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What Does It Mean to Live Well?

Human Flourishing and Philosophical Practices from Ancient Philosophy to Contemporary Scholarship

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the ancient Greek conception of philosophy as a way of life, emphasizing its connection to happiness understood in terms of human flourishing (εὐδαιμονία, *eudaimonia*), emotional development, and philosophical practices. Moving from Pierre Hadot's interpretation of ancient philosophy, my proposal highlights how philosophical discourse started from an existential choice: to live in pursuit of wisdom and virtue, that is, to live well. Central to this pursuit was the transformation of the self through disciplined practices aimed at aligning one's life with philosophical values. Philosophical exercises were designed to harmonize both affective and cognitive dimensions of the person so to establish an excellent behaviour, such as courage for example. The conclusion of the paper examines how contemporary thinkers Romano Màdera and Claudia Baracchi revive this tradition, proposing renewed ways in which philosophy can represent a path to emotional maturity and existential fulfillment.

Keywords: Eudaimonia, Virtue, Courage, Philosphical practices, Màdera, Baracchi.

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1 INTRODUCTION

We are usually drawn to think about philosophy as a sophisticated elaboration of systems of thought, expression of the refined exercise of reason. Since ancient Greek philosophy, the human being has been defined in accordance with their rational faculty and with the ability to formulate syllogisms. Famously, Aristotle says that the ἄνθρωπος (*ánthropos*) is the animal that possesses λόγος (*lógos*).[1] However, this is just a way of interpreting such a discipline. In fact, according to the studies of the French philologist Pierre Hadot concerning the origin of ancient Greek thinking, philosophy started as a discussion on different lifestyles and as an explanation of them. Philosophical discourses motivated or contested specific way of living, with the aim to understand which one was the most suitable for humans. Therefore, in antiquity the philosophical schools were places where, together with speeches and dialogical exercises, other kinds of activities were proposed with the intention of transforming ans converting the entirety of the human psyche in a virtuous sense.[2] The spiritual exercises, as Hadot calls them, were meant to promote the formation of a good and happy life.[3] Plato's Academy, Aristotle's Lyceum, Epicurus's Garden, and Zeno's Stoa were locales in which daily practices were scheduled following specific priorities, where days were beaten by meals together and by devotion to research. The few philosophical texts from that time which have reached us guarantee proof of these existential styles and the tasks aimed at fortifying a wise and happy behaviour.

The aim of this paper is to explore the ancient Greek conception of philosophy as a way of life, emphasising its connection to happiness understood in terms of human flourishing (εὐδαιμονία, *eudaimonia*), emotional development, and philosophical practices. In this context, the analysis of courage as a virtue in both Plato and Aristotle will be exemplary, showing how the emotional impulse can be guided to achieve an eudaimonic condition. Moving from Pierre Hadot's interpretation of ancient philosophy, my proposal highlights how early philosophical discourse started from an existential choice: to live a happy and fulfilled life, that is, to live in pursuit of wisdom and virtue. Central to this pursuit was the transformation of the self through disciplined practices towards an alignment of one's life with philosophical values. The Greek understanding of εὐδαιμονία presupposes a comprehensive interpretation of the human being's intimate nature as

[1] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a9-16 (in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. by J. Barnes, trans. by B. Jowett, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1984).

[2] P. Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. by Michael Chase, Belknap Press, Cambridge 2002, and Idem, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. by A. Davidson, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 1995.

[3] As we know, Aristotle suggests that for humans the ultimate good and happy life do coincide. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095a14-16 (in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, cit., trans. by W. D. Ross, revised by J. O. Urmson).

a togetherness of multiple elements, suggesting that flourishing involves engaging with other faculties beyond the purely rational dimension. In Greek philosophy, emotional cultivation was considered integral to this transformative process, as emotions were seen as indicators of one's ethical disposition and orientation toward the good. Philosophical exercises—such as ascesis, dialogue, meditation, dietary regimes, and contemplation of death—were designed to harmonise both affective and cognitive dimensions of the person. The conclusion of the paper examines how contemporary thinkers, for example Romano Màdera and Claudia Baracchi, revive this tradition, proposing renewed ways in which philosophy can today represent a path to emotional maturity and existential fulfilment.

