DELIBERATIO
STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHICAL CHALLENGES

https://deliberatio.uvt.ro/
2025, *5*, 31-53 SSN 2810 – 5826 ISSN – L 2810 – 5532 Print
ISSN 2810 – 5532 ISSN – L 2810 – 5532 Online

Provocation in Philosophical Practice

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Abstract

Challenging conventional notions of comfort and safety in philosophical practice, this article argues for the primacy of reason in the work to provoke and exercise thinking. Exercising thinking involves problematization and conceptualization of cherished ideas and attitudes. Consequently, philosophical consultations can be uncomfortable; rather than seeking to alleviate this discomfort, this article examines it directly. Assumptions that discomfort is harmful, consultation is dangerous, philosophers are therapists, or success is mandated are actively problematized. The authors appreciate the growth promoting role of discomfort, see the beauty of exercising the thinking capacity, and respect the thinking competence of all people. The authors propose that the purpose, priority, and goal of philosophical practice is the provocation of thinking, whereas other results are secondary. The authors detail the specific actions philosophers undertake—and refrain from—to be driven by this telos and address how secondary objectives can interfere with and distort this pursuit. By prioritizing reason, the authors advocate for the Socratic spirit, with its aesthetic, performative, and provocative nature. This stands in contrast to contemporary tendencies towards professional codes and generalized safety preoccupations preempting inquiry. Philosophical practice through the application of Socratic methods promotes freedom to develop and use wisdom.

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Keywords: provocation, *askēsis*, Socratic method, argumentation, critical thinking, philosophical practice, philosophical consultation, subjectivity, cognitive empathy, development, process, primacy of reason

Introduction

Philosophy fundamentally provokes thinking, continually inviting humanity to build argumentation, to search for evidence, to question their findings, and to resist the assumption that they have found the ultimate truth. Socrates provoked thinking and criticized the Sophists for selling their truth and their rhetoric; he instead treated inquiry and process as his worthy pursuit. Philosophical practice, rooted in the Socratic spirit, employs questioning with intellectual curiosity, with an interest in the human state and a freedom to explore life and its intricacies (*Apology*, 20e-23b, 38a; Hadot, 1995; Vlastos, 1991). As seen in Plato's texts, the process is dialogue based: interlocutors share and challenge ideas, refine their arguments, and think for the sake of thinking and for the recognition of the limits and possibilities of the self. Philosophical practice is ruled by reason above all else, λόγος ἀρχή (reason as first principle), where logic and common sense are invoked in order to apply reason in the exercise of thinking. Emotions and appetites are interesting as much as they provide indications or characteristics to understanding the human condition, and are discussed as objects of interest in a rational way. Philosophical practice is free to explore, questioning presuppositions, problematizing positions, building arguments, conceptualizing, testing ideas. Through learned ignorance, any idea or assumption can be questioned and verified. Philosophical practice is thus open, with no demand for a specific outcome, and without desperation or predestination, but rather available and curious to find the interesting developments of skill and knowledge that emerge from the process. While conclusions and advice may emerge, they are never prioritized over the dialogical exercise of thinking itself.

To be wise, to be well read, to be clever, to be an intellectual are all revered statuses in a formal sense, yet to practice the work of the mind is not commonly pursued in the ways that Socrates modeled and prescribed. Some, viewing philosophy through the lens of other pragmatic and goal-oriented professions like healthcare, tend to seek tangible outcomes. This approach relegates the development of thinking to a secondary, instrumental role, often dropped if it fails to deliver expected pragmatic results or touches something sensitive. The pursuit of wisdom is replaced by the pursuit of desire fulfillment. As Plato warns in Timaeus (90b-c), the unrestrained rule of desire over reason disorders the soul and occludes judgment. Those looking for problem solving would likely rather examine isolated incidents than consider their modes of being and patterns as a way of life

and the ways in which they are implicitly participants in the phenomena that arise in their lives. Individuals seeking diagnoses, remedies, or prescribed interventions are appropriately referred to specialists in appropriate fields. In a culture valuing capitalistic efficiency, where education and religion offer practical answers and professions operate as businesses, philosophical practice is neither immediately nor easily understood.

Philosophical practice is built on the Socratic Method of exploring ideas and provoking thinking. In this sense, the practice is an ancient discipline: following the methods and moves of Socrates in his dialogues, the foundation of philosophy, in order to develop the mind and to live an examined life (Arendt, 1978; Gadamer, 1960). The particular Western renaissance happening in the last fifty years, however, that is invoked with the term philosophical practice is relatively new in its implementation. Post scientific method and research-based systems of approaching evolving disciplines, this ancient practice suddenly seems underdeveloped. The general discipline of philosophy is rather relegated to the dusty shelves and stuffy halls of academia—distinguished, impractical, perhaps even pretentious—or it is given a new interpretation by democratic and capitalistic minds. Psychology is a relatively new branch of dialogue-based philosophy, yet it has developed its own schools of research, evidence-based interventions, codes of ethics, and professional standards to distinguish itself in its mere century of existence. In the modern era, disciplines which can demonstrate quantitative outcomes flourish. The field of medicine illustrates this well: traditional solutions are rather dismissed as superstitious, while evidence based scholarly publications are definitive. It seems only natural that, in order to be relevant, a discipline would be considered as strong as its journals' impact factors and graduate programs' networks. Philosophical practice is not competitive by these modern standards, nor does it wish to be: it does not tie itself to specific outcomes and implicitly does not seek to develop specific statistical methodology to predict their reach.

This article distinguishes the role of philosophical practice and its particular dynamic nature from other disciplines which seek more pragmatic outcomes. In contrast to similar disciplines, philosophical practice is shown to have a telos of the primacy of reason in the work to provoke and exercise thinking. It is this unique quality that sets philosophical practice apart from normal pursuits and goals, which has detriments in being understood in modern contexts and benefits for the life of the mind.

