

# PHILOSOPHY AS A BEST PRACTICE: TOWARDS A POSSIBLE GUIDELINE FOR PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELLING

*LAS BUENAS PRÁCTICAS EN LA FILOSOFÍA: HACIA UNA POSIBLE  
DIRECTRIZ PARA LA ORIENTACIÓN FILOSÓFICA*

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**Abstract:** This article aims to be a brief synthesis of my personal experience as a certified philosophical counsellor – as practised in the last 10 years – that I shared in the form of a presentation with the global audience of students and expert colleagues during the *1<sup>st</sup> International Conference on Philosophical Counselling*, organized by Professor Balakanapathi Devarakonda, Department of Philosophy, at the University of Delhi, 14-16 January 2022. The conference was held under the aegis of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research (ICPR), New Delhi, and the Department of Education, University of Delhi.

The philosophical horizon, “*the train of thought*” (Whitehead, 1978), within which I find most of the ‘travel friends’ for extending the dialogue with my clients, forms the first part of the article, together with some frequently asked questions, both on the client’s and the counsellor’s side.

The second part of the article includes a couple of real practical cases, a good and a bad one. As a presentation, it was aimed to stimulate discussion on the decisions made, and analyse eventual controversies together.

Thus, for the time being, the presentation was meant to be mainly a helpful handout, while as a work in progress, it has a more ambitious goal: to become a sort of ‘Guideline for Philosophical Counselling as a Best Practice’, that borrows some lexicon from the medical field, along with few methodological criteria.

I am well aware that this goal may appear as risky as hard to fulfil, since we all know there is not only ‘one philosophy’, neither only one vision of the world, nor a unique method for philosophical counselling. There are too many geographical, historical, anthropological, linguistic – in one word, cultural – implications that make the philosophical scenario always complex and multifaceted. Therefore, not a one-size-fits-all handbook on philosophical practice, but rather a guideline based on evidences that will end with some recommendations.

As a matter of fact, one frequent objection moved against the application of philosophy as an effective way to help ordinary people in managing everyday life problems is that philosophical counsellors generally refuse to adhere to standards that may prove the quality of their work, and ground its validity.

Recommendations will be classified from grade A to grade C, according to their validity in terms of practical efficacy and positive outcomes for the clients:

- Category A: strongly recommended for implementation, and supported by numerous successful cases, philosophical texts and studies;
- Category B: recommended and accepted as a practice, supported by limited evidence and philosophical literature;
- Category C: represents an issue for which limited consensus regarding its validity exists.

In the final text I would like to include a few pitfalls, as well as some open issues and a list of tips and tricks which may be beneficial to our younger colleagues and practitioners.

**Keywords:** philosophical counselling, meaningful questions, communication, time, happiness, recognition, art.

**Resumen:** Este artículo pretende ser una breve síntesis de mi experiencia personal como asesora filosófica certificada – ejercitada en los últimos 10 años – que compartí en forma de presentación con la audiencia global de estudiantes y colegas expertos durante el Primer Congreso Internacional Conferencia sobre Orientación Filosófica, organizada por el Profesor Balakanapathi Devarakonda, Departamento de Filosofía, Universidad de Delhi, del 14 al 16 de enero de 2022. La conferencia se llevó a cabo bajo los auspicios del Consejo Indio de Investigación Filosófica (ICPR), Nueva Delhi, y el Departamento de Educación, Universidad de Delhi.

El horizonte filosófico, “el tren de pensamiento” (Whitehead, 1978) dentro del cual encuentro a la mayoría de los ‘amigos de viaje’ para ampliar el diálogo con mis clientes, forma la primera parte del artículo, junto con algunas preguntas frecuentes, tanto del lado del cliente como del consejero.

La segunda parte del artículo incluye un par de casos prácticos reales, uno bueno y otro malo. Como mi presentación tuvo el objetivo de estimular la discusión sobre las decisiones tomadas y analizar en conjunto eventuales controversias.

Por lo tanto, así, la presentación pretendía ser principalmente un folleto útil, mientras que como trabajo en curso tiene un objetivo más ambicioso: convertirse en una especie de 'Guía de Buenas Prácticas para la Orientación Filosófica', que toma prestado algún léxico del campo médico, junto con pocos criterios metodológicos.

