Philosophy and Narrative as Social Practice and Care

Irene Monge

Department of Cultures and Civilizations, University of Verona; Filosofia della narrazione, Italy

irene.monge@univr.it

Abstract

This paper explores the profound synergy between ancient philosophical practices and the power of narrative as a framework for personal and social transformation. By examining the Socratic method of maieutics - a form of questioning that guides individuals through the discomfort of uncertainty to new insights - we argue that intellectual and emotional growth is a co-created process, not a solitary one. The article highlights how this dialogical approach fosters a collaborative construction of meaning, promoting empathy and understanding over conflict. Furthermore, we analyze the therapeutic and ethical potential of narration, demonstrating how myths and allegories offer a unique and complementary access to reality, speaking to universal human truths on an intuitive and emotional level. We connect these concepts to Foucault's interpretation of *épiméleia heautoû* (the care of the self), arguing that this self-reflective practice is not a withdrawal from the world but a necessary foundation for ethical, responsible, and socially engaged existence. Ultimately, this work posits that the integration of philosophical inquiry and storytelling offers a powerful pathway for navigating the complexities of human experience, fostering a resilient sense of self, and building deeper connections with others.

Keywords: philosophical practice; narrative philosophy; philosophy of narration; social care

Introduction

Words are fundamental to human existence, facilitating self-definition, recognition of others, and the expression of emotions. They enable the articulation of experiences, fostering self-awareness and authentic listening. This paper explores the profound connection between language, self-discovery, and philosophical inquiry, particularly through the lens of Socratic dialogue and the power of narrative, including myth. We argue that the maieutic approach of questioning, combined with the inherent therapeutic nature of storytelling, provides a robust framework for personal transformation and the co-creation of meaning. This essay delves into how these ancient philosophical practices offer contemporary relevance for understanding and addressing individual and collective human experiences, promoting self-care and fostering shared truth.

Methods

This analysis employs a conceptual and interpretive approach, drawing primarily from classical philosophical texts, particularly those of Plato and the Socratic tradition, alongside contemporary interpretations of narrative and therapeutic practices. Our primary methods involve philosophical exegesis, which entails a close reading and interpretation of key Socratic and Platonic concepts like maieutics, the Delphic oracle's *know thyself*, and *mythos* (mythology) in relation to *logos* (reason). We then establish conceptual linkages by connecting these philosophical ideas to the broader human experience of language, emotion, identity, and shared understanding. Narrative analysis is also central, as we examine the role of storytelling, particularly through Plato's Allegory of the Cave, as a vehicle for self-reflection, emotional engagement, and exploring universal questions of meaning. Finally, we discuss the practical implications of these philosophical and narrative

approaches for personal growth, therapeutic processes, and social interaction, including the concept of self-care (*épiméleia heautoû*) as articulated by figures like Foucault.

The Socratic Method and the Discomfort of Uncertainty

The Socratic method is fundamentally a process of dismantling previously held certainties. It works by guiding the individual through a series of questions that reveal inconsistencies, contradictions, and gaps in their current understanding. This process naturally leads to a state of intellectual and emotional discomfort, as it challenges the cognitive frameworks upon which a person's beliefs, identity, and sense of reality are built (Hadot, 1995). This discomfort is not a flaw; it is the method's primary mechanism. It forces the individual to confront their intellectual blind spots and the limitations of their knowledge, which can manifest as cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). A key element of this process is the *aporistic state* – a state of perplexity where multiple valid perspectives coexist (Plato, 1997, 150c-d). Rather than a failure of the dialogue, this state is a sign of its success. It is a fundamental truth that the Socratic method is not just about finding answers; it is about learning how to live well with questions. The ability to tolerate and even appreciate the *aporistic state* is a mark of true intellectual and emotional maturity.

Dialogue as the Co-creation of Meaning

While Socratic questioning is often perceived as an individual's journey of self-discovery, it is fundamentally a dialogical process. The interaction between the questioner and the respondent is not a simple transfer of information; it is a shared, collaborative act of meaning-making (Bakhtin, 1981). This dynamic, often described as a "friendly but real struggle", transforms the dialogue into a shared space where reality is negotiated and co-created (Plato, 1997, 187a-e). The insights gained are not merely pulled from the respondent's mind but are born from the interaction itself. The questioner, by posing the right questions, acts as a midwife, helping to bring forth ideas that the respondent was unable to articulate alone (Plato, 1997, 150c-d).

