



PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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Book Review

Lodovico Berra, *La regola della vita: Il morire e l'angoscia di morte*.
Torino: ISFiPP Edizioni, 2021. EAN: 9788890356780. 276 pages.

REVIEWED BY ANNA SORDINI

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Epicurus said that we should not fear death, because it does not really touch us: “while we exist death is not present, and when death is present, we no longer exist”. This much quoted reasoning has probably done little to help mankind to really overcome the dread of death, but it certainly legitimizes a widespread cultural attitude—even among psychologists—according to which it is pointless to devote intellectual and emotional energies to the problem of death, while the primary task is to improve life, that is everything that lies on this side of that impassable border. Lodovico Berra—philosopher, university professor of neuroscience in Turin, psychiatrist and psychotherapist—argues in his book that this perspective should be overturned. Precisely those who aspire to a wise and happy life, those who want to strengthen their psychological resources cannot avoid a confrontation “without veils or subterfuge” with death (142). This is because death is “the rule of life,” both in the sense that it is naturally woven into the biological cycle, in the incessant cellular transformation of bodies, in the daily psychic experiences of loss and mourning, and because the awareness and acceptance of the ever-impending possibility of death is able to give form and fulfillment to our human existence.

Berra’s ideas may sound familiar to a reader of the book by Irvin Yalom, *Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Terror of Death* (2008), which is very popular among philosophical practitioners and care professionals. Berra and Yalom are both existential psychiatrists, and they share some theoretical assumptions. They think that death anxiety is not a “mask” of something else—for example, of separation anxiety—but it is the original fear, always lurking in some ravine of our mind and disguised by other symptoms (such as phobias, obsessions, panic, hypochondria). They firmly believe that becoming aware of our finite and transient natures can initiate major life changes and promote a more authentic way of being. However, the two authors develop the topic of death differently. Yalom’s aim is to suggest to readers some strategies to mitigate the fear of death, for example the thoughts of great philosophers as Epicurus and Nietzsche, or the concept of “rippling,” which means leaving behind something good that spreads “in circles” for generations, like a stone in a pond. It is also Yalom’s strong conviction that human connectedness, namely sharing our most intimate fears and thoughts with others, can to some extent dress the wound of our mortality. Since the focus of the book is on these coping strategies, death itself is mentioned, evoked, looked at out of the corner of Yalom’s eye, but never really shown in its harshness and inexorability. Berra’s purpose is likewise to help the reader to overcome death anxiety, but he openly refuses every workaround to soften the hard law of dying, which must be borne by each individual, in the painful separateness of his or her “here and now.” To the inevitability of this law is linked the phenomenon of death anxiety, which, if not coped with, can give rise to psychological disorders, counterproductive mental habits, and existential risks. Therefore it is necessary, according to Berra, to gradually develop “familiarity and confidence” with death, as the “simplest and most natural event of our being-in-the-world” (117). And this can be done only by getting to know its multiple dimensions, which Berra illustrates in a 360-degree survey: from the main philosophical positions on death, to its description as a biologi-

cal process, from the development of the idea of death thanks to the particular conformation of the human brain, to the emergence of the darkest aspects of death anxiety in psychopathologies, from the interpretation of illness (the “reminder” of death) as a permanent condition, always potentially present in the fragile balance of our homeostatic processes, to the various facets of the experience of other people’s death, and finally to the description of the different ways of dying and preparing for death.

A main thesis underlies this material, presented in clear and comprehensible language that makes the book a pleasant read, even for non-Italian speakers who, however, are able to read even fairly elementary Italian. Death must be given the right amount of significance—neither too much nor too little—in the context of psychic life. This entails an emotional detachment from the fact, which cannot be experienced, of one’s own passing (a common and trivial event, a “quick and imperceptible instant, of which there will be no memory” [151]), and at the same time a good use of that idea of death—death as foreseen, imagined, feared—which in death anxiety presents itself as a nightmare, but if properly understood can have a fundamental therapeutic function. Yalom also highlights this function, but Berra focuses more on its benefits for mental health. Death, says Berra (quoting Heidegger), is the final, certain and yet indeterminate “*possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all*” (22). Keeping this original limit in the background of the ebb and flow of our lives can be a powerful means of personality integration, since it avoids wasting precious time in meaningless activities that are not authentically chosen, but mostly dictated by the world of “gregarious uniformity” (155). It can encourage self-realization, insofar as it corrects our bad habits of postponing important choices to a future that we unconsciously live as if it were infinite, when “it might never be” (113). It avoids the depressing consequences of an abstract, dichotomous way of thinking: if we realize that death is not ontologically different from life, but rather gives it form and texture, it is easier to look at life itself as an inextricable weave of gift and doom, joy and suffering, achievement and failure. We learn to appreciate everything, much more, as an expression of this total experience: “every moment is the whole of life” writes Berra, and the very precariousness of living can give even the most ordinary objects and situations a poignant beauty (160).

