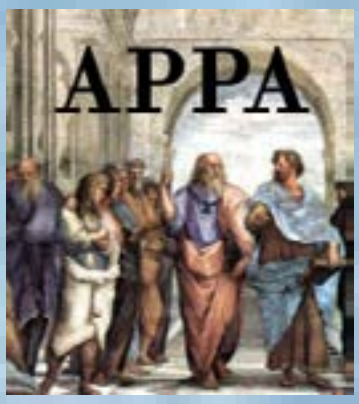


PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

Journal of the APPA

Volume 21 Number 2 July 2026

Editor
Lou Marinoff

Managing Editor
Rick Repetti

Reviews Editor
Leslie Miller

Associate Editor
Carol S. Gould

Associate Editor
Johnson Cheung

Technical Consultant
Greg Goode

Legal Consultant
Thomas Griffith

Editorial

Editorial Introduction
Rick Repetti

Articles

Chester H. Sunde
Hidden in Plain Sight: The Tetradic Psukhe in Plato's Politeia

Shanti Jones
The Moral Third: Love, Virtue, and the Ethics of the Between

Tatiana Martin
Self-Esteem and the Philosophical Life: Nietzsche, Kant, Stoicism, and Existentialism

Wang Zhiyuan
Nine Essential Practices for a Life Free from Disturbance: A Philosophical Perspective

Book Reviews

Philosophical Praxis: Origin, Relations, and Legacy
Reviewed by Leslie C. Miller

Uncanny Soulscapes in Uncustomary Dreamscope: Collected Philosophical Fragments
Reviewed by Patrizia F. Salvaterra

Biographies of Contributors

https://appa.edu
ISSN 1742-8181

Nemo Veritatem Regit
Nobody Governs Truth

The Moral Third: Love, Virtue, and the Ethics of the Between

Shanti Jones
Independent Scholar and Philosophical Counselor, Taos, New Mexico

Abstract

This article develops the Moral Third as a practical ethical framework for philosophical counseling. While Jessica Benjamin introduced the concept within psychoanalysis to describe mutual recognition, its philosophical implications remain underexplored. I argue that the Moral Third is best understood as an ethical orientation grounded in virtue rather than merely a relational achievement.

Drawing on Andrew Fitz-Gibbon's account of love as a disciplined moral practice, the Moral Third is enacted through shared commitments to virtues such as respect, humility, patience, and honesty. These function as lived constraints on self-assertion and moral absolutism, enabling a shared ethical space that neither party controls.

Philosophical counseling is thus redefined as an orientation toward a "third" moral horizon that structures inquiry, challenges solipsism, and supports meaning. The cultivation of this ethical space becomes central to fostering truth, recognition, and shared moral life.

Keywords: *moral third, intersubjectivity, phenomenology, love, virtue ethics, couple dynamics, dream analysis, relational psychoanalysis*

Introduction

The concept of the Moral Third, as articulated by Jessica Benjamin (2004, 2018), has become a central construct within relational psychoanalysis. It refers to a shared ethical space that transcends the dyadic oscillation between domination and submission and enables mutual recognition between subjects. Within this space, each partner is accountable not only to the other but to the relationship itself as a living, ethical reality.

Despite its conceptual importance, the Moral Third remains underdeveloped in its clinical articulation. While it names a crucial dimension of relational life, it does not always specify how this space is enacted, sustained, or restored when it collapses. Clinicians are left with a powerful concept that risks remaining abstract without a corresponding account of practice.

In this paper, I address that gap by proposing that the Moral Third may be more fully understood when conceptualized as love, not as an affective state, but as an ethical-relational practice. Drawing on Andrew Fitz-Gibbon's (2013) account of the virtues of *love*, this framework provides concrete guidance for how the Moral Third is lived in experience.

At the same time, the paper situates the Moral Third within a broader philosophical and phenomenological lineage. Specifically, it draws on Aristotle's account of virtue and the shared good, Martin

ISSN 17428181 online © 2026 APPA

Buber's conception of the relational "between," Donald Winnicott's notion of transitional space, Hans-Georg Gadamer's theory of the fusion of horizons, and Alasdair MacIntyre's account of practice and narrative identity. These perspectives are further grounded phenomenologically through Martin Heidegger's concept of being-with and Paul Ricoeur's account of narrative refiguration.

