

Emotions as Biographical Material

Desire and Fullness in Romano Màdera's Philosophy as a Way of Life

Susy Zanardo

Università Europea di Roma, Italy

susy.zanardo@unier.it  <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0633-3275>DOI: [10.17421/2498-9746-12-08](https://doi.org/10.17421/2498-9746-12-08)

SUBMITTED: 31.03.2026 – REVIEWED: 06.08.2026 – ACCEPTED: 20.08.2026

Abstract

This article examines the role of emotions in human flourishing through the framework of Biographical Analysis with a Philosophical Orientation (ABOF), developed by the philosopher and psychoanalyst Romano Màdera. It first reconstructs Màdera's diagnosis of the capture of emotional life in late-modern consumer societies and then presents ABOF as a practice situated at the intersection of philosophy as a way of life, depth psychology, and social critique. Its specific contribution is to articulate three movements through which emotions become biographical material: attending to emotion without immediate identification, anamorphically re-reading its bodily, relational, and social layers, and discerning the orientation of desire expressed through it. Emotions thus emerge neither as disturbances to be eliminated nor as self-interpreting truths, but as privileged sites of biographical discernment. The article argues that this work connects emotional self-knowledge with solidarity and with a non-confessional spiritual openness, allowing human flourishing to be understood as the capacity to value finite goods without requiring any one of them to provide total fulfilment.

Keywords: Emotions, Human flourishing, Desire, Biography, Philosophical practice, Romano Màdera.

CONTENTS

1	The Capture of Emotional Life in Late Modernity	126
2	Biographical Analysis as a Practice of Orientation: Philosophy, Depth Psychology and Social Critique	128
3	The Biographical Method as a Spiritual Exercise: Narrative, Sense, and Self-Transformation	131
4	Reading Emotions, Discerning Desire	134
5	Solidarity and Fullness: The Ethical and Spiritual Horizon of Human Flourishing	137

This article examines the role of emotions in human flourishing from the perspective of Biographical Analysis with a Philosophical Orientation (Analisi Biografica a Orientamento Filosofico, ABOF), developed by the philosopher and psychoanalyst Romano Màdera¹.

The argument unfolds in three stages. First, it briefly reconstructs Màdera's diagnosis of emotional life in late modernity. Second, it presents ABOF as a response to this cultural configuration, both in its theoretical foundations (Section 2) and as a practice of philosophical life (Section 3). Finally, it develops the article's central claim: emotions can be understood as biographical material and as privileged sites for discerning the orientation of desire towards fullness (Sections 4 and 5).

1 THE CAPTURE OF EMOTIONAL LIFE IN LATE MODERNITY

Màdera interprets late-modern consumer societies as a civilisation of accumulation, in which goods, experiences, stimuli, and cognitive and emotional contents proliferate within an ever-expanding economy of excess. Its dominant imperative is to transgress every framework.² Paradoxically, however, this imperative itself functions as a higher-order norm: it promises liberation from every constraint while the information, communication, and consumer industries systematically organise and appropriate both desire and attention.

Stiegler's analysis of psychopower helps to clarify this aspect of Màdera's diagnosis. In this configuration, the body and the psyche are governed less by repression than by hyperstimulation: attention and desire are continuously solicited, while sensory experience is increasingly exploited.³

Màdera uses the term *licitationism* (*licitazionismo*) to designate this new ethos. He derives it from *Inferno* v, where Dante writes of Queen Semiramis that she “made lust lawful in her law” (*libito fé licito in sua legge*, v. 58).⁴

¹Cf. R. MÀDERA, L. V. TARCA, *La filosofia come stile di vita. Introduzione alle pratiche filosofiche*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2003; R. MÀDERA, *Dalle origini di Philo uno sguardo sul metodo*, in *Philo. Una nuova formazione alla cura*, ed. by C. Mirabelli, A. Prandin, Ipoc, Milano 2015, pp. 17-27; *Che cosa è l'analisi biografica a orientamento filosofico?*, available at: <https://www.scuolaphilo.it/download/madera-abof.pdf>, accessed 30 March 2026.

²Cf. R. MÀDERA, *Una filosofia per l'anima. All'incrocio di psicologia analitica e pratiche filosofiche*, ed. by C. Mirabelli, Ipoc, Milano 2013; *La carta del senso. Psicologia del profondo e vita filosofica*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2012; G. CAPPELLETTY, R. MÀDERA, *Il caos del mondo e il caos degli affetti*, Claudiana, Torino 2020.

