking. Actually, “God” is the primary principle of metaphysics. Thus, worshiping God is one kind of speculative action, an acme of wisdom and happiness.

**Water:** Exactly, I think so. It is really an acme of wisdom and happiness for a person to worship God. And it is really good for a person to do so. I recommend to you Aristotle’s theory of the soul, which is also nice.

**Fish:** I did read it. His general idea on soul is that soul is the principle of a life to be fulfilled. Inside the body, soul promotes life, and is the reason for a body’s generation, decay and motion.

**Water:** Right.

**Fish:** All living beings possess a soul, which has two parts: emotional soul and rational soul. Feeling is common for both human beings and animals, but intellectual activity, as a special function of rational soul, is a special trait of human beings. The emotional soul governs instincts like sensations, physical urges, and basic behaviors. In contrast, the rational soul drives higher functions, including theoretical thinking (e.g., logic, creativity) and practical decision-making (e.g., moral judgment, planning).

**Water:** This theory shows that the human being has a special function which lays a strong foundation for us in pursuit of goodness.

**Fish:** Really? Anyhow, I have already read his practical science in which goodness is talked about in detail.

**Water:** Very good. Speak of it according to your understanding, please.

**Fish:** Ok. For Aristotle, practice means action aimed at and directed towards goodness. The ultimate goal for both a nation and a person is goodness, but goodness realized in a nation is more superior, more complete, and more honorable than goodness realized by a person. Thus practical philosophy has two branches: ethics and politics. The two are interconnected, as individuals can fully actualize their highest good only within the context of shared political life.

**Water:** Exactly.

**Fish:** Goodness has different levels. Goodness at lower levels submits to goodness at higher levels; the latter is the aim of the former.

**Water:** Yes. For instance, the aim of taking a sleeping pill is health, the aim of health is joyfulness, and the aim of joyfulness is happiness.

**Fish:** So happiness is the natural aim of life, and also the highest goodness. Moreover, everyone tends to pursue happiness naturally, but the aim of happiness is happiness itself.

**Water:** Yes, this kind of happiness for human beings comes from nature. Humans have the ability to distinguish good from evil, and to approach good by avoiding evil. This ability is called rationality. When rationality guides human beings to act, it is called virtue. So, a happy life emanates from virtue.

**Fish:** I think so. Aristotle pointed out that joyfulness is necessary for happiness. But he wanted to maintain a balance between joyfulness and virtue. Generally, both joyfulness without virtue and virtue without joyfulness are not happiness, but the former is further away from happiness.

**Water:** Yes, virtue is vital for a person's pursuit of happiness.

**Fish:** Given that that happiness is the greatest good, how do we approach it or attain it? The answer lie in practical wisdom. This kind of wisdom involves understanding real-world contexts and concrete facts. When applying it, two steps are essential: First, deliberate carefully by considering all possible options, comparing them, and thinking them through deeply. Second, after this thorough consideration, choose the best course of action.

**Water:** Yes.

**Fish:** There is a rule we must abide by when using practical wisdom, namely the rule of the golden mean. The golden mean shows that every virtue is a mean between two extremes, namely deficiency and excess, each of which is a vice. Here are some examples. Courage is a mean between cowardice and rashness. Liberty is a mean between profligacy and slavery. Healthy pride is a mean between vanity and self-abnegation. By avoiding these extremes, virtues become guiding lights for ethical living.

**Water:** Good. But a quantitative mean is determined by theoretical wisdom, by which we can see essence of a thing.

**Fish:** Great, this helps me understand better, beyond what I read.

**Water:** Very nice, you got the main ideas.

**Fish:** Thanks. So how can a person lead a happy life, or achieve the so-called highest goodness?

**Water:** Well, as we know, although Aristotle's scientific deficiencies abound in our modern age, we can still learn a lot from his ethics, and adopt them for fulfillment of our happiness.

**Fish:** Good idea.

**Water:** According to Aristotle, motion is the change of a thing—with its essential carrier remaining unchanged—from one state to another. This suggests that, like any entity, a person can transform themselves from one state to another. Ideally, this transformation should lead to a better state than the previous one. After all, we all hope to evolve from lesser to greater states of being through self-improvement.

Aristotle's three principles demonstrate how privation drives change. Privation, he explains, is a specific form of deficiency: it represents a quality a thing is meant to have but currently lacks. Motion, however, actualizes this latent potential. By moving toward fulfillment, we acquire a new, complete form.