Soy muy consciente de que este objetivo puede parecer tan arriesgado como difícil de cumplir, ya que todos sabemos que no existe una sola filosofía, ni una sola visión del mundo, ni un único método de asesoramiento filosófico. Hay demasiadas implicaciones geográficas, históricas, antropológicas, lingüísticas, en una palabra, culturales, que hacen que el escenario filosófico sea siempre complejo y multifacético. Por lo tanto, no se trata de un manual de práctica filosófica de talla única, sino de una guía basada en evidencias, que terminará con algunas recomendaciones.

De hecho, una objeción frecuente en contra de la aplicación de la filosofía como una forma efectiva de ayudar a la gente común a manejar los problemas de la vida cotidiana es que los asesores filosóficos generalmente se niegan a adherirse a estándares que puedan probar la calidad de su trabajo, y fundamentan su validez.

Las recomendaciones se clasificarán del grado A al grado C, según su validez en términos de eficacia práctica y resultados positivos para los clientes:

- Categoría A: fuertemente recomendada para su implementación y respaldada por numerosos casos exitosos, textos filosóficos y estudios;
- Categoría B: recomendada y aceptada como práctica, respaldada por evidencia limitada y literatura filosófica;
- Categoría C: representa un tema para el cual existe un consenso limitado en cuanto a su validez.

En el texto final me gustaría incluir algunas 'trampas', así como algunas cuestiones abiertas y una lista de consejos y trucos que pueden ser beneficiosos para nuestros colegas y profesionales más jóvenes.

**Palabras clave:** Asesoramiento filosófico, preguntas significativas, comunicación, tiempo, felicidad, reconocimiento, arte.

## Introduction

Philosophy as a corpus of knowledge is probably as ancient as the human species: the moment when human beings started

questioning about the meaning of their condition can be recognized as the start of philosophy. Philosophy always begins with a question, and the question often begins with a why.

Many questions – all stemming from the human need to understand and know why things happen and how – may be the same, but answers may differ significantly, as they are strongly connected to the culture, history, geography, language and time we are living.

In the practice of philosophical counselling, they may also depend on the philosophical preferences of both the counsellor and, in some cases, the client.

Here are some of the fundamental and most recurrent questions which may accompany the philosophical conversation during a session of counselling, and that may arise directly from the client, or the counsellor.

*Why do we live? Why do we die?*

They are universal and timeless questions connected to the sphere of our existence and experience of Life and Death, and our perception of Time. They can drive the research of the individual along the pathways of supernatural and transcendental – metaphysics, spirituality, ontology, and religion are the philosophical horizons. I consider Lou Marinoff (born 1951) an anchoring author in particular with regard to what he calls “the big questions” (Marinoff, 2003). I think the Greek Aristotle (384 -322 BC), taught by Plato and tutor of Alexander the Great, and the contemporary British philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) are some excellent sources for reading and discussing life and death with my clients. Intense discussions may arise from crucial decisions that today's individuals or families may face regarding – for instance – their becoming parents after a risky illness, often by means of frozen embryos through an in vitro fertilization procedure.

*Why do we need to act in a virtuous way? What is Good and what is Evil? Why do we need to live in a societal form? How do we choose to behave in one way or another? Where do our ideas come from? How do they become an ideology?*

They are all questions related to morality, ethics and politics. They may refer to the concept of free will, to our relationship with other people, and to the quality of human communication. Seneca (4 BC-65 AD) – the Roman philosopher of Stoicism – is one of my favourite references, together with Plato (428/7-348/7 BC), the Greek philosopher taught by Socrates (470-399 BC). In my practice, the German philosophers Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Karl Marx (1818-1883), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), and Jürgen Habermas (born 1929) are pivotal sources to enhance critical thinking skills, and reinforce the exercise of a constructive doubt, *de omnibus dubitandum*, when we are in search of truth. A current dilemma may refer to the global pandemic situation – if getting vaccinated can be considered a moral imperative, a health-policy-related choice or an economic decision.

