

**Andrea Ignazio Daddi**

Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca, Piazza dell'Ateneo Nuovo 1, IT-20126 Milano  
andrea.daddi@unimib.it

**Renewed Philosophical Practices and  
Philosophically-Oriented Biographical Analysis**

**An Italian Approach to Education and Care**

**Abstract**

*This paper outlines the main features of the Biographical Philosophy and the related Renewed Philosophical Practices by the Italian thinker Romano Mådera. Following the appeal of Pierre Hadot's work, Mådera tries to find a possible way to adapt the ancient vision of philosophy as a way of life to the contemporaneity, even recurring to the contribution of psychoanalysis and deep psychologies. A portion of the paper is dedicated to presenting the specific practice of Philosophically-Oriented Biographical Analysis that Mådera promotes.*

**Keywords**

biographical philosophy, renewed philosophical practices, philosophically-oriented biographical analysis, philosophy as a way of life, Romano Mådera

**Renewed Philosophical Practices  
and Biographical Philosophy**

The expressions “renewed philosophical practices” and “biographical philosophy” refer to a composite set of experiences and reflections that originated in Italy in the early 1980s and that have grown over the years involving – around the main figure of the philosopher and psychoanalyst Romano Mådera – an increasing number of the people, publications, events and exchanges with other realities in the attempt to renew philosophy by practicing it as a way of life (Mådera & Tarca 2003; Mådera & Tarca 2008). Of these experiences, the association Philo – with its Higher School in Philosophical Practices and the connected Cultural Centre in Milan – is now the most ample and significant result and completion, but it is considered opportune to retrace, at least in broad outline, the long journey that has prepared the current reality, making implicitly emerge, at the same time, its distinctive and original features in relation to the vast world of philosophical practices *tout court* and its value as a peculiar form of adult education and care.

**Along the Way**

As Romano Mådera himself recounts, recalling his youthful and never dormant dissatisfaction with philosophy within the limits of the sole philosophical discourse, Philo's idea has its roots in those first experiments he started at the University of Calabria in 1979,

“... with some undergraduate students available at weekly analytic meetings in order to extract from their life stories, dreams, fantasies, readings and reflections a trace of a personal myth, a mythological inspiration that, secretly, would enliven the work of writing an apparently traditional thesis.” (Màdera 2015, p. 18)

A second experiment was to follow, this time in Venice, among friends, towards the end of the eighties: a small group of people, later self-denominated “Company of Everyone”, decided to undertake an autobiographical narrative conferring the due value to every symbolic and conceptual amplification emerging from the shared life stories and avoiding any possible rebuttal or opposition in the perspective of mutual recognition, empathy, offer of other possible points of view and auto-analytic suspension of the attack on the other (Daddi, 2016).

The formulation of the five rules of biographical supportive communication, that are still central in Philo’s proposal and through which the participants in turn narrate about themselves, goes back to this period:

1. “... the reference to the biographical experience is always present, regardless of the type of speech;
2. the affirmations of the other are accepted as an expression of one’s self and beliefs. This means that communication departs from the opposition of competing theses for a truth that excludes the truth of the other;
3. the listening of the other is open, which means that it tends to suspend any substitutive interpretation;
4. the contributions and feedbacks of listeners tend to express themselves as an anamorphic offer, which means the possibility that a different point of view will discover other aspects of what has been said and that these other aspects can be freely taken into account, or neglected, by those who lead the meeting;
5. the temptation of destructiveness must be suspended and re-examined autonomously and silently.”<sup>1</sup>

This is, in some way, a reinterpretation of the ancient spiritual practice of confession, in vogue in the philosophical schools of late antiquity such as the Epicurean Garden. The rules, “that have proved to be able to function as a channel of transmission of a knowledge imbued with the experiences of each one and to accommodate differences of points of view by making them cooperate among themselves” (Màdera & Tarca 2003, p. XXVII), must be studied by memory and then put into practice just as the maxims of the ancient philosophical schools.

