

CHAPTER NUMBER
PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELING AND
CONTRADICTIONS:
BUT YOU CAN'T ALLOW A
CONTRADICTION TO STAND! WHY
NOT?

ESTHER RAMHARTER
DONATA ROMIZI

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

Walt Whitman¹

Introduction

'*Odi et amo*' wrote the Latin poet Catullus² (1st century BC). He apparently felt love and hate at the same time for the same person (who he called Lesbia), and the poem highlights through pregnant brevity how a contradiction may be simply and immediately present in terms of feelings, while reason cannot account for it (*nescio, sed fieri sentio*: 'I have *no idea*).

I just *feel* it'³). 'You wonder, perhaps, why I'd do that?' the poet asks, imagining that his interlocutor would wonder about the contradiction. But would we really wonder how the poet feels? Are contradictory feelings really all that surprising? Not particularly. Nearly everybody has this experience, and one probably would not insist that feelings should be non-contradictory. Contradictions between (or among) feelings (C1) are not the main topic of this paper anyway.

A further kind of contradiction that is widely experienced is the one between our will or values and our behaviour (C2): 'I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do', as is expressed perfectly in the Bible (*Romans*, 7:15, New International Version)⁴. Note how even this description emphasizes the disorientation of reason ('I do *not understand*') with respect to the living experience of contradiction.

Finally, in her book entitled *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy*, Lydia Amir points to a similar, fundamental (existential) conflict experienced in human life — that is, (C3) 'the tension between one's desires and one's capacity for fulfilling them on the instinctual, emotional, and intellectual levels', or 'the [tragic] gulf between aspiration and achievement'⁵.

The present paper focuses on a different type of contradiction: that between opposite and coexistent beliefs (C4). Obviously, in concrete cases of Philosophical Counseling it may well be that contradictory beliefs have some relationship with contradictory feelings, incoherent behaviour, or tragic inner conflicts. Contradictory beliefs may be the root, or the symptom, of these latter forms of conflicts. To what extent and how (C1), (C2), (C3) and (C4) may relate to each other is an interesting question, which nevertheless cannot be given a general answer, and which we shall not deal with in this paper. Of course, depending on the answer to this question, what we shall say with respect to (C4) may be seen as more or less relevant also with respect to (C1), (C2) and (C3).

In the following, we will deal with the issue of contradictory beliefs, particularly with regard to Philosophical Counseling: both voices from the philosophical tradition (with no claim of being exhaustive!) and concepts developed by philosophical practitioners will be considered, in order to make clear what a wide range of resources for dealing with contradictions

is available to the philosopher who may wish to engage in Philosophical Counseling.

Among the philosophical practitioners, we devote special consideration to Ben Mijuskovic and Gerd Achenbach, and this for two main reasons: first, because the issue of contradiction plays a central role in their concept of Philosophical Counseling and, accordingly, it is given special consideration in their writings; second, because their approaches to Philosophical Counseling are so different that by looking at them one can get an impression of the variety of the positions one can adopt in Philosophical Counseling with respect to the issue of contradiction.

Preparation for the end, to begin with: Montaigne's contradictory beliefs about death

Let us now consider a concrete example of contradictory beliefs concerning a matter that is quite relevant for life and, therefore, for Philosophical Counseling: death, or rather, one's personal attitude toward one's own mortality.

In one of his beautiful essays,⁶ Michel de Montaigne recommends thinking of death, particularly our own death, again and again, in order to prepare us for it. Many people, he says, try to escape the fear of death by avoiding the thought, but this—he argues—is just stupid.⁷ We should instead

take a way quite contrary to the common course. Let us disarm him [i.e. death] of his novelty and strangeness, let us converse and be familiar with him, and have nothing so frequent in our thoughts as death. Upon all occasions represent him to our imagination in his every shape [...] (Montaigne, 1952: 30–31)

Here, Montaigne is perfectly in tune with the older stoic 'spiritual exercise'⁸ of preparation for death. Moreover, the aim of the exercise is not just (1) to be always prepared for death because it could happen at every moment. According to Montaigne, the contemplation of death also has (2) a more profound meaning for life and (3) a special relationship with philosophy. The contemplation of death has immediate consequences for one's way of living, since it provides the contemplator with a special kind of inner freedom:

The premeditation of death is the premeditation of liberty; he who has learned to die has unlearned to serve. There is nothing evil in life for him who rightly comprehends that the privation of life is no evil: to know how to die delivers us from all subjection and constraint. (Montaigne, 1952: 31)⁹

Finally, Montaigne points to a special relationship between the preparation for death and the activity of philosophizing: first, because philosophy, like death, elevates our soul beyond our body; second, because philosophy helps us to not fear death.¹⁰

In sum, in the essay we have referred to so far, Montaigne argues for the thesis according to which one should prepare oneself for death by thinking of it again and again. Moreover, he values philosophy because of its ‘affinity’ to this kind of contemplation.