In this light, the discussion of classical topics does not aim to offer an entirely novel theoretical contribution; rather, it seeks to map the insights of their most authoritative figures, predecessors as well as more recent, framing them as a reflective foundation for the philosophical practices. Concurrently, it will be my primary care to emphasize how these accounts presuppose the pivotal, non-rational role of the desiderative dimension in achieving a truly eudaimonic life.

2 DISCUSSING THE TERMINOLOGY: EUDAIMONIA AND THE MEANING OF LIVING WELL

According to the teachings of Greek philosophers, living and living a good life are two separate possibilities. It is Aristotle who reminds us that philosophy finds an appropriate space to rise only when all the survival needs are met.[4] That is to say that to be an ensouled animal is a necessary premise, although not sufficient, to open up the possibility for the existential fulfilment closely similar to a godlike condition. Moreover, such a peculiarity seems to be a unique feature of the human beings, excluding such possibility for other animals: the capability of structuring oneself, educating oneself as a consequence of the constant choices undertaken which elude the basic instincts. However, at the same time, there is not a shared agreement concerning what actually a 'good life' is or what it means to live accordingly. Actually, good itself is a subject of dispute. Plato confirms it when he locates διάνοια (*dianoia*) at the height of the philosophical path and the practice of thought:[5] not a solipsistic accomplishment, not the assurance of correspondence between a learner and an object of knowledge, which confirms the actual comprehension of what is true or good, but the noetic synthesis obtained thanks to the

[4] IDEM, *Metaphysics*, 982b18-25 (in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, cit., trans. by W. D. Ross). See also *ibidem*, 1098a8-20.

[5] PLATO, *Republic*, 511e (in *Complete Works*, ed. by J. M. Cooper, trans. by G. M. A. Grube, revised by C. D. C. Reeve, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis 1997).

dynamic between multiple perspectives.[6] In a letter to a friend, Plato admits that of these important teachings, there can be no instruction but only a firsthand experience: as from the grinding between two pebbles, the light of knowledge comes suddenly and illuminates the obscurity, the blindness of the mysterious.[7] Thus, what is good cannot be established *a priori*, rather debated and tested together, by actually doing philosophy together, συμφιλοσοφεῖν (*sumphilosophein*).

Considering what just stated and recalling the previous suggestions by Hadot, we could conclude that philosophical schools owe their differentiation to the disagreement concerning the definition of 'good.' Each school embodied an existential possibility, organised according to what its founder or members believed was the good and a life devoted to it.

Εὐδαιμονία (*eudaimonia*) is the Greek word that describes happiness. Moreover happiness is the main topic of ethical considerations for the Greek culture, differently from modern morality that focuses on duty and adherence to norms. Etymologically speaking, the term εὐδαιμονία is composed of the prefix εὐ (*eu*), i.e., 'well', and δαίμων (daimon), usually rendered with 'divinity' o even 'demon.' Already the use of a term related to δαίμων to describe the highest condition of the human suggests that the human is not purely human; indeed, the good life depends on the capacity to live with the non-human that dwells in us, and also acts through us. In Plato's dialogues, Socrates often relates to the δαίμων when in doubt and when about to take an important decision, so to underline that, when a choice is needed, reason alone is not sufficient to determine a moral judgement.[8] Ahead of any metaphorical representation or treatises on intrapsychic distinctions, εὐδαιμονία immediately sanctions the composite multiplicity that we are and, consequently, the difficulty of con-ducting our existence. Let us underline this again: if we properly consider εὐδαιμονία, even if deciding to translate it with 'flourishing' instead of happiness, what must be recalled is that the roots of this condition are grounded in the structural complexity of human nature, and specifically in the activity of a divine side of human nature. This peculiar status does not maximize an anthropological feature alone, grounding the human experience in subjectivity, but actually indicates a transcendent openness that expands our boundaries—as to say that the fullest condition of the human being is achieved when they are dissolved in the touch and engagement with other than oneself.[9] Εὐδαιμονία occurs when, through human awareness, life acknowledges

[6] *Ibidem*, 511e. For a deep analysis of the topic, see J. Sallis, *Being and Logos. Reading the Platonic Dialogues*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1996, pp. 413 ff.

