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PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICES IN THE CONTEXT OF A UNIVERSITY MASTER'S DEGREE PROGRAM¹

Abstract

The text traces the preparatory interview for 16th International Conference on Philosophical Practice organized in 2020 in S. Petersburg and postponed due to Covid. The interview presents Master's degree programme in *Philosophical Counseling*, established at the University of Roma Tre in 2006, and illustrates the activities of the association *Agàpe School. Training in philosophical counseling and philosophical practices* within the university Master. The Master programme focuses on the importance of the dialogue between the practitioners that daily deal with the classical and grounding texts of the philosophical tradition, moved by both historical and linguistic rigorous approaches, and the counselors, who listen, in their philosophical practices, to the urgent questions that arise from the everyday life of society. In such a mutual exchange, the practical approach to philosophy allow them, on the one hand, to constantly go back to the sources of the philosophical wisdom as well as to merge into the dialogue between philosophy and sciences, and, on the other, the philosophical research can hearken the problems of the plurality, which inhabits modern societies, reenacting the ancient philosophical practice that always strives for the good and the flourishing life.

Keywords: Consultancy; Master Degree; Philosophical Practices; University

1. *The origin of the Master's degree program at Roma Tre University*

How did it happen that the Faculty of Philosophy at Roma Tre University established a Master's degree program in Philosophical Practice in 2006?

The first time I heard about philosophical practice was around 1990. I was a researcher in the Institute of Philosophy at La Sapienza University. The director of our Institute, Franco Bianco, had organised a conference on Dilthey's thought in 1984, and he later asked me to translate a Odo Marquard's essay on anthropology. I was already accustomed to deconstructive thinking, but that essay brought the entire process to an end, obliterating the essence of man, and posed the question, «in that case, what remains?»; only to subsequently reply with the answer, «I, Odo Marquard, remain»².

I considered this sentence to be supremely presumptuous of him, thinking perhaps not even he remained. Only later did I begin to appreciate the ironic style of his thought, and I came to understand the significance he gave to the individual as something that

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1 Interview prepared for 16th International Conference on Philosophical Practice organized in 2020 in S. Petersburg by Russian colleagues at the Faculty of Pedagogy. Postponed due to Covid, the interview was broadcast online 2021. <https://www.icpp2020.ru/l/patrizia-cipolletta-italy/>

2 O. MARQUARD, *Dilthey e l'antropologia*, in *Dilthey e il pensiero del Novecento*, a cura di F. Bianco, Franco Angeli, Milano 1985, p. 167.

existed in flesh and blood: since just saying “individual” is a category, it is already a universalisation.

One day, Franco Bianco, who had continued a long friendship with Maquard, called me into his office, and told me that on his last trip to Germany, he had learned that a sort of *cura sui* using philosophy was being developed there. Later, it became clear to me that he had become acquainted with Achenbach’s philosophical practice. I don’t know if he had direct knowledge of Achenbach or if he had merely learned about *Philosophische Praxis* from Marquard’s stories.

At that time, I was studying Lacan and Irigaray. I was totally engrossed by that particular subject matter. I certainly questioned psychoanalytical therapy, although I recognised its importance; yet it did not seem possible to me that philosophy could be used therapeutically. This is why, despite Franco Bianco trying to push me in this direction, I nipped his expectations in the bud. But the seeds of this notion remained dormant underground, and later began to germinate.

When did the Master’s programme at the University of Roma Tre start?

Around 2000, I felt a growing sense of demoralisation within me. I was teaching philosophy at university, and, after graduating, my students either aspired – with much frustration – to a university career, or they would look for work in sectors that were very far removed from philosophy. In so doing, they felt they were abandoning their interest in and love of philosophy.

So, I had the idea of creating a space in our philosophy magazine to publish their works, which were written on the fringes of their working day. The column is still in use, and now it is mainly our philosophical consultants who are published in it.

Around 2004, my colleagues and me – with whom I first went through my existentialist phase, during our own formative years, and then later, the rehabilitation of practical philosophy – decided to start a Master’s degree in Philosophical Consultancy to open up new job opportunities to those who graduated in Philosophy and explore new routes of philosophical research. My colleagues, in particular, had developed their research interests in the direction of Foucault and the concept of ‘care of the self’, which he had recovered from the ancient philosophical tradition.