*Why do we need to prove our beliefs with facts and observations?*

This also sounds like a very contemporary matter (just think of the growing power of data and data analysis as a source of truth!) but it is more or less the same question that Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), the Italian philosopher and scientist born in Pisa and formed at the University of Padua, asked himself when trying to prove that Ptolemy was incorrect. According to the Greek tradition, the Earth was in the centre of the universe, around which all celestial objects orbited. Galileo proved Ptolemy wrong by using a telescope for the first time to observe Venus, thus confirming the hypothesis of a heliocentric system put forth by Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543),

with the Moon travelling around the Earth. Galileo gave a start to the scientific cosmology, moving the designated centre of the known universe from the Earth to the Sun. Epistemology and the philosophy of science are the fields where to draw for sources, knowledge and inspiration for clients who prefer to debate in a rational and more scientific way, but at the same time, are looking for a meaningful change of perspective.

*Why do we create a work of art? Who establishes that an artifact is a work of art or it is not? Why do we enjoy listening to music, reading literature and poetry, admiring paintings and sculptures? Why do we like going to the theatre, opera house and cinema, or to visit an ancient church?*

These are all questions connected to the aesthetic dimension of life, to the concept of recognition (*Anerkennung*) and the experience of beauty, which is strictly (even if not always) connected to the experience of happiness at one of its highest grade. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) and Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), the principal founder of phenomenology, may provide a deep foundation for our dialogue. French contemporary philosophers such as – among many others – Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), Francois Lyotard (1924-1998), Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) and Jean-Luc Nancy (1940-2021) can be truly enlightening when examining ‘the body’ and ‘the flesh’ as key concepts in our experience of pleasure and love. And if we consider these two concepts on a different level of analysis, they may also be crucial for bringing out the aesthetic dimension of the dialogic process itself, which essentially connotes the philosophical encounter between the counsellor and the client.

*Why do we need to define objects? Why do we need to understand the meaning, the origin and the sense of the concepts we use?*

These are questions regarding semiotics, semantics, logic and philosophy of language. A reflection on these questions, in polyphony with the voices – again – of Russell, Rudolf Carnap (1871-1970) and Algirdas Julien Greimas (1917-1992) may help our clients to better understand the implications of the way they think and how they speak (or write) about their lives and others.

Philosophy in practice does not look for clear answers. It mainly aims for a deeper understanding, sometimes a different vision of the world – hopefully, one more respectful of nature! – and at other times to encourage the experience of the research itself, together with the satisfaction which derives from it.

Thus, why should we, as philosophical counsellors, be worried about not to have the right answers for our clients if we are able to share some meaningful questions with them?

## **Two cases**

### *The first case*

Anna R. is a 42 years old manager, living near Turin, Piedmont area, Northwest Italy. She is the R&D Director of an international chemical company. She and her husband adopted a girl (Federica) when she was 3 years old, and now she is 15. In the last two years, she has been feeling a strong desire to become a mother for the second time. She would like to resort to in vitro fertilization with embryo transfer and artificial insemination as they are an infertile couple. Her husband (Piero) is doubtful: he is a man of faith, and has a sort of moral and ethical resistance against it. He thinks that this kind of choice goes against nature, as becoming parents is

existentially and ontologically linked to the conjugal act. In the case of impossibility – as it is for them – he thinks that an ethical decision, socially more acceptable and significant, is the adoption of an already-born child. Piero's position has generated a conflict between them that – as she said during our first session – has spoiled their relationship in time, in many aspects: the daily dialogue between them tends to be monothematic, and often ends up with quarrels. Their physical relationship has been affected, and their adolescent girl seems to escape from both of them, isolating and refusing any involvement in this matter – apparently she never showed any wish to have a brother or a sister. Besides, lately, she has had some rare outbursts of rage, and Anna is worried about her misbehaviours. Anna has looked for advice from relatives, colleagues and friends, and has spent the last couple of months meeting a psychologist once a week; at present, she feels more confused and disoriented than ever.