[7] Plato, *Letter VII*, 341b-d (in *Complete Works*, cit., trans. by G. R. Morrow).

[8] Plato, *Apology*, 31a-b (in *Complete Works*, cit., trans. by G. M. A. Grube); *Theaetetus*, 151a (in *Complete Works*, cit., trans. by M. J. Levett, revised by Myles Burnyeat); *Phaedrus*, 242b-c (in *Complete Works*, cit., trans. by A. Nehamas, P. Woodruff).

[9] Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 430a15-20; 431a1-5 (in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, cit., trans.

itself. Even more: life perceives itself in the act of living,[10] and there is glimmer of something divine in this occurrence.[11]

Happiness is the exercise of a difficult balance of harmonising the differentiated parts of the human soul: at first, it is precarious, then it has the chance to become gradually more and more lasting regardless of favourable or adverse situations; through spiritual activities, one can explore occurrences of such stability. Soul, in turn, is understood as a kind of force (δυνάμει),[12] especially involved with motion and sensation.[13] Thus, εὐδαιμονία is literally a concern about comportment, questioning the causes of the involvement with the manifold composition of oneself and in relation to external circumstances.

The acquisition of a habit, as any other ethical activity, is an architectural matter.[14] Since human nature detains the chance of self-structuring, whatever gained characteristic becomes a sort of second nature, a potency that can be implemented at any time.[15] Although the eudaimonic status is of a brief and ephemeral duration compared to a lifetime, it can be prepared and made more enduring through philosophical practices that consolidate behavioural attitudes of the self. The good exercise of each one of our features allows to develop their appropriate use, their qualitative excellence—this is what was called ἀρετή (*aretè*), often translated with 'virtue.' Thus, virtues are derived from the components of the human soul; it is actually their optimal practice.[16]

Plato distinguishes three dimensions of the human soul—rational, animated, and desiring.[17] To each of them corresponds a virtuous activation—wisdom, courage, temperance.[18] There is another virtue, justice, which results from the inner harmony guaranteed by an appropriate actuation of the other three virtues just mentioned. There is a wonderful passage within *Republic* Book 4 where Plato describes justice with musical terminology, therefore comparing the exercise of justice with a tuned melody literally composed by every part of the human inner reality:

> [a]nd in truth justice is, it seems, something of this sort. However, it isn't concerned

by J. A. Smith). Cf. C. Baracchi, *Aristotle's Ethics as First Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011, pp. 301-305.

[10] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072b1-27.

[11] Let us recall that 'divinity' for the Greeks means what is not human, an entity that is not traced by finitude and death. Thus divinity is that which remains always exposed to the sunlight, never fading into the obscurity of Tartarus.

[12] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246a.

[13] Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 403b25.

[14] Plato, *Republic*, 395d. Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a14.

[15] Plato, *Republic*, 395d and Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1107a1.

[16] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1102a4-1103a10.

[17] Plato, *Republic*, 439d-e.

[18] *Ibidem*, 441a-442d.

> with someone's doing his own externally, but with what is inside him, with what is truly himself and his own. One who is just does not allow any part of himself to do the work of another part or allow the various classes within him to meddle with each other. He regulates well what is really his own and rules himself. He puts himself in order, is his own friend, and harmonizes the three parts of himself like three limiting notes in a musical scale—high, low, and middle. He binds together those parts and any others there may be in between, and from having been many things he becomes entirely one, moderate and harmonious. Only then does he act. And when he does anything, whether acquiring wealth, taking care of his body, engaging in politics, or in private contracts—in all of these, he believes that the action is just and fine that preserves this inner harmony and helps achieve it, and calls it so, and regards as wisdom the knowledge that oversees such actions. And he believes that the action that destroys this harmony is unjust, and calls it so, and regards the belief that oversees it as ignorance.[19]