³Cf. B. STIEGLER, *Prendre soin. 1. De la jeunesse et des générations*, Flammarion, Paris 2008; *Économie de l'hypermatériel et psychopouvoir. Entretiens avec Philippe Petit et Vincent Bontems*, Mille et une nuits, Paris 2008; *États de choc. Bêtise et savoir au XXI^e siècle*, Mille et une nuits, Paris 2012.

⁴Cf. R. MÀDERA, *L'animale visionario. Elogio del radicalismo*, il Saggiatore, Milano 1999.

Licitationism describes a cultural condition in which whatever is desired comes to appear permissible, until desire itself acquires the force of law and operates as an organising principle of social and cultural life.⁵

The late-modern subject thus stands at a crossroads. Liberation from repression, social control, and sanction opens genuine space for self-determination: individuals may shape their own life projects rather than conform to destinies prescribed by gender, social class, or family background. At the same time, the erosion of shared frameworks leaves them with few maps of meaning beyond the injunction to transgress every boundary. Freedom is therefore accompanied by a new form of subordination: the compulsion to enjoy, consume, and remain constantly stimulated may prove no less coercive than the earlier moralities of prohibition.⁶ Màdera calls this double bind—emancipation and capture at once—“collective psychic division.”⁷

The artificial prolongation of stimulation pushes desire in two opposing directions: it may implode into the numbing routines of habituation or erupt in impulsive enactments that bypass psychic elaboration. The search for satisfaction “becomes all the more insatiable as it is sharpened by satiety itself.”⁸ The dominant cultural logic thus shifts not simply from repression to freedom, but from repression to exploitation: desire is drawn into a restless pursuit of stimuli and gratification that culminates in exhaustion and resentment.⁹

Consumption is only one side of this cultural configuration. The same subject who is urged to enjoy is also required to optimise the self, treating the body, affects, and capacities as resources to be enhanced. Enjoyment and efficiency thus operate as complementary imperatives: licitationism and the performance principle subject individuals to different but mutually reinforcing pressures. Precarity is framed less as a social problem to be addressed than as a proving ground from which those deemed most capable are expected to emerge, while self-management operates as a dominant mode of subjectivation, reinforced by systems of rewards and incentives.¹⁰

This ethos has significant emotional and social consequences. Relentless

⁵IDEM, *Il nudo piacere di vivere. La filosofia come terapia dell'esistenza*, Lindau, Torino 2025, pp. 76 ff.

⁶*Ibidem*, p. 67.

⁷IDEM, *Filosofia come esercizio e come conversione*, in R. MÀDERA, L. V. TARCA, *La filosofia come stile di vita*, cit., p. 4. All translations from Italian are my own.

⁸IDEM, *Il nudo piacere di vivere*, cit., p. 156; *La carta del senso*, cit., pp. 98 ff.

⁹Cf. C. TÜRCKE, *Erregte Gesellschaft. Philosophie der Sensation*, C. H. Beck, München 2002; M. A. MOLLISI, *Metafisica materiale e infrapolitica del “come stiamo”*, in M. BENASAYAG et al., *Il pessimismo è un lusso che non possiamo permetterci*, Jaca Book, Milano 2025, pp. 115–146; E. ILLOUZ, *Explosive Moderne. Eine scharfsinnige Analyse unserer emotionsgeladenen Gegenwart*, Suhrkamp, Berlin 2024.

¹⁰M. A. MOLLISI, G. ZACCARO, *Una regola minima per l'atleta stanco*, in M. BENASAYAG et al., *Il pessimismo è un lusso che non possiamo permetterci*, cit., pp. 15–36.

demands for performance and productivity foster a pervasive sense of inadequacy: the compulsion to produce ever more, at an ever-increasing pace, generates widespread anxiety and impotent anger, leading individuals to oscillate between compulsive acceleration—in both work and consumption—and depressive exhaustion.¹¹

The weakening of shared frameworks, compounded by the ideal of self-sufficient success, contributes to a crisis of self-formation. Fragmented life narratives may coexist with or give way to reactive forms of belonging, including closed communities, echo chambers, and defensive identifications.