When all the participants had told their own life story, another group of people – characterised by a greater heterogeneity of the participants – undertook this test in 1995. The “Company of Everyone” never referred to a determined philosophical creed but always adapted the philosophical tradition to the themes of the autobiographical offer within the background of a free and supportive communication, usually inhibited in the everyday life, both in the workplace and too often in intimacy too (Lo Russo 2006).

In 1998, from the intellectual partnership between Màdera and his friend and colleague Luigi Vero Tarca, the first Open Seminary of Philosophical Practices was founded at the University of Venice, decisive thrust for the return to philosophy as a practice of philosophy, that is, as a lifestyle (Daddi 2016). Not accidentally, in that occasion the Italian version of Hadot’s *Philosophy as a Way of Life. Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (1995) was read in depth and commented at length. The Maderian philosophical practices are, then, “renewed” precisely because they are conceived as instruments for

converting one's life to philosophy, in analogy to what happened in the ancient philosophical schools, but with the important difference constituted by the total absence of particular *dógmata* and the continuous reference to the rules of biographical supportive communication which make it possible to approach the different philosophical schools or religious doctrines starting from the needs, questions and preconceptions of each path of life. They respond, in fact, to the need to renew the ancient philosophical exercises, adapting them to contemporary sensibility, and to propose new ones, creating a philosophical discourse able to keep the universal in the biographical and vice versa and to transcend the Ego that forgets the essential co-belonging and the inter-intra-being of the Self within the human community and the life of the planet.

In the autumn of 2002, the first retreat of philosophical practices took place, an appointment which became annual. Significantly this tradition began in Anghiari, at the Free University of the Autobiography, but it was during another retreat, in the summer of 2004 in Croatia, that Màdera and Tarca further expanded the original idea and defined the main lines of a real community of philosophical practices (Tarca 2006). Màdera, in particular, emphasises the importance of a “daily diet” which can include meditation, yoga, singing, prayer, reading texts and physical and spiritual exercises of various kinds: each one must find one's own diet, the one adapted to one's own of being, to one's own specific situation and to one's own stage of maturation. In such a community, everyone is the creator of one's own diet as well as the controller of its actual implementation, but at the same time the diet of each one is the result of the comparison with the others and thus of their mutual help. It is not difficult to see in all this, *in nuce*, what shortly thereafter will find an even more complete systematisation. In 2005, in fact, the Seminar also arrived at the University of Milan-Bicocca and in the autumn of the same year, the desire to experiment an innovative synthesis between philosophical practices and Jungian psychoanalysis, in the opening to other significant contributions, lead to the birth of Philo. In 2006, in Milan, the cultural association and the training school in Philosophically-Oriented Biographical Analysis (POBA)<sup>2</sup> were formally founded, followed, in 2007, by the Society of Philosophical Oriented Biographical Analysis.<sup>3</sup> Since 2010 the activities have been multiplying with events open to the public, conferences, training seminars, meetings, webinars and conferences. The Open Seminars of the Universities of Milan and Venice are still active and other Seminars have opened in different Italian cities. Newsletter and a newsgroup have also been created. Both in Milan and in other cities, desks for analytic-philosophical listening for individuals and groups are also active. On the occasion of its tenth anniversary of life, Philo presented, then, their new creature, “Mitobiographic – School of the Craft of Living”, a training program for adult people aimed at understanding and promoting the ability to become what we are, discovering and pursuing our own personal myth.<sup>4</sup>

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See: <https://www.scuolaphilo.it/eventi/categoria/seminari-di-pratiche-filosofiche/> (accessed on 27 February 2021).

2

See: <https://www.scuolaphilo.it/scuola-abof/> (accessed on 27 February 2021).

3

See: <https://sabof.it/> (accessed on 27 February 2021).

4

See: <https://www.scuolaphilo.it/cos-e-scuola-mitobiografica/> (accessed on 27 February 2021).