Taken together, these traditions converge on an insight: human relational life unfolds within a field of meaning that must be actively sustained. Relational breakdown, therefore, may be understood not simply as a failure of communication, but as a disturbance in this shared field.

While this paper focuses on the Moral Third as an ethical and intersubjective achievement, this perspective does not exclude love as an affective state. Romantic love may be understood as one expression arising within the broader field of thirdness, while the Moral Third provides the shared ethical orientation that sustains the relationship when emotional experience inevitably fluctuates.

The clinical case that follows illustrates how the Moral Third, understood as love, can be cultivated within individual philosophical counseling and brought to bear on a couple dynamic.

Case Context

Robert is a graduate student in his late twenties who has been engaged in individual philosophical counseling for approximately four years. During this time, increasing distress in his romantic relationship with his partner, Bonnie, has become a central focus of our work. They have been together for four years but have not sought conjoint therapy.

Robert describes a pattern of emotional withdrawal, sexual dissatisfaction, and difficulty expressing his needs. He reports a persistent internal tension between desire and inhibition: he experiences frequent sexual desire but feels unable to articulate this within the relationship. Over time, this has led to frustration, guilt, and a sense of disconnection.

Bonnie, in turn, struggles with body image and self-criticism. Robert notes that she often experiences herself as physically inadequate and responds to perceived vulnerability by withdrawing. He has attempted to reassure her but over time has become less responsive, describing himself as "numb" to the dynamic.

The relationship is characterized by mutual distancing. There is a sense of stability on the surface, yet a marked diminution of vitality. Both partners accommodate one another in ways that avoid rupture but also foreclose deeper connection.

From a phenomenological perspective, this dynamic may be understood as a disturbance in *being-with* (Heidegger, 1962). The shared world of the couple has become attenuated; the relational field no longer supports the emergence of new meaning. Instead, each partner is increasingly isolated within their own experience.

The Dream and Disclosure of Relational Breakdown

The clinical turning point emerged through a dream of striking intensity. In the dream, Robert was required to amputate Bonnie's leg "to save her." She later appeared healed, and they sat together

among family members. However, upon touching her body, Robert became aware of the irreversible loss. Overcome with panic, he retreated to a bathroom, holding the door shut while hyperventilating.

This dream condensed the central paradox of the relationship: the attempt to preserve the bond through self-silencing and accommodation resulted in the loss of the very vitality that constituted it. The act of amputation, though framed as necessary, represents a form of relational sacrifice that cannot ultimately be repaired.

The apparent "healing" reflects the couple's outward stability. They remain together and the relationship appears intact. Yet the missing limb signifies a deeper loss—one that becomes undeniable when brought into embodied awareness.

Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), the body may be understood as the primary site of relational meaning. The loss depicted in the dream is therefore not merely symbolic; it reflects a disruption in lived, embodied connection. The diminished sexual and emotional intimacy described in waking life is here represented in visceral form.

The client's panic is particularly significant. It occurred not at the moment of amputation, but at the moment of recognition. This suggests that the primary difficulty lies not in the existence of relational loss, but in the inability to integrate and articulate that loss within a shared context.

From a Ricoeurian perspective, the dream functions as an act of narrative refiguration (Ricoeur, 1984–1988). It organizes disparate experiences—desire, frustration, guilt, and withdrawal—into a coherent symbolic structure. However, because in this situation the narrative remained unshared, it produced anxiety rather than transformation.

The Collapse of the Moral Third

In Benjamin's terms (2004), the dynamics described above reflect a collapse of the Moral Third. Without a shared ethical space, each partner became confined to their own subjective experience. Robert was left to manage his desire and frustration internally, while Bonnie remained immersed in her self-critical experience.

This collapse had several consequences. First, it led to the privatization of relational truth. Experiences that might otherwise have been negotiated within the relationship remained unspoken. Second, it produced a cycle of withdrawal and diminution, as each partner attempted to avoid causing harm. Third, it resulted in a loss of mutual recognition, as each partner became less available to the other as a Subject.

The dream vividly illustrates this collapse. The act of amputation represents a unilateral attempt to resolve relational tension, bypassing the possibility of shared engagement. The subsequent panic reflects the failure of this approach.