Yalom’s and Berra’s are both courageous books, written in a jargon-free manner and meant not only to improve psychotherapeutic practice, but to help everybody. They are essential reading for philosophical practitioners and therapists: how can these professionals be helpful to clients, if they don’t work directly with death anxiety, which Yalom and Berra persuasively show to be the root of all existential issues? And how can professionals inquire deeply into death anxiety if they are reluctant to face their own? As a reader, however, I must say that the two books are not equally effective. Yalom’s work is most useful for a first approach to such an uncomfortable topic, it entertains us with personal memories and a great many stories of patients whose death anxiety is treated in close relation to a variety of difficult life situations, but its influence remains, in my experience, confined to an intellectual level. Berra’s book is strictly committed to the theme of death and leads gradually the reader to accept death emotionally, to see his or her own life from above, with a slight detachment (the author calls it “transcendent thinking” [154-157]), and to understand that preparing for death without waiting for it to come up from behind does not mean spreading a gloomy veil over existence but mastering it. Like a good course of therapy, *La regola della vita* plants a seed in our minds that lingers and can actually change the way we deal with our own daily lives.

Philosophical practitioners and care professionals might make good use of the communicative style of Berra, which is never soothing, in fact does not offer any easy comfort, but at the same time

is sympathetic and transmits to the reader the feeling of being linked to the author by a common fate. This balance between intellectual honesty and human closeness is difficult to achieve, but it should be the rule of any authentic relationship between a therapist or a practitioner and her or his client. Practitioners could also find it useful to consider how Berra discusses not only death itself, but suicide, euthanasia and terminal illness. He does not express moral judgements and maintains a purely descriptive approach, but does not hesitate to mention courage, stoicism, and dignity in the face of life's difficulties, such as a hopeless diagnosis or serious suffering (137-138, 192). With regard to such questions, each reader is obviously called upon to develop a personal opinion according to her or his ethical position. Nevertheless, the author's reference to the traditional vocabulary of virtues, which are rarely heard in both the care and education professions, is worth noting and appreciating. The systematic substitution of the language of ethics—which calls into question the personal responsibility of the individual—with that of psychology and psychotherapy is a widespread phenomenon in our culture. The multi-disciplinary vision of Berra, who is indeed a therapist but also a philosopher, helps to overcome this limited perspective.

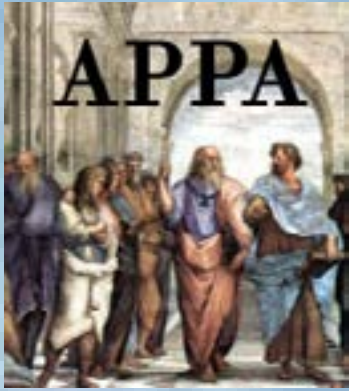
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Aims and Scope

Philosophical Practice is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

APPA Mission

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a non-profit educational corporation that encourages philosophical awareness and advocates leading the examined life. Philosophy can be practiced through client counseling, group facilitation, organizational consulting or educational programs. APPA members apply philosophical systems, insights and methods to the management of human problems and the amelioration of human estates. The APPA is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization.

APPA Membership

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a not-for-profit educational corporation. It admits Certified, Affiliate and Adjunct Members solely on the basis of their respective qualifications. It admits Auxiliary Members solely on the basis of their interest in and support of philosophical practice. The APPA does not discriminate with respect to members or clients on the basis of nationality, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, age, religious belief, political persuasion, or other professionally or philosophically irrelevant criteria.

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