It has been a long journey of fine-tuning, thinking, discussions, attempts and experiments. So much so that I always say jokingly that ‘philosophical consultancy’ is a process, and there is always some ongoing ‘work in progress’ – adjustments and tweaks here and there, and reflecting on what we do and how we do it.

The Master’s course has never used the term ‘counsellor’, which is closer to psychology. However, in Italy, philosophical consultancy has long been linked with associations that used this term. My colleagues and I from Roma Tre University initially believed that it was important for our students to have a national association they could belong to, such as the SiCoF (Italian Society of Philosophical Counselling), which was later closed. Nevertheless, we continued on this journey

alone, and strengthened our initial position, which is certainly more in keeping with philosophical practice.

2. The relationship between philosophical consultancy and counselling

Why has philosophical consultancy in Italy often been associated with currents of existential psychology, and paths that are in some ways far removed from philosophy?

Philosophy in Italy was certainly a late starter when it came to considering philosophical practice, and our Master's course itself started considerably behind other associations, which arose from psychiatry or psychology.

Some farsighted scholars of psychiatry and psychology, psychoanalysts, some of whom had a degree in philosophy, in my opinion, sensed a crisis in their respective disciplines and tried to return to the bosom of their mother philosophy. I do not know if they are also focused on the search for different ways to 'treat' the psyche, or only turned to philosophy to modify their conception of the psyche and the theoretical structure within which they operate in their own praxis.

First and foremost, this is where we can see the completely different methods used by philosophical practice as compared with the various forms of psychological practice. Philosophical practices derive from the deconstruction of the theoretical conceptions of 19th century philosophy.

Before we spoke of Man (with a capital M), of the human race in a general sense. The 20th century challenged all definitions of man: he is now fumbling around in the dark. And it seems to me when considering all the various types of psychological practices that if, on the one hand, they have questioned the centrality of the cogito and conscience, on the other, they are not particularly accustomed to that same process of deconstruction from the last century, and have constructed 'theories' to guide them in their practices, and, like all scientific theories, they must accept potential and continuous adjustment.

All sciences have assumptions, which can undoubtedly be modified by research practices and the practical application of theories; nevertheless, they continue in their practice with that same theoretical orientation, which is always being modified, but which still remains constant as a theoretical orientation.

They need to explain, and we know that any reasoning, any explanation that tends to be exhaustive is a trap, and once you have fallen into this hole, the only way out is with a broader explanation, which then leads to another trap.

The original theory is modified, yet it remains, and it helps psychologists to orient themselves and understand what problems they face in the exercise of their profession. I do not deny that some psychological practices are important and that they help people get back on track in life; like a doctor who treats a broken leg, so too do psychologists believe they can heal the psyche, and perhaps it is only right that they should treat it that

way in some cases. Trying to lead the patient back to what they define as ‘normality’. But philosophy operates in a different way.

In the Master’s course, the term ‘counsellor’ is never used, the term philosophical consultancy is preferred instead. Do you think this term fully encapsulates the practice, or are you always looking for a word that better clarifies this concept?

I know that the use of ‘philosophical consultant’ and ‘philosophical consultancy’ has led to many misunderstandings in Italy. Leaving aside the difficulty of translating ‘*philosophische Praxis*’, but also the translation of the German term *philosophischer Praktiker* or the English ‘philosophical practitioner’, in Italian they do not convey the same sense: the words *praticante* [practising/trainee], *pratico* [practical], are closer to the idea of *praticone* [lit. practical worker/old hand], which has negative connotations.

Furthermore, I don’t like to talk about practical philosophers: I am too attached to the Stoic Epictetus who refused to even define himself as a philosopher.

We will return to this issue later when we talk about the relationship between philosophical practice and university research. I would like to conclude here with another term that has become fashionable: ‘philosopher-analyst’, which seems to me even closer to analytical psychology.

The problem is that philosophical practice does not involve analysis – nothing is analysed. By this, I mean that, in Italy, what takes place in philosophical practice does not have a name yet. I have sometimes heard the term ‘guest’, but it is not a suitable term in general contexts, because ordinary people do not understand it. Francesca Aversa, one of the staff members at the *Agàpe Scuola*, introduced me to a poem by Mario Benedetti, *The Accomplice in Life*³. That’s how I feel, like an accomplice who helps people use their heart and imagination, who – as the poem says – «shoulders the burden of our regrets until our conscience allows forgiveness».

