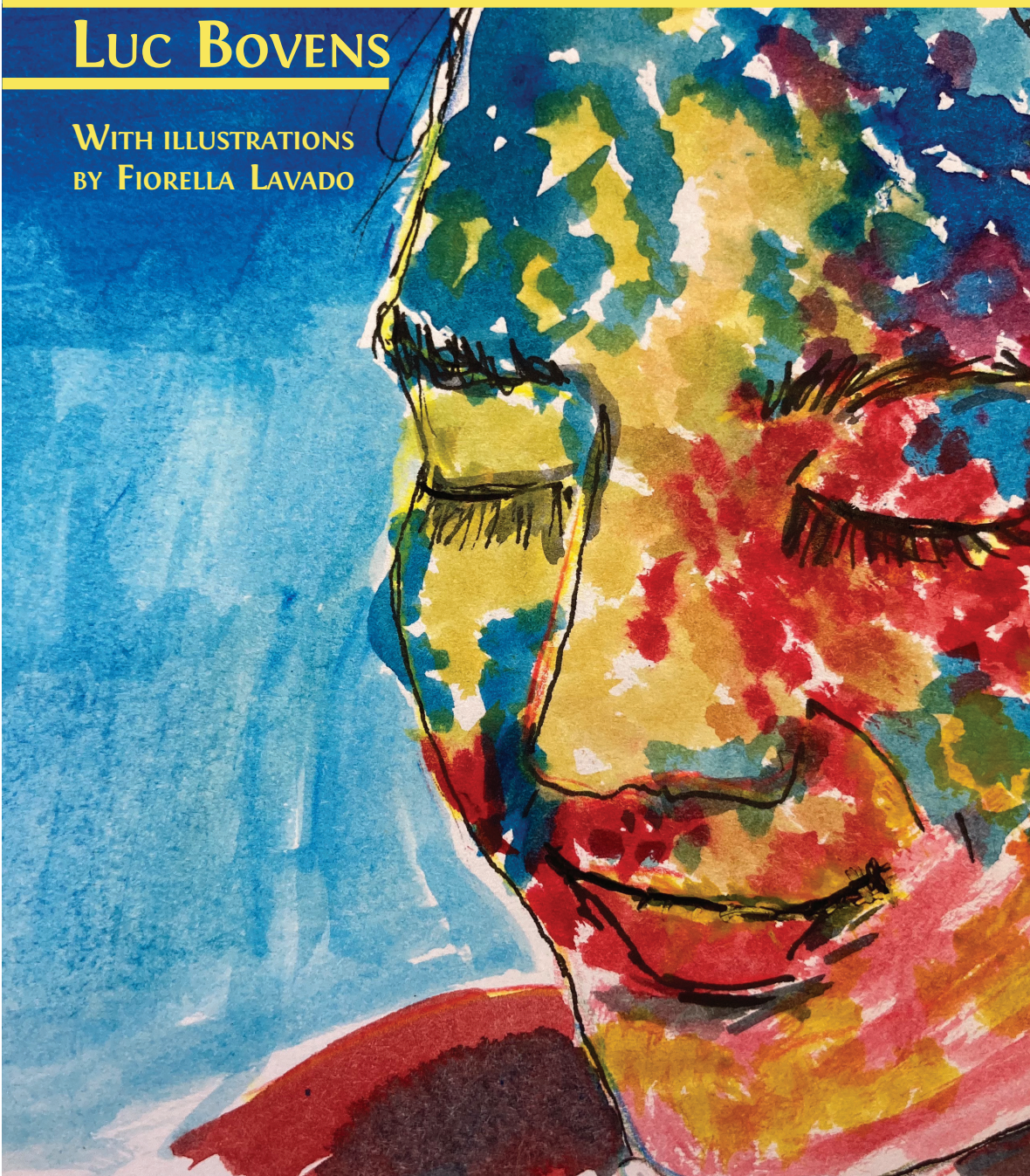


# C O P I N G

## A PHILOSOPHICAL GUIDE

LUC BOVENS

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS  
BY FIORELLA LAVADO





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# Discussion Questions

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## Chapter 1. Hope

1. I draw a distinction between 'being hopeful' and 'hoping' when it comes to the health situation of a loved one. Explain this distinction. Do you think it is a plausible distinction? Can you think of other examples in which this distinction holds?
2. George Frederic Watts was a nineteenth-century British symbolist painter. 'I paint ideas, not things,' he said. Here is a version of his painting, 'Hope.' What ideas does this painting convey about hope?
3. How is the 'audacity of hope' explained in the text? Do you think that this is a reasonable interpretation of this phrase?
4. I laid out various pros and cons of hoping. What pros do you find most and least convincing? What cons do you find most and least convincing?
5. Comment on Emily Dickinson's poems 'Hope is the thing with feathers' and 'Hope is a subtle glutton.'
6. One might object, as a counter to my analysis of hope, that we only genuinely hope for things that, all in all, we want. Dark and shameful desires may preoccupy us and engage our imagination, but unless we affirm and embrace them, they do not really underlie our hopes. We can only hope for things that we want upon due consideration and in a cool hour. Do you agree with this objection?
7. One might object, as a counter to my analysis of hope, that a person who despairs engages just as much in mental imaging of what they would like to have, but under the guise of there

being this wonderful thing that they cannot have. Hence, my analysis does not distinguish between hope and despair. Do you think that this is a reasonable objection?

8. The hope for salvation is central to the Christian faith. Some (though by no means all) Christians consider faith to be a matter of certainty. But given that we can only hope for things that are less than certain, how can it be meaningful to say that one hopes for salvation and is certain of salvation? How can we make both attitudes consistent?

## Chapter 2. Death

1. Would you prefer to die suddenly without forewarning or to see your death coming from far ahead (assuming the absence of pain in both cases)? What do you think makes for the difference between people who prefer the former and people who prefer the latter?
2. Imagine that you are Shakespeare on his death bed, and you could have (i) all your manuscripts preserved anonymously or (ii) half (or ninety percent or ten percent) preserved with your name attached to it. What would you choose?