3 Courage as the Expression of the Animated Part of the Soul between Plato and Aristotle

The animated part of the soul (θυμός, *thymos*), whose corresponding virtue is bravery, is trained through music and gymnastics,[20] which suggests that courage comes from a good qualification of this side of the psyche by arranging both the sensibility towards harmony and the athleticism of the body. According to the hypothetical analogy between the human psyche and the city, this animated part is represented by the guardians of the town who are prepared to defend the interests and borders of their motherland. This is a crucial educational aspect for Plato, who discusses the topic extensively, especially in *Republic* Book 3. Apparently, music would contribute to cultivating the soul, while physical training would improve bodily toughness;[21] however, these two activities both address the education of the soul that has primarily influence on the body.[22] Plato consistently discusses courage in other two dialogues, *Laches* and *Protagoras*, where he describes this virtue as the ability to discern between what should be feared or not, but in the *Republic* he adds this element of safeguard (σωτηρία, *soterìa*) which is progressively expanded through the entire text.[23] In order to improve the attitude to defend the city, guardians should be able to consider what exists beyond the single citizens taken individually and rather take care of what transcends the singulars: "what is advantageous to the city"[24] represents their main interest. To

[19] *Ibidem*, 443d-e.
[20] *Ibidem*, 442a.
[21] *Ibidem*, 410a-410b.
[22] *Ibidem*, 411e-412a.
[23] *Ibidem*, 470a-471c, 502c, 621b-c.
[24] *Ibidem*, 412d-e.

refine this capability, the guardians must both gain experience with the emotional element of fear and be skilled in formulating their opinions towards what is useful for the town or what isn't.[25] Through the voice of Socrates, Plato even suggests that since an early age the guardians should be exposed to dreadful or frightful events to prove their endurance to excessive pleasures. These emotional tests are organised in realistic settings but are actually a convenient tool, an expedient that mimics reality. From this perspective, the examination arranges the environment just as ancient philosophical schools did with their spiritual exercises. During their training, that is supposed to last some years, the guardians' obedience to rhythm and harmony is particularly appreciated, as these resemble the norms of the town.[26] Guardians are suspicious with respect to external enemies as much as to internal adversaries which endanger the disruption of the city;[27] thus, bravery, as expression of the animated character of the soul, *cooperates* with λόγος and defends what is deliberated by reason.[28]

The alliance between the same two dimensions of the human psyche is metaphorically represented in the *Phaedrus* with the allegory of a chariot.[29] In the scope of this dialogue, while trying to explain the motion of living animals, Plato describes the composition of the human soul with a myth and an image: the human soul would be similar to a chariot led by a charioteer and pulled by two horses, a white one and a black one. The charioteer would be comparable to the rational feature, who knows where to direct the chariot; the white horse is analogous to the spirited capability, which provides motivation; the black horse is alike desire, difficult to manage but greatly strong.[30] The comparison between the human soul and the winged vehicle gives a good picture of the difficulty of behaving, which requires more effort than a rational calculation as we are about to discuss. Ultimately, here Plato addresses two concerns, that is (i) what is the origin of human motion and (ii) which of the differentiated qualities inhabiting the human drives their actions. Especially the second issue, closely related to the topic of εὐδαιμονία previously discussed, sheds light on the difficulties of behaviour: it is not enough to appeal to the faculty of λόγος to guarantee a rational conduct, because this part needs to operate together with the other

[25] *Ibidem*, 412e; 429c. In *Laches*, Plato discusses whether courage is a science, see *Laches*, 194d ff. (in *Complete Works*, cit., trans. by R. Kent Sprague). The same in the *Protagoras*, 360d (in *Complete Works*, cit., trans. by S. Lombardo, K. Bell).

[26] Plato, *Republic*, 413e. Do recall that the Greek νόμος (*nómos*) can be translated as law or as song depending on the accent.

[27] *Ibidem*, 414b.

[28] *Ibidem*, 442b. Here I understand λόγος in a more nuanced manner, not only as a calculative faculty. I do so by fully considering its etymological derivation, rooted in a relational meaning. A further elaboration of the topic is traceable in some of my previous publications.

[29] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246b.