**Fish:** Sounds nice. But how to do it?

**Water:** His four causes can illustrate this. He calls them material, formal, efficient and final. Take sculpting as an example. According to his theory, the material cause of a sculpture is marble; the formal cause is the sculptor's model; the efficient cause is the sculptor, and final cause is the finished sculpture itself. Aristotle argues that material and formal causes can be utilized for our convenience, when they are consistent with our efficient and final causes. Therefore, we can also realize a new form of ourselves, a new form of our lives, as well as of others.

**Fish:** Wow, fantastic.

**Water:** Aristotle argued that everything has a natural position. If we deviate from this position—whether due to external forces or personal choices—we lose the form that defines us at our best. Since nature inherently seeks its proper state, any deviation triggers a movement toward restoration. The same principle applies to us: when we find ourselves in an unnatural form, we must strive to return to our truest state.

Even if we're uncertain whether we're in our "natural position," it doesn't matter. Desire itself reveals privation (a lack of something essential). When we feel this yearning, it's a signal to transform—to move from our current state toward a new, more fulfilling one.

**Fish:** And theoretical and practical wisdom will help us, right?

**Water:** Right. When we elevate ourselves—body and spirit—through self-improvement, we develop a greater form and reach higher levels of existence. In theory, this could lead us toward divinity in the Aristotelian sense, or at least bring us closer to it. For Aristotle, worshiping the divine represents the pinnacle of wisdom and happiness, the acme of human potential. And if such transformation is possible, perhaps we can aspire to something even greater.

**Fish:** If we utilize this practice in political action, we can achieve greater goodness, or even the highest goodness.

**Water:** Absolutely.

**Fish:** Goodness has different degrees, so we need not immediately realize the goodness of God-worship.

**Water:** Right. We can live different kinds of lives happily at different times, or in other words can realize different kinds of goodness.

**Fish:** Great. Can you suggest an operating procedure?

**Water:** There is no universal one for all, but you can refer to the following one, which we call *Model of Revised Realization of Aristotelian Goodness*.

First, find a privation of yourself;

Second, find your final goal;

Third, by using practical wisdom, and theoretical wisdom when needed, deliberate all means to your goal;

Fourth, choose the best alternative.

Fifth, rationally, do something according to that alternative to change the present form of yourself.

**Fish:** Good. Well, can you also give me a definition of how to realize goodness?

**Water:** Ok, I'll try. Realizing goodness is a process in which, guided by rationality, enlisting theoretical and practical wisdom, we deliberate all means and their corresponding ends, choose the best alternative, then act on it.

**Fish:** In a previous dialogue we discussed happiness based on Roemer's General Theory of Exploitation, and we published that conversation. Is there any difference between the happiness we discussed back then, and the happiness we have discussed today?

**Water:** Generally speaking, I don't think there is any significant difference between them. Both of them aim for a better state, and both involve agents recognizing shortcomings. Roemer's idea of shortcoming refers to improving our expected utility, as previously discussed; Aristotle's, to the notion of privation, as we have discussed today. If there really is a difference, Roemer's version of happiness is based on a deductive model, while Aristotle's is based on love of wisdom among other virtues.

**Fish:** Which one would you more highly recommend when we face problems?

**Water:** I think either one will be effective. It depends upon you.

**Fish:** Very good, I think I understand you well.

**Water:** Excellent. May you become more and more different from now on, and happier and happier.

**Fish:** Thanks.

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### Book Review

Kieran Setiya, *Life is Hard: How Philosophy Can Help Us Find Our Way*  
Riverhead Books/Penguin Random House LLC. New York, NY. 2022.  
ISBN: 9780593538227 (paperback). 222 pages.

REVIEWED BY KATE MEHURON  
EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY/YPSILANTI, MI

We can lay our clients' and our own self-imposed burdens down by thinking philosophically. That is a realistic aspiration that many philosophical counselors and their clients want to hear. It sounds simple. Listen to our clients, choose from the philosophical pantheon as we know it, and offer helpful insights from the tradition and from our own experiences that speak to the client's concerns. But this practice is not simple.