A History of Love as Ethical-Relational Field

The conceptualization of the Moral Third as love finds resonance across multiple philosophical and psychoanalytic traditions. While Benjamin's formulation emerged within relational psychoanaly-

sis, its underlying structure reflects a broader lineage in which human flourishing is understood as inseparable from the ethical quality of relational life. These traditions converge around a central insight: that meaning, identity, and vitality arise not within isolated individuals, but within a shared relational field that must be actively sustained.

Aristotle's account of virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, 2009) situates human flourishing within relationships oriented toward the good. Friendship (*philia*) is not merely emotional but constitutes a shared activity in which both partners participate in the recognition and cultivation of what is good. This shared orientation functions as an early articulation of what may be understood as a proto–Moral Third: a space that transcends individual desire while sustaining mutual recognition through ethical practice.

Martin Buber (1970) provided a phenomenological articulation of this relational space through the distinction between "I–It" and "I–Thou" modes of encounter. The "I–Thou" relation emerges not within either Subject alone, but in the "between," a relational field characterized by presence and reciprocity. The Moral Third may be understood as this "between," and its collapse as a shift into "I–It" relating, in which the Other becomes objectified.

Donald Winnicott (1971) further elaborated this field through the concept of transitional space—an intermediate area of experience that is neither purely subjective nor fully objective. The Moral Third may be understood as a form of transitional space.

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989) contributed a hermeneutic dimension through the concept of the fusion of horizons. Every individual brings a historically situated perspective. Understanding emerges through dialogue in which these perspectives are opened and transformed. The Moral Third constitutes the relational space within which such a transformative fusion is possible. Without it, shared meaning cannot emerge.

Alasdair MacIntyre (2007) situated virtue within practices that realize internal "goods." Relationships may be understood as such practices, requiring virtues that sustain participation in shared "goods" such as intimacy, trust, and mutual recognition. His emphasis on narrative identity aligns closely with the phenomenological work of Paul Ricoeur (1992), who demonstrated how identity is constituted through narrative and how meaning is reconfigured through interpretation. When there is no Moral Third, each partner has an incomplete and unintegrated account of the relationship.

Finally, Martin Heidegger (1962) provided the ontological grounding for these viewpoints. From a phenomenological perspective, human existence is fundamentally *being-with* others (*Mitsein*), and relational life unfolds within a shared world. How we are shapes how the Other is encountered and responded to. For example, attentiveness allows the Other to be perceived in their specificity, while non-possessiveness prevents the reduction of the Other to an extension of the Self. The Moral Third may thus be understood as a mode of this shared being—one in which the relational field is sustained as open, responsive, and meaningful.

Taken together, these philosophical and psychoanalytic perspectives converge in understanding the Moral Third as an ethical-relational field. It is a pragmatic, lived space in which virtue, dialogue, narrative, and presence come together to sustain relational life.

The Moral Third as Love

The ethical-relational field of the Moral Third can fruitfully be framed and understood as love. Fitz-Gibbon's (2013) account of the virtues of love provides a framework for this practice. These virtues include courage, attentiveness, non-possessiveness, care, humility, patience, honesty, and forgiveness. Each represents a capacity that enables individuals to remain engaged in relationship despite the presence of tension, difference, and vulnerability. Fitz-Gibbon's account of love is particularly important because it shifts the understanding of love away from sentiment, attraction, or private feeling and toward an ethically disciplined orientation to the good of the Other and the relationship itself.

Love, in this framework, is not emotional intensity or compatibility. Rather, it is a moral practice sustained through the cultivation of virtue. This distinction is essential for understanding the Moral Third clinically. If love is conceived primarily as feeling, then relational collapse is interpreted as the fading of affect or attraction. However, if love is understood as an ethical orientation, then the task becomes the restoration of the relational conditions that permit mutual flourishing. Love is therefore not simply something one "has" or "is in", but something one does and continually re-enacts through practice.

For Fitz-Gibbon, love involves a decentering of the isolated Self. The loving person is called beyond immediate self-protection, defensiveness, and possessiveness toward participation in a shared moral reality. This does not entail self-erasure or submission. Rather, it requires the difficult balancing of selfhood and mutuality.