Precarity and competition also erode the capacity to negotiate closeness and distance, making it more difficult to maintain clear boundaries between self and other. Individuals may consequently oscillate between fusional attachment and self-enclosed isolation, affective dependence and defensive withdrawal.

From another theoretical perspective, Bernard Stiegler offers a convergent diagnosis: what is often described as a narcissistic culture is, in his view, more deeply shaped by a narcissistic *wound*. This wound may appear either as conformist homogenisation, in which the striving for distinction collapses into the “frenzied race to be the first to be like everyone else,”¹² or as an implosion of narcissism that gives rise to violence against oneself or others—from self-harm to collective forms of suicidal behaviour, as in certain manifestations of fanaticism.¹³

In this context, emotional life risks being reduced to raw material, organised and exploited according to market imperatives and performance demands. Emotions are channelled towards consumption, continuous stimulation, and self-optimisation, while their biographical and relational meaning remains insufficiently recognised and elaborated. If emotional life is shaped and captured in the interplay of cultural norms, social conditions, and personal biography, any practice oriented towards human flourishing must engage these same dimensions.

2 BIOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS AS A PRACTICE OF ORIENTATION: PHILOSOPHY, DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE

Against this background, ABOF emerges as an interdisciplinary practice of biographical inquiry addressing the crisis of meaning characteristic of late modernity. Rather than responding to the crisis through nostalgia or moralism, it seeks

¹¹Cf. A. EHRENBURG, *La fatigue d'être soi. Dépression et société*, Odile Jacob, Paris 1998; P. DARDOT, C. LAVAL, *La nouvelle raison du monde. Essai sur la société néolibérale*, La Découverte, Paris 2009.

¹²R. MADERA, *L'animale visionario*, cit., p. 62.

¹³Cf. B. STIEGLER, *Aimer, s'aimer, nous aimer. Du 11 septembre au 21 avril*, Galilée, Paris 2003.

orientation from within the uncertainty and fragmentation of contemporary experience. Its method brings into dialogue two major traditions—philosophy as a way of life and depth psychology—while a historical-critical perspective situates individual biographies within the social and cultural contexts that inform them.

In the first tradition, philosophy is understood as a form of experiential knowledge that combines contemplative attention to the whole with active engagement in life. These dimensions are not opposed: contemplation transforms perception, allowing emotions, desires, and decisions to be interpreted within the wider network of relations that gives them meaning. This view draws on Pierre Hadot's account of philosophy as a way of life: a practice of seeking meaning, educating perception, and discerning desires and aversions.¹⁴

In dialogue with both Hadot and Màdera, Claudia Baracchi further clarifies the mode of knowledge involved in this practice through what she calls a "view from the standpoint of the whole" (*katholou*): a gaze that "grasps each thing in its connections with every other, understanding it within a play of interdependence and mutual determination."¹⁵ Here, "the whole" does not imply a totalising perspective or a closed system, but a way of seeing attentive to the relations through which each singular reality takes shape. Whereas specialised inquiries must delimit their objects and methods, philosophy situates specific forms of knowledge and experience within a wider horizon and asks what they mean for the orientation of a life.

Depth psychology introduces a different kind of attention, directed towards both the multiple modes of feeling and thinking—logical and conceptual, but also symbolic, narrative, and imaginal—and the less accessible regions of psychic life: silences, symptoms, shadow aspects, dreams, and inner conflicts. Psychoanalysis, primarily though not exclusively in its Jungian tradition, offers practical tools for attending to dimensions of inner experience that resist immediate understanding: the dense interplay of sensations, emotions, memories, and desires; experiences of failure, pain, and loss; and feared or scarcely acknowledged aspects of the self, including character masks developed in response to social expectations. The aim is not to eliminate unresolved material, but to remain in contact with it without being wholly absorbed by it.

In Màdera's account, ABOF thus differs both from philosophical practices that leave the unconscious unexamined and from forms of coaching focused primarily on enhancing individual performance. It involves working through emotional

¹⁴Cf. P. HADOT, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?*, Gallimard, Paris 1995; *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, Albin Michel, Paris 2002²; *La philosophie comme manière de vivre. Entretiens avec Jeannie Carlier et Arnold I. Davidson*, Albin Michel, Paris 2001.