We met eight times. Questions arising from her storytelling regarded at first the concept of Time: *was her desire connected to her age, her awareness of the time passing – being 42 years old, or the recent loss of her father? Moreover, did the loss of her beloved father make her think about what matters and what does not?* We spent an entire session trying to clarify the edge of her desire to have her own child, and we read some passages from Seneca's *De Brevitate Vitae* (Seneca, 49 AD). For the Roman philosopher, it is how we use our life and how we consider ourselves that is strictly connected to our well being, and consequently, to time and death:

It is not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a lot of it. Life is long enough, and a sufficiently generous amount has been given to us for the highest achievements if it were all well invested<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Seneca, Lucius Annaeus: *On the Shortness of life*, I 13.



Regarding her right to desire this new parental experience, we discussed a sentence by Friedrich Nietzsche taken from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and Nobody* (Nietzsche, 1883-1885):

Everything about a woman is a riddle, and everything about women has a single solution: that is, pregnancy<sup>2</sup>

Even if, for Nietzsche, the idea of pregnancy was linked to his project of a radical transformation of modern humanity, yet his words contain a positive hope in what a new life may present us. Then we examined her husband's position. I suggested that finding different sources on ethics could be used as a valid philosophical background for discussing the morality of in vitro fertilization with embryo transfer in a wider perspective. We commented Aristotle and his concept of Nature (as matter and form):

that embodies within itself an innate principle by which it has the ability to move itself or keep itself at rest<sup>3</sup>

The end towards which its development moves:

The form indeed is 'nature'... for a thing is more properly said to be what it is when it has attained fulfilment than when it exists potentially<sup>4</sup>

According to Aristotle, a rational account of a being (logos) is subject to the same principle that governs the physical motion and generation of a being. Piero's ratio and value system seem mainly to refer to the concepts of respect for human life and natural procreation as in the document written by the Catholic

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<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: a Book for Everyone and Nobody*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008, p.57.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle: *Physics* I, 192a 12-27.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle: *Physics* II, 193b 7-8.

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF, 1987), which is partly rooted in Thomas Aquinas's (1225-1274) ethical theory based on natural law, which in turn comes from Aristotle. The CDF interpretation of the Scholastic philosopher would drive us to consider immoral the practice of artificial insemination just because of its being "unnatural", and only natural things are inclined to goodness. But for Thomas Aquinas, the natural tendency of human beings is toward good, as

every act of reason is responsive to natural inclination, and so every rational act is virtuous<sup>5</sup>

Reason is the light which guides our actions, and it has been placed by Nature and thus by God so that virtuous acts are the results of an examination under the aegis of reason. As Aristotle writes:

the work of man is achieved only in accordance with practical wisdom as well as with moral virtue; for virtue makes us aim at the right mark, and practical wisdom makes us take the right means<sup>6</sup>

We discovered that Anna was probably moved by both a natural desire to bear her genetic child, and by a rational examination of the situation of her family – with her full-time role in the Company that she would like to change and reduce, and her daughter as an only child which reconnects to time and death. Above all, Anna accepted that nothing was wrong with her desire. She decided to share these philosophical reflections with her husband as proof of her understanding of his doubts. She tried to make him see both the good and moral aspects, and the rational ones behind all the scientific research that developed the new reproductive technologies for the successful treatment of infertility,

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<sup>5</sup> Aquinas: *Summa Theologica*, Ia-IIae, q.20 and 94, art. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1144a 7-10.

and that they were not necessarily in contrast with his religious beliefs.

After that, Piero admitted that he also had some fears regarding the possibility of damage suffered by the embryo during the process of transferring into the mother's uterus, a fear that Anna could share. She said she trusted her physician, and reminded him that one couple of their best friends had had a child with artificial insemination – all had gone smoothly, and both parents were happy with their newborn.

We moved on to consider her daughter's position. Federica was in her adolescent period, which fundamentally is an ongoing research of herself and the gradual making of her own identity. She reasonably found the world outside (indeed quite unknown) more attractive than her family (indeed quite known). On one side, her parents – this brand new type of conflictual couple – were suddenly unwelcome to her and destabilizing. Was she afraid to lose certainties – in a period when she is justified to have none – and her familiar supportive walls? On the other side, because of this moment of disruption, she probably needed her parents' stability and their unquestionable love more than ever. Could a brother or a sister threaten parental love for her in some way?