The virtues associated with love function as safeguards against reducing the Other to an object of need fulfillment or control. Virtue creates the conditions for genuine recognition. The partner is encountered not merely as a function within one's psychological perspective, but as a Subject with their own vulnerability, history, and horizon of meaning. Love therefore becomes inseparable from ethical perception: the capacity to truly see and respond to the reality of the Other.

This formulation provides important support for the concept of the Moral Third because it situates relational life within a shared ethical horizon that transcends the fluctuating emotional states of either partner. The Moral Third is sustained not through agreement or harmony alone, but through the ongoing willingness of both individuals to orient themselves toward relational truth. Fitz-Gibbon's work clarified that this orientation requires virtue precisely because intimate relationships inevitably evoke anxiety, disappointment, ambivalence, and narcissistic injury.

Without virtues such as courage and humility, individuals retreat into defensiveness, silence, blame, or domination. In Robert's case, his withdrawal and inability to articulate his experience can be understood as not merely psychological inhibition, but as a failure of ethical participation within the shared relational field. The therapeutic intervention therefore aimed not simply at emotional expression, but at the cultivation of the virtues necessary for sustaining dialogue and mutual recognition.

Seen in this light, the interventions proposed in therapy are deeply grounded in Fitz-Gibbon's understanding of love. Encouraging Robert to speak honestly without accusation reflects the virtue

of courage tempered by humility. Asking him to recognize Bonnie's suffering while remaining connected to his own needs reflects attentiveness and non-possessiveness.

Framing the problem as belonging to the relationship rather than to either individual reinforces the idea that love is participation in a shared good that transcends individual self-interest. The Moral Third thus becomes not merely an abstract psychoanalytic construct, but a lived ethical practice structured by the virtues of love. Through these virtues, relational space is reopened, and the possibility of mutual transformation emerges.

Love, in this sense, is not reducible to affect. It is an orientation toward the Other that is enacted through practice. It involves a willingness to remain present to relational difficulty rather than withdrawing or attempting to control the situation.

Clinical Intervention

Within the context of the Moral Third, the therapeutic task became supporting Robert in moving from private affect regulation to shared ethical engagement. This required preparing him to enter dialogue with Bonnie in a way that transformed intrapsychic containment into intersubjective articulation.

Several elements structured this intervention. First, blame was decentered: the difficulty was framed as belonging to the relationship rather than to either individual, reducing defensiveness and opening a space for shared inquiry. Second, Robert was guided to own his subjectivity without accusation, articulating his desire, frustration, and withdrawal as his experience rather than as a response to Bonnie's deficiencies. Third, Bonnie was recognized as a Subject in her own right; her struggles with body image and self-criticism were acknowledged without negating Robert's needs. Finally, collaboration was explicitly invited, positioning the conversation as a joint effort to understand and care for the relationship rather than as a demand for change.

To concretize this shift, the intervention incorporated a structured reflective questionnaire (Appendix A) and a guided dialogue framework (Appendix B). The questionnaire prepared the ground by helping Robert and Bonnie examine the costs of silence and the virtues required for mutual flourishing—such as honesty, courage, and patience. The dialogue framework then helped Robert to translate these reflections into relational practice, helping him to orient both partners toward a shared moral horizon. In this way, the Moral Third became a lived ethical space in which meaning could be negotiated and mutual recognition sustained.

The therapeutic intervention therefore sought the gradual construction of a Moral Third capable of holding tension, injury, and asymmetry without collapse into reciprocal retaliation. This required surrender from both members of the dyad—not submission, but the relinquishment of omnipotent certainty regarding one's own innocence and the other's guilt. Benjamin describes this as an asymmetrical yet mutual process (Benjamin, 2004).

For Robert the process involved cultivating the capacity to remain emotionally present without collapsing into shame or retaliatory withdrawal when confronted with Bonnie's intense need for independence. Rather than responding defensively to Bonnie's distancing, Robert was encouraged

to maintain reflective awareness of both his own longing and Bonnie's fear of engulfment. This stance represents an important movement away from reactive complementarity and toward ethical recognition.