Since these statements pertain to the realm of normativity and values, they have consequences for the conduct of life. For this reason, it is not just conceptually surprising, but even existentially confusing, to read entirely opposite considerations by Montaigne in another of his essays.¹¹ Here, he criticizes in an almost sarcastic way Seneca’s effort to cope with the stoic exercise of preparing for death,¹² and even disdains philosophy in favour of precisely those vulgar folk he had so vehemently criticized: *these common people* — Montaigne says now — are the ones who really know how to cope with death: for them, death is something usual and natural, and they do not give thought to it¹³. Due to their conformity to Nature, Montaigne argues, these ‘beasts’ can teach us ‘how to live and how to die’, while science and knowledge bring along only misleading sophistications.¹⁴ Consequently, Montaigne criticizes the exhortation, as formulated by Seneca and other philosophers, to prepare for death and he contrasts this exhortation with some quite pragmatic considerations. For instance:

If you know not how to die, never trouble yourself; nature will, at the time, fully and sufficiently instruct you: she will exactly do that business for you; take you no care — [...] If we have not known how to live, 'tis injustice to teach us how to die, and make the end differ from all the rest; if we have known how to live firmly and quietly, we shall know how to die so too. They may boast as much as they please: ‘Tota philosophorum vita commentatio mortis est’; [‘The whole life of philosophers is the meditation of death’ — Cicero, *Tusculanae Quaestiones*, ii. 30] but I fancy that, though it be the end, it is not the aim of life [...]. (Montaigne, 1952: 509–510)

The contradiction is evident: Montaigne ends up criticizing the same authors (Seneca and Cicero) whom he had quoted with approval in the essay we previously mentioned. More significantly, he appears to hold

contradictory beliefs: on the one hand, he believes that we should prepare for death by thinking often of it; on the other hand, he believes that we should not care about death while we are living.

How would (or should) a philosophical counselor deal with such contradictory beliefs, if Montaigne were a counselee and his contradiction were to emerge in the context of a consultation? Should Philosophical Practice, like traditional argumentative philosophy, aim at eliminating contradictory beliefs, e.g. by helping the counselee choose one of them and rejecting the opposite one?

Struggling with contradictions

Views of Philosophical Counseling inspired by analytical philosophy would doubtless conceive of contradictory beliefs as a problem that should be cleared away. Such a view is developed, for example, by Ben Mijuskovic in his article, ‘Some Reflections on Philosophical Counseling and Psychotherapy’ (Mijuskovic, 1995).

In this article, Mijuskovic illustrates — to put it in a Kantian fashion — the conditions of possibility for Philosophical Counseling, that is, a series of conditions which have to be fulfilled by Philosophical Counseling as such and which, therefore, catch its essence and distinguish it, for example, from a psychotherapeutic setting. These conditions, in turn, imply a certain *Menschenbild*: Mijuskovic’s starting point is the description of human beings as rational creatures holding a belief system that could even be defined as axiomatic. Each personal belief system is rooted in what Mijuskovic calls ‘fundamental assumptions’, or ‘first principles’. These are fundamental beliefs with the following characteristics:

(a) They refer to the ‘big questions’ about reality and/or human nature — that is, they correspond to the particular stance one takes with respect to general and fundamental dilemmas, like ‘determinism vs. freedom’, ‘relativistic vs. absolutistic conception of ethical principles’, ‘materialism vs. idealism’, etc.

(b) They have not been chosen by the person who holds them on the basis of rational grounds, but rather are ‘the result of passional decisions’ (here, Mijuskovic endorses a kind of voluntarism).

(c) They are akin to the first principles of an axiomatic system. All other beliefs derive from them, which means that all other beliefs of the person can be traced back to these fundamental ones.¹⁵

On the basis of this *Menschenbild*, Mijuskovic conceives of Philosophical Counseling as a dialogical work on the belief system of the counselee—that is, as a dialogue having a cognitive rather than an emotional nature: ‘What makes a treatment philosophical rather than psychological is that its focus revolves around the individual’s first principles rather than centering on the subject’s emotional distress’ (Mijuskovic 1995: 94).

As already mentioned, according to Mijuskovic, Philosophical Counseling has to fulfil a set of conditions in order to be considered a genuine philosophical dialogue. These conditions are the following¹⁶:

(1) ‘Recognizing that the choice of the first principles derives from the agents’, and that it is not, for example, the result of unconscious and uncontrollable forces.¹⁷

(2) ‘That the ensuing system developed from these first principles must adhere to the laws of *consistency and non-contradiction*’ (Mijuskovic 1995: 88, our emphasis)

(3) ‘That both the principles and system are intersubjectively communicable and shareable, rather than being personal and uniquely private’¹⁸.