3. *The relationship between university research and philosophical consultancy*

In your experience as director of the Master’s degree programme at Roma Tre University, and in your practice as a philosophical consultant, what relationship do you think there is between philosophical practice and the type of scientific research that, in the strict sense of the word, is being carried out at third level institutions today?

I believe that the rehabilitation of practical philosophy, in the 1970s, is the fundamental reason why philosophy, even at universities, raised the issue of philosophical practice. In the 1970s, practical philosophy was re-evaluated, but even before this, in the early 1900s, it had come to light that there could be no theoretical instructions on how to act, that no universal principles to which action was required to conform could be found. Not

3 See P. BENEDETTI, *Adioses y bienvenidas: 84 poemas y 80 haikus*, Seix Barral, Barcellona 2005.

even science, according to the Cartesian myth, could indicate perfect behaviour.

Then, towards the end of the 20th century, university research in this field came to a halt. After the period of deconstructive philosophy, and the development and deconstruction of hermeneutics, philosophy seemed to have nothing more to say; it seemed that its path towards truth had stopped. There were multiple 'singular' truths, all of which were possible.

In Italy, we can trace this acme in the thought of Gianni Vattimo, who conceived the term: 'weak thought' – a thought that could not speak of the universal, could not find a single truth for everyone. This was seen as the failure of philosophy. It is clear that philosophy seeks the universal, it is not satisfied with the particular or details, and relativism is certainly something that is very close to sophistry and very far from philosophy.

Thus, towards the end of the century, some of us opened up to philosophical practice, others sought the path of political philosophy and political practices, others continue to pursue universal truth, trying to grasp the structure of the Whole, trying to comprehend what 'Man' is.

Whether or not the search for universality and strong thought risks becoming a normative and exclusionary thought once again, we cannot know: this will be judged by posterity. Today, philosophy at universities is also a centre of dialogue with the sciences, and this practice is also extremely important for philosophy. However, it must be careful not to become subservient to science, as in the past it was subservient to theology.

Philosophy has certainly lost the rigorous point of view that previously brought it closer to science, so it risks becoming a journalistic debate. In Italy, many so-called philosophers have become columnists, and they express their opinions in newspapers and on television. These opinions are certainly much more valid than those of the ordinary man on the street, because they involve the search for the big picture. Plus, philosopher-columnists articulate their attempt to express this overview of opinions in a much stronger discourse than those made by the average columnist, because they know how to wisely articulate their discourse. And here there is always the danger of imposing a point of view, which appears general, but is still only one of many. Indeed, it is not possible to have an overall vision, neither by revelation of the Whole (as happened in ancient times), or by collecting together multiple forms of knowledge (today, there really are many).

Academic philosophy will continue to look for that certain something that unites all men, which is now identified in the neurological research of the sciences or is identified by others in Husserl's later work on *Einfühlung*.

Without a doubt, the critical and deconstructive characteristic of twentieth-century philosophy is – in my opinion – the aspect that is still essential to philosophy today, but this too risks being generalised and becoming imposing, of becoming critical in order to criticise.

There is frequently a risk that philosophical research will no longer know how to listen. Academic philosophy, which often remains locked in its ivory tower, does not

always have the humility to understand this. But all this leads us in a different direction, towards the search for what philosophy is today, which is certainly a fundamental issue and important area of research, but perhaps it is beyond the scope of the present discussion, which is on philosophical practice.

What relationship has been established between philosophical practice and consultancy associations and university professors?

In many cases, this relationship is less than ideal. Many professors do not recognise philosophical practice and it is difficult to get them to accept it. And I have often heard philosophical consultants who harbour resentment against university professors, claiming that their research is pointless and useless. Above all, they fear that they want to use their research to impose general canons. Many also hold a grudge for not being accepted into the ranks of academic research.

From the university academic's perspective, the casual way in which philosophical consultants use the 'sacred texts of philosophy' is unacceptable. Even I get irritated at times by the way philosophers from different eras are mixed together, and the words of great thinkers are quoted improperly.