¹⁵C. BARACCHI, *Il fantasma dell'anima e alcune sue storie*, in *Philo. Una nuova formazione alla cura*, cit., p. 112.

resistances and defensive narratives, regarding them not merely as obstacles but as valuable materials for biographical inquiry.¹⁶

The historical-critical dimension of ABOF begins with the recognition that the self is always embedded in a web of familial, social, and cultural relations. An individual life story is therefore also a social document: it bears the traces of the contexts, institutions, and symbolic frameworks within which the person has taken shape, without being fully explained by them. Accordingly, the psyche is neither an interior realm detached from the world, nor a mere effect of social forces, nor a phenomenon reducible to biological processes. It is, rather, a threshold at which psychophysical life and sociocultural formation meet and are taken up by the person in a singular process of interpretation.¹⁷ Our biography begins before we do: “by the time we enter the scene, we are already, in ourselves, the reflection of all that has brought us there.”¹⁸ To begin from oneself is therefore also to question the world inscribed in one’s psyche and body. ABOF thus neither reduces biography to individual psychology nor dissolves it into social determination: the singular and the transindividual remain inseparable dimensions of biographical inquiry.

Because individual biography is interwoven with the social world, suffering cannot always be understood as a purely private matter: it may arise from or be intensified by social and economic circumstances. Yet ABOF asks not only how the self has been formed under these conditions, but also how possibilities of reorientation towards greater freedom and solidarity may emerge. Working with the unconscious does not mean escaping its influence but loosening its compulsive grip: what remains unthought binds us more tightly, whereas what becomes partially legible can be interpreted rather than compulsively enacted. On the reading proposed here, such work presupposes that the person is neither wholly determined by the social conditions of their formation nor governed by unconscious psychic dynamics but remains capable of entering into a more conscious relation with both and of responding with greater awareness and freedom, rather than merely reproducing inherited biographical scripts, relational patterns, and defensive responses.

¹⁶R. MÀDERA, *Pratiche filosofiche*, in *Formazione. I metodi*, ed. by G. P. Quaglini, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2014, chap. 27, digital edition.

¹⁷IDEM, *Dodici domande su psicoanalisi e filosofia. Risposte di Romano Màdera*, ed. by A. Campo, P. Pascarelli, «European Journal of Psychoanalysis», available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20190408141400/http://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/dodici-domande-su-psycoanalisi-e-filosofia/>, accessed 27 March 2026.

¹⁸IDEM, *Il metodo biografico. Come formazione, cura, filosofia*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2022, p. 38.

3 THE BIOGRAPHICAL METHOD AS A SPIRITUAL EXERCISE: NARRATIVE, SENSE, AND SELF-TRANSFORMATION

In ABOF, biographical inquiry is practised as a spiritual exercise. Drawing on Hadot, Màdera understands a spiritual exercise as engaging the whole person rather than the intellect alone: it transforms not only the content of thought but also one's ways of perceiving, feeling, desiring, and acting in the world. ABOF may therefore be regarded as a contemporary renewal of philosophy as a way of life, one that acknowledges both the opacity of lived experience and the possibility of rendering it more intelligible through sustained biographical work.¹⁹

Narrative in biographical inquiry is not merely a medium of self-expression but a formative practice. A person's account is interpreted within the familial, social, cultural, and symbolic relations in which their life has developed, allowing otherwise obscure patterns and meanings to emerge from the narrative itself.²⁰ Telling one's story does not simply articulate what is already known about oneself; it can transform one's relation to the past by revealing previously unrecognised tensions, connections, and possibilities. Its formative power lies in enabling a person to reconstruct their psychic history and discern *an orienting sense* among biographical events.

A reading of Màdera's texts suggests that the word *sense* carries at least three interconnected meanings. First, it refers to *feeling*: sensation, sensibility, and embodied contact with the world. Second, it denotes *meaning*: the elaboration of experience into an intelligible form. Third, it indicates *direction* or *orientation*, as in the expression *sense of direction*: the ability to navigate precariousness and disorientation while imagining possible alternatives.²¹ Taken together, these three dimensions clarify the movement of the biographical method: it begins from what is felt, seeks to grasp its biographical significance, and may thereby disclose a possible direction.

This process unfolds in three moments. The first is what Màdera calls a *naïve autobiography*: an initial account of one's life, still marked by blind spots. The narrator speaks from within the spontaneous forms of self-understanding through which a life first becomes narratable, bringing to the surface significant episodes, turning points, relationships, bodily traces, and biographical knots—moments of conflict, repetition, or blocked choice. Like someone surveying a landscape from within it, the narrator can perceive some features but not yet its boundaries or overall configuration. At this stage, one can only begin to discern the

¹⁹IDEM, *La carta del senso*, cit., p. 222.