(4) ‘That they are open to questioning, challenges, attack, or criticism’.¹⁹

Mijuskovic’s conception of Philosophical Counseling, as defined by these assumptions, is rooted in that particular, longstanding philosophical tradition which aims at transcending subjective emotions and opinions, and at reaching an inter-subjectively valid dimension of universality and necessity.²⁰ In light of such a tradition, philosophy is a rational endeavour pursued by rational human beings mainly through argumentative dialogue. Such a dialogue aims at inter-subjectively valid truths and is ruled by inter-subjectively valid norms (logical laws). Correspondingly, Mijuskovic acknowledges Philosophical Counseling to be a dialogue with a normative character, in which the counselee’s belief system is subjected to conceptual examination (and, if necessary, criticism), with a particular focus on its logical consistency: ‘the criterion of validity in philosophic counseling’ Mijuskovic argues, ‘remains an ideal of consistency and intersubjective communicability’ (Mijuskovic, 1995: 99).²¹

Mijuskovic is not the only philosophical counselor to follow this ideal; so does, for example, Oscar Brenifier.²² This model of Philosophical Counseling has some virtues. In particular, it defines clearly the range of action of philosophy, provides us with a clear-cut differentiation of Philosophical Counseling from psychotherapies, excludes (or aims to exclude) any influence of the counselor on the counselee other than an influence through argumentation (and, thus, through the rational and autonomous consensus of the counselee). Mijuskovic's model also holds some advantages for the counselor. In fact, she does not need to get emotionally involved and is provided with quite a clear methodology that promises to be efficient and helpful²³: The counselor may ask the counselee some questions, until she finds a contradiction. Then, the counselee has to decide how to avoid the contradiction, and, at the end of this process, his state of mind should be better organized than before.

In fact, according to Mijuskovic, the final aim of Philosophical Counseling is the 'conceptual satisfaction' (Mijuskovic, 1995: 99, point 7) of the counselee.

Living with contradictions

At this point, a look at Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy suggests itself. Wittgenstein, who can be seen both as a part and as an opponent of the tradition that Mijuskovic represents, shares with Mijuskovic a positive valuation of conceptual satisfaction: 'Thoughts at peace. That's what someone who philosophizes yearns for' (Wittgenstein, 1984: 43e). But is consistency necessary for this peace? Wittgenstein's answer differentiates:

(i) Not always is it necessary to avoid every contradiction. Although — or rather because — Wittgenstein utters the following remarks with respect to mathematics, they are also relevant for Philosophical Practice.

But you can't allow a contradiction to stand!—Why not? We do sometimes use this form in our talk, of course not often—but one could imagine a technique of language in which it was a regular instrument. (Wittgenstein, 2001: 370)

For might we not possibly have wanted to produce a contradiction? Have said — with pride in a mathematical discovery: 'Look, this is how we produce a contradiction'? Might not e.g. a lot of people possibly have tried to produce a contradiction in the domain of logic [...]? These people would then [...] be glad to lead their lives in the neighbourhood of a contradiction. (Wittgenstein, 2001: 211)

Even in logic and mathematics, it does not go without saying that and why we have to avoid contradictions, and even in logic and mathematics there could be a contradiction between emotions and rationality, as in the example that we are asked to imagine by Wittgenstein. But Wittgenstein does not promote irrationality:

(ii) There *are* situations in which we do try to avoid a contradiction; these are the situations in which we would not know our way about otherwise.

Can we say: 'Contradiction is harmless if it can be sealed off'? But what prevents us from sealing it off? That we do not know our way about in the calculus. Then that is the harm. And this is what one means when one says: the contradiction indicates that there is something wrong about our calculus. It is merely the (local) symptom of a sickness of the whole body. But the body is only sick when we do not know our way about. [...] (Wittgenstein, 2001: 209)

A philosophical problem has the form: 'I don't know my way about'. (Wittgenstein, 1953: §123)

A contradiction bothers us if it disturbs our orientation in life, if it disarranges large parts of our thoughts, habits and attitudes. Not every contradiction is a philosophical problem; moreover, not every contradiction is a problem for Philosophical Counseling.

(iii) Anyway, the law of non-contradiction is in general not, as Mijuskovic seems to hold, something that offers quick help: Something very different is sometimes required in order to come out of an impasse.

A confession has to be a part of your new life. (Wittgenstein 1984: 18e)

Men have believed that they could make the rain; why should not a king be brought up in the belief that the world began with him? And if Moore and this king were to meet and discuss, could Moore really prove his belief to be the right one? I do not say that Moore could not convert the king to his view, but it would be a conversion of a special kind; the king would be brought to look at the world in a different way. (Wittgenstein 1969: § 92)

Confessions and conversions — think of Descartes or Rousseau, for example — have a longstanding tradition in philosophy. Although some of these conversions are described as happening all of a sudden, a closer look at the following development of the respective philosopher in many cases shows that the conversion actually takes some time. Achenbach points out that conversion can also be seen as a preliminary step for convincing someone. He refers here to Socrates converting his interlocutors by preparing 'their hearts' before coming up with arguments.²⁴

(iv) Moreover, the law of non-contradiction does not apply without restrictions. Wittgenstein strongly objects to Mijuskovic's condition (4). It is essential to our basic principles that they are not *in toto* open to criticism and doubts:

That is to say, the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn. (Wittgenstein, 1969: § 341)

The idealist's question would be something like: 'What right have I not to doubt the existence of my hands?' (And to that the answer can't be: I know that they exist.) But someone who asks such a question is overlooking the fact that a doubt about existence only works in a language-game. Hence, that we should first have to ask: what would such a doubt be like? And don't understand this straight off. (Wittgenstein 1969: § 24)

In sum, Wittgenstein warns us not to overestimate the universality of the law of non-contradiction. Indeed, there may be contexts that allow for contradictions to persist and for people who can live well with them.