I believe that the historians of philosophy at universities are a bit like the keepers of tradition: they must continue to study it, look for their sources, and by studying the respective historical period, discover the potential in the ancient texts, and above all, keep their spirit alive, or rather keep alive the essential nature of these texts, which remains, even with the passage of time. In Italian, 'spirit' is also synonymous with alcohol, which is the result of a process of fermentation and the passage of time, and when it comes to fine wine: the older, the better.

The distortion of those texts, through their use for philosophical practice, and, therefore, resulting in greater diffusion, could, however, offer new insights into their interpretation for academic research, which must then verify whether it is possible that that particular author could have thought in that way or if that reading is the fruit of the imagination of the philosophical consultant.

A prime example of this are the texts by Hadot on Stoicism⁴: the historians of philosophy contest his reading of the ancient and Roman Stoic movement, because it is mixed with Augustine and Descartes. Yet, it is precisely those same contaminations that are very fruitful for the philosophical consultant.

However, they must be aware of these contaminations. I often jokingly say that the ancient philosophers, as well as those from the twentieth century, have soared very high, and have grasped the totality of many things. Some features of their thinking today are no longer of interest to us, others are still current. They are examples for us – like signposts, they show us the way and each of us chooses the directions that we feel closest to.

Philosophical consultants must have the humility to understand that they will often mistreat the classical philosophers, and I find it unseemly for them to appropriate the thoughts of past philosophers in their writings without citing them.

4 See P. HADOT, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, Albin Michel, Paris 2002.

It is even more inappropriate for them to be so bold as to call themselves philosophers. Especially when they stress the fact that they elaborate new philosophical thought, while university scholars often merely critique and comment on the thought of others.

Our task with philosophical practice is to lead everyone to think, because, as long as there are those who do not think, we cannot reach the truth. Only by thinking together we can walk towards the truth that we all love.

I believe that a dialogue between universities and philosophical consultants is the foundation that will allow us to kickstart philosophical thought and a love for knowledge once again.

4. How does philosophical consultancy work? How are philosophical consultants 'trained' and what 'education and training' do the trainers have?

Professor Cipolletta, you have stated that philosophical consultancy is not based on assumptions like psychological practices. Like any human science, psychology and the various forms of psychoanalysis have a theoretical orientation, which, although modifiable, is a kind of guide to its praxis. If philosophical consultancy does not have a theoretical framework of reference, then how does it work?

Philosophical consultants, those who conduct philosophical practice, have understood the void left behind by the deconstruction of theories; they know how to stay centred in a whirlwind in which everything can not only be questioned, but has already been questioned, as can be seen from the philosophy of the twentieth century. But, precisely because of that void, they listen, and not only do they listen to the 'guest' in order to help the 'guest', but they also listen to themselves to help themselves. Because what they are looking for is not something in particular, which can be isolated, and therefore, also manipulated. They do not seek a piece of the truth, which the sciences offer, nor do they even seek the truth of that person in front of them, but the truth in its entirety, which concerns them, the 'guest', and also the whole world, which concerns everyone and everything.

Reading and studying the philosophies of the past have accustomed the philosophy student, the Master's student, to seeing things as a whole: every philosopher from the past has tried to see the Whole, to comprehend the Whole as well as the particular through their philosophical thought, as Hegel tried to do.

And every past philosopher has tried to express this Whole with a certain rigour so that everyone would be able to reach that same overall vision. Only to then question the understanding they have reached, and find themselves feeling a certain nostalgia for the Whole. That type of philosophical education which looks at the Whole, and which simultaneously deconstructs any vision of the Whole, is what prepares philosophical consultants.

It trains them to adopt an extremely mobile and, at the same time, extremely emotional mode of listening, because it touches on terrain in which not only the consultee's life is at stake, but also their own life.

I would say that the task of the philosophical consultant is to arouse profound levels of emotion and to open up a dialogue on the extreme things that concern everyone. Today's world is always in a hurry, no one asks questions anymore, like: «where am I going?», «who am I?», «where do I come from?», «what is life?». We are used to the fact that sciences pose questions that can sooner or later be answered, so those philosophical questions that trigger exploration, but which cannot be answered, are set aside by most people – lost and forgotten.