Nature of Philosophical Practice

Subjectivity and the Thinking Exercise

Philosophical practice is a dynamic activity that involves thinking and leads to the training of the cognitive capacity, enabling individuals to learn about the world and examine themselves in relationship with otherness. This exercise of reason can be employed in both formal and informal contexts: workshops, philosophical consultations, or daily encounters. The thinking and questioning techniques that practitioners incorporate naturally into their mode of being has the potential to turn any conversation or experience into an inquiry of ideas, examination of life, self-awareness, and self-knowledge.

Philosophical practitioners engage individuals' critical thinking when the capacity and potential for developing reason are present. Inquiry presupposes willingness and readiness to offer and assess argumentation; dialogue is invitational, not coercive. In the collaborative critical reflection process, the philosopher and the interlocutor become aware of their thinking tendencies and of their tendencies not to use reason. They address recognizing their subjectivity, when their subjectivity takes priority, and methods to test and expand their perspective. They acknowledge their emotions and desires and notice when they become obstacles to reason or when they can be objects of inquiry.

As Descartes (1637) noted, it is the thinker who produces a thought. A certain degree of subjectivity is therefore necessarily present, manifesting through an individual's attachment to ideas, psychological dispositions, or cognitive tendencies. Unlike academic philosophy, philosophical practice directly engages the subject in a free-thinking exercise, making it crucial to address the subjectivity that emerges throughout the process. In contrast with psychotherapy, philosophical practice does not assume there is something abnormal, deviant, or dysfunctional in individuals to diagnose, requiring treatment, repair, or healing (Tiurean, 2021), but rather that rational individuals have an intrinsic revelatory aesthetic that contributes to the deepening of the understanding of humanity. Finally, in opposition to the capitalist way, philosophical practice does not seek to fulfill subjective agendas of desires, aspirations, intentions, or goals, but to contemplate and examine them.

The confrontation to one's subjectivity often reveals surprising aspects to the individual. What was not conscious becomes conscious. The beautiful, the ugly, and the interesting come to light. The philosopher invites the interlocutor to suspend moral judgment, to find the ugly in the beautiful and the beautiful in the ugly, and to embrace the ancient Greek imperative to know thyself—the very counsel given upon entering the Temple of Delphi before consulting the Oracle.

Resistance to Thinking as Natural Versus Pathological

Philosophical practitioners must be prepared to encounter resistances to the thinking exercise that naturally arise from subjectivity and can be either cognitive, psychological, or both. While individuals may be aware of concepts like distance, *epoché*, or rigor, they are also shaped by attachments to emotions, desires, and cherished worldviews. Each interlocutor has many characteristics with varying strengths and weaknesses and degrees of plasticity, detachment, rigor, and openness. The philosopher accepts resistances as natural during a dialogue and consciously chooses whether, when, and how to address them.

A philosopher's essential role is to invite the interlocutor to become aware of their resistances and to engage in thinking about them as an exercise of self-knowledge. While this awareness may lead to personal or relational changes, self-improvement is not the philosopher's objective. The philosopher is engaged in thinking with the other, including thinking about oneself as a representative of humanity and a rational being. In this approach, philosophers do not presuppose they are engaging with ill individuals, but rather with those who have the potential to be rational (Amir, 2019; Cook & Hamm, 2023). They do not assume an interlocutor is too fragile to engage with a question; instead, they recognize potential resistance while inviting the individual's means to master it. Finally, philosophers do not see the interlocutor as a victim of self or circumstances, but as an autonomous being capable of being challenged and taking responsibility for their agency, thinking, and actions.

Philosophers engage in rational dialogue. If an interlocutor struggles to reason, the dialogue shifts to a meta level to explore the underlying issues causing their unavailability. Subjectivity is inherent to human nature, not an obstacle in itself. It is rather a condition for thinking that shapes an individual's way of being in the world, influencing preferences and existential drives. While subjectivity can become an obstacle (e.g. if sacralized), the impediment typically lies in one's relation to it. Thus, subjectivity is of interest precisely because this relationship can either hinder thinking or illuminate paths to self-knowledge and understanding humanity. The philosopher explores these dynamics in the primary pursuit of exercising thinking. If the interlocutor is unwilling to engage in this activity, the dialogue stops. Since exercising thinking as an agent of reason is essential to philosophical practice, the interlocutor's availability to reason is fundamental for the activity's feasibility.

The psychologist's enterprise is different. Their role involves directly addressing subjective problems to help individuals overcome inner obstacles to a fulfilled life, fostering better feelings about themselves, others, and the world, and ultimately increasing wellbeing. Particular approaches such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy or logic-based therapies (Ellis & Ellis, 2011; Cohen, 2013)

resemble philosophical practice in their shared Stoic premise: that thoughts influence feelings, and thus changing thought can change feeling (Epictetus, c.125, *Enchiridion*, §5; *Republic*, IV, 436). However, psychologists assess individuals against social norms of health, determining if they are more affected or impaired in their reasoning capacity. This assessment considers emotional and physical dispositions, psychological order versus disorder, risk and protective factors, and other elements influencing an individual's life.

Thus, while the philosopher views resistances to thinking as natural and intriguing opportunities to understand humanity, the psychologist perceives individual resistances as symptoms to investigate a particular individual's unique frame of reference. The philosopher's investigation aims at exercising thinking with the interlocutor presenting material for reason, while the investigation of the psychologist is to diagnose and treat. Psychologists examine circumstantial factors affecting an individual's life (cf. circumstantial thinking; Brenifier, et al. 2022), assessing risks and protective factors that influence choice and wellbeing. They then collaborate to create strategies for internal and external changes, managing damaging or difficult aspects, and cultivating elements that nurture the body and the soul.

Resistance is a characteristic of the human being as a physical unity and as a psychological entity. Mental health professionals assess the etiology and functionality of resistances and undertake specific treatment steps to effect health-related changes in the subjective structures underlying these resistances. Philosophers, conversely, contemplate and explore resistances as revelatory of the human being as a form of existence and let them be as they are: to some extent repetitive, and to some degree in a process of becoming.