Even Mijuskovic's aim of 'conceptual satisfaction', upon closer examination, makes room for both, feelings (satisfaction is a feeling rather than a belief) and subjectivity. What makes a particular counselee 'conceptually satisfied' could be unsatisfying for others, and vice versa. Let us go back to Montaigne. Clearly, he had quite a relaxed and liberal attitude with respect to contradictions. This attitude is embedded in a relativistic and sceptical conception of truth that leaves room for contingency, change and suspension of judgment and which is evident in even the title of his *Essays*:

I cannot fix my object; 'tis always tottering and reeling by a natural giddiness: I take it as it is at the instant I consider it; I do not paint its being, I paint its passage; not a passage from an age to another [...] but from day to day, from minute to minute. I must accommodate my history to the hour: I may presently change, not only by fortune, but also by intention [...] whether it be that I am then another self, or that I take subjects by other circumstances and considerations: so it is, that I may peradventure contradict myself, but [...] I never contradict the truth. Could my soul once take footing, I would not essay but resolve: but it is always learning and trial.²⁵

Montaigne would thus probably have no particular 'dissatisfaction' with respect to his contradictory beliefs about death; he would explain them away saying that he has just changed his mind,²⁶ or that he was considering things from different perspectives, or that he just does not really know how to deal with the perspective of death, and was only

‘essaying’ two possibilities. Should a counselor compel such an unsteady counselee to commit to a consistent position?

Such an endeavour could possibly be helpful in some cases, but Montaigne’s words — ‘I may peradventure contradict myself, but [...] I never contradict the truth’²⁷ — point to a concept of truth that does not imply formal consistency but rather may even result as incompatible with formal consistency, and which we may call ‘authenticity’. What if a counselee, compelled to the effort of reaching formal consistency, were to draw away from authenticity? What if logical consistency is reached at the price of emptying the beliefs of their real reference? What if consistency proves to be only an artificial arrangement that just embellishes the surface, while the underlying truth implies contradictions and confusion?

According to views like that of Mijuskovic, a contradiction actually does not exist as a ‘thing’ in its own; there are only contradictory propositions, and the reason why they contradict each other is that one is true and the other is false. The task, then, is to find the true proposition, and the law of non-contradiction is a reliable tool for Philosophical Counseling. But there may be other views, like Wittgenstein’s one, according to which contradiction ‘is something’: It can be the object of study or contemplation, feelings can be addressed to it, and, at least, we can have some sort of awareness of it as an ‘it’. From such a point of view, contradictions are not just a conceptual problem concerning propositions, but rather the manifestation of something real.

Cultivating contradictions

The idea that contradiction is an essential feature of reality, as well as the recognition that reality has a dynamic character (as pointed out by Montaigne), are at the bottom of Hegel’s concept of dialectics. It is not surprising, therefore, that these ideas also characterize the philosophical stance of Gerd Achenbach, since the German philosopher and official founder of Philosophical Practice has a philosophical background in Hegelian, and, more generally, in German idealist and romantic philosophy.

Achenbach’s concept of reason, to begin with, differs essentially from the concept of rationality. In Achenbach’s view, the Hegelian idea of

dialectics should persuade philosophical counselors to abandon the presumptuous will of eliminating everything unreasonable:

What Hegel thought as the concept of dialectic movement, opposes the presumptuousness of ignoring the ‘irrational’, as well as the decisiveness to bring it to terms [in German, literally: to bring it back to reason]. Philosophical Practice is the insolent demand on philosophy to maintain this insight.²⁸

Moreover, Achenbach does not conceive of reason as an antipole with respect to feelings or emotions, as his recurrent references both to Blaise Pascal’s *raison du coeur* and to Hegel’s concept of a ‘thinking heart’ (*denkendes Herz*)²⁹ show.³⁰ Consequently, Achenbach sees Philosophical Counseling as an encounter between two human beings, neither of whom shuns emotional involvement: ‘One does not understand the other only through sentences — rather, one understands a human being as a whole human being’³¹.

In the context of such an encounter, the dialogue does not primarily focus on the examination of beliefs and the testing of arguments³². The dialogue instead consists primarily in the narration of longer and shorter stories³³, in the joint meditation of life experiences, in the consideration and discussion of examples, and — if it comes to a counsel at all—it would be in Walter Benjamin’s sense of *Rat*: ‘[...] counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding’ (Benjamin, 1999: 86).