3. Can you think of anyone (whether famous or not) who lived in such a way that you would say: If I were to have lived like that, then I would die easy (as in the gospel blues song 'In my Time of Dying'). What kind of life would you look back upon in a contented manner? And what makes such a life a meaningful or a good life?
4. Some countries have legalized euthanasia and assisted suicide. Should people who opt for euthanasia or assisted suicide be able to choose to be organ donors?
5. Suppose that humans were no longer fertile and you were the last generation on earth, as in P.D. James's novel *Children of Men* (1992). How would this affect how you live your life? Would you still be able to find meaning in the things you do? Or suppose that scientists predicted with certainty that an asteroid were to hit the earth one year from now, wiping out



all of humanity. Compare this predicament to learning that you have a terminal illness and have one more year to live. Does it make a difference to how you would live the remaining year of your life? (Samuel Scheffler takes up this issue in *Death and the Afterlife* (2013).)

6. Look at the pictures of Alan Kurdi's lifeless body in the *Guardian* (2 Sep. 2015). If you were on the editorial team of a newspaper, which of the two pictures would you defend for publication? If you were Alan Kurdi's surviving parent, would you consent to have either picture published? Why or why not?
7. In the poems 'Remember' and 'Song' Christina Rossetti tells a beloved how she wishes to be remembered after death. What is her wish? Can you identify with this sentiment? Would you wish for more? Or would you wish for less?

### Chapter 3. Love

1. Which of the models of love discussed in this chapter are you most drawn to? Which one are you least drawn to? Explain. What model of love would you like a beloved of yours to see you through? What model would you want them to not see you through? Explain.
2. As Yeats' poem 'For Anne Gregory' suggests, people want to be loved for themselves. What does this mean? What is it not to be loved for oneself?
3. Comment on the three components of the *agape* view of love: (i) It is through love that one elevates one's beloved, (ii) love is unconditional, and (iii) love is subject to the will and hence a matter of commitment. How intertwined are these components?
4. In 'Love's Bond,' (Nozick, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations*, 1989; reprinted in Solomon and Higgins, *The Philosophy of (Erotic) Love*, 1991), Nozick writes: 'Although both see the *we* as extremely important for the self, most men might draw the circle of themselves containing the circle of

the *we* as an aspect within it, while most women might draw the circle of themselves within the circle of the *we*.' (pp. 74–5 in Nozick; p. 421 in Solomon and Higgins) Do you think that this claim still holds today?