²⁰P. JEDŁOWSKI, R. MÀDERA, *Racconti di racconti. Una conversazione*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2024.

²¹R. MÀDERA, *Lo spirito universale della narrazione*, «Doppiozero», 14 August 2015, available at: <https://www.doppiozero.com/lo-spirito-universale-della-narrazione>, accessed 27 March 2026.

“stratified, complex, contradictory, and conflict-laden” character of one’s recollections.²² Memory and forgetting are themselves mediated by the affective tonalities of narration. The narrator’s gaze is thus never entirely immediate but informed by inherited lenses not yet fully recognised or named.

In the second moment, autobiography takes the form of what Màdera terms a *four-handed biography*. The narrative is developed collaboratively, with a companion in analysis or within a community engaged in shared biographical inquiry. The presence of others introduces questions the narrator might not ask alone and draws attention to repetitions, recurring patterns, implicit values, and apparently self-evident cultural scripts. It may also offer “an anamorphic restitution”: a shift in perspective through which a previously unseen configuration comes into focus. Biographical reconstruction proceeds through both discursive reflection and engagement with images, dreams, myths, and the symbolic dimensions of affect and desire. Through this shared work, the narrator comes to see, as Baracchi writes, that every life “has passed through infinitely many others, in infinitely many configurations, and bears in its very texture the unconscious memory of those passages.”²³

Biographical-solidary exchange is guided by five rules: self-awareness, non-destructive listening, recognition of the other in their difference rather than through projection, anamorphic restitution, and vigilance towards one’s own aggressive impulses. These are not merely ethical guidelines added to a method that could function independently of them, but constitutive relational conditions: they protect the exchange from intrusion, projection, authoritarian interpretation, covert aggression, and the imposition of an alien narrative on the narrator’s life. By practising these rules, participants may transform the biographical encounter into what Màdera describes as a micro-political laboratory in which plurality and solidarity are concretely exercised.²⁴

In Màdera’s account, the third moment is a *critical autobiography*, in which the narrator gradually becomes aware of family patterns, social position, gender expectations, and cultural models that had already influenced their experience before becoming objects of critical reflection. They also learn to recognise narrative traps: identification with an idealised self-image or, conversely, habitual self-devaluation; superegoic demands inherited from their community; and adherence to the late-modern performance principle. At the same time, critical re-reading does not consist solely in uncovering constraints: it also retrieves the maps of meaning that have given direction, coherence, and value to the events of a life.

²²IDEM, *Il metodo biografico*, cit., p. 28.

²³C. BARACCHI, *Il fantasma dell’anima e alcune sue storie*, cit., p. 115.

²⁴R. MÀDERA, *La carta del senso*, cit., pp. 227-233.

Once critically re-read, the story can be narrated anew, while the life it recounts can be inhabited with greater freedom. Returning to one's history may thus foster a fuller integration of previously disowned or split-off aspects, fidelity to biographical truth—understood here as a refusal to falsify or domesticate the events, affects, and desires that have marked one's experience—and a deepened relation to others. In this process, becoming oneself entails moving beyond the confines of the ego. On the reading developed here, this relationality is not merely an effect of social conditioning, but a constitutive dimension of personhood: each life is formed within relations of language, care, recognition, and shared meaning. Yet the person does not simply coincide with these conditions. The capacity to recognise how they operate already introduces a reflective distance from them, made possible by the intentional openness through which one can examine, interpret, and respond to what has been received.

Without denying its deep affinity with the ancient philosophical traditions reconstructed by Hadot, particularly with their understanding of philosophy as a transformative way of life, ABOF gives this legacy two distinctive contemporary inflections. First, drawing also on feminist accounts of situated experience, it begins from oneself²⁵—not from an abstract or self-sufficient subject, but from an embodied biography already traversed by familial, symbolic, social, and political relations. This starting point entails neither introspective enclosure nor the reduction of the person to these conditions. It treats singular experience as both the ground of inquiry and a point of departure for moving beyond the self.