[30] *Ibidem*, 253d-e.

existing features, each of them being pulled toward apparently irreconcilable directions. According to Socrates' conviction, the philosophical exercise marks a difference between a corrupted attitude and a harmonious one:

Of course a man who was initiated long ago or who has become defiled is not to be moved abruptly from here to a vision of beauty itself when he sees what we call beauty here; so instead of gazing at the latter reverently, he surrenders to pleasure and sets out in the manner of a four-footed beast, eager to make babies; and, wallowing in vice, he goes after unnatural pleasure too, without a trace of fear or shame. A recent initiate, however, one who has seen much in heaven—when he sees a godlike face or bodily form that has captured beauty well, first he shudders and a fear comes over him like those he felt at the earlier time; then he gazes at him with the reverence due a god, and if he weren't afraid people would think him completely mad, he'd even sacrifice to his boy as if he were the image of a god.[31]

Philosophy represents a way to rearrange an interpretation of reality and our inner dynamics in a broader perspective, in a wider vision which harmoniously encompasses all the impulses inhabiting our psyche[32]—this is the indication of the myth proposed in the *Phaedrus* of the winged chariot that travels vertically and tries to approach the plane of the truth. In this sense, reaching truth is actually a matter of extended capacity of sight and progressively vast inclusion: here the exercise of contemplation is described in terms of vision, i.e., through the language of sensibility and not of motivations logically conceived. The theoretical work is an activity of expanding the horizon, an invitation to not stop our considerations to a nearsighted distance nor to a deaf reasoning. The final prayer that Socrates recites at the end of the *Phaedrus* provides a clue for such an interpretation:

> Even more so if such work no longer satisfies him [Isocrates] and a higher, divine impulse leads him to more important things. For nature, my friend, has placed the love of wisdom in his mind. [...].
> Socrates: Shouldn't we offer a prayer to the gods here before we leave?
> Phaedrus: Of course.
> Socrates: O dear Pan and all the other gods of this place, grant that I may be beautiful inside. Let all my external possessions be in friendly harmony with what is within. May I consider the wise man rich. As for gold, let me have as much as a moderate man could bear and carry with him. Do we need anything else, Phaedrus? I believe my prayer is enough for me.
> Phaedrus: Make it a prayer for me as well. Friends have everything in common.

[31] *Ibidem*, 250e-251a.

[32] *Ibidem*, 247c-e. To deepen the topic see E. Bartolini, A. Villa, *Lo sguardo dall'alto che tocca il mondo*, in *Esercitarsi a vivere. Le pratiche filosofiche*, ed. by I. Gamelli, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2026, pp. 99-100.

SOCRATES: Let's be off.[33]

Let us underline that without the sustenance of the animated side or the push of the desiring part of the soul, nothing alike would be possible. The philosophical adventure is led by the ability to sublimate desire, directing its efforts to a more enduring addressee, and desire is a divine impulse, which drives an uncanny and extraordinary enterprise. Therefore, philosophy is a matter of integration, the practice of acknowledging our nature without suppressing any of it—happiness is the difficult result of such an alliance. During a walk into nature just outside the city, Pan—god of fecundity whose name recalls wholeness—is invoked to underline that nothing remains outside the philosophical concern and that hopefully, through the philosophical work, everything is worthy of attention. Within this embrace, we become friends with others, sharing with them this risky endeavour.

Aristotle too is interested in understanding the complexity of the human nature. As Plato, he recognizes the presence of manifold aspects of the soul, i.e., "self-nutrition, sensation, thinking, and movement."[34] The second kind of psychological qualities, the ones related to sensation (αἴσθησις, *aísthēsis*), it is also said to be impetuous (ἐπιθυμία, *epithumia*) and somehow similar to desire (ὄρεξις, *orexis*).[35] Equally, Aristotle derives the ethical behaviour from the psychological structure, given that happiness is defined by him as "activity of soul in conformity with excellence, and if there are more than one excellence, in conformity with the best and most complete."[36] Again, similarly to his teacher, Aristotle claims that the finest exercise of one's own judgement concerning what to fear results in the virtue of courage. In Book 2 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle diffusely discusses the nature of virtue, differentiating it from passions and faculties.[37] The main characteristics of virtue compared to the other two are that "states [are] the things in virtue of which we stand well or badly with reference to the passions [πάθη, *pathē*], e.g. with reference to anger we stand badly if we feel it violently or too weakly, and well if we feel it moderately; and similarly with reference to the other passions."[38] While we do not have much power over the rise of passions, likewise we cannot intervene in the possessions of faculties; the range of our reactions finds then space in our behaviour. Actions are the realm of virtues.[39] Virtuous habits, together with reasonable considerations, are the source of choices that result in a mediation between opposite vices.[40] The development