In this framework, it is not surprising that the normative dimension typical of argumentative philosophy and possibly entailed in Philosophical Counseling becomes more soft, gentle, and complex. A philosophical counselor, according to Achenbach’s concept, would not demand from the counselee that he expresses and justifies his beliefs in a way that must fulfil the criteria of inter-subjectivity, consistency and universality. On the contrary, in Achenbach’s view, the counselor has to meet the challenge of understanding the counselee in his uniqueness and individuality. The individuality of the counselor also plays a major role in Achenbach’s concept of Philosophical Practice, for both philosophy and Philosophical Practice are said by him to exist concretely only in the shape of the individual philosopher herself: ‘The concrete form of philosophy is the philosopher: and he, the philosopher as an institution in a case, is the Ph.P.’³⁴ In sum, ‘The centre of Philosophical Practice [...] are two “beings” [...], two individuals, who are not variations or modifications of a universal, normatively conceived being called human being’.³⁵

Achenbach's scepticism towards arguments and his exaltation of individuality (probably also related to his fondness for Romanticism) do not imply that no criticism should be allowed in Philosophical Counseling³⁶. On the contrary, Achenbach sympathizes with Adorno's and Habermas' idea, according to which philosophy is nowadays possible only as critique, and argues:

Rather than deeming itself capable of giving requested answers and conducting itself as if it continued to be certain of the absolute and as the representative of the unconditionally valid, [...] philosophy remains conceivable and at the same time necessary only as critique. As critique, however, that does not simply affirm itself as the 'fury of disappearance' (Hegel) [...].³⁷

This conception of philosophy moves away from that tradition which we recalled above in commenting on Mijuskovic's position, insofar as it renounces orienting itself towards the ideal standard of an absolute and universal validity of truths and norms. Instead of a criticism that relies on universal standards of logical consistency, Achenbach seeks a 'wholesome' (*heilsam*) critique³⁸— that is, 'a naming of the false, which does not paralyse, but strengthens confidence, which does not make discouraged, but courage'.³⁹

Note that in addressing the issue of criticism, we have already returned to the topic of contradiction; for what else is a criticism other than a contradiction (*contra dire*) generated by the critic with the expectation that his interlocutor would abandon his own thesis in favour of the new antithesis?

But, again, does criticism have to assume the form of an *aut-aut*? Should the counselor bring the counselee to abandon his belief, once the criticism has shown it to be unsound? In referring to a passage by Blaise Pascal,⁴⁰ Achenbach shows rather an affinity with Montaigne's kind of perspectivism:

When we wish to correct with advantage and to show another that he errs, we must notice from what side he views the matter, for on that side it is usually true, and admit that truth to him, but reveal to him the side on which it is false. He is satisfied with that, for he sees that he was not mistaken, and that he only failed to see all sides.⁴¹

This kind of critique not only acknowledges to the counselee the recognition he deserves, but — in contrast to the static character of logic — it sets the thoughts in motion. While the 'logical treatment' of

contradiction brings the thought process quickly to an end by the endorsement of one alternative and the rejection of the opposite one, the dialectical way of dealing with contradictions utilizes them as resources to help the counselee out of the perspective in which he is stuck, and, moreover, opens the way to an appreciation of the complex character of reality.

An instance of this dialectical process is found in Chapter 2 of Achenbach's *Vom Richtigen im Falschen*, entitled 'On living with contradictions'.⁴² This chapter is devoted to the narration of one of Achenbach's experiences as a counselor. We shall reconstruct it here in a brief and obviously incomplete way. A young man came to Achenbach and told him about the many investigations he had been pursuing for many years in order to find the truth about religion and to understand if he could be a believer. In the course of his investigations, he was confronted with so many contradictory positions, so many absurd ideas, so many people telling lies and doing horrible things that he was now in a state of terrible confusion and disorientation. Achenbach's approach to this case may be summarized in the following steps: (1) ironic radicalization: 'why seeing contradictions, lies and misdeeds only in the field of religion? They are to be found in every field of human life!'⁴³; (2) antithesis/negation: '...but there are also good people, like Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa, or even uncle XXX. Everywhere there are not only bad people and deeds, but also good people and deeds'. At this point, Achenbach raises the crucial question (3): 'Should we say, therefore, that there are good people and deeds, on the one hand, and bad people and deeds, on the other — and that the world is composed of good and bad, true and false things?' The young man agrees: Probably, he would endorse the principle of non-contradiction and think that something good cannot, at the same time, be bad, and vice versa. But Achenbach claims, 'No, it is not so', and opens (4) a dialectical perspective through a long series of examples of things and deeds being good and bad at the same time. Thus, we can very well say, for example, that the invention of cars has been a good thing (cars are useful) and that it has been a bad thing (see the statistics of deaths because of car accidents): The invention of cars has been both, a good and a bad thing, even if the two beliefs formally contradict each other.

Achenbach, one could say, reacted to the counselee's confusion by showing him that, in a sense, he was not confused enough. We would not call this 'solving a problem', but the new sense of dynamical complexity evidently awoke in the young man a lively interest in new questions (e.g.

‘Is there anyone being *that* bad, that she may not be forgiven in any case?’) and in this way helped him out of his impasse.

Concluding remarks

The question about how to deal with contradictory beliefs emerging in the context of Philosophical Counseling does not admit a standard, universal answer: One may want to struggle with contradictions in order to solve them, but one could also notice that the counselee is perfectly capable of living with them; one can even cultivate them, that is, make them fruitful and see them as a sign of the inexhaustible richness of life. The counselor will do well to adjust her reaction to the particular nature of the contradiction in question, to the context in which it is embedded, and, above all, to the particular counselee and his own way of looking at it and perceiving it. Therefore, it is all the more important to appreciate the wide range of different perspectives on contradiction offered by the philosophical tradition.