5. Kahlil Gibran's 'On Marriage' (1923) is a commonly read text at wedding ceremonies. In a blog post, 'Please Don't Read This Poem at Your Wedding' on the *National Catholic Register* website, Jennifer Fulwiler argues that this is a recipe for disaster. Do you agree? Is it possible to form a joint identity through love and still retain one's own identity? What models of love underlie Gibran and Fulwiler's views?
6. Do you have any sympathy for any of the cynical models of love? Do they provide a more truthful and accurate analysis of love than the rosier *eros*, *agape*, and *fusion* models? What is their place in life? Can they coexist with these models?
7. How have dating apps changed the nature of courtship? Have they changed our conception of romantic love?

## Chapter 4. Reconciliation

1. One cannot accept apologies unless apologies are offered. But can one forgive, even if no forgiveness is asked for? Can one forgive an unrepentant offender? Can one forgive an offender who asks for forgiveness but is clearly not intent on changing their ways?
2. Are accepting apologies and forgiving always discretionary? Or do we sometimes have an obligation to accept apologies and to forgive?
3. Why might it matter to a repentant offender that a victim accepts their apologies or forgives them when they have sincerely offered their apologies and have sincerely asked for forgiveness? Should it matter? What difference does it make?
4. Is there any truth to P.G. Wodehouse's lines: 'It is a good rule in life never to apologize. The right sort of people do not want apologies, and the wrong sort take a mean advantage of them'?

5. There is much discussion recently about reparation payments to African Americans for slavery. Are reparation payments an appropriate tool to atone for historical wrongdoings? For some arguments for and against, read Andre M. Perry and Rashawn Ray 'Why we Need Reparations for Black Americans' (Brookings, 2020) and Jeff Jacoby 'Reparations for Slavery are Unworkable—and Unjust' (Boston Globe, 2019).
6. Does Zidane's apology to his fans in his TV interview, after the 2008 head-butt against Materazzi constitute a meaningful apology?

## Chapter 5. Self-Management

1. Can you think of any cases in which you adapted your tastes, beliefs, or attitudes in response to your circumstances? Do you look back on this as a positive move in your life?
2. What is the difference between hopefulness, wishful thinking and self-deception?
3. If a bit of self-deception makes you happy, then what, if anything, might be wrong with it? Why should we believe based on the evidence? You might say that we want to have true beliefs, but what is so good about true beliefs if they make us unhappy?
4. You may have misgivings about deceiving yourself and trying to believe something that you know deep down to be false. But would you also object to not wanting to know certain things by refusing to consider the evidence? Why would this be less objectionable? Can you think of plausible cases? Do you think that consciously not wanting to know something can sometimes be a good way to proceed in life?
5. Pascal lays out two routes to religious faith. There is Pascal's wager, and there is the advice to acquire religious beliefs by acting as if you already believe, that is, by blessing yourself with holy water and going to Mass. Do you find the wager a reasonable argument for adopting religious beliefs? Might

Pascal's advice for acquiring religious beliefs work? Would it be an acceptable route to religious belief?

6. What is hipster irony? Is it just a fad? Or might it be a worthwhile ideal to strive for?
7. 'Being Sexually Submissive Doesn't Make You A "Bad Feminist"' (HuffPost, 2018) argues that feminism should not stop women from embracing submissive sexual desires. Do you agree? Are there certain desires that one should try to extinguish or cultivate for moral or political reasons?

## Chapter 6. Counsel

1. The Cicero quote '[Gratitude] is not only the greatest virtue, but it is also the parent of all the other virtues' can be found in For Plancius, chapter 33. Cicero offers five virtues that are spawned by gratitude: (i) filial affection; (ii) good citizenry; (iii) piety; (iv) friendship; and (v) kindness. Explain how he supports these connections. Do you think that friendship and loving relationships require mutual gratitude?
2. Gratitude is thought to procure joy. We find this idea in E.E. Cummings' poem 'i thank you God for most this amazing.' We find it in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*: 'Gratitude is a divine emotion: it fills the heart, but not to bursting; it warms it, but not to fever.' Willie Nelson thought of it as transformative: 'Once I started counting my blessings, my whole life turned around.' How is