Second, the encounter with depth psychology extends philosophical attention to the symbolic, imaginal, and unconscious dimensions of affective life. This does not imply that ancient philosophical schools neglected the passions; rather, ABOF approaches affects as symbolically and biographically layered. The task is neither to split them off or deny them, thereby losing access to their energy, nor to surrender to fantasies of immediate satisfaction that erase the distance between desire and fulfilment. It is, in Màdera's words, "to extract from them a potential for self-transcendence"²⁶—understood here as the capacity to move beyond immediate gratification and the confines of the ego. This work may enable the person to loosen the identification of desire with its immediate objects and to integrate these affective movements into a broader process of individuation.²⁷

Taken together, these features also clarify the contemporary relevance of ABOF in relation to the cultural diagnosis outlined in Section 1. In societies marked by the inflation of what Màdera calls "the little self," the biographical method does more than foster individual self-understanding and personal formation: by decen-

²⁵Cf. L. MELANDRI, *L'infamia originaria. Facciamola finita col Cuore e la Politica*, Edizioni L'Erba Voglio, Milano 1977; L. MURARO, *L'ordine simbolico della madre*, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1991.

²⁶R. MÀDERA, *La carta del senso*, cit., p. 223.

²⁷*Ibidem*, p. 217.

tring the ego, it offers a cultural response to defensive self-enclosure and social fragmentation and may create conditions for forms of solidarity weakened by the logics of performance, competition, and consumption.²⁸

Màdera identifies a further potential of the method in “a form of dialogue and mutual aid among different symbolic and ideal affiliations, a kind of ecumenism unknown to the great majority of philosophies and wisdom traditions.”²⁹ Here, “ecumenism” should be understood analogically rather than in an ecclesiological sense: it does not imply convergence on a common doctrine or an undifferentiated consensus, but a space in which distinct symbolic worlds remain recognisable while entering into mutual exchange.

On the reading proposed here, this possibility rests on a common human ground marked both by finitude—embodiment, dependence on others, exposure to loss, and the need for recognition—and by the openness of thought and desires to what no finite object or fulfilment can contain. This openness enables the person to step back from immediate impulses, to assent or refuse, and to pursue meanings and goods that transcend momentary satisfaction. Without erasing plurality, such a ground makes mutual aid possible across different affiliations. Through narration, attentive listening, empathy, and self-transformation, ABOF may thus cultivate relational capacities needed for life in a plural and divided world.

These relational capacities are cultivated not apart from emotional life, but through the biographical work performed on it. This aspect of ABOF’s philosophical practice will be examined in the following section.

4 READING EMOTIONS, DISCERNING DESIRE

Within ABOF, emotions can be understood as biographical knots. They are regarded neither simply as passions to be mastered nor as immediate truths to be obeyed, but as biographical material whose bodily, relational, symbolic, and historical layers can be discerned. These knots bear traces of personal history, desire, relationships, symbolic frameworks, and cultural expectations, often at levels not immediately accessible to consciousness.

This conception resists reducing emotions to merely private inner states, neurobiological processes requiring regulation, or resources to be optimised in the service of performance. For Màdera, they are privileged sites of resonance between self and world, in which questions of meaning and direction may become perceptible through biographical attention.

Approached in this way, emotions are not data to be managed or

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 260.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 226.

manipulated, but embodied access points to personal history, where relationships, cultural scripts, conflicts, values, and orientations of desire converge. Within biographical-solidary exchange, the other does not interpret an emotion in place of the person who experiences it but may offer an anamorphic restitution that discloses otherwise unnoticed resonances, genealogies, and meanings.

So-called negative emotions—such as shame, fear, grief, and anger—should not therefore be treated merely as disturbances or obstacles to be removed. The designation “negative” may refer to their unpleasant affective valence, but it may also reflect their social stigmatisation or their incompatibility with prevailing demands for efficiency, positivity, and self-control. None of this deprives them of meaning. On the contrary, they may constitute especially valuable material for biographical inquiry, since they can disclose conflicts, attachments, wounds, expectations, and desires that have not yet been adequately expressed or understood.

The same interpretive attention applies to emotions of positive valence—such as joy, gratitude, hope, and enthusiasm. They may likewise reveal what a person values: the relationships and activities in which they feel more fully alive and the goods towards which desire is oriented. They too require interpretation, since their pleasant character does not in itself guarantee authenticity or human flourishing.