In this paper, we could not offer a complete review of all philosophical positions concerning the issue of contradiction — neither all those endorsed by philosophical counselors, nor all those developed by the ‘traditional philosophers’. We focused on Ben Mijuskovic and Gerd Achenbach as representatives of quite opposite conceptions among the practitioners, while, with respect to the ‘traditional philosophers’, we devoted special attention to Montaigne and Wittgenstein, and only briefly mentioned some others, like Hegel or Pascal. But the list of philosophers that we could have considered is unlimited. Faced with the counselee’s contradictory beliefs, the philosophical counselor could think of Heraclitus and suspect the contradiction to be only apparent, while dissolving at a more profound level of reality. From the sceptics, the counselor may hear that for every opinion there is always an opposite and equally plausible one, and learn to be careful and suspend judgment. Aristotle could suggest not trying to solve the contradiction by seeking a general truth in matters of life, but rather by looking at the concrete special case. A utilitarian perspective could possibly allow the counselee to solve the contradiction by talking himself into whatever is better for him. And so on.

One could suppose *prima facie* that the counselor is on safe ground if the counselee contradicts himself, because then the counselor knows what to do: Ask the client to resolve the contradiction by deciding for one option

and dropping the other. The law of contradiction is a useful tool for philosophical practice, indeed. Nevertheless, as we hope to have shown, a closer look at the philosophical tradition, as well as at different conceptions of Philosophical Counseling, offers a great variety of possible attitudes towards contradictory beliefs, so that the counselor herself has to assume the responsibility of deciding, in each concrete situation, how to deal with the counselee's (as well as with her own) contradictions.

References

- Achenbach, Gerd (2009). *Lebenskönnerschaft*. Köln: Dinter.
- Achenbach, Gerd (2010). *Zur Einführung der Philosophischen Praxis: Vorträge, Aufsätze, Gespräche und Essays, mit denen sich die Philosophische Praxis in den Jahren 1981 bis 2009 vorstellte*. Köln: Dinter.
- Achenbach, Gerd (2014). *Vom Richtigen im Falschen: Auf Wegen philosophisch inspirierter Lebenskönnerschaft*. Köln: Dinter.
- Amir, Lydia (2014). *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy: Shaftesbury, Hamann, Kierkegaard*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Bakewell, Sarah (2010). *How to Live, or a Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Benjamin, Walter (1999). *Illuminations*. London: Pimlico.
- Berra, Lodovico (2012). 'L'identità del Counseling Filosofico: rapporti con la consulenza filosofica e la professione di psicologo'. *Rivista Italiana di Counseling Filosofico* 8: 34–40.
- Catullus (2005). *The Poems of Catullus: A Bilingual Edition*. Translated by Peter Green. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Feyerabend, Paul (2002). *Against Method*. London and New York: Verso.
- Hadot, Pierre (1995). *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (1894). *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind: Being Part Three of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*. Translated by William Wallace. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Mijuskovic, Ben (1995). 'Some Reflections on Philosophical Counseling and Psychotherapy'. In *Essays on Philosophical Counseling*, edited by R. Lahav and M. Da Venza Tillmanns, 90–100. Lanham: University Press of America.

- Marquard, Odo (1989). 'Praxis, Philosophische'. In *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Vol. 7. Basel: Verlag Schwabe.
- Montaigne, Michel (1952). *The Essays*. Edited by W. Carew Hazlitt. Translated by Charles Cotton. Chicago, IL: Encyclopaedia Britannica.
- Pascal, Blaise (1952). *The Provincial Letters. Pensées. Scientific Treatises*. Translated by W. F. Trotter. Chicago, IL: Encyclopaedia Britannica.
- Popper, Karl R. (1972). *Objective Knowledge. An Evolutionary Approach*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Reeves, Julie (2002). *Writing Alone, Writing Together: A Guide for Writers and Writing Groups*. Novato, CA: New World Library.
- Rousseau, Jean Jacques (1796). *The Confessions of J.J. Rousseau, Citizen of Geneva: Part the First. To which Are Added, The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, Vol. 1. London: G. G. and J. Robinson.
- Steinbeck, John (1993). *The Grapes of Wrath*. New York and Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Tarca, Lucio Vero (2003). 'Filosofia ed esistenza oggi. La pratica filosofica tra episteme e sophia'. In *La filosofia come stile di vita. Introduzione alle pratiche filosofiche*, edited by R. Mâdera and L.V. Tarca, 111–120. Milano: Mondadori.
- Whitman, Walt (1965). *Leaves of Grass*. New York: New York University Press.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1953). *Philosophical Investigations*. Edited by G.E.M. Anscombe, Rush Rhees. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1969). *On Certainty*. Edited by Georg H. von Wright, Rush Rhees, R., G. E. M. Anscombe. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1984). *Culture and Value*. Edited by Georg H. von Wright. Translated by Peter Winch. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig (2001). *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. Edited by Georg H. von Wright, Rush Rhees, G. E. M. Anscombe. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell.