The Therapeutic Power of Myth

The exploration of Plato's Cave in a workshop setting serves as a case study to illustrate how these theoretical concepts can be practically applied to elicit personal reflection and foster dialogue on shared human dilemmas. Myths, with their symbolic and archetypal nature, offer a different and complementary access to reality compared to personal or fact-based narratives. While a personal story provides a specific account of an individual's experience, a myth operates on a universal, timeless plane. Its power lies in its ability to bypass the rational mind and speak directly to our collective unconscious (Jung, 1968). This atemporality and universality make myths exceptionally effective in reaching deeper truths about the human condition. They are not about what happened to one person but about what it means to be human (Campbell, 1949). This symbolic language allows us to engage with complex themes like love, death, betrayal, and purpose on an intuitive and emotional level, fostering an intuitive and emotional engagement that a mere factual account cannot replicate.

According to the philosopher Enrico Berti, in fact, Plato would resort to myths in different situations and modalities, but always with a common purpose: myth allows to illustrate contents that could be incomprehensible to most, to make them more easily understandable and above all to express oneself in a more effective way. We can therefore say that in Plato's philosophical system, the ability of images and narratives to expose a state of affairs in a comprehensive and intuitive

way, acts as an irreplaceable counterpoint to conceptual analysis. Myth appears as a second way of accessing reality which, although it cannot do without logos as far as content is concerned, nevertheless presents a plus compared to it that cannot be replaced in any other way (Berti, 2022).

The Social Dimension of Self-Care

The practice of self-reflection and emotional management, cultivated through methods like maieutics and narrative, is not a solitary pursuit. It fundamentally transforms our social interactions. When we engage in deep self-awareness, we develop a benevolent self-confutation - the ability to recognize and challenge our own assumptions and biases without judgment (Nussbaum, 1994). This internal practice of questioning our own certainties naturally extends outward. Instead of seeing a difference of opinion as a personal attack, we can approach it with curiosity, seeking to understand the other person's perspective. This allows for a collaborative construction of meaning rather than a conflict. By managing our own emotions, we can stay present in the conversation and genuinely listen. We learn that dialogue is not a battle to be won but a shared process of discovery.

The Philosophy of Narration

Central to this approach is the philosophy of narration, which explores how stories serve as fundamental tools for human existence (Ricoeur, 1984). At its heart, this philosophy posits that stories define us, reveal truth, and foster connection. They are the framework through which we make sense of our experiences, convey universal truths, and build empathy. Furthermore, stories enable self-discovery and transformation, as the act of narrating one's experiences can be a therapeutic process (Bruner, 1986). Ultimately, the philosophy of narration contends that stories are a way of life: an ongoing, dynamic process of interpreting and shaping our understanding of the world. We approach stories not just as entertainment, but as the very fabric of how we experience, interpret, and navigate our lives.

Epiméleia Heautoû: A Social Practice

Ultimately, the intertwining of philosophy and narration, as *mythos* and *logos*, provides a complementary way of accessing reality. This approach, which emphasizes self-care (*epiméleia heautoû*), transcends individual introspection to become a true social practice. Based on Foucault's work, this ancient Greek practice is a vital and transformative social tool.

1. **Self-Governance as a Prerequisite for Governing Others:** Foucault links the practice of *épiméleia heautoû* to the classical Greek ideal of a virtuous citizen. For an individual to rightfully and ethically govern their household or participate in political life, they must first demonstrate their ability to govern themselves. This self-mastery is the foundation for responsible and just social engagement (Foucault, 1988).
2. **Truth-Telling (*Parrhesia*) as a Social Practice:** A central element of self-care is the practice of *parrhesia*, or truthful, candid speech. This act requires the courage to speak honestly and the ethical integrity to listen to the truth about oneself (Foucault, 2001). This practice is inherently social, as it is always exercised in relation to others, transforming self-reflection into a co-creation of ethical truth.
3. **The Creation of an Ethical-Aesthetic Self:** Foucault also highlights how *épiméleia heautoû* is about crafting a life as a work of art. An individual's way of life and their disciplined habits become a public testament to their ethical convictions (Foucault, 1984).

> This self-creation serves as a point of reference and a form of social critique, showing that it is possible to live a different kind of life based on deliberate choice and self-mastery.

In essence, Foucault's care of the self is not a retreat from the world but a necessary preparation for engaging with it ethically and responsibly. This internal process is what makes us truly social beings, able to engage in *benevolent confutation* and collaborative construction of meaning, as it allows us to see others not as obstacles, but as partners in the shared project of living a good life.