Kieran Setiya's heartfelt exposition of philosophical practice, applied to the burdens elucidated in chapters on infirmity, loneliness, grief, failure, injustice, absurdity and hope, shows us how thinking philosophically is a complex task all too often quixotic. Practice-oriented philosophers find themselves tilting at the traditional philosophically abstract windmills. Some philosophical concepts should be laid aside to find ways to live as well as we can. Setiya offers two insights that he claims are supported by his book. First, we should live as well as we can, dispensing with the end goal of happiness, and second, even the most personal concern to live well with the burdens described in his successive chapters are entangled with one's compassion for others and one's underlying passion for justice. To support these claims, Setiya identifies some concepts from the western philosophical tradition that ought to be given up, and some that are helpful, once revised. Simultaneously, he draws from the wisdom of writers whose presuppositions have no obvious allegiance to the vexed philosophical sources that he critiques. Setiya offers relevant personal examples that are reflectively integrated into his arguments. This lends to the heartfelt quality of his writing, making it resonate with readers beyond academia.

Setiya's description of his own chronic pain in the first chapter is a genuine, compelling account of how philosophy can help and fail to help. One of our self-impositions, causing more pain than warranted, lie in our perfectionism inherited from Aristotelian ideals about the good life. While bodily malfunctions afflict people across social inequalities, some infirmities are minoritized more than others. Considerations of injustice are pertinent to any account of disability, yet injustice need not be the sole focus of remediation. Stoic reflection on the value of one's life, despite one's infirmities, is an antidote to self-imposed ideals that invite the sense of failure. Setiya notes that paradoxically, pain gives a false sense of how joyful its respite would be. He argues that the lesson of his chronic pain is the importance of his focus on the present, and the enriched sympathy for others gained by sustained empathic reflection on the spiritual and social loneliness of pain. This is a quality of philosophical reflection, Setiya remarks, that bears witness to the suffering that comes along with having a body and gives solace to others in being seen and understood. Setiya's critique of the western philosophical tradition for its lack of attention to pain in both its epistemic and social dimensions could be more severe. But critique is not the aim of this chapter. Rather, philosophical edification

is sought. Given this, it is puzzling that contemporary philosophical resources that do offer useful reflection on these dimensions of disability, are not identified here.

In his second chapter “Loneliness,” Setiya is right to note that most of modern western philosophy is about the moral and epistemic aspects of solipsism, with very little discussion of the condition of loneliness. Yet, he comments, insightfully, that loneliness is obliquely seen in much philosophical writing. The topic of friendship has more of a philosophical presence than loneliness in classical, Kantian, and contemporary thought. Setiya argues that the Aristotelian meritocratic bias toward worthy friendships should be brushed aside in favor of the Kantian value of respect that is necessary to accord to any potential friend. Friendlessness is a state in which our own value is unrecognized and unengaged, to which we respond with a sense of our own gradual disappearance. Paying attention to others’ value makes loneliness less harsh and aligns with the same primary stance toward others that is required by oneself. The way out of loneliness, Setiya asserts, runs through attending to other people’s needs and participating in meaningful public life. Finding a friend is a possible but not guaranteed outcome of this effort. Setiya’s antidotes to loneliness implicitly defend a voluntarist, *atelic* stance toward loneliness.

This stance is made explicit in Chapter Four, “Failure.” It is key to how all the other hardships are addressed and should be elucidated earlier in his book. This chapter is the most interesting and useful of all his chapters, because it challenges a key tenet held both by classical philosophy as well as philosophical narrativists: that the capacity to narrativize one’s life is needed for one to live a meaningful, fulfilling life. Not so, Setiya argues. Setiya stipulates that *atelic* activities are meaningful because of the intrinsic value of those activities for the agent. *Telic* activities are those with ends in mind, purposefully undertaken. These are meaningful for the agent in terms of the outcomes achieved (102). He identifies the dangers of over-valuing personal teleological narratives in pursuit of the good life. Setiya himself has experienced the loss of the intrinsic value of philosophizing itself, by subordinating this activity to the *telic* demands of academic, professional philosophy. The *telic* stance within what is typically considered a coherent life-story, does more to encourage one’s retrospective inertia, fashion one’s understanding of “failure” and our self-blame for it, and to self-identify with one’s “failures.” Setiya aims to loosen the hold of the *telic* bias by using literary resources that give non-linear stories of people’s lives, showing how the use of non-linear, storied bricolage illustrates “failures” as events, often contingent or arbitrary, rather than reifying failures in agentic identities. Being alive, Setiya writes, is more a “digressive amplitude” than a linear *telic* tale told (100). Much of Setiya’s analysis and conclusions are echoed by contemporary cognitive research and are taken seriously by contemporary philosophers. *Atelic* values can ameliorate loneliness, encouraging engagement without fear of failure, more freedom to attend to present concerns, and opens to seeing one’s life as full of inexhaustible goods.