[33] *Ibidem*, 279b-c.
[34] ARISTOTLE, *On the Soul*, 413b13.
[35] IDEM, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1102b30.
[36] *Ibidem*, 1098a15.
[37] *Ibidem*, 1105b19-20.
[38] *Ibidem*, 1105b26-28.
[39] *Ibidem*, 1106b25.
[40] *Ibidem*, 1106b36-1107a3.

of virtue is twofold, like the genre of virtues recognised by Aristotle—intellectual excellence finds its roots in teaching, whereas moral excellence comes from repetition.[41] In the case of bravery, this means that it is the exercise of courageous actions in front of events that usually would provoke the insurrection of fear or excessive confidence to progressively build up bravery and the right discernment with respect to those occurrences. Even different life experiences contribute to defining a proper response in this sense,[42] precisely as it happens in the context of the ancient philosophical institutions. Fear is listed by Aristotle among passions, together with "appetite, anger, [...], confidence, envy, joy, love, hatred, longing, emulation, pity, and in general the feelings that are accompanied by pleasure or pain,"[43] implicitly connecting it to the part of the soul connected to sensation. Moreover, Aristotle is willing to specify that, although it is not pleasant to familiarise oneself with fear, it also shows an unpredictable, beautiful side:

> Yet the end which courage sets before it would seem to be pleasant, but to be concealed by the attending circumstances, as happens also in athletic contests; for the end at which boxers aim is pleasant—the crown and the honours—but the blows they take are distressing to flesh and blood, and painful, and so is their whole exertion; and because the blows and the exertions are many the end, which is but small, appears to have nothing pleasant in it. And so, if the case of courage is similar, death and wounds will be painful to the brave man and against his will, but he will face them because it is noble [καλὸν] to do so or because it is base not to do so. And the more he is possessed of excellence in its entirety and the happier he is, the more he will be pained at the thought of death; for life is best worth living for such a man, and he is knowingly losing the greatest goods, and this is painful. But he is none the less brave, and perhaps all the more so, because he chooses noble deeds of war at that cost. It is not the case, then, with all the excellencies that the exercise of them is pleasant, except in so far as it reaches its end.[44]

In this touching passage, Aristotle proves that the philosophical concern expands life in every direction; nevertheless, this does not mean to live in a confused way but actually to live more fully. Being virtuous is in itself desirable; however, it can happen not to be preferable from the perspective of the ἄνθρωπος. Participating in excellence may result in being more painful in some situations because it proves a deeper understanding of life's greatness in liminal situations at the edge of human existence. Nevertheless, it is preferable to the contrary, ignorance, because for Aristotle σοφία and the consequent understanding always represent a magnification of life of which the human being has the privilege to participate. The horizon of the philosophical undertaking is all held here: a perpetual exercise

[41] *Ibidem*, 1103a15-20.
[42] *Ibidem*, 1115a36-1115b6.
[43] *Ibidem*, 1105b22-23.
[44] *Ibidem*, 1117b1-17.

of attention and presence, which amplifies the perception of life's nuances. With its continuous questioning, the philosophical method opens fissures where apparently there is no other space for exploration. By doing so, it nourishes curiosity and the pleasure of understanding[45]—that is, of comprehending the causes—and at the same time increases the possibilities for discomfort or misery. "Humani nihil a me alienum puto," Publius Terentius Afer had to say—the highs and the lows are all included in the range of possibilities.

Both Plato and Aristotle move from an understanding of the manifold dimensions of the human nature to explain both virtues and happiness: according to their philosophical approach, happiness is the proper activation of the faculties provided by the soul.[46] In this sense, the ethical reflection concerning human flourishing comes *after* an acknowledgment of the specific arrangement of human psychological capacities and an attentive understanding of their dynamic interplay.