With regard to her tendency to isolate and not to talk to her parents, we examined the value of communication as a fundamental, structural, primary need for all human beings, and maybe for all living creatures. We read some parts of the text written by Paul Watzlawick (1921-2007) focussed on his theory regarding human communication (Watzlawick, 1967). The fresh example of our open, argumentative and free-from-prejudice conversation – a Socratic dialogue which went gradually in-depth – could show how thoughtful words can be helpful for clarifying a confusing situation, trying to untangle knots and enlightening the dark corners of our thoughts and beliefs.

Anna said that they habitually exchange information through short written messages with Federica on the smartphone. We reflected on how Western philosophy originated in live conversations: the Athenian philosopher Socrates considered only face-to-face discussions as an effective means to communicate what is real and what is not, what is good and what is evil, what is our role in the world and how we should live. Socrates had not had great respect for the written word, as we learn from the platonic dialogue *Phaedrus* (Plato, 370 BC):

It will implant forgetfulness in their souls. They will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks<sup>7</sup>

Socrates, as well as his student Plato, thought that when a person talks directly to an individual when individuals discuss together, things may change and evolve. New perspectives and rational understanding may emerge; furthermore, the dialogic mode may testify to attention, care and affection to the other person. The mere existential fact to be ‘bodily’ together makes the quality of the relationship grow and transform in a more positive way. Anna and I shared some basic considerations on communication: it is not only what we say that counts, but also the way we say it: the tone, the closeness, the fondness, the glance, the demeanour, the kindness etc., they are all capital elements to express respect for the other, and – in her case – for what Federica thinks and how she feels. In this context, the communicative process, made of reciprocal listening (Barrientos, 2009) and understanding, does not have to be only verbal (idem, 2021), as pauses produce sense and may hold thoughtful meaning.

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<sup>7</sup> Plato: *The Phaedrus*, 274b-277a.

So then, why not look for a peaceful moment when mother and daughter may listen to each other and talk in an open, frank way? It can be a refreshing change in a time when young people prefer texting to talking. They are more used to noting things down, writing messages and comments, browsing and posting on social networks, than to facing and speaking directly; and generally, everything appears plainer when spoken than when unspoken. After a clarifying conversation, even Federica's need to be silent takes on more significant contours. Sitting in silence does not necessarily imply empty gaps to be filled or an uncomfortable vacuum between detached individuals, but can be read as a valuable moment of reflection, self-growth and freedom within a lively, sympathetic familiar frame.

We spent an entire session examining Federica's occasional outbursts of rage. As Peter Vernezze (born 1959) writes:

Most of us tend to be Aristotelians when it comes to anger. While admitting that uncontrolled anger is harmful and ought to be avoided, we reject as undesirable a state of being that does not allow us to express legitimate outrage<sup>8</sup>

In *De Ira* (45 AD), Seneca invites us to think about what is worth our getting angry, and suggests for our own good to zoom out of the situation, to “draw further back, and laugh”<sup>9</sup> because “anger is a kind of madness”. And let's think about Socrates – I reminded Anna – one of the greatest examples of wisdom of the ancient world, unjustly accused and executed in prison in 399 BC: he never showed any anger, nor any feeling of revenge, as we have learned from the platonic dialogues the *Phaedo* and the *Crito* (Plato, 360 BC).

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<sup>8</sup> Vernezze, Peter: “Moderation or the Middle Way: Two Approaches to Anger”, in *Philosophy East and West*, volume 58, number 1, Hawaii, 2008, pp. 2-16.

<sup>9</sup> Seneca, Lucius Annaeus: *De Ira*, 3.37.

Therefore, the consequent question was: what had caused those episodes of Federica's angriness? Could mother and daughter try to examine the succession of events in a peaceful way? Anna and I agreed on the fact that sometimes trying to juxtapose daily unpleasant events of Federica's quotidian with the immensity of the universe – its mystery, its beauty, its influence on us – could be a useful stratagem to downgrade her occasional rage.

Then came the following question to ask Federica: Considering what caused your outburst of rage, do you think it really mattered so much, was it really so important to make you lose your reason? Because if the cause is not so relevant, our reaction, on the contrary, is: losing control, with the desire to hurt, offend, and hit people and things, which may be destructive and dangerous. And if we do not succeed in dominating anger, the same anger will end up dominating us.