Unfortunately, Setiya’s ahistorical critique of the nineteenth century abolitionist Fredrick Douglas’ lecture “Self-Made Men” diminishes his account (117-118). Setiya’s critique singles out Douglas for the individualism espoused in his lecture, framing Douglas’ individualist sentiment as a symptom of a white supremacist capitalist mindset, as analyzed by the contemporary writer Ta-Nehisi Coates (115). Douglas’s words are taken out of the historical context of his enslavement, and his later success as a renowned abolitionist orator. Setiya’s decontextualized critique signals a failure in the careful attention required to understand and integrate the achievements of those foes of injustice

whom Setiya otherwise seeks to emulate. Historical context should be resistant to the story-telling bricolage of philosophers as well as historians.

Linked to his atelic voluntarist approach is Setiya's balanced emphasis on the importance of close reading, or "doing justice" to texts, people and social issues encountered. What moves us ethically and politically, Setiya argues in his chapter "Injustice" is the effort to appreciate what is there (128). Appreciative attention is the motivating factor behind our choices to care for what we witness, and to take steps toward political engagement and accountability. If human life is to be good, there must be things that matter, incrementally gained by empathic agency. Setiya, crediting philosopher Iris Young, urges us to consider activism that redresses the injustices to which we personally contribute. Structural injustice and collective complicities are clearly delineated in Setiya's account. The philosophical activity of articulating injustice and uncovering what is calls us to do (130). is a service that must be yoked to testing our limits in challenging our complicities. His chapter "Hope" is consistent with these insights, reiterating the importance of imperfect, good enough aspirations that are realistically appraised to be vulnerable to failure.

Throughout his book, there are some contradictions, inaccuracies, and a few significant omissions worth noting. Grief, Setiya argues, as a topic in western philosophy and psychology, is most often treated as a pathology to be solved, unlike in its "digressive amplitude" manifested in literary writing. Whether grief is about a lost relationship, an attunement to the harms of death to others, or a response to the sheer loss of life, grief expresses love in the sense of cherishing what is lost, and wanting good for the others so affected (68). Setiya summarily dismisses the understanding of, and treatment of grief offered by Sigmund Freud as "not evidence supported" (69). However, are literary expressions "evidence supported"? The central point, Setiya states, is that accepting the change incurred by loss need not imply disloyalty or betrayal by the grieving party. This point is convincingly argued by Freud in his several works on the nature of mourning, melancholy, and the problem of guilt therein. Subsequent psychoanalytic clinical experience on this score is more "evidence based" than Setiya's own philosophical reflections. He argues for developing "resilience" in the face of grief, that can be aided by exposure therapy or cognitive behavioral interventions. The flavor of Setiya's antidotes to grief is both pathologizing and dismissive of psychoanalytically gained insights and sets the reader adrift. Setiya contradicts his expressed sentiments by favoring pathologizing interventions over the kinds of close attention, giving witness, and empathic resonance offered by philosophical counselors and psychotherapists.

Existential approaches to the sense of absurdity are laid aside by Setiya as "wrong" with no argument or support (166). This dismissal is a grand error. The western existentialist tradition has aptly named nihilism as absurdity's twin and has addressed both with philosophical remedies premised on the sorts of telic and atelic versions of voluntarism espoused by Setiya. It is best to read Setiya's philosophical discussion on the question of absurdity as dependent on the existential tradition for its coherence and vocabulary. The polyphonic existential tradition has already invited Setiya's recommendations of reason, affirmation, and solidarity as antidotes to the futuristic uncertainties occasioned by war, species extinction, and the demise of humanistic values.

Readers can rest assured that *Life is Hard* is not a comprehensive philosophical guide to the good enough life. Instead, this is an account of a few of our self-imposed philosophical burdens; burdens

that make some of the hardships of life harder than they need be. This book advises the dangerous conceptual terrain to be discarded by those seeking meaning in a good enough life. It behooves philosophical counselors to consider this advice, while providing their best, imperfect attention to their clients.

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## Book Review

Iddo Landau, *Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World*  
Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017. ISBN: 97801906. 312 pages.

REVIEWED BY LESLIE C. MILLER  
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Landau says his purpose in this book is “to present and critique some presuppositions about the meaning of life that lead many people to believe [unnecessarily] that their lives are meaningless; to reply to recurring arguments made by people who take their lives to be meaningless; and to offer strategies that may help people identify what is meaningful, and increase meaningfulness, in their lives” (3).