4 PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICES TODAY: ROMANO MÀDERA AND CLAUDIA BARACCHI

In his studies about ancient philosophy as a way of life, Hadot traces elements of such an interpretation of the philosophical activity through the entire history of this discipline and questions if it is still possible in contemporary times to live philosophically in the same or in a similar way.[47] Although with some adjustments, Hadot seems to be positive to consider it to be an option even these days.[48] In this sense, Romano Màdera and Claudia Baracchi, together with the cultural association Philo-Philosophical Practices, are an example of a close adherence between philosophical discourse and a life lived coherently. Moving from both philosophical studies and depth psychology, the two authors demonstrate an interested considerations of the essential sides of the human in order to promote a fulfilling and encompassing existence. Màdera and Baracchi do not address the excellence of the human life by promoting the acquisition of virtues, nevertheless their researches properly consider the centrality of the non rational sides of the human psyche and their integration for a life explorated in all of its possibilities.[49] Both Màdera and Baracchi intend the philosophical practices as transfor-

[45] ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics*, 980a21. Here, I prefer the translation of this passage provided by C. BARACCHI, *Aristotle's Ethics as First Philosophy*, cit., p. 17: "All human beings by nature desire having seen [τοῦ εἰδέναι ὀρέγονται]." Moreover, Aristotle is interested in investigating the nature and knowledge of causes. See ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics*, 981a27-981b5.

[46] PLATO, *Republic*, 435b-d; ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a15-17.

[47] P. HADOT, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, cit., pp. 253-270.

[48] *Ibidem*, pp. 271-281.

[49] For a better understanding of the current scenario of the philosophical practices and the philosophical counseling in Italy, see N. SANFILIPPO, *Esistere è interrogare: la filosofia come possibilità.*

mative opportunities, an improvement of the self made possible thanks to shared circumstances. Likely the accounts of Plato and Aristotle previously taken into consideration, in the two Italian authors is present an interest towards the unrational dimensions of the human. While Màdera, especially influenced by the work of Jung and Bernhard, speaks of 'depth psychology,' Baracchi particularly emphasises the unfathomable aspects of desires. The two do not reformulate a properly original consideration of the human psyche; they substantially relate to the frameworks of ancient philosophy or modern psychoanalysis. That is to say, their philosophical practices may not explicitly address the animated part of the soul or emotions; however, they do wish for everyone to reach a fullfilled life.[50]

Dissatisfied with academic discipline and with the broken promise of a social revolution, Màdera founded a community of people who aimed at living philosophically. The group was called 'la compagnia di ognuno', that is 'each other's company', and met regularly to read together philosophical texts while discussing life issues on the basis of a biographical-solidarity communication.[51] Then, around 1998, Màdera read Hadot for the first time and found in his work the solid philosophical reconstruction to understand Western philosophy beyond a scholarly subject relegated to few academics within university classrooms.[52] In 2005, Màdera inaugurated the Open Seminars of Philosophical Practices at the University of Milan-Bicocca, a series of meetings accessible to whoever desires to reflect together aiming at conversion to a happy life. The Open Seminars offer various possibilities of practice, not only lectures but also meditation, readings, dancing, bodily movement.[53] The subsequent year, in 2006, with other friends, he established the cultural association Philo-Philosophical Practices that nowadays counts more than one hundred registered people. Màdera has further elaborated

Condizione umana e pratiche filosofiche per il nostro tempo, Diogene Multimedia, Bologna 2026.

[50] R. Màdera, *La carta del senso. Psicologia del profondo e vita filosofica*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2012, pp. 27-90; C. Baracchi, *Filosofia antica e vita effimera. Migrazioni, trasmigrazioni e laboratori della psiche*, Petite Plaisance, Pistoia 2020, pp. 79-80. I would also like to mention that it is worth of interest the work of Luigina Mortari on the philosophical practices and on the ethics of care related to spiritual exercises. Although there are some crucial aspects proposed by the scholar on which I disagree, she owes merit to have brought the topic to a larger audience and to have developed a pedagogical approach inspired by this material. In particular, see L. Mortari, *Filosofia della cura*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2015 and Eadem, *Aver cura di sé*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2019.

[51] R. Màdera, *La carta del senso. Psicologia del profondo e vita filosofica*, cit., pp. 227-233.

[52] R. Màdera, L. Vero Tarca, *La filosofia come stile di vita. Introduzione alle pratiche filosofiche*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2003, p. 27; R. Màdera, *La carta del senso. Psicologia del profondo e vita filosofica*, cit., pp. 191 ff. For an extensive description of Màdera's work see A. I. Daddi, *Filosofia del profondo, formazione continua, cura di sé. Apologia di una psicoanalisi misconosciuta*, Ipoc, Milano 2016.