Finally, we examined Anna's lack of desire for intimacy with her husband, taking into account the concepts of pleasure and love. For Epicurus (341-270 BC), pleasure is the end of all actions, in a complex sense: if we think of a standing state of pleasure (*katastematic*) it is meant as freedom from pain in the body (*aponia*) and in the mind (*ataraxia*); if we consider a more transitory pleasure (*kinetic*) it is meant as the satisfaction of a natural desire which sometimes can be necessary as eating, drinking, resting, and sometimes is not, as having sex in the form of *Eros*. They are natural desires, but not at the same level of importance. For instance, many individuals may live a full, rich life without experiencing *Eros* and practising sex, but nobody can live without eating, drinking or sleeping. The Greek concept of *Eros* sometimes includes *Pathos*, a strong ardour that refers to a wide range of emotions – physical attachment, affection, and passion that may end in a sort of obsessive and ill desire. If the concept of *Eros* includes the physical pleasure, the Greek word *Philia* refers to a more spiritual and intellectual attachment, such as good

friendship. The Latin word *Amor* is in-between the two concepts: when we love someone, we desire that person totally: physically (which is not only related to sex), emotionally and mentally. In a more contemporary philosophical analysis, these three elements – the person’s physical body, the emotions and the mind are linked together *ab origine*: embodied, and embodied in flesh. It is so in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). We feel wholly attached to our loved one; we suffer his or her absence; when we are not together, our well-being is compromised.

So then, how did Anna feel about her husband? She asked herself what kind of pleasure she was experiencing with Piero: could she live without him? Indeed she said she still loved him – even if her sentiment had changed and deeply transformed. They had known each other for so many years! She said they both had contributed to the economic well-being of the family in a balanced way, their roles were interchangeable, and she considered this aspect very important. They were ‘partners’, not only ‘husband and wife’, but she regretted their not being also ‘lovers’.

How could she recover this missing part of their long-lasting relationship? Why not share experiences they both like and enjoy? Why not carve out some joyful moments as a non-parental couple? This could restore a feeling of reciprocal friendship, desire and complicity that could help them in various aspects of their Eros. Moreover, this occasional escape could be beneficial for Federica as well: she needed to be trusted in her growing independence, and two parents who were getting along well again were much easier to manage.

“Do things together that we both like!” Dinner out more frequently, going to the gym together, going to the cinema and the Opera house with Piero – Anna made a list of things she would like to do again with her husband. They had been so absorbed in their

parental role to forget they were two individuals who had known and loved each other for many years before becoming parents.

### *The second case*

If Anna's recent case has been one of the longest of my philosophical practice (in terms of the number of sessions), the following one has been one of the shortest – just three sessions. The case dates back to 2016, and I think it can be educational to remember it briefly as I consider it a sort of 'bad case', not *per sé* but for the decisions that emerged. In medicine, in surgery, a bad case is when something goes wrong – in the diagnosis, in the therapy, in the operating room – and the outcome is not what is expected. This was the case, and I will try to explain to you why.

Sergio is a second-year student reading Law at the University of Padua, Venetian area, Northeast Italy. He is 21 (high school in Italy goes on until 19) and has two younger brothers and one older sister. Both his parents are lawyers, and run a good law firm with a solid reputation. Recently he feels always tired. He is missing lectures and tests, losing weight and energy. He has seen his family doctor, had clinical examinations, but no physical problem has emerged. Apparently, he is in good health, but he is always "not feeling well".

His parents wanted him to meet a psychiatrist, but he independently decided to see a philosophical counsellor instead. He found me by word of mouth, through a friend of his family who had been one of my clients.

"How do you think that philosophy could help me?" was Sergio's first question, and many, many others followed. In the beginning, Sergio was very curious about philosophy in general. We agreed on what the Stoic and Roman philosopher Seneca tells his younger friend Lucilius on philosophy (Seneca, 65 BC), which "is not a way



to amuse our mind, but an exercise to guide our actions and mould our souls”<sup>10</sup>. During our first session, he showed a strong interest and competence in the paintings and wood sculptures that I have in my studio.