Landau thus takes this perennial question seriously. What causes people to ask it? According to Landau, the answer here is straightforward: “People who take their lives to have no meaning, or to have insufficient meaning, are saying that they do not take their lives ... to be of sufficient worth” (6). With this move, he interprets the problem of ‘meaning’ in terms of worth, importance, value, or significance: “A meaningful life is one in which there is a sufficient number of aspects of sufficient value, and a meaningless life is one in which there is not a sufficient number of aspects of sufficient value” (15-16). While his interpretation here remains for the most part at this vague level, that vagueness has been sharpened enough for his purposes and tone. As he states early on, he is writing this philosophical work to be a practical help for nonacademics, as well as academics. The rest of the book really is an unpacking and clarifying of what he means in the above quotation. To those of us with experience in the classroom, it becomes apparent quickly just how much of the material in this book deals with many aspects of the phenomenon of Student Relativism. It seems that the SR and meaninglessness in life both stem from many of the same faulty beliefs. Understanding Landau’s responses could lead professors to better ways of dealing with that pernicious classroom scourge and could help practitioners faced with clients who come in wanting to know the answer as to the meaning of their lives.

Chapter 2 (“Implications”) sees Landau, well, unpacking the implications of his understanding of the relationship between meaning and value, beginning with using Aristotle to justify the lack of precision in his definitions: Of course, we can’t expect philosophy to be as precise as the exact sciences, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t help or make progress. From this point on, the book presents a wealth of points one could bring up with clients facing the dreaded existential crisis. For example, the second implication is that, because people can be mistaken about their values, they can be mistaken about the meaning of their lives—and this is one of the main thrusts of the work as a whole, this pointing out of mistaken assumptions we often have about the value of (and in) our lives. Just as a sample, here are a few more assumptions and implications, most of which get unpacked and explained throughout the book:

- We often presuppose that the meaning of our lives is fixed and can never change.
- If we take our lives as less than meaningful, we should look for what is valuable and enhance that in our lives.
- Meaning (value) comes on a continuum and isn’t a static quantity.

- Many presuppose that if what one finds meaningful in life changes, that then their lives are meaningless.
- It is not the case that we must devote our entire lives to what is meaningful.
- We should not expect a constant level of meaning in our lives.
- Difficulties in life do not presuppose meaninglessness.
- A uniqueness of one's life is not necessary for meaning.

Beginning with the third chapter and running through the 13<sup>th</sup>, Landau delves deeply into many of the mistaken beliefs people hold that keep them from believing their lives have value or significance, or even *could* be valuable: perfectionism, death and annihilation, our finitude, determinism, skepticism and relativism, mistaken ideas about the goals of life, suffering, and evil. Some of these issues get several chapters dedicated to them.

Landau starts his discussion of perfection, the presupposition of which, many people use as an excuse for believing their lives are meaningless and can never be meaningful. Citing the ideas of Nietzsche, Camus, and Nozick, he explains how, without some perfection, excellence, or perfectly enduring effect on the world, there is no value to be had in our lives. Of course, this is one of the mistaken presuppositions he argues against (and yet another of the wonderful things we can make explicit to our clients). The non-perfect, to those who believe in the absolute necessity of perfection, is without any value—think of those students who complain that their lives are over when they get “merely” a 98% on an assignment, for example, or the client who complains that he only got the second-highest rating in his last performance review.

As with most chapters in this main part of the book, Landau, after explaining the faulty beliefs, continues by illustrating with counterarguments the irrationality and untenableness of these presuppositions. Here, with perfectionism, for example, he talks about how we dismiss perfectionism in many aspects of our lives. One might ask such a client if her spouse is perfect. When she says he is not, but she loves him anyway ... she has shown that she is being irrational in holding that her life itself or the universe must be perfect in order for it to have value. Another useful technique here presented is the common and irrational practice of demanding perfection from ourselves, but not others; that is, we discriminate against ourselves. With my clients and students, I use this by pointing out, when they give me examples of self-talk, that they would never ever talk to anyone else that way. What makes them so special that they wouldn't be affected by such denigration and negativity? Are they really that spectacular and special that they can hold themselves—rationally—to standards much higher than any other human on the planet? What makes them so great? Of course they insist it isn't because they are awesome, but that they are so flawed that they deserve the punishment and need the higher standards—which just leads to a discussion of other irrational beliefs like ...