Similarly, Bonnie was invited to recognize that Robert's desire for emotional and physical connection was not reducible to coercion or control but reflected a legitimate longing for mutuality. The therapeutic aim was to create enough reciprocal acknowledgment that each partner could experience the Other not as adversary or judge, but as a Subject whose suffering and needs possess equal reality and dignity.

The Moral Third becomes visible whenever the couple can acknowledge injury, witness one another's experience, and restore some degree of lawfulness to the relational field. Thus, therapy is not simply conflict resolution, but the cultivation of an intersubjective ethical space in which mutual recognition can survive disappointment, frustration, and difference.

Virtue and Existential Risk

The success of this ongoing intervention depends on Robert's and Bonnie's ability to embody the virtues associated with love. Robert identified courage, attentiveness, non-possessiveness, care, and forgiveness as particularly relevant and was determined to put these particular virtues at the forefront of their practice. As he moved forward with his dialogues with Bonnie, he was relieved to find her receptive to these ideas and the changes that would necessarily ensue and to find some of their equanimity and openness restored.

In Tillich's (1952) framework, this movement represents an act of existential courage. Robert had to confront the anxiety associated with expressing his needs and risking the response of the Other. Robert's conversation with Bonnie thus became an existential act. It involved a willingness to risk discomfort in the service of a more authentic and vital relationship.

Clinical Threshold

Robert's dream presented a clear threshold. If the relational loss remained unspoken, it would lead to internal panic. If it was brought into shared space, it would become open to transformation.

The introduction of the Moral Third interrupts the "amputation dynamic"—the fantasy that the relationship could be preserved through silent sacrifice. In its place emerged the possibility of dialogical co-creation.

Robert and Bonnie's relationship demonstrates the collapse into what Jessica Benjamin described as "twoness," the complementary structure of "doer and done-to." Within this dyadic framework, each partner experiences the other less as a Subject than as a force to which one must either submit, or against which one must defend. Their interactions become organized around rapid oscillations between accusation and withdrawal, demand and resistance, idealization and defiance. As Benjamin noted, such complementarity creates a "ping-pong" dynamic in which reciprocal actions lock each partner into reactive positions rather than freely chosen responses.

In Robert and Bonnie's case, the inability to establish sufficient symmetry or equality within the relationship gradually caused idealization to deteriorate into submission to each other. Bonnie's pursuit of autonomy was increasingly experienced by Robert as exclusion and rejection, while Robert's longing for closeness was experienced by Bonnie as pressure and intrusion. Each partner struggled to avoid occupying the position of the "bad one." The result was a defensive relational dance in which both attempted to preserve innocence through blame, retreat, or counterattack.

From the perspective of the Moral Third, the therapeutic threshold emerges when both partners become capable of tolerating the inevitability of causing and suffering pain without destroying the shared ethical space between them. The task is not to eliminate conflict, asymmetry, or disappointment, but to create a relational field in which injury can be acknowledged without collapsing into domination or submission. The Moral Third introduces a differentiating principle that interrupts the binary logic of complementarity and allows each partner to recognize the humanity of the Other, even amidst frustration and unmet need.

At stake clinically is the restoration of agency. In the absence of a Moral Third, agency collapses because each person is merely reactive: controlled rather than recognized, blamed rather than responsible. The Moral Third makes possible a different mode of participation in which each can begin to experience themselves as an author of meaning rather than as a passive recipient of the Other's actions. This shift depends upon the emergence of a relational space grounded in mutual recognition and sustained reciprocity.

Discussion

This case demonstrates that the Moral Third is a clinically usable ethical framework that can organize therapeutic intervention within philosophical counseling. By conceptualizing the Moral Third as love enacted through virtue, the clinician is provided with a concrete way of understanding relational suffering that moves beyond both intrapsychic reductionism and purely behavioral formulations.

The relational crisis between Robert and Bonnie is not understood merely as a communication failure, sexual incompatibility, or defensive conflict, although these elements are present. Rather, the difficulty is interpreted as the absence of an ethical-relational field that sustains mutual recognition and vitality. The intervention, therefore, is aimed at establishing the conditions under which shared meaning can emerge.