Philosopher as Non-Subject

Another crucial quality of the philosopher in the practice is the exercise of becoming a non-subject, an agent of reason, a Kantian regulative ideal (1781). For the philosopher to be a non-subject, they maintain an active role in bracketing their subjectivity. Philosophers exercise awareness of their subjectivity, self-distancing from their subjectivity, playing with objectivity by building arguments from various perspectives and paradigms, and accepting the non-subject role. This does not mean to expect that the philosopher is devoid of subjectivity, but that the philosopher actively practices being conscious of their subjectivity. This approach diverges from common psychotherapies, most of which, rooted in humanistic traditions, view the therapeutic encounter as an intersubjective experience. Being a non-subject involves acknowledging one's inherent system of beliefs, life perspectives, and preferences for living that inevitably influence attitude and lines of questioning. A philosopher's continual work on their own consciousness,

attachments, and acknowledgements enhances collaborative critical reflection. This involves regularly problematizing their own ideas, exercising diverse perspectives for a more dialectical understanding of the world, and analyzing their own thinking and existential tendencies.

These practices form a crucial regimen of mental hygiene for the philosopher, improving their capacity for objectivity in consultation and in interacting with others in general. In a way, when a philosopher does critical thinking work regularly, there is a constant polishing and reshaping of their own lenses—a plasticity of the mind. But it is only realistic to be aware that to have "clean lenses", to "be melting snow" as Rumi (c.1200) implores, or to "become a non-subject" as Zhuangzi (c.221 BCE) proposed, are regulatory ideals that serve as a guide for the work on the self. Oscar Brenifier dedicates an entire chapter in *Philosophical Consultation* (2018) to this practice, arguing that "to philosophize is to cease living". A close reading reveals that this means exercising reason over one's desires and impulses, achieving freedom from impulsive or self-interested enactment. Husserl (1913) describes this as *epoché*, a preliminary act in phenomenological analysis, consisting of a suspension of the trust in the objectivity of the world. He entreats thinkers to set aside their pre-understanding of the world in order to be able to act in ways that are not affected by previous knowledge. This idea echoes Descartes' (1637) foundational philosophical work of questioning everything.

In a dialogue where the philosopher suspends his subjective interests, knowledge becomes the fodder, thinking the instrument, and reason the arbiter of creating new interpretations and new understandings. The philosopher does not attempt to invite the other into a particular worldview, but rather to think in dialogue about conditions of possibility, a process in which the philosopher is inevitably transformed as well. Both learn to see in new ways, as all ideas can be challenged. Any clinging to subjective interests interferes with this fellowship in the exploration of reason.

Priorities

Reason Over Ethics

Ethics is the discipline that addresses values and criteria to evaluate human behavior and decisions in order to judge them as right or wrong, good or bad. Different ethical systems prioritize different values, determining what is considered just or fair within a given society or trans-culturally. Every system has limitations and implied problems. Given that professional ethical codes are founded on social and conventional criteria—and recognizing human imperfection—accepting a standardized code that could censor philosophical thinking presents several problems. First, ethical principles or codes are themselves

imperfect and subject to problematization, typically the domain of meta-ethics. Seeking consensus among philosophy practitioners on ethical issues can devolve into endless debate. Second, some ethical preoccupations frequently stem from contemporary and social sensibilities. For example, philosophical dialogue's conceptualization work sometimes involves identifying and naming an individual's characteristics. This can elicit powerful resistance if the person feels reduced to that aspect or perceives negative moral judgment. Philosophical conceptualization, however, is an exploration of the essence, limits, and implications of ideas. Philosophers play with concepts as hypotheses: reducing the curvature of being to an essence, then expanding the thesis, with causes, results, facets, all while testing and further refining. This is similar to the diagnosing work of medical doctors, engineers, mathematicians, and others (Harteloh, 2014). Judgment need not be moral. Labels, when treated as working hypotheses, become interesting avenues for exploration. In this dynamic, the interlocutor's interest is self-knowledge, and the philosopher's interest is investigating humanity.

Philosophizing for its own sake declares an appreciation for existence and its endless dialectical processes, simultaneously expressing a state of availability and trust in reason. Philosophical practice is a potentially endless process, ceasing only when reason itself ceases. When professionals are trained in ethical codes, the aim is to become skilled in thinking ethically—not merely in obeying protocols—otherwise that would not be a formative but an informative activity. When guided by reason, the philosopher maintains a meta-ethical stance, enabling the necessary critique that leads to the adaptation and development of ethical principles rather than their rigid maintenance. The work of philosophy goes beyond categorizing actions as good or ethical, critically examining what is meant by "good" or "ethical" and the individual's autonomy and agency in thinking rationally (Nietzsche, 1887). To critically judge a system, one has to take distance from it, which is only attainable by being free and able to critically reflect about its practical and its moral functioning (Kant, 1781). Discussions of ethical codes also cannot be reduced to a mere definition, but merit continual refinement and consideration (Moore, 1903). Therefore, reason remains the ultimate guide in ethics, serving as an exercise of setting limits and critically examining criteria for what constitutes ethical behavior, distinct from authoritarian conventional morality. Reason, from a higher perspective of self-knowledge, establishes limits that foster awareness, options, and autonomy. In philosophy, reason is the standard and arbiter.

Cognitive Empathy Over Emotional Empathy

While philosophers do not prioritize a subject's pragmatic interests, they do practice cognitive empathy. This is a distinct conceptual approach from emotional empathy (de Waal, 2005; Goleman, 2008; Ioannidou & Konstantikaki, 2008).