Conclusion

The exploration of Socratic maieutics and the art of narration reveals a powerful synergy for human understanding and transformation. Words, far from being mere symbols, are the crucibles in which identity is forged, emotions are articulated, and shared realities are constructed. The Socratic method, characterized by questioning wonder, guides individuals through the discomfort of uncertainty to the genesis of new insights, cultivating a profound love of wisdom and patience. Similarly, narrative, particularly in its mythical form, serves as an invaluable tool for expressing meaning without rigidly defining it, resonating with universal human experiences. The maieutic question and the act of narration both address the fundamental human query, 'Who am I?', fostering self-recognition through the encounter with both internal dialogues and external stories. The *aporistic state*, where multiple valid answers coexist, encourages the acceptance of incompleteness and a pathos that embraces the full spectrum of emotional and experiential reality. This philosophical-narrative approach offers a therapeutic pathway that moves beyond symptom management, facilitating the healing of anxiety, transforming emotions, and cultivating a continuous art of living that allows individuals to navigate their inner and outer worlds with greater awareness and connection.

The therapeutic potential of this philosophical-narrative method lies in its ability to facilitate the healing of anxiety, transform emotions, and cultivate a continuous art of living that is practiced in every moment, allowing individuals to navigate the complexities of their inner and outer worlds with greater awareness and connection. This philosophical-narrative approach offers a powerful therapeutic pathway, moving beyond mere symptom management to address the root causes of psychological distress. Its core strength lies in its ability to facilitate profound healing by re-framing our relationship with our inner lives.

1. **Transforming Anxiety through Dialogue and Narrative:** Anxiety often arises from a perceived lack of control or an inability to make sense of uncertain situations. The philosophical-narrative method directly confronts this by reframing uncertainty not as a threat, but as an opportunity for discovery. By using maieutic questioning, an individual is guided to explore the origins of their anxiety - its triggers, its underlying assumptions, and the stories they tell themselves about it. Instead of trying to suppress the feeling, they learn to engage with it in a dialogue. Through this process, the vague, shapeless dread of anxiety is given a narrative structure. It becomes a character in one's life story, and by understanding its role, the individual can begin to write a new, more empowering chapter. This act of naming and understanding transforms anxiety from a tyrannical force into a manageable, even instructive, part of the human experience.

1. **Cultivating an Art of Living:** This method is not a one-time cure but a continuous practice - a genuine art of living. It encourages individuals to adopt a daily habit of self-reflection and emotional management. This practice is about cultivating a stance of attentive awareness toward one's thoughts and feelings in every moment. By learning to observe emotions without

immediate reaction, they can respond to situations more deliberately and less impulsively. This ongoing work, like an artist honing their craft, allows them to navigate the complexities of their inner and outer worlds with greater grace and resilience. It's the difference between being swept away by the currents of life and learning to sail with them. The self-awareness gained becomes a compass, helping the individual steer through life's challenges with intention and purpose.

1. **Fostering Deeper Connection:** The therapeutic benefits extend beyond the individual. As discussed previously, the internal practice of self-knowledge and benevolent confutation is the foundation for healthier social interactions. By understanding and managing our own emotions, we become more empathetic and less reactive in our relationships. The ability to engage in a genuine collaborative construction of meaning with others is a direct result of the work done on oneself. This creates a ripple effect: as individuals heal, their families, friendships, and communities are positively impacted. The method thus facilitates a deeper, more authentic connection not just to one's self but to others, transforming private healing into a social and relational good.

References

Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*. University of Texas Press.

Berti, E. (2022). *Invito alla filosofia*. Scholè Press.

Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Harvard University Press.

Campbell, J. (1949). *The hero with a thousand faces*. Princeton University Press.

Cavarero A. (2001). *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti. Filosofia della narrazione.* Feltrinelli.

Chirico G. (2019). *Mi racconti una storia? Perché narrare fiabe ai bambini*. Meltemi Editore & Harper Collins Press.

Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford University Press.

Foucault, M. (1984). *The history of sexuality*, *Vol. 2: The use of pleasure*. Vintage Books.

Foucault, M. (1988). *Technologies of the self*. University of Massachusetts Press.

Foucault, M. (2001). *Fearless speech*. Semiotext(e).

Hadot, P. (1995). *Philosophy as a way of life*. Blackwell Publishing.

Jung, C. G. (1968). *The archetypes and the collective unconscious*. Princeton University Press.

Napolitano Valditara L. M. (2010). *Il sé, l'altro, l'intero: rileggendo i Dialoghi di Platone*. Mimesis Edizioni.

Napolitano Valditara L. M. (2018). *Il dialogo socratico: fra tradizione storica e pratica filosofica per la cura di sé*. Mimesis Edizioni.

Nussbaum, M. C. (1994). *The therapy of desire: Theory and practice in hellenistic ethics*. Princeton University Press.

Plato (1997). Laches. In Cooper, J.M. (Ed.) *Plato: Complete works.* Hackett Publishing Company.

Plato (1997). Theaetetus. Cooper, J.M. (Ed.) *Plato: Complete works*. Hackett Publishing Company.

Ricoeur, P. (1984). *Time and Narrative (Volume 1)*. University of Chicago Press.