The belief that nothing has any value or significance since we will die and all we do will come to nothing, so what is the point? Landau makes this the topic of chapters 5 and 6. People holding this belief seem to think that because everything will be annihilated, nothing—life included—has any worth. Of course, this also means that the lives of other great people like Mozart, Einstein, Galileo, Mother Theresa, Gandhi, MLK, etc. also had no worth—something most people are not willing to admit to. Destruction of this irrational belief begins with a discussion of Thomas Nagel and his argument that, if we won't matter in a million years, then nothing in a million years matters now

... so it doesn't matter that in a million years no one of us (or our accomplishments) will remain. This brings to mind Epicurus: when we are here, death is not, and when death is here, we are not. Interestingly, Landau goes there, too. In this chapter he argues against most philosophical solutions to this issue—from Nagel to Epicurus, Lucretius, and even (veiled) Frank Kermode's *Sense of an Ending*. It is not until chapter 6 that we get Landau's positive response.

The second chapter on death and annihilation (Chapter 6) begins with Landau's agreement with the beliefs of many that death and annihilation do diminish the value of life, along with his rebuttal that even as they may decrease value, they still do not make life valueless. His points are fairly easy to understand. First, things of value that exist at some time, but not at other times are not thereby worthless; we cannot change the fact that they did exist and did have value. Second, finitude in time cannot remove all value from our lives ... unless, he says, we view our lives through the filter of perfectionism—which he has already dealt with.

His response here is very akin to the concept of wabi-sabi: "What is transient is not of *perfect* value. But it is of *some* value, and that may well be very much" (89). If people who object that finitude and imperfection remove *all* value from things, then wouldn't it hold that *nothing* has ever had or ever will have any value at all? And isn't that a strange position to take? It is often the things that, by their very nature, are delicate or finite or imperfect that we hold as having the most value. Do we not keep pets with short lifespans? Do we not buy food that will soon be gone?—in fact, the whole point of buying food is to make it go away!

I will leave the fascinating contents of the rest of these intermediate chapters for the reader's discovery, except for my favorite, Chapter 11.

Chapter 11 Landau titles "The Paradox of the End." This chapter is so full of insightful ways of looking at these issues that I am contemplating using it my philosophy classes when we discuss focusing on the path instead of the goal. In our culture we are taught that goals are of utmost importance. We are to set goals, focus on our goals, always keep our goals in mind. What good people do is set and achieve their goals—as if that were the secret to life. When our clients try to do this, however, they tend to go overboard, taking nothing but the goal as important or valuable. Then, when they attain their goal, they are left with nothing of value, and so must set another goal. Of course, this is exacerbated by the fact that our neurological anticipation systems are much stronger than our satisfaction systems. Instead of finding value in traversing the path towards the goal, we often find ourselves, when we have no immediate goal, with nothing of value in our lives. It is a shame that Landau doesn't explicitly bring mindfulness into this discussion.

I will conclude this review with a simple list of Landau's five most important practical guidelines in the book. First is the dictum to avoid perfectionism. Second, not to discriminate against oneself. Third is a common saying: "This is not a dress rehearsal." Next, the idea that we should not be cruel to ourselves. Finally, work. Productivity is, after all, the basis of morale. This latter may be the most important. With my clients, those with the most anxiety, depression, and sense of meaninglessness are usually those who also say, when asked what they are good at or what they like to do, respond with "nothing." Of course if they don't *do* anything, don't improve their lives, seek knowledge, etc., they will feel like their lives are empty.

This work by Iddo Landau is an exceptional book with much to use in both classroom and clinical settings. The book could be used as “homework,” given to clients to read so that the ideas might be discussed in sessions, or simply as a sourcebook of ideas for the clinician to apply. The sheer number of helpful ideas in the book is almost overwhelming. For those who are interested in the question of the meaning of life, there are many fresh approaches here. For those who tend to be dismissive of the question, the book will most likely change their minds. This is, hands down, one of the most approachable and fecund sources of material we can use to diffuse the faulty beliefs of clients when it comes to the meaninglessness of life. I recommend this book highly for everyone.

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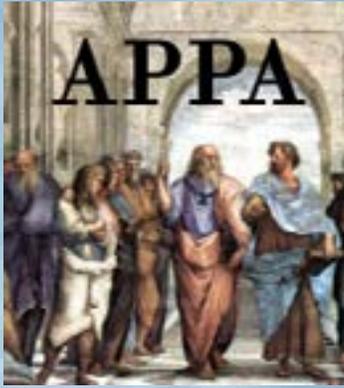
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# PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

## Journal of the APPA

Volume 20 Number 2 July 2025

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