Emotional empathy involves not only understanding but also sharing others' emotions and feelings, compassionately offering consolation, relief, or emotional co-regulation. The emotionally empathic individual helps others bring feelings into a window of tolerance (Siegel, 1999), facilitating containment, adequate expression, and the capacity to meet adaptive needs. The emotional empath recognizes and shares the other's suffering, a connection that in Jungian terms (Jung, 1938) aligns with the mother archetype—a universal symbol of care, nurture, protection, and fertility. The mother displays emotional empathy towards her child, she suffers when the child suffers, and therefore, she works to eliminate the pain. The mother protects and cures. Recognizing the other's emotions is for the mother a painful experience because she identifies with them.

Cognitive empathy (Hodges & Myers, 2007), in contrast, is the ability to grasp the other's ideas or perspective. The cognitively empathic individual explores the other's perspective from a rational point of view, without identifying either with the other's ideas or emotions. This approach aligns with the Jungian father archetype, representing discipline and limits (Jung, 1938). The father recognizes and understands the child's pain, but does not identify with it, allowing for distance, challenge, and confrontation. In philosophy, reason is prioritized over private logic, truth over emotional sensitivity, and growth and critical inquiry over temporary discomfort (Williams, 2002).

Given the philosopher's role in challenging thinking and inviting rational, objective critical inquiry into ideas and one's relationship to them, prioritizing cognitive empathy over emotional empathy is imperative. One who identifies with the other's emotions may have difficulties to propose to the other a more distant perspective to think about those emotions, the self, or the world. They suffer with the other and naturally work to eliminate the pain at the expense of a more rational and critical understanding of it. Conversely, one who approaches with cognitive empathy can establish clear limits to thinking, for instance, within an exercise of clarity. Emotions are informative—they are less likely to distort the thinking. Employing cognitive empathy over emotional empathy is fundamental to investigating emotions, clarifying, and possibly problematizing them with appropriate distance. The aim is not to ignore what is revealed during the process—be it some cognitive difficulty or some psychological discomfort or pain—but to acknowledge it and address it as another intriguing object of investigation.

A primary role of the philosopher is to challenge thinking, and cognitive empathy provides the necessary space for this. Psychological approaches do not necessarily view challenges negatively, but are more reluctant to employ them, guided by precise protocols that delineate when to challenge and when not, due to a stronger preoccupation with protection inherent to their caring role. Psychological approaches demonstrate lower trust in an interlocutor's capacity to handle challenges, presuming clients have been hurt, are vulnerable, and are easily

triggered into re-experiencing past pains. Therefore, psychologists tend to prioritize the individual's needs for feeling safe, nurtured, and cared for, to be able to facilitate the re-establishment of their trust in others, which later renders them more courageous and less refractory to being challenged by others.

Ultimately, psychotherapists pursue both cognitive and emotional empathy, while philosophers hold the interlocutor capable of rationality accountable to reason and common sense, maintaining a distinct distance from personal narratives and private logic of the subjects.

Provoking Over Protection

Across various schools of philosophical practice, counseling, and psychotherapy, concerns often arise regarding the subjective, particularly the psychological dimension of the thinking exercise. Two main presuppositions underlie these concerns. First, that the philosopher has the responsibility to support the subject, to help the subject reach solutions to their problem, or to guide them to address the specific issue they bring to the consultation. Second, that the critical thinking process can be dangerous when the philosopher problematizes some ideas that the subject raises, when the philosopher formulates direct questions that address the subject's thinking problems, or when the philosopher challenges or draws attention to some psychological aspects that constitute an obstacle to the thinking exercise. All these concerns collectively stem from a helping attitude and a rather radical rejection of perceived negativity.

The helping position comes perhaps from one's difficulty to tolerate meaninglessness, powerlessness, and pointlessness. Adopting a helping function offers an easy escape, as it appears positive, purposeful, and orientational. However, from a symbolic interactionist view (Goffman, 1956), any social role invites the interlocutors into complementary positions—so, in order to satisfy the counselor's need to feel helpful, the other becomes "the needy". In this arrangement, the helper's proclivity is to think for the needy, who, in turn, are inclined to let them. This assigns the former a greater responsibility and unnecessarily demotes the latter to justify the professional service. In this way, the subjectivity of the client is treated as the object of the professional activity and the subjectivity of the counselor is treated as the instrument of repair. This intricate social dynamic, rather than provoking thought, generates social script fulfillment (Goffman, 1956).

Preoccupations with safety and protection are often linked with survival instincts—the urge to conserve their identity and beliefs. Such preoccupations are the opposite of critical thinking, contaminating dialogue with biases and fallacies and self-serving narratives, such as justifications and rationalizations, meant to define reality in terms acceptable to one's worldview. These preoccupations

manifest as rigidity, suspicion, victimization, complacency, manipulation, and rationalization, among other attitudes and behaviors. Safety is a subjective experience, characterized by an absence of the expectation of danger. Provocation of thinking is not inherently unsafe, but one can perceive danger in challenge, in learning something new, in being confronted about bad faith, or in consciously addressing repressed issues. These processes are often experienced as a form of symbolic death—akin to leaving childhood behind and becoming an adult.

The philosophical practitioner provokes. Rooted in the etymology "to call forth, to challenge", philosophical provocation is strongly connected to the concept of agon. In Plato, through this agon, ideas are tested, refined, or refuted (Reid, 2020). Socrates withholds comfort, referring to himself as a gadfly stinging to arouse, a physician who dared not use rhetoric, and a master of irony used for provocation (*Apology* 30e; *Gorgias* 521e-522e; Vlastos, 1991). Nietzsche (1872) further emphasized the vital role of agon, seeing struggle and conflict as essential for development and expression of human capacity, rationality, and the existential self. Thus, the philosophy practitioner generates agon through provocation, employing dialogue to develop ideas, arguments, and challenges collaboratively. The philosopher treats the interlocutor as an agentic being with access to reason and accountability for their own ideas and modes of being. A focus on safety or a responsibility to help become irrelevant when the interlocutor is empowered to help themselves. The philosopher's role as provoker therefore nurtures empowerment through:

Clarity. Conceptualizing, distinguishing, and discerning are a few ways in which thinking establishes boundaries and systematizes the world. At a slow and easy to follow pace, philosophical consultations utilize clarification questions to illuminate and articulate the position and the evidence. The dialogue is dependent on thinking together, maintaining a common grasp on reality, and taking ideas one step at a time. Clarity implies visibility: when something is visible one can take a position towards it and respond effectively.