## Living Philosophically

In order to sketch the main features of that biographical philosophy that Mådera proposes as a daily spiritual exercise,

“... it can be said that it consists of a philosophical itinerary biographically constructed and inspired to the subjective experience in an attempt to understand and enhance it along the lines of sense required and measured by the biography itself” (Mådera & Tarca 2003, p. 75)

This way, able not to divide truth and life, is declined for each one according to his personal coordinates and using theories and practices of different origins in an ecumenical and syncretic way: their cohesion and cooperation is made possible by the fact that all are addressed to the exploitation of the differences of each individual. Among the reference techniques Mådera cites the free use of the diary and the autobiography (Daddi 2016) as a writing exercise always renewed and resumed since the true philosopher is the one who has the conscience that he has not yet reached wisdom (Hadot 1998).

For biographical philosophy, the use of imaginary activation through the explicit enhancement of dreams, intuitions, representations, emotions and affections is also fundamental. A double movement of concentric amplification and circumstantiality follows the narrative of one’s life story.

“The concentric amplification brings back the singularity and momentariness of the biographical experience to features generally valid in a culture or even to cultures of other contexts. Thus the conviction of being closed in the incommunicability of the private dimension is dissolved, recognising that personal patterns of behaviour expressed in images and stories evidently draw their universality and millenary constancy from their inherited phylogenetic root. The counter-movement of balance instead heads in the direction of the return to the biographical circumstances in order to grasp the differences. The biography refers to the myth that lives in it, in order to be able to understand itself, then the myth returns to the biography because only in this way it can live, articulating itself in the contingencies of reality and experiencing its potential developments.” (Mådera & Tarca 2003, p. 85)

This movement is then shared with the others, with the spirit of searching for a formation oriented towards a supportive self-fulfilment, today hindered by the factual conditions of a civilization governed by the laws of economic accumulation. Therefore, those activities that have always characterised philosophical disciplines in institutional training contexts – namely listening, studying, teaching, writing, dialogue and debate – remain central. Yet, at the same time, they assume a new colouring: any specialism is here subordinated to the singular specialisation of one’s own life story, the study programme is customised and for teachers the quality of the interpersonal relationship, always open to the involvement of third parties, becomes a priority over the mere transmission of knowledge that is common in universities.

In summary, it can be said that biographical philosophy is a courageous attempt to revitalise

“... two great and rich traditions such as those of ancient philosophy and depth psychology [along a path] where religious traditions could also find a new language capable of making live their old truths.” (Mådera 2013a, p. 16)

Its purpose is to give practitioners the chance to live according to a philosophical style, that is conscious and able to give expression and reason for each particular biography and, at the same time, to go beyond the ego and its claims by recognizing self-consciousness as a part of the cosmos, relating to others and taking authentically part in a truth that becomes the criterion and

the measure of our attempts (Màdera 2012, Màdera 2013a, Màdera 2013b). So the biographical philosophers sets out on their own to find in themselves the world, their own place in it and the direction of a shared path towards wisdom and self-realisation in solidarity.

If we do not conceive exclusively philosophy as an abstract conceptual elaboration that conforms to certain canons, but we give back to the term the original meaning of a life lived with awareness and striving toward good, then every existential trajectory oriented to the pursuit of such objectives is a philosophical life and, as such, a biographically founded philosophy that accompanies a daily practice with a discourse capable of giving reason to it. This discourse can be formulated in a more or less specialised and theoretical manner, but in any case it does not imply a consequent greater or lesser philosophicity.