¹ *Song of Myself*, Part 51, v. 1324–1326, in Whitman, 1965: 88.

² ‘Odi et amo. quare id faciam, fortasse requiris? / nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior’ (‘I hate and I love. You wonder, perhaps, why I’d do that? / I have no idea. I just feel it. I am crucified’). Catullus, 2005: 190–191.

³ Catullus, 2005: 191; our emphasis.

⁴ Another wonderful description of this kind of inner conflict is available in Chapter 4 of John Steinbeck’s masterpiece *The Grapes of Wrath*, where the preacher tells Joad about his own experience of being unable to avoid acting against his own faith and principles. See Steinbeck 1993: 23–28.

⁵ Amir, 2014: 219–20. Amir emphasizes how humor is a key feature that makes us humans capable of living with such unresolved conflicts without turning to forced solutions.

⁶ Montaigne, 1952, Book I, Ch. XIX, ‘That to study philosophy is to learn to die’.

⁷ ‘The end of our race is death; ’tis the necessary object of our aim, which, if it fright us, how is it possible to advance a step without a fit of ague? The remedy the vulgar use is not to think on’t; but from what brutish stupidity can they derive so gross a blindness?’ (Montaigne, 1952: 29). See also Montaigne’s critical description of the ‘vulgar use’: ‘They go, they come, they gallop and dance, and not a word of death. All this is very fine; but withal, when it comes either to themselves, their wives, their children, or friends, surprising them at unawares and unprepared, then, what torment, what outcries, what madness and despair!’ (Montaigne 1952: 30).

⁸ See Hadot, 1995.

⁹ Admittedly, this profound passage would deserve a further analysis, which, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁰ ‘Cicero says — [Tusc., i. 31.] — “that to study philosophy is nothing but to prepare one’s self to die”. The reason of which is, because study and contemplation do in some sort withdraw from us our soul, and employ it separately from the body, which is a kind of apprenticeship and a resemblance of death; or, else, because all the wisdom and reasoning in the world do in the end conclude in this point, to teach us not to fear to die’ (Montaigne, 1952: 28).

¹¹ Montaigne, 1952, Book III, Ch. XII, ‘Of physiognomy’.

¹² ‘To see the trouble that Seneca gives himself to fortify himself against death; to see him so sweat and pant to harden and encourage himself, and bustle so long upon this perch, would have lessened his reputation with me’ (Montaigne, 1952: 504).

¹³ See Montaigne, 1952: 504: ‘To what end we so arm ourselves with this harness of science? Let us look down upon the poor people [...]’, or 510: ‘I never saw any peasant among my neighbours cogitate with what countenance and assurance he should pass over his last hour; nature teaches him not to think of death till he is dying; and then he does it with a better grace than Aristotle [...]’.

¹⁴ See Montaigne, 1952: 509.

¹⁵ ‘[...] these ultimate beliefs, or first principles, are the result of individual passional decisions. In my view, philosophical Counseling itself is based upon this

unargued premise, this basic presupposition, namely, that each of us “wills”, or “chooses” or “opts” for a certain starting point, principle, or basic assumption, which then serves as the philosophical ground for the rest of our belief system. The choice, or decision, between mutually exclusive first principles, which deals with reality and/or human nature, *always* presents itself as an option between at least two (but sometimes more) opposing candidates’ (Mijuskovic, 1995: 87).

¹⁶ See Mijuskovic, 1995: 88–90.

¹⁷ Here, Mijuskovic wants to contrast philosophy with psychotherapies, but one may object that according to his view the agent chooses his first principles through ‘passional decisions’, and passions could also be seen as uncontrollable forces.

¹⁸ See Mijuskovic, 1995: 85: ‘[...] at the clinic where I work, I conduct a weekly men’s group [...]. The main focus and pivotal center of the discussion is always the universal features of loneliness and intimacy. In this sense, I consider the group to be engaged in philosophical Counseling than psychotherapy’.

¹⁹ Again, Mijuskovic’s intent is to distinguish Philosophical Counseling from psychotherapy: according to him, in a psychotherapeutic setting, ‘[...] the patient would be distressed to have his or her thoughts and feelings systematically challenged and criticized precisely because these views are not intended to be universal truths but rather personal impressions’ (Mijuskovic, 1995: 89).

²⁰ On the relationship between this tradition and Philosophical Practice see also Tarca, 2003.

²¹ If we assume that contradictory propositions are less, or even not, understandable for subjects other than the one who formulates them, then it becomes evident that there is a strong relationship between the criterion of consistency and the one of inter-subjectivity.

²² See the videos of his philosophical consultations on the following website (retrieved: November 4, 2014):

<http://www.pratiques-philosophiques.fr/videos/consultations/?lang=en>

²³ This is an advantage only insofar as one endorses a conception of Philosophical Counseling as something which should, at the end of the day, solve problems or, more generally, help the counselee in some respect. This is not obvious: Achenbach, for example, would not endorse such a conception, and in Italy a distinction has been made between ‘Counseling filosofico’, which aims at solving the counselee’s problems, and ‘consulenza filosofica’, which is not committed to this aim (see Berra, 2012).