Agility. Philosophical practice methods cultivate agility in trying different worldviews, developing arguments, and critically examining one's own ideas and the ideas presented to them. Applying these reasoning competencies yields significant outcomes: novel perspectives emerge, previously invisible problems become obvious, common tricks and fallacies and manipulative rhetoric are exposed for what they are, rendering them unable to pose the difficulties they are designed to create.

Understanding. Philosophical practice provides access to understanding increasingly more about humanity and the self—including nature, desires, and modes of being—along with a working knowledge on how the world functions and how one functions in the world. This important gain of skills and knowledge

enables a more comprehensive view of self, of relationships, and of circumstances and an open attitude in engaging with them.

Discernment. Those who routinely exercise reason have valuable tools to decide the desired position to adopt in a circumstance, according to an assessment of various positions, arguments, risks, and benefits. This cultivates increased autonomy, enabling deliberation and reason-based choices. Individuals learn to discern between rational arguments, hollow assertions, underdeveloped justifications, veiled desires for approval, attention or validation, and manipulative attempts at persuasion.

Development. Philosophical practice, through its provocations, is fundamentally a process of problematizing, not attacking. The philosopher remains patient, calm, and willing to accompany the interlocutor's processes as the interlocutor develops: initially, cultivating trust in their own capacity to reason, in suspending moral judgment, and in the guidance of common sense. Subsequently, this development extends to training intuition, trusting others, and suspending defenses of self and image opening up to the possibilities of challenge.

In sum, provocation of thinking is not inherently safe or unsafe. The philosopher's responsibility is to the exercise of thinking. Protection from challenge is not the aim; provocation is. It is the form of care proper to philosophy.

Development Over Remedy

As philosophical practice increasingly forms into consultation, its association with psychotherapy risks confusing its distinctive role. Unlike mental health fields, which are typically goal-oriented and focused on remedy or problem solving, often evidenced by measurable outcomes in research-based journals (Norcross et al., 2022), philosophical practice operates from different premises. Many philosophical practitioners are tempted to think that their role can have similar values and they are therefore likely to overlook three main considerations. First, to instrumentalize philosophy and its cognitive skills contradicts the nature of the activity, which is open to reason and which critiques everything, even itself. Second, they risk undermining individual autonomy by predefining "good" goals or pathways, instead of engaging in dialogue open to evolving exploration, questioning, and reflecting on diverse forms of wisdom. Third, they may settle for relative success, defined in relation to pragmatic goals (e.g., happiness, fulfillment, avoidance of suffering), rather than aspiring to transcendental truths—a territory of willfully accepted perpetual research.

Counselors who explicitly or implicitly aim to remedy their interlocutors often operate from the assumption that there is something in the individual's functioning that is abnormal and merits fixing. Such counselors adhere to a specific set of tenets

regarding the definition of mental health, the diagnosis of its lack or dysfunction, and methods for its achievement (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

In contrast, philosophy adopts the attitude that the interlocutor is a representative of humanity: with imperfections, desires, problems, limitations, preoccupations, defense of the self, and so on, but ultimately an agent of reason. While the provocation of thinking may sometimes yield therapeutic side effects experienced phenomenologically as a remedy, pursuing such benefits is not the aim of philosophical practice. Its core role is to provoke thinking that leads to the confrontation and examination of one's being in relation to existential givens. In this way philosophy differs from therapy much as athletics differs from kinesis therapy, even if transformative effects on wellbeing or health are likely outcomes of both (see Aristotle's Peripatetics; Brenifier, 2019; Hadot, 1995; Hegel, 2006; *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099a3-1120a17; Nussbaum, 1994; Reid, 2012; *Republic*, III, 403c-414a). Foucault addressed this "exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself" as a recalling of the ancient Greek philosophical work of *epimeleia heautou* ("take care of yourself"; Foucault, 1984).

Boethius' *On the Consolation of Philosophy* (524) presents an aspect of philosophical practice through a medical metaphor. In this text, the term cure is interpreted as the Latin *cura*: to take conscious concern or responsibility (cure in the sense of remedy does not appear until centuries later). The suffering patient is a convict unjustly sentenced to death, deploring his fate and lamenting the degradation of humanity. Lady Philosophy arrives to cure Boethius' attitude—to restore his capacity to think, drawing him out of passivity. Her methods are a combination of compassion and provocation. Lady Philosophy assumes Boethius is overwhelmed because he has given up on reason. As a consequence, he is experiencing hopelessness, complacency, or other debilitating emotional states that prevent him from using his faculties of sense, reason, and intellect, to be able to enjoy a tranquil life, irrespective of adverse circumstances (Boethius, 524). Another assumption is that philosophical dialogue can restore the individual's vitality and capacity to reason by provoking thought, instead of allowing repetitive lamentation. Lady Philosophy asks him to respond to her questions, prompting him to focus, to recall his previous learning, and to reflect critically and philosophically about what has happened to him, with an eye on the wider context.