### **The Philosophically-Oriented Biographical Analysis (POBA)**

In Màdera's texts (Màdera 2012, Màdera 2013a, Màdera 2013b) it is possible to grasp an invitation and a constructive challenge. An invitation to the deepening of a theoretical path that aims – as we have seen – to incarnate philosophy in everyday life, subtracting it from the narrow monopoly of academia, and a challenge, both to philosophy itself and to psychoanalysis, to a fruitful convergence of intentions. In the context of a more general renewal of the wisdom typical of ancient philosophical schools, Màdera integrates the depth psychologies with the suggestions of Pierre Hadot on philosophy as lifestyle outlining original perspectives for the existential care of the self and the others (2012, in particular “Introduction” and “Chapter 5”). The precise investigation of all those unintentional psychic activities which distance themselves from logical-conceptual reasoning and from common sense as well as the discovery of figural-symbolic like a different, autonomous form of thought to which it has recognized importance revealing its structural expressive modalities are the greatest merits of psychoanalysis. It has led to an extension of human psychism to areas which were previously unknown and devalued and which this particular philosophical orientation is intended to build on.

What Màdera proposes is the crossing of the mere dualistic juxtaposition of the two different forms of thought in the direction of their unification:

“... the ‘symbolological’ as inseparable unity of symbolic and logical characteristics of the human, in accordance with the specific distinguishing features.” (Daddi 2016, p. 92)

It can be argued that the forms of thinking influence each other, fertilise each other and can be conceived and felt as one.

“We can think rationally what we feel, we can feel passionately what we think, we can give a logical formula to the symbol and figural shape to the formalized thought.” (Màdera 2012, p. XXIV)

A recomposition between the different dimensions of human expression presupposes that equal dignity which only from Jung onwards will find full citizenship within the psychoanalytic community. In this regard Màdera recalls that still in Freud remained, in fact, the substantial primacy of reasonable thinking, to which was also conformed the latent content, concealed by narrative-figural forms and removed from consciousness because unpleasant, but rationally understandable once interpreted (Màdera 2012, pp. XXIII–XXIV).

The way of life of the Hellenistic philosophical schools, carefully reconstructed by Hadot (2002) and marked by the common striving to the transcendence of Ego (in the search for truth and in the relationship with others and with the universe) is taken as a model by Philo and adapted to the specificities of our era. The contribution of the depth psychology is configured, in this scenario, as decisive to formulate the proposal of a philosophically-oriented analytic practice, indicating new forms of transcendence (the relationship with the inner magisterium, the anamorphic transformation of the negative, the re-composition of the mitopoietic link and the desire for desire) and offering in dowry the ability to understand the subsoil of otherwise human that much of philosophical and scientific thought has neglected, excluded, and sanctioned. What follows is the proposal of a Philosophically-Oriented Biographical Analysis (POBA) inserted within the spiritual exercises of the renewed philosophical practices (cf. Bartolini & Mirabelli 2019). Its biographical specificity derives from being biographical both its object – the history of life – and its method, in line with the modern centrality of the individual and the singular, but aimed at repairing all the divisions between the individual biographies that interweave among them as multiple forms of a single story. Unlike ancient cultures, that according to Pierre Hadot (2002) were mostly prone to the devaluation of the individual in favour of the collective, the individual here is the starting point and – as a result of the profound transformation that the attained awareness of being part of the all involves – even the point of arrival. Such an analysis does not address the treatment of specific psychopathologies (for which psychotherapy is recommended), but the “healthy” and “normal” dimension present in all persons who, as human beings, daily deal with the painful existential conditions of anguish and bewilderment and experience a common openness to the search for meaning.

Analysis oriented to, and from, philosophy as a lifestyle does not have its goal in a resolution of a pathology or an existential difficulty, although it takes care of and helps to overcome them. Instead, it considers both the pathology as well as any stumbling into self-realisation as second-level symptoms, since it is the same “normal” condition, “quite healthy” and “quite good”, to make problem, to constitute obstacle. Normal life is still illness. The desired objective is not a condition of annihilation of pain, evil, negative. The philosophical happiness, as completeness, must be able to include pain, evil, all negativity. There are no good solutions for every time and situation. The meaning of a path of life is constantly precarious, even the recognition of our past self can become stale or even become an obstacle. The self-narrative itself has the same time of life and needs continuous adjustments, always revised versions.