Listening to emotions involves at least three movements, which are analytically distinguishable rather than rigidly successive. The first is to attend to an emotion without immediately identifying with it. Such attention separates what is felt from the reaction it may prompt and opens a space for discernment. To feel anger is not to be defined by it, still less to be compelled to act on it. In the pause that precedes narration, different layers of experience may emerge—for example, the distinction between an unpleasant sensation and the irritation that may arise around it as a secondary response.³⁰ The aim is neither to detach oneself from emotion nor to neutralise it, but to interrupt its direct translation into action and make it available for biographical inquiry.

Attended to in this way, emotion may become a site of self-knowledge, though never a purely introspective one, since its structure is relational. Through feeling, I learn something both about myself—about what matters to me and what I fear or desire—and about the person, object, or situation that addresses me as affectively significant. Emotion does not provide unmediated access to the world; rather, it discloses the significance that emerges in the relation between self and world, without reducing it either to subjective projection or to an objective property of things.

³⁰IDEM, *Il nudo piacere di vivere*, cit., p. 163.

The second movement consists in an anamorphic re-reading of emotional experience. This does not preclude emotional regulation or cognitive reframing, both of which may be valuable in appropriate contexts, but neither is sufficient to elucidate its biographical significance. Such re-reading considers the situation in which the emotion is felt, the relationships through which it has developed, and the norms and expectations that inform it. Three interconnected dimensions may thus be explored: its felt content, namely its bodily and affective quality; its relational genealogy, comprising bonds, losses, experiences of recognition, and conflicts; and its social codification, namely the categories through which it is regarded as legitimate, shameful, appropriate, or unproductive.

Anamorphic re-reading does not aim to eliminate the emotion, but to open it onto the biographical sediment from which it has developed, allowing it to become a source of understanding rather than merely a difficulty to be neutralised. Shame, for example, may point to the internalisation of an unrealistic standard, fear of exposure or rejection, a need for recognition, or a desire that has not yet found words or a socially available form. It does not itself determine which of these possibilities is correct but raises a biographical question to be explored. Self-devaluation may likewise stem from an unconscious identification with an ideal ego—an internalised standard against which the person repeatedly judges themselves inadequate.³¹ The emotion can thus be situated within the personal history that gives it its form and significance.

The third movement concerns the orientation of desire as it becomes legible through emotional experience. Biographical inquiry can then ask what attachment, need, or pursuit of the good it expresses. Fear of losing someone we love, for example, testifies to our attachment to an irreplaceable person while also confronting us with loss, time, and finitude. The broader biographical perspective does not dissolve the singularity of the bond into an abstract meditation on mortality; rather, it allows the emotion to bring into view dimensions of desire that might otherwise remain outside conscious awareness.

What is at stake, then, is not merely the modification of an emotional state or a more manageable relation to distress, but an understanding of the movement of desire that emotional experience renders intelligible. In Màdera's account, the desire thus disclosed is exhausted neither by any single object nor by their accumulation of finite objects, but remains open beyond every finite fulfilment. The following section examines the ethical and spiritual implications of this openness.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 159.

5 SOLIDARITY AND FULLNESS: THE ETHICAL AND SPIRITUAL HORIZON OF HUMAN FLOURISHING

The movement from emotional discernment to the orientation of desire gives ABOF an explicitly ethical horizon. Its aim extends beyond enhanced performance or subjective well-being. More specifically, ABOF does not conceive human flourishing solely in terms of individual resources, resilience, personal satisfaction, or adaptation to existing conditions. This does not entail rejecting such goals but questioning their sufficiency. When happiness is conceived primarily as individual self-realisation, without adequate attention to social conditions and bonds of solidarity, it risks becoming a more refined form of accommodation to the performance principle.

Human flourishing is therefore understood not as the maximisation of satisfaction, but as a form of life cultivated through practices and habits, within relationships, and through choices renewed over time, in a sense close to the ancient notion of *eudaimonia*.³² For Màdera, this ethical horizon is articulated through what he calls *solidary self-realisation*: the development of the person cannot be separated from a horizon of coexistence and solidarity extending across peoples, genders, generations, and species.³³ Ricœur's notion of symbolic debt helps to name the asymmetry at its root.³⁴ Life, care, and recognition are received within relationships and communities that precede us and provide the context in which our lives unfold.³⁵ The response to what has been received cannot therefore be confined to direct repayment but may assume the form of a transitive and generative reciprocity that carries the gift beyond the original exchange—to other people, future generations, wider communities, and the living world.