The notion of curing is often laden with meanings that render it problematic for practice. First, it views the patient as ill or incapacitated, unlike Lady Philosophy, who sees Boethius as competent (Boethius, 524). Second, the medic is the expert, teaching and telling the "ill" what to do, unlike Lady Philosophy, for whom theory emerges from practice. Third, curing generally involves a specific procedure—assessment, treatment, and follow-up—designed to restore health. Lady Philosophy, however, does not follow medical protocol; instead, she questions Boethius' attitude. Her method involves strategic, progressive demands for rational

arguments, leading him to admit his suffering results from abandoning reason and that his situation is not intrinsically evil but a natural course of life. Once this conclusion restores a philosophical attitude, they proceed to substantial analysis of his previously acquired doctrines (Donato, 2013). Fourth, the conventional curing model assumes that it is the patient who calls the doctor to rid him of irritants. In contrast, Boethius' story is that the doctor calls the patient and irritates him with questions. This emphasizes that philosophy provokes even those who did not call for it and also those who wish to avoid it. Philosophy is a pervasive part of every human being remaining somehow involved in the attitudes and capacities used or misused throughout life. Philosophy, then, represents humanity's intrinsic power to self-transcend, inherited partly from humanity's collective philosophical legacy and partly developed through the individual use of philosophy to deepen an understanding of what has been learned.

To understand what development refers to in philosophical practice, which is fundamentally based on the critical examination of ideas and the subject who formulates them, there are key dimensions of the activity:

Ideas. Through the provocation of thinking by questioning and hypothesis articulation, the philosopher facilitates the individual's formulation, verification, critique, and development of concepts and ideas. During the dialogue, the interlocutor is invited to construct their ideas in a complete and consistent way, and these ideas are put into test, both from a formal perspective and content wise. In this sense, the participants of the dialogue are developing, through the process, their thinking skills, by working on the rigor of the production of ideas and the flexibility in their perspectives. Just like Boethius, while working on ideas the participants see how their strengths, habits, and problems of their thinking competencies relate to their own assumptions, perspectives of the world, and particular modes of being, but what to do with this consciousness is not directly addressed. One is not cured of ideas, but elicited to deliver them into consciousness and to see in which conditions they make sense and what their consequences and implications are. Individuals choose how to operate with them in their own life.

Understanding. The provocation of thinking brought about by philosophical practice increases understanding of the world, relationships, and oneself. Psychotherapy can happen without understanding or awareness, often involving a so-called corrective emotional experience or giving up on certain beliefs in favor of others that make one feel better and more fulfilled in life. Philosophical practice takes the approach that awareness and understanding are fundamental for the thinking process. In philosophical practice, one does not cling to some ideas and resign others for the sake of a convenient psychological structure. Human beings frequently have difficulties identifying and formulating their main concern with respect to their own subjectivity and even have little awareness of how their subjectivity prevents them from thinking objectively. Their understanding of the

world is usually strongly determined by subjectivity, often mistaking their own interpretations of what is with reality. All ideas in philosophy can be hypothesized, trying on different perspectives like different clothes.

Skill. In counseling and therapy, cognitive skills are usually developed in order to serve emotional self-regulation, relations with others, and problem solving, in order to be well equipped for approaching issues intra-psychically and interpersonally. Philosophical practice involves exercising various competences of critical reflection, which leads to skill development without it being an essential goal or intention. One can maintain various philosophical approaches to life, issues, and relationships, irrespective whether that puts one at odds with other people. Socrates was killed for his dedication to reason. Other philosophers were also judged improper by common social standards of courtesy for similar reasons. They refused to play the usual social games and more often exposed them.

Challenge. Practical experience enables the development of a positive relationship to challenge. The remedy approach is usually oriented towards problem solving, not problem contemplation or problem enjoyment. Problems are usually considered something to be solved. With this perspective, the aesthetics of the process are overlooked, there is no consideration of the interesting aspects of what is commonly rejected as ill or harmful. In opposition, philosophical practice assumes the position that problems are what fundamentally make existence interesting. A problem is a challenge, an opportunity to know oneself better and to grow. It requires awareness to identify it, sharpness to understand it, and a vitalist attitude to enjoy thinking about it. Challenge is what allows for development. Philosophical practice is a method to experiment with challenge.

Process. Dialogue is free: free to explore, to investigate, to discover interesting ideas revealed in process. It is free from desires to conclude or to answer or to fix. With this freedom, the ability to critically think, to be focused in the moment on thinking work, to enjoy the beauty of exercising without being concerned about some measurable result, the process is promoted. Individuals train their intuition and learn how to trust it, take joy in the agony of challenging themself, and exercise these skills for their thinking work to become increasingly easier and better. The remedy perspective has a rather instrumental approach to thinking: there is an objective to be met, so the process is determined by that objective. This limits the engagement with the process, as it usually does not require as much presence as a free, unpredictable dialogue would require. The focus is on the results rather than in the process.

Being. Philosophical practice is an exercise of the power to exist: the subject is required to make choices and arguments, to admit to their manifestations and not take back what is said, but see what is revealed through it. Some people repress ideas, live in bad faith, or have hypocritical positions. Some people change their discourse and play tricks in conversation because they are not satisfied with how

they are and are busy working on how they seem. When one allows one's being to reveal its curvature, humanity as well as the transcendental begins to reveal itself to the self through the self. This has a naturally transformative power.

Self-transcendence. To self-transcend is to think beyond one's personal concerns and interests, survival instincts, desires, and ideas to which one has become attached. It involves connecting with others, with nature, with the world, with higher values, and with the previously unconsidered. Socrates was devoted to reason and philosophical inquiry and when he was challenged to give them up to preserve his life, he responded, "the unexamined life is not worth living" (*Apology*, 38a). Socrates engaged himself and others in philosophical practice at a great personal cost. Kant as well supports a distinction of the human not just as a rational creature, but an agent, capable of employing their rationality in order to work on realizing, conducting, forming themselves as a human being (Kant, 1798).

Potency. By making a habit of reasoning, one inevitably becomes versed at it. Thinking is an exercise of potency. First, it requires the active participation of the subject. Thinking implies a conscious exercise of one's own agency, an active subject. Second, thinking implies self-awareness and the disposition to be accountable for one's own ideas and attitudes. One should be able to acknowledge their choices and understand and take charge of their implications in order to be free and objective. Third, a philosopher implicitly trains others to think by expecting them to take risk and responsibility for their ideas and their subjectivity, their self-awareness and autonomy. The philosopher invites the other to produce ideas, to understand their relation to the world and their subjectivity, to be in the thinking process, to think without depending on an external agent who provides answers. This approach requires a rather ontological understanding of oneself, in opposition to an investigation where the individual's own dispositions, tendencies, or attitudes towards thinking and existence are explained through circumstances.