### **The Vocation of the Quest for a Meaning**

Psychoanalysis itself can benefit from the encounter with philosophical practices; they move against that institutionalised split that separates the professional dimension of analytic work from the analyst’s personal life in the name of his alleged neutrality, recovering that inseparable link between everyday life and vocation to the search of meaning as a continuous existential posture of his person. The biographical analyst, in fact, places himself at the complete service of the listening and the acknowledgment of the other, without expecting the satisfaction of his own affective needs in return and participating in the emotional worlds evoked by the analysand during the journey, in order to sug-

gest, then, new possible ways. The encounter with the other relativises every technique and theory and, after passing transference and counter-transference phases, it is possible to have access to an authentic individual relationship, freely negotiated between equals, which implies a dialogue between two visions of the world as the main therapeutic factor. The relationship between the two psychic systems of the analyst and the analysand forms a third field containing it. The invitation is to abandon the purely pulsional, uni-personal and biological optics to land to a conception of care as a joint construction of narratives and transformative exchange of meanings, even on the basis of what already in post-Freudian and contemporary psychoanalysis has moved in a constructivist direction. We therefore cannot fail to mention the extraordinary assonance that the POBA evokes – even with all the distinctions due to the reciprocal specificities – with the recent narrative-oriented psychoanalytic approach which means analysis as a narrative co-construction of two subjects and a diagraphic experience.

Repositioning the setting between nature, history and individuality, biographical analysis presupposes, therefore, the passage from an implicit biography to a first level autobiography to find, afterward, in the meeting with the biography offered by the vision of the other, a reflective autobiography. It is from this patient work of co-weaving between experiences, emotions, thoughts and images that slowly takes shape a philosophical discourse capable of giving expression and reason to a particular biography. Admirably the philosophical-biographical approach then reports the individual experience recounted by the analytic couple to the collective cultural narrative that made it possible and that is its essential reference: that same Freudian Ego that was not ‘master at home’, in the conclusive phase of the biographical analysis, turns out to be part of a myth and point of a whole. Among the most important philosophical contributions to the analysis, this death of the self-centrement goes much further and, envisaging a new religiosity and secular mystique, reintegrates the subject’s experience into the great circle of life and universe, enhancing it and, at the same time, relativizing it as a point of a circumference with infinite dimensions and infinite centres.

### **Re-Thinking Life-Stories: The POBA as Positive Care**

Even the *vexata quaestio* of the end of the analysis finds, in this approach, an unprecedented reformulation. Alleviating Freudian assumptions that see in a libidinal block dating back to some stage of the psychosexual child development the primary cause of neurosis, there is no longer any reason to believe that the end of the analysis must take place simultaneously with the renewed free flow of psychic energy, once the defences have been broken. If this were to be the case, it would be difficult to justify possible new analysis without having to blame the former for some failure. Then we proceed – upstream – to a qualitative rereading of the unconscious and the removed. The Freudian conception of the unconscious as a magmatic cauldron of chaotic instincts and uncontrolled drives is thus returned to its historically determined bias. In the light of current bioethological knowledge it is clear that, in reality, instincts are rigidly determined by our phylogenetic inheritance (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1989). The separation between actions and instincts has been progressively made possible thanks to the cerebral lateralisation and corticalisation, to the assumption of erect posture and the acquisition of panoramic sight, to

the development of language and the liberation of hands. All this, naturally, originates culture, reflected behaviour and the ability to imagine otherwise. Sharply Mådera observes how, therefore, the “perturbing” does not deal with the drives, but with the creative and producing possibility of alternatives which is, in fact, the second nature of the man.