The case also illustrates the importance of phenomenology in understanding relational life. Robert's distress cannot be adequately grasped solely through cognition or affect. His experience is embodied, existential, and relationally situated. The dream revealed this. The symbolic amputation conveyed the lived experience of sacrificing vitality to preserve attachment, while the subsequent panic revealed the unbearable weight of unshared truth. From a phenomenological perspective, the dream disclosed a disturbance in being-with, rather than simply an unconscious wish or fear. The body became the site through which relational truth appeared. In this sense, the dream functioned clinically as a disclosure of distortions within the shared world of the couple, making visible what had become concealed in waking relational life.

The integration of virtue ethics expands the therapeutic horizon. Contemporary therapeutic discourse frequently emphasizes emotional validation, communication skills, or attachment needs, all of which are valuable. However, the present framework suggests that relational flourishing also depends upon the cultivation of moral capacities. Fitz-Gibbon's account of love as disciplined ethical practice is especially useful because it identifies the virtues necessary for sustaining relational openness under conditions of anxiety and vulnerability. Courage permits truth-telling despite fear of rupture. Humility tempers the impulse toward moral certainty and blame. Patience allows ambiguity and incompleteness to be endured without premature closure. Non-possessiveness permits the Other to remain genuinely Other rather than becoming subsumed within one's own psychological needs. These virtues collectively sustain the Moral Third by preventing the collapse of dialogue into domination, withdrawal, or defensive self-protection.

The case additionally highlights the importance of narrative within relational healing. Ricoeur (1972) suggests that human beings make sense of suffering through the ongoing interpretation and reinterpretation of experience. When the Moral Third collapses, so does a shared world view. Each partner becomes enclosed within isolated interpretations that cannot be mutually negotiated. In Robert's case, his silence illustrated this fragmentation. His experience remained internally organized but relationally unspoken. Counseling functioned, in part, to restore the possibility of a shared world view. By preparing Robert to articulate his experience ethically rather than accusatorily, the intervention sought to transform private suffering into dialogical meaning. In this way, relational repair became not merely emotional reconciliation, but the co-creation of a more truthful shared world.

This framework also has implications beyond couple dynamics. The Moral Third may be understood more broadly as a foundational structure for ethical life itself. Families, friendships, communities, and even political life depend upon the existence of shared moral space in which individuals can encounter one another without collapsing into domination or mutual negation. Contemporary culture often oscillates between radical individualism and coercive forms of moral certainty, both of which erode the conditions necessary for genuine dialogue. The Moral Third offers an alternative vision grounded in mutual recognition, ethical restraint, and shared participation in truth-seeking. The concept has significance not only for psychotherapy, but for philosophical counseling and for moral philosophy more broadly.

Finally, philosophical counseling is uniquely positioned to engage the terrain of the Moral Third, because it explicitly addresses meaning, ethics, responsibility, and human flourishing. It is well suited to working with relational suffering understood as an existential and moral phenomenon. The integration of phenomenology, virtue ethics, and relational psychoanalysis provides a framework through which counseling may attend simultaneously to subjectivity, narrative, and ethical practice. The Moral Third, understood as love enacted through virtue, thus becomes both a philosophical and clinical orientation toward sustaining human relational life.

Conclusion

The Moral Third represents more than a psychoanalytic concept describing mutual recognition. When understood phenomenologically and ethically, it emerges as a living relational field through which human beings sustain shared meaning, recognition, and vitality. The Moral Third is most

fully understood as love—not romantic feeling alone, but an ethical-existential practice grounded in virtue.

Within philosophical counseling, this understanding has profound implications. Relational suffering cannot always be reduced to pathology, cognition, or communication deficits alone. Often, what is at stake is the integrity of the ethical field itself: the capacity of two individuals to sustain a shared world in which truth, vulnerability, and recognition remain paramount. Philosophical counseling becomes the cultivation of conditions under which meaningful relational life may flourish.

Ultimately, the Moral Third invites a reorientation of therapeutic practice toward the ethical dimension of human existence. Love, understood as virtuous participation in shared being, becomes not an idealized abstraction but a lived discipline of remaining in relationship. Against the isolating tendencies of contemporary life, the Moral Third offers a vision of human flourishing grounded in dialogue, mutual recognition, and the courage to inhabit relational truth together.

References

Aristotle. (2009). *Nicomachean ethics* (W. D. Ross, Trans.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. (Original work published ca. 350 B.C.E.).