Process Over Result

Philosophical practice prioritizes the dynamic process of thinking itself over predetermined outcomes or solutions. Through rigorous engagement with reason, philosophical practice engages the philosopher and interlocutors in dialogue that develops critical thinking abilities and dispositions. The development of critical thinking is achieved through philosophical consultations, much like a fit body is achieved through gymnastics or sustained physical work, although these are not necessarily the goals of the philosophical process either. Most people who engage in an activity for training purposes envision a desired outcome, but with philosophical practice the goal is to be in the process of employing reason, irrespective of where it might lead—an openness to discovery and to thinking. This is the general condition of human beings: to be in process and to have rather limited

awareness of where the process is going (Heraclitus; Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 4.43; Laozi, c.300 BCE; Montaigne, *Essais*, III.2; Zhuangzi, c.221 BCE). Philosophical practice is non-instrumental.

The value of the thinking process resides in several aspects, with freedom from objectives or outcomes. First, the quality of the inquiry is visible and understandable to various interlocutors or observers who can notice if there are any methodological problems. Second, the specific orderly and slow pace of the activity has a structuring effect on dialogue and implicitly on the minds of the thinkers. Third, every participant to the thinking process follows the discussion in order to be able to take the next step further on behalf of the group: this involves being alert, being focused, and being attentive. Fourth, characteristics of the subject are revealed through the subject's participation in the process. Fifth, repetition and the stray from repetitive patterns are both acknowledged and accepted parts of the dynamic reality of interacting subjects. In prioritizing process over result, several characteristics of philosophical practice distinguish the work from other pursuits:

Clarity. The quality of the activity is about clarity, precision, and rigor. In the thinking process one might start working with some impression someone has in relation to the description, interpretation, or problematization of an idea, but then the work of the philosopher is to guide the other in the exercise of conceptualizing that impression. Impressions are states of having been affected by something and so the thoughts may be confused at first: one is experiencing the immediate feelings towards what is presented and there is no distance from the object of thinking nor with one's own impressions about it. These are causes of confusion in dialogue. When impressions are put into words, they become expressions and they are conceptually organizable. Confusion then is replaced by clarity. If one tries to construct a thought from an idea that is not conceptualized and articulated, an idea that is only based in their intuition, this likely indicates undetermination and undifferentiation in the thinking process—pre-conscious, unflexive. So, in order to have a rigorous and consistent dialogue, the interlocutor needs challenge to conceptualize their own thoughts.

Confrontation. Critical thinking requires confrontation, in opposition to a complacent approach to ideas or attitudes. In the thinking work ideas are tested, both in their content and in their form: they are checked to be clear, differentiated, complete, coherent with the rest of the discourse. Whenever an idea is lacking, the philosopher proposes work to refine it. Not everything goes. This demonstrates rigor in the dialogue, in contrast to a conversation where self-expression is the priority. Another reason for confrontation is that subjectivity is not sacred and merits testing in the same way ideas do: one investigates their relation to the concepts or ideas brought, if that relation is problematic in the sense that constitutes an obstacle for thinking or existing. Confronting one's own subjectivity takes distance from it in order to be critical about it or to put it into brackets when

exploring someone else's worldview (Zahavi, 2025), is a way to better understand cognitive, psychological, and existential dispositions. Otherwise, the thinker often gets stuck in an endless, self-complacent justification of their own thinking and existential issues.

Discovery. Philosophy employs dialogue as the format of exercise to build thinking competencies and discover revelations of humanity and manifestations of curvature of being (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). The philosopher and the interlocutor are in dialogue together that is open, exploratory, of interest to both. The interlocutor may exhibit patterns, values, or perspectives that in dialogue can be explored and named. Where psychology sees repetition as compulsion and symptomatic, or a failure of the remedy and thinks of reemergence of certain aspects of being as a relapse, there is no value judgment inherent in philosophical practice. Concepts have good, bad, and neutral possibilities. The philosopher's function is performative; their job, through questioning, is to open spaces for thinking to arise, to provoke an effect in the interlocutor, to create voids for the subject to take charge. The work might identify ways of being, test them, distill them, explore new perspectives, question whether they align with values, take agility towards them. The philosopher also takes interest in this process as an exploration of humanity, its manifestations, its functioning. The philosopher maintains their own work in exploring, and thus looks for inspiration in everyday life, in experiences, and in dialogue. Philosophical practice is an exercise in dialogue and discovery for the philosopher as much as the interlocutor.

Freedom. The exercise of critical thinking is a present focused activity. To reach a solution is not what guides the exercise, and if a solution happens, it is incidental. Thus, the exercise is free, there is plasticity regarding what to do or where to go, an openness to whatever results might emerge, even to the possibility of getting nowhere with the philosophical conversation. The philosopher is ready to take into consideration and explore whatever emerges during the discussion, while also ready to be flexible to change direction and to use different strategies to provoke the other's thinking, without worrying about arriving at some specific outcome. The philosophical exercise enhances, therefore, the aesthetic dimension of the process. Its nature is performative, it creates an effect and then watches the response, learns, verifies its learning, and contemplates the structure of this form of being. Philosophical practice is an exercise rather than a service.

Learning Over Teaching

The Latin *educere* reflects Plato's belief that the educator or provoker "leads out" what one already knows, like Socrates' comparison to the work of the midwife, as well as the *periagōgē* "turning of the soul" (*Meno*, 82b-86b; *Republic*, VII, 518c–519b; *Theaetetus* 150b-150d). Many philosophical practitioners think of

the philosopher as a skilled facilitator of autonomous critical thinking. Their education and capacity to reference and apply philosophical ideas and fundamental texts serve as stimulating elements in the philosophical dialogue. By positioning oneself as an expert via philosophical practice, their role is to create an adequate learning environment—one that fosters the development of ideas and concepts and deepens understanding of self, the world, and what constitutes a good life.