“In other words: culture is what is properly perturbing.” (Mådera 2012, p. 145)

It is so disturbing that it must be disciplined and regulated in order to keep alive the creative process itself. Paying a price in terms of loss of imagination, neurosis and psychosis assume, at this point, the aspect of forms of defence from the source of human creativity, which is potentially also destructive. So the “positive care” proposed by the author will not consist in turning to the past, to search what has been removed, but in extending towards the future, freeing the creative imagination and remedying the mutilation inflicted to the life drive. The analytic work then becomes a four-handed version of new stories, new possibilities, new fantasies, new paths and new projects, drawing from the reservoir of the imaginative. Variations of the main version of the life story of the analysand, never definitive, but, as from Ericksonian lesson, always questionable, depending on the seasons of the existence itself.

The renewed philosophical practices and the biographical analysis (re)lead depth psychology to its first meaning of investigation into the human being in its most hidden dimensions and, in doing so, they innovate it, enriching it with new tools. Beyond and before the therapy there is a spiritual *paidéia* to be refounded for our time. Various disciplinary fields are called to collaborate in this enterprise and philosophy is the origin of all of these. We hope in a fertile epistemological contamination that already seems to be fruitfully underway (Daddi 2016).

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### Andrea Ignazio Daddi

## Obnovljene filozofijske prakse i filozofijski orijentirane biografske analize

### Jedan talijanski pristup obrazovanju i skrbi

#### **Sažetak**

*U radu se ocrtavaju glavne značajke biografske filozofije i uz nju vezane obnovljene filozofijske prakse, talijanskog mislioca Romana Màdera. Slijedeći privlačnost rada Pierrea Hadota, Màdera pokušava pronaći mogući put prilagodbe drevnog viđenja filozofije kao načina života za suvremenost, čak se vraćajući doprinosu psihoanalize i dubinske psihologije. Dio rada posvećen je predstavljanju posebnosti prakse filozofijski orijentirane biografske analize kakvu predlaže Màdera.*

#### **Ključne riječi**

biografska filozofija, obnovljene filozofijske prakse, filozofijski orijentirana biografska analiza, filozofija kao način života, Romano Màdera

### Andrea Ignazio Daddi

## Erneuerte philosophische Praxis und philosophisch orientierte biografische Analysen

### Ein italienischer Ansatz zur Bildung und Fürsorge

#### **Zusammenfassung**

*In der Arbeit werden die Hauptmerkmale der biografischen Philosophie und der mit ihr verquickten erneuerten philosophischen Praxis des italienischen Denkers Romano Màdera in Umrissen geschildert. Dem Reiz von Pierre Hadots Werk folgend versucht Màdera, einen möglichen Weg zu finden, die uralte Sichtweise der Philosophie als Lebensform auf die Moderne abzustimmen, und kehrt sogar zum Beistand der Psychoanalyse und Tiefenpsychologie zurück. Ein Teil des Papers widmet sich der Darstellung von den Besonderheiten der Praxis der philosophisch orientierten biografischen Analyse, wie sie von Màdera vorgeschlagen wurde.*

#### **Schlüsselwörter**

biografische Philosophie, erneuerte philosophische Praxis, philosophisch orientierte biografische Analyse, Philosophie als Lebensweise, Romano Màdera

**Andrea Ignazio Daddi**

**Pratiques philosophiques revisitées et  
analyses biographiques à orientation philosophique**

**Une approche italienne à l'éducation et aux soins**

**Résumé**

*Ce travail décrit les principales caractéristiques de la philosophie biographique et les pratiques philosophiques revisitées qui lui sont liées au penseur italien Romano Màdera. En se basant sur le travail attrayant de Pierre Hadot, Màdera s'applique à frayer un chemin possible qui vise à accorder la vision ancienne de la philosophie, en tant que mode de vie, à la modernité, en revenant également sur la contribution de la psychanalyse et de la psychologie des profondeurs. Une partie du travail est consacrée à présenter la spécificité de la pratique à orientation philosophique de l'analyse biographique telle que Màdera la conçoit.*

**Mots-clés**

philosophie biographique, pratiques philosophiques revisitées, analyse biographique à orientation philosophique, philosophie en tant que mode de vie, Romano Màdera