Benjamin, J. (2004). Beyond doer and done to: An intersubjective view of thirdness. *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 73*(1), 5–46.

Benjamin, J. (2018). *Beyond doer and done to: Recognition theory, intersubjectivity, and the Third*, New York, NY: Routledge.

Buber, M. (1970). *I and thou* (W. Kaufmann, Trans.). New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons. (Original work published 1923).

Fitz-Gibbon, A. (2013). *Love as a guide to morals*. New York, NY: Brill.

Gadamer, H.-G. (1989). *Truth and method* (2nd rev. ed., J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, Trans.). London, New York: Continuum. (Original work published 1960).

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). New York, NY: Harper & Row. (Original work published 1927).

MacIntyre, A. (2007). *After virtue* (3rd ed.). Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception* (C. Smith, Trans.). NY, NY: Routledge. (Original work published 1945)

Ricoeur, P. (1984–1988). *Time and narrative* (Vols. 1–3). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Ricoeur, P. (1992). *Oneself as another* (K. Blamey, Trans.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Tillich, P. (1952). *The courage to be*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.

Winnicott, D. W. (1971). *Playing and reality*. London, England: Tavistock Publications, Ltd.

Appendix A
The Moral Third - A Brief Relational Virtue Inventory

The *Moral Third* is the shared ethical space created when two people attempt to relate to one another through mutual recognition, responsibility, and love understood as a practice of virtue rather than merely a feeling. This inventory is designed to help each partner consider both their own participation in the relationship and their perception of the other's efforts.

Instructions:
Rate each virtue from 1–5 for yourself and for how you currently experience your partner.

- 1 = Rarely present
- 3 = Sometimes present
- 5 = Consistently present

Virtue	Me	Partner	Reflection
Patience	___	___	How do we handle each other's imperfections?
Kindness	___	___	When do we feel emotionally cared for?
Humility	___	___	How easy is it to admit fault or listen openly?
Generosity	___	___	How freely do we give time, energy, or attention?
Forgiveness	___	___	How do we respond after hurt or disappointment?
Truthfulness	___	___	How honest and emotionally transparent are we?
Faithfulness	___	___	How dependable and committed do we feel?
Respect	___	___	Do we feel recognized as full persons?
Courage	___	___	How willing are we to face difficult conversations?
Compassion	___	___	How well do we understand one another's suffering?
Justice/Fairness	___	___	Does the relationship feel mutual and balanced?
Hope	___	___	Do we believe growth and repair are possible?

Final Reflections

1. Which virtue currently strengthens the relationship most?
2. Which virtue most needs attention or repair?
3. Where do you feel most misunderstood by your partner?
4. Where do you think your partner may feel unseen or unheard by you?
5. What would help the relationship move closer to the Moral Third?

Appendix B
Sample Moral Third Dialogue using Fairness as the Central Virtue

Context:
This is a sample dialogue which I put together as a model for how Robert might approach Bonnie. The purpose of this dialogue is not to determine who is "right," but to demonstrate how a couple might approach the issue through the lens of the Moral Third, with fairness functioning as the guiding virtue.

Robert:
I want to bring something up that has been difficult for me, but I want to try to do it differently than I have in the past. I do not want this to be about blame or pressure. I want us to think about it together.
Bonnie:
Okay. I appreciate you saying that. What is on your mind?
Robert:
I have been feeling sad and disconnected about the lack of physical intimacy between us. Part of me has been carrying resentment, and I do not want that resentment to quietly grow. At the same time, I know this is painful and complicated for you too.