And because we forget those upsetting questions, we also send all the emotions that can accompany them into hibernation. At the very most, they become questions that our minds ask but when our mind gets no reply, it abandons them. And yet, if they are forgotten, a part of us suffers, gets too violently attached to trivial things and empties life of meaning, and, in losing that meaning, sooner or later, we lose our bearings and get confused.

Once a Master's student asked me: «who says that those questions concern everyone?», and this threw me back into the whirlwind that always accompanies us. Every time you conquer a small foothold, it could end up crumbling, and perhaps the only thing that those who practice philosophy can learn is not to be afraid of falling into the void.

But how does philosophy work in practice? Can you at least explain what happens in a meeting between a philosophical consultant and a consultee, or guest? And what happens in group philosophical practice sessions?

Philosophical consultants work by listening and collecting what we are told. It is the void that reigns supreme in these meetings, the more we understand how to stay in that void, the more open we are to welcoming it.

The various threads of the story of the consultee's life are collected together. The fact that everything is listened to and all aspects of their life are accepted, without judgment, without thinking about so-called 'normality', allows the consultee to gain greater clarity.

It is a phenomenological journey of his or her experiences, in search of the essential, even though it can never be found, but the journey itself is what remains as essential. In the beginning, the guest or consultee invests us with authority, with the role of truth-keeper.

It often happens to me: it may be because of my white hair, or my position. They believe that we philosophical consultants are the keepers of the truth and that we will lead them to the truth. Simply the path towards truth is enough to make them feel good.

Not everyone comes to understand that no one holds the truth, and that I am, myself, still looking for it, and that the truth is not a certainty, that it is not a fixed point to hold on to. Arriving at these questions and sticking with the unanswered questions is already the fruit of a great journey. Undoubtedly, this is how we can learn to live in uncertainty.

But this is not the aim of philosophical counselling, it is perhaps more a consequen-

ce. This result is the aim of educators who teach mankind to have the elasticity needed to adapt to situations, which are constantly transforming, and live in our world, which is ever-changing, yet never actually changes at all. And the coaches that want to train pliable workers because, in the world of work, changing the point of view can change ways of working.

But this does not concern philosophical consultancy: we seek the essential, or rather we want to show the path towards it. Some consultees stop when they are satisfied with the relief they have received, some manage to plough the soil of their soul, others welcome seeds that will bear fruit later on.

In group practice sessions there is a different approach, because here the philosophical consultant has the task of listening to a group of people, and must act as a mediator, giving the floor to each person in turn. In this way, consultants will present literary texts to think about.

I prefer literary texts, rather than philosophical texts, which are more difficult and more technical. Literature and poetry go hand in hand with philosophy – they speak to everyone.

Not everyone is always able to understand that we are all in the same boat, full of questions, which is why, as I have said, they give us a certain authority that goes beyond ourselves. The best philosophical consultation occurs when this authority is ultimately removed.

A philosophical consultant must always accept the authority or prestige conferred by consultees with reservation, and, for this reason, a continuous dialogue with his or her colleagues is always necessary. Only in this way will the consultant not fall into the trap set by the consultee when conferring such authority, which he or she does not, in fact, have.

Only through continuous supervision will they not fall into the position of a guru, a keeper of the truth. Humility and the path towards the search for truth are essential. For this reason, as I mentioned earlier, I think of Epictetus who, when asked about philosophers, pointed to others, and even more so, I think of Kierkegaard who, in *The Sickness Unto Death*⁵, underlines how even the stoic on his path cannot afford to stop, otherwise he risks becoming proud of his humility. We must never forget that we are also consultees: it is something I always insist on in my courses.

When I am asked what a philosophical consultant does, I always think of a story by Ernst Bloch in *Traces*: some people decide to venture beyond the reassuring boundary wall surrounding a village, and wander around inquisitively until some of them later get lost in the dark forest, attracted by the sounds within. Psychologists want to bring them back inside the village walls, to normality, but we show them the way, on a clear path, towards the inn, towards that community of thought that does not yet exist⁶.

5 See S. KIERKEGAARD, *The Sickness unto Death*, edited and translated with introduction and notes by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton University press, Princeton, New Jersey 1980.

6 E. BLOCH, *Daneben: Wirtshaus der Irren*, in *Spuren*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M 1985, p. 138.