He confided to me that his strongest interest was in Art, and that the choice of Law had been the only option considering the tradition of his family. He was a decent piano player, but his real passion was painting. “Follow your Muse”, I said to him. We examined the origin of the word Muse, which is Greek – and it relates to music (sharing the three initial letters) and art in general. Its Latin roots include the concepts of ardour, passion, and intense desire – again, a wide range of emotions and feelings referring to Eros, love. That sort of uncontrolled tension can be unusual and worrying in Sergio’s familiar context. Art is, according to Raymond Williams’s interpretation, a “structure of feeling”, not “a picture of reality”<sup>11</sup>. Yet, Art is not irrational, since – for the contemporary German philosopher Jürgen Habermas – it is coherent with a “communicative reason” that accomplishes an experimental and pragmatic expression of human needs. Artworks need an intersubjective dimension of ‘social’ recognition (of their being works of art), but at the same time, promote the growth of the person’s subjectivity and provide the motivational structures for moral autonomy and scientific reasoning<sup>12</sup>.

“What about following your Muse?” – I asked him again during our second session. Art transcends cultural and language

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<sup>10</sup> Seneca, Lucius Annaeus: *Moral Letters to Lucilius: On Philosophy the guide of life*, L.16.3.

<sup>11</sup> Boucher, Geoff: “The politics of Aesthetics Affect – A reconstruction of Habermas’ Art Theory”, in *PARRHESIA*, number 13, Melbourne and Dundee, 2011, pp. 62-78.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. Habermas, Jürgen: *The Theory of Communicative Action I*, Peacon Press, Boston, 1984, pp. 86-95. Habermas, Jürgen: *The Theory of Communicative Action I*, Peacon Press, Boston, 1984, pp. 239-40.

boundaries, and helps people to feel more lively. Sergio quoted Joan Miró, the Catalan painter when interviewed in 1975 on the death of General Franco, and being asked what he had done to oppose the Spanish dictator: “A simple line painted with the brush can lead to freedom and happiness”.<sup>13</sup> We went on reading together Seneca. In the Letter n. 32 the Roman philosopher invites Lucilius to stick to his own project and mind:

I am indeed confident that you cannot be warped, that you stick to your purpose, even though the crowd may surround and seek to distract you. What, then, is on my mind? I am not afraid lest they work a change in you; but I am afraid lest they may hinder your progress. And much harm is done even by one who holds you back, especially since life is so short; and we make it still shorter by our unsteadiness, by making ever fresh beginnings now one and immediately another. We break up life into little bits, and fritter it away<sup>14</sup>

But Sergio did not stick to his passion, and that is why I consider this case ‘a bad one’. In a way, he could not: he did not feel free to cultivate his interest in Art. During the third and last session, he told me that his parents considered his desire of studying art as a foolish project. Art was seen by his family as the “professional choice of a loser”. However, he had succeeded in talking to them openly, and considered this fact an upgrade in their relationship. He was feeling better, and that was our last encounter.

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<sup>13</sup> Adams, Tim: “Joan Miró: A life in paintings”, in *The Observer*, London, 2011, available in <https://theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/mar720/joan-miro-life-ladder-escape-tate> (last access February the 8<sup>th</sup> 2022).

<sup>14</sup> Seneca, Lucius Annaeus: *Moral Letters to Lucilius: On progress*, L32.2.

## Conclusions

Both cases may contribute to our better understanding of the complexity of the decision processes. If the first example highlights the value of each individual position, trying to facilitate the reaching of a wise agreement within a family whose members still love each other and share a common project, the last case reminds us that parents can be deluded in what they wish for their children, and their projects may differ from each other.

Even Lucilius' parents would have wanted worldly success for him, the continuation of the family property and fortune, and his contribution to the fatherland. Seneca does not condemn them, who are probably moved by parental love, but tells us that life is short and only truly goods are eternal. He encourages Lucilius to believe in himself, indulge his vocation for poetry and use his own reason.

That is just our hope as philosophical counsellors: helping human beings to see more clearly what really matters to them, an exploration which – most of the time – leads to a better quality of life.

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