²⁴ Achenbach, 2010: 112.

²⁵ Montaigne, 1952: 388. See also Montaigne, 1952: 447: ‘The contradictions of judgments [...] neither offend nor alter, they only rouse and exercise, me [...] When any one contradicts me, he raises my attention, not my anger. [...] [M]y imagination so often contradicts and condemns itself, that ‘tis all one to me if another do it [...]’. Note how Montaigne here is open to criticism (Mijuskovic’s fourth criterion) precisely because he does *not* see contradictions as a problem.

²⁶ It seems that Montaigne radically changed his mind (and his heart) about how to deal with death, as a consequence of a riding accident (see Bakewell, 2010, Ch. 1). However, he never corrected his *Essays* correspondingly, as he would have done

had he believed that he had now finally discovered *the* right way of dealing with mortality. He let the contradictory opinions about how to deal with mortality stay, even if he otherwise kept revising his *Essays* till his death.

²⁷ See also Montaigne, 1952: 389, where Montaigne declares that there is still something that cannot be the case in his work, something, he says, ‘which I often see elsewhere, that the work and the artificer contradict one another’.

²⁸ Achenbach, 2010: 58 (‘Was Hegel als Begriff der dialektischen Bewegung dachte, opponiert der Überheblichkeit, das “Unvernünftige” zu ignorieren, ebenso wie die Entschlossenheit, es “zur Vernunft zu bringen”. Philosophische Praxis ist die Zumutung an Philosophie, diese Einsicht zu bewähren’). Since there is no official English translation of the texts by Achenbach that we are quoting in this paper, we have translated the quotations ourselves. However, for the purpose of transparency and precision, we also report the original German version.

²⁹ An instance of Hegel’s integrative conception of mind and feelings is to be found in his *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (see Hegel, 1894: 93), in which he speaks of ‘truth’ as ‘the rationality of the heart’.

³⁰ See, for example, Achenbach, 2009: 153.

³¹ Achenbach, 2010: 98 (‘Man versteht den andern nicht allein mit Sätzen — sondern mit sich selbst, den Menschen durch den Menschen.’). Achenbach also refers to Rousseau’s passage from the *Confessions* (Book II), in which the French philosopher admonishes: ‘it is ever a bad method to attempt to read the hearts of others by endeavoring to conceal our own’ (Rousseau, 1796: 150)

³² Achenbach likes to quote Feyerabend’s rhetorical question: ‘What is the use of an argument that leaves people unmoved?’ (Feyerabend, 2002: 16).

³³ See Achenbach, 2010: 385–387, where Achenbach illustrates his conception of Philosophical Counseling by referring to the figure of Scheherazade, the storyteller from *One Thousand and One Nights*.

³⁴ Achenbach, quoted in Marquard, 1989: 1307 (‘Die konkrete Gestalt der Philosophie ist der Philosoph: und er, der Philosoph als Institution in einem Fall, ist die Ph.P.’).

³⁵ Achenbach, 2010: 92 (‘Die Mitte der Philosophischen Praxis [...] sind zwei “Wesen” [...], zwei Individuen, die nicht etwa Varianten oder Modifikationen eines allgemeinen, verbindlich gedachten Wesens Mensch sind’).

³⁶ For instance, Achenbach refers to Popper, according to whom it is ‘necessary to try to improve our philosophies by criticism. This is the only apology for the continuing existence of philosophy which I am able to offer’ (Popper 1972: 33; Achenbach, 2010: 16).

³⁷ Achenbach, 2010: 52–53 (‘Statt sich erfragter Antworten mächtig zu dünken und aufzutreten, als sei sie weiter des Absoluten gewiß und Repräsentantin des unbedingt Gültigen [...], ist Philosophie denkbar und nötig zugleich nur mehr als Kritik. Als Kritik nun allerdings, die sich nicht als “Furie des Verschwindens” (Hegel) nur noch selber affirmierte [...]’).

³⁸ With respect to the difference between ‘criticism’ and ‘critique’ it is interesting to consider the following criteria, proposed by the writer Julie Reeves: [1] ‘Criticism finds fault/Critique looks at structure.’ [2] ‘Criticism looks for what’s

lacking/Critique finds what's working.' [3] 'Criticism condemns what it doesn't understand/Critique asks for clarification.' [4] 'Criticism is negative/Critique is positive (even about what isn't working).' [5] 'Criticism is vague and general/Critique is concrete and specific.' [6] 'Criticism has no sense of humor/Critique insists on laughter, too.' Reeves, 2002: 65.

³⁹ Achenbach, 2010: 109 ('[...] eine Nennung des Falschen, die nicht lähmt, sondern Zuversicht bestärkt, die nicht mutlos, sondern Mut macht').

⁴⁰ See Achenbach, 2010: 100.

⁴¹ Pascal, 1952: 173 (*Pensées*, Section I, n. 9).

⁴² Achenbach, 2014, Ch. 2: 'Vom Leben in Widersprüchen'.

⁴³ Please note that this direct speech and the following ones are not direct quotations from Achenbach's book.