How does the Master's degree programme educate and train philosophical consultants?

The master's programme has an agreement with a philosophical consultancy association. For several years there had been a collaboration with the SUCF, then as I approached my 70th year and retirement, along with some of the other colleagues with whom I shared this adventure, we founded an association, *Agàpe Scuola*, which deals with the practical training of philosophical consultants, while the university offers lectures and talks with those who carry out research activities at Roma Tre University, because I believe that a future philosophical consultant must always maintain a dialogue with those who do research at university level.

At *Agàpe Scuola*, therefore, we deal with the practical lessons that will allow students to become experts in philosophical practice. But we must start by saying that a good philosophical consultant is someone who has worked successfully on him or herself.

I believe there are two ways of training philosophical consultants. And I repeat the term 'train', because they have to demonstrate a certain level of performance and skill. When we work as philosophical consultants, we are never trainers, because we do not have a paradigm to teach to. Other people have this role in society.

In the Master's programme and the course at *Agàpe Scuola*, we have the task of training 'philosophical consultants'. Therefore, this educational path is close to, but also distant from, practical philosophy.

Our students, when they enrol in the Master's, already have an understanding of philosophy, which they will have learned during their university studies. At university, we mainly focus on the mind, acquire knowledge, and also end up fascinated by the various practical theories, by the indications of good living that philosophers have offered over the centuries. But it is another thing entirely to have them become your life.

Very often, students who have just left university are idealists, they often have precise, wonderful thoughts, and are generally afraid to act, or, according to the adage of an old proverb: 'they do not practice what they preach'. Therefore, they must digest what they read. They must not only welcome it into their mind, but also ruminate on it, digest it until they forget the philosophical indications they have chosen, and thus make them become flesh and blood through their actions.

However, the path I like to take with the Master's students is the journey that, starting from the banality of life, from the various levels of emotions that accompany us in everyday life, leads to deeper degrees of emotional understanding, which allow us to perceive the void and the silence. To then return to listen to each of our individual points of view on the world, and finally return to everyday life in a community filled with people who are different but who are together, and who can work together even if they are different and have different perspectives.

I believe it is this path that frees them from a certain stiffness and allows them to arrive at the void and the silence that prepares them to listen to any perspective, any vision of the world that the consultee might want to present them with. When students

have finished the three-year course in philosophical consultancy, will they be ready for philosophical practice and philosophical consulting? When will they be ready to train other philosophical consultants in turn?

The Master's degree at the University of Roma Tre and the Agàpe Scuola association place a particular focus on apprenticeship. Our students are not left alone, rather their first work experience is carried out under the guidance of a tutor, who will accompany them in the various situations where a group philosophical practice project will take place.

The students' first experience will take place in senior centres, or schools, at sports associations or other kinds of associations, in libraries or companies, or even in prisons and places where prisoners serve probationary sentences, or group homes.

The first phase is listening to the situation in which the trainee will have to operate, and their tutor will help them understand that situation, help them create a void inside themselves to prepare to listen and understand what the most suitable method is for that environment.

Then, the trainee-student and the tutor choose the best philosophical practice and start the process with a poem, with a short literary text, with the story of one of the participants: this is how listening and feedback begin, and the dialogue takes shape.

In general, the trainees are very afraid, but you know, you can only learn by diving in.

We are much more attentive to one-on-one consultations and discussions with students are also very important even after the Master's programme is finished.

Education and training are always ongoing. We want to avoid our students becoming amateur psychologists, but, above all, we want to avoid them falling into the trap of charisma, which leads them to lose that trait of humility that must always be present in the philosophical consultant.

Another extremely important point is the education and training of those philosophical consultants, after having acquired the necessary experience, who will become the trainers of future philosophical consultants. On this, we are very strict at Agàpe Scuola association: a training course is mandatory, made up of discussions with old lecturers, and observing the methods they use to train philosophical consultants.

It is not enough to be a good philosophical consultant if you want to teach at our Agàpe Scuola and lecture on the Master's course at Roma Tre University. When you become a lecturer for the Master's degree programme in Philosophical Consultancy, the danger of falling into the trap of authority and prestige, and the need to feel recognised is even greater. And discussions with old lecturers and colleagues must therefore be even more regular.