The ethical response to symbolic debt should be understood neither as dependency nor as a form of self-effacing altruism that may conceal resentment, impotence, or guilt. Rather, it consists in a freely assumed commitment to pass the gift on. Gratitude gives this commitment a self-transcending and generative direction: it carries reciprocity beyond the grateful subject and the original exchange, extending it towards a shared horizon.³⁶

For Màdera, the ethical relation to others is inseparable from a spiritual openness to what exceeds the self. Solidarity and reciprocity do not exhaust this orientation; by decentring the ego, they may also transform one's perception of reality. To recognise oneself as relationally constituted and as a recipient before

³²Cf. C. BARACCHI, *Aristotle's Ethics as First Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007; EADEM, *Aristotele. Il pensiero e l'animale*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2023.

³³R. MÀDERA, *Il nudo piacere di vivere*, cit., p. 98.

³⁴Cf. P. RICŒUR, *Parcours de la reconnaissance. Trois études*, Gallimard, Paris 2005.

³⁵N. JANIGRO, R. MÀDERA, *Cura. Per sé e per il mondo*, Editrice Bibliografica, Milano 2023.

³⁶R. MÀDERA, *Il nudo piacere di vivere*, cit., p. 126.

becoming a giver is to encounter existence as received rather than self-produced. Màdera associates this altered perception with *the splendour of the world*: the capacity to acknowledge, without denying suffering, loss, or injustice, the elemental wonder of being alive.³⁷ Biographical inquiry thus approaches mystery not by explaining it away, but by attending more closely to its inexhaustibility.

Màdera's language of mystery is framed in non-confessional terms. Here, spiritual openness names an irreducible dimension of human existence: the search for meaning, depth, and orientation within the whole of reality. Philosophical, religious, and wisdom traditions have interpreted this openness in different ways. A theological reading may understand the givenness of life and the world in terms of creation and relation to God; a non-theistic one may describe it as participation in a reality greater than the individual self, or as an intensified awareness of existence. At a methodological level, ABOF does not adjudicate between these interpretations. It remains a philosophical practice that takes seriously the capacity to move beyond merely functional needs and to ask how one's life is situated within a broader horizon of meaning. What emerges is an understanding of the person as open and receptive, constitutively oriented beyond the self.

Happiness, from this perspective, is neither the sum of satisfactions nor a permanently positive emotional state. It does not consist in bringing desire to rest through the possession of an all-encompassing object; neither does it amount to perpetual dissatisfaction. It lies, rather, in learning to inhabit the tension between the real value of finite goods and the inexhaustibility of desire.

Biographical work provides the practical mediation through which this relation to finite goods may be cultivated. It can reveal when desire has become narrowly attached to objects, images, or stimuli that promise completion but repeatedly produce boredom, frustration, or resentment. Its task is not to detach desire from finite goods, but to loosen the demand that any one of them should bear the weight of total fulfilment. In this reoriented relation to the finite, inseparable from solidarity with others and the search for an ultimate meaning, Màdera locates the possibility of fullness, which he defines as "the capacity to savour, in the present, the presence of the infinite and the eternal."³⁸ Fullness is therefore neither the possession of the infinite nor an achievement secured once and for all, but a way of inhabiting experience while remaining open to transcendence.

Seen in this light, the ancient question—how should one live?—remains decisive. ABOF responds not by offering a doctrine or a universally applicable prescrip-

³⁷Cf. IDEM, *Lo splendore trascurato del mondo. Una mistica quotidiana*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2022; *Una spiritualità laica. La vocazione a essere finalmente umani*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2025.

³⁸IDEM, *Il nudo piacere di vivere*, cit., p. 163.

tion, but through a practice of biographical inquiry: the demanding and sometimes painful work of becoming more fully oneself together with others.

Human flourishing, then, is neither an end state to be attained nor an individual achievement. It is a direction—one that must be continually renewed, including in times of suffering and disorientation. This helps explain why Màdera describes ABOF as a search for a meaning capable of blessing life and strong enough to bear it.³⁹

© 2026 Susy Zanardo & Forum. Supplement to Acta Philosophica



Quest'opera è distribuita con Licenza [Creative Commons Attribuzione - Non commerciale - Non opere derivate 4.0 Internazionale](#).

[Testo completo della licenza](#)

³⁹Cf. IDEM, *Il metodo biografico*, cit.