Bonnie:
It is hard for me. Sometimes when the subject comes up, I immediately feel anxious or guilty, like I am already failing before we even talk about it.
Robert:
I think in the past I may have approached it in ways that made you feel cornered or judged. I am trying instead to understand how we can think about this as our problem rather than your problem or my problem.
Bonnie:
That feels different hearing it that way. I think I often experience the conversation as being about what I am not providing.
Robert:
I can understand that. But I also need you to know that I experience the distance as painful. Sometimes I begin to feel undesirable or emotionally alone. I do not want to withdraw from you over it.
Bonnie:
I do not want you to feel alone. I think part of the difficulty is that when I sense your disappointment, I become even more self-conscious and shut down further.
Robert:
That makes sense. I think fairness here probably means that both of our experiences matter equally, even though they are different. I do not want my needs to erase your discomfort, but I also do not want your discomfort to erase my longing.
Bonnie:
Yes. That actually feels fair to me. Sometimes I fear that fairness means I should simply force myself to meet your level of desire, but that leaves me feeling emotionally absent.
Robert:
I do not want intimacy that comes from obligation alone. I think what I am hoping for is that we stay emotionally engaged with the issue together rather than avoiding it.
Bonnie:
I could probably do that better. Avoiding the subject may protect me from anxiety in the short term, but I think it leaves you carrying the loneliness alone.
Robert:
And I can work on bringing it up with less resentment and less hidden accusation. I think when I get hurt, I sometimes speak from frustration instead of vulnerability.
Bonnie:
I appreciate hearing the vulnerability more than the frustration. It helps me stay present instead of defensive.
Robert:
Maybe fairness is not about perfectly equal desire, because that may never happen. Maybe it is more about whether both people feel heard, respected, and considered.
Bonnie:
I think so too. And maybe part of fairness is asking how we can protect the relationship itself, not just defend our individual positions.
Robert:
That feels important to me. I want us to keep searching for something that honors both of us and keeps us connected.

Commentary

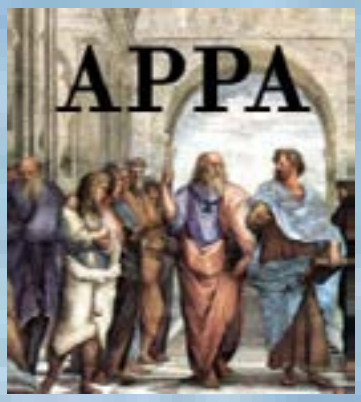
This dialogue illustrates several features of the Moral Third:

- The issue is framed as belonging to the relationship rather than to one defective partner.
- Robert owns his subjective experience without collapsing into accusation.
- Bonnie's experience is recognized as equally real and morally relevant.
- Fairness is understood not as transactional equality, but as mutual recognition and ethical consideration.
- The dialogue seeks collaboration and shared responsibility rather than victory or coercion.

The goal is not immediate resolution, but the preservation and strengthening of the shared ethical space between the partners.

Dr. Shanti Jones, an independent scholar and certified philosophical counselor in private practice in Taos, NM, is especially interested in the intersection of ethics, spirituality, and personal transformation and in how meaningful change becomes experientially recognizable. Her work centers on helping individuals become the subject of their lives through reflective dialogue, dream work, and the cultivation of virtue. Dr. Jones has been appointed Visiting Scholar in the Department of Philosophy at SUNY/Cortland for the 2026/2027 academic year.

Correspondence: shanti@barbaraujones.com



PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

Journal of the APPA

Volume 21 Number 2 July 2026

Editor
Lou Marinoff

Managing Editor
Rick Repetti

Reviews Editor
Leslie Miller

Associate Editor
Carol S. Gould

Associate Editor
Johnson Cheung

Technical Consultant
Greg Goode

Legal Consultant
Thomas Griffith

Aims and Scope

Philosophical Practice is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

APPA Mission

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a non-profit educational corporation that encourages philosophical awareness and advocates leading the examined life. Philosophy can be practiced through client counseling, group facilitation, organizational consulting or educational programs. APPA members apply philosophical systems, insights and methods to the management of human problems and the amelioration of human estates. The APPA is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization.

APPA Membership

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a not-for-profit educational corporation. It admits Certified, Affiliate and Adjunct Members solely on the basis of their respective qualifications. It admits Auxiliary Members solely on the basis of their interest in and support of philosophical practice. The APPA does not discriminate with respect to members or clients on the basis of nationality, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, age, religious belief, political persuasion, or other professionally or philosophically irrelevant criteria.

Subscriptions, Advertisements, Submissions, Back Issues

For information on subscriptions, advertisements and submissions, please see the front pages of this document. For information on back issues, APPA Memberships and Programs, please visit https://appa.edu.

https://appa.edu
ISSN 1742-8181

Nemo Veritatem Regit
Nobody Governs Truth