[53] It is worth noting that at the University of Milano-Bicocca there is a classroom specifically dedicated to bodywork. The room consists of an empty open space, without desks or chairs, where one enters barefoot.

on the kind of activities of ancient philosophical schools and re-formulated some of these exercises, especially in light of reading Jungian texts focused on depth psychology. In *La carta del senso. Psicologia del profondo e vita filosofica*, released in 2012, Màdera proposes and explains a series of practices that can be implemented nowadays to live philosophically in a context that, for many cultural and historical reasons, differs from the Greece of the 5th century b.C.: *lectio philosophica*, philosophical meditation, symbolic hermeneutics, interior debate, biographical and autobiographical exercises, philosophically oriented biographical analysis.[54]

Claudia Baracchi is an inspiring example of how theoretical work can be endured and experienced as a philosophical practice, in a constant and intimate dialogue with every aspect of life—from the most joyful to the arduous, from the most personal to collective participation. It is true that in the last decades, especially within the scope of ethics, the scholarship has attempted to unify thought and practice; however, oftentimes this discussion remained a wishful recommendation without being seriously addressed. It is not the case for Baracchi, whose writing comes from a hand-to-hand exchange with the philosophical material and the matter of life. Under this perspective, Baracchi seriously assumes Aristotle's teaching, '*amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas*,'[55] and courageously challenges the preconceptions of a life undertaken without the accompaniment of thought or, the opposite, a thinking deaf to the fluctuations of life. In turn, Aristotle learnt the method from Plato himself, who in the *Republic* while speaking of Homer states "no one is to be honoured or valued more than the truth."[56] Baracchi seems to suggest that a philosophical community is needed as much as one's strength to take responsibility for a truthful knowledge, which can be reached only by the close and yet precarious space of proximity with others.[57] Inevitably, topics such as the relation between life and λόγος, sensibility and sensuality (this latter understood in an etymological sense), friendship, and the ethical posture are at the centre of the work she elaborates. In her words:

> [a]nd so: neither theory governing experience, nor fragmentary and unreflective localism lost in individualistic reverie. And although, in my teaching and in the seminars I occasionally hold, I increasingly integrate elements of practice (meditation, exercises at various perceptual levels), I do not intend to reiterate the distinction between theory and practice, but simply to highlight different modes of *study*. Exer-

[54] R. MÀDERA, *La carta del senso. Psicologia del profondo e vita filosofica*, cit., pp. 222 ff. During the conference "Emotions and Flourishing," February 25-27, 2026, Susy Zanardo proposed an insightful study on philosophically oriented biographical analysis.

[55] The phrase is a periphrasis that elaborates Aristotle's words as proposed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. See ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1096a13-16.

[56] PLATO, *Republic*, 595c.

[57] For a deeper analysis on the topic see C. BARACCHI, *Friendship. The Future of an Ancient Gift*, trans. by E. Bartolini, C. Fullarton, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2023.

> cise is not an application of theory, but a place of contemplation, a horizon within which knowledge springs, forms emerge, and offer themselves to the possibility of stabilization. In turn, the lesson is not theory superordinated to experience, but an exercise of thought in action, a "posture of the word," in enunciation and listening.[58]

Theoretical work focuses on the phenomenological manifestations of existence rather than embedding reality within rigid conceptual frameworks. Its aim is to accompany, reflect, and question, thus uncovering the layers of reality.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Through an exploration of the ancient conception of philosophy as a way of life in relation to human nature, this paper highlights the connections between flourishing (εὐδαιμονία), emotional development, and philosophical practices both in ancient Greek philosophy and nowadays. As humans, part of our existence includes the possibility of experiencing moments of great expansion: it is important to remind us that such transcendence is our highest good and yet, precisely there, the self is always already together with otherness. The philosophical practices are an opportunity to delve us into this path called life with presence and purposeness.

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[58] C. Baracchi, *Filosofia antica e vita effimera. Migrazioni, trasmigrazioni e laboratori della psiche*, cit., p. 17 (author's emphasis, my translation).