Consequently, in philosophical practice's core activity of provocation of thinking, exercise takes precedence over mere transmission. Philosophy, as the "cultivation of the self" (Foucault, 1978, 2001; Hadot, 1976, 1995; Marcus Aurelius, 180), prioritizes developing dialogue, argument building skills, and exploring ideas with their origins and implications, rather than a teacher simply imparting truths to a student. Nurturing an attitude of critical analysis—critiquing perspectives and argumentation—is more important than accepting what is presented and what the self believes. Knowledge is deposited in one's library of ideas, but remains inert without exercise. Consider the many things children memorize, most of which are forgotten. What often remains is the practical ability of critical thinking: the competencies to gain insight and expand what is beyond the current horizon of comprehension (Brenifier, 2019).

The ancient Latin concept of the *artes liberales* refers to the skills appropriate for a free citizen (Cicero, 55 BCE, *De Oratore*, 1.72–75; Quintilian, c. 95 CE, *Inst.* 1.10-12; Seneca, c. 62 CE, *Ep.* 88.1–5, 20–37; Tubbs, 2014). Philosophers uniquely position themselves as fellow learners who invite their students to think and to reflect and to think about thinking with them (*Apology*, 33a-b). What distinguishes the philosopher from the student is the philosopher's active development of critical thinking skills, an experience with a routine critical thinking habit, and a formalized practice. The expert facilitates the critical examination of ideas, entrusted with the responsibility of identifying thinking problems, lack of rigor or precision, and the effects of subjectivity on the thinking process. Importantly, they make these elements visible and conscious to the interlocutors. This empowers students to learn how to conceptualize, organize, verify, and problematize knowledge, thereby developing advanced information processing skills, the ability to critique and decide what to do with information, and how to further provoke one another's thinking.

Socratic Pact

In With philosophical practice's unique priorities in mind, its work is to take Socrates as a model of dialogue. To that end, reading philosophy, practicing critical thinking exercises, and engaging in philosophical dialogue are the natural and routine habits of the philosopher. They also find interlocutors. Philosophical practice is an activity best understood by doing, yet individuals sometimes request

clear expectations, opportunities to observe, or general awareness of the work before participating. In response, Jerome Lecoq composed the Socratic Pact to articulate the practice's main principles (Lecoq, 2018).

The Socratic Pact is a tool, not a professional code. Pacts are meant to clarify roles that might otherwise be undertaken performatively, based on individual subjective assumptions about what should be done. Despite pacts, difficulties will still likely arise in dialogue because this is how living systems persist: by resisting, maintaining an identity, and reproducing themselves. The role of the pact is partly symbolic—it is an agreement of mutual trust. Another use of the pact is to stimulate reflective thinking—encounters that start with pacts are already consultative and philosophical because interlocutors are called to state their arguments about the principles that should govern their interaction. The pact contains agreements to be guided by reason, thereby becoming a strong foundation for the human encounter. It provides guidelines designed for reason to be exercised by all parties involved, which in turn invites each to set aside emotions, circumstances, and subjectivity. Consultation processes are emergent—participants do not know where they lead, though they can expect provocation. Consultations are like life itself: they demand adaptation without predetermined guarantees.

Pacts in philosophical consultation practices are not meant to protect individuals from surprises and challenges inherent to the dynamics of dialogue. Despite pacts or standards, the dialogue is between rational yet imperfect beings, each with subjectivity, priorities, perspectives, and ideas that are interesting to explore. A pact does not guarantee protection; like any standard, it chiefly sets expectations and methods. It articulates that philosophical practice prioritizes reason, the subject's capacity, and the open-ended and emergent properties of dialogue.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the narrative orientation of philosophical counseling approaches enables individuals to integrate experiences, temporal stages of life, memories, Given that the subjective dimension in philosophical practice is unavoidable, yet comprehensible and manageable, this article raises a central question: what should philosophical practice prioritize? In brief, the philosopher works on their own subjectivity, learns about it and how it affects their practice and developing capacities to contain and bracket it. This journey towards becoming a kind of non-subject ensures their interests and passions do not significantly enmesh with those of the interlocutor or with the methodology employed in the consultations. This exploration addresses several key differences between philosophical practice and common counseling or therapy services to define the unique priorities of philosophical consultation.

Philosophical practice uniquely seeks to exercise critical thinking, explore the human condition, learn about one's subjectivity, and foster becoming a non-subject. In contrast, academic philosophy looks at the history of the development of schools or attempts to posit and build new perspectives of viewing the world, while many therapies aim at change in subjective functioning, and general coaching and counseling often prioritize goal attainment. The approach of philosophical practice, therefore, is distinct in telos and method. Often it is possible that philosophical practice leads to epiphenomenal outcomes: informed by exploration, more conscious of the self, one can choose their goals and adhere to a course towards them, making decisions to instill changes in their way of life. This process could be considered a natural consequence of challenges and the opportunity to think the previously unthinkable. These are secondary consequences, while critical thinking is the primary activity.

To undertake this kind of journey demands an active work of acknowledging reason as first principle. This attitude embodies an approach that truly cares for the soul by recognizing that provoking critical thinking is the fulfilling activity of humanity, fosters becoming over being, and builds a well-ordered soul as proposed by Socrates and Aristotle. Socrates offers the analogy of the midwife assisting in the delivery of ideas (*Theaetetus*, 148e-151d), compares with the image of the gadfly that irritates the horse from sluggish living (*Apology*, 30e), and requests that the Athenians in his absence trouble his sons with questions in his style of committing impiety towards the gods and corrupting the youth (*Apology*, 41e-42a). It is this work that the philosopher continues under the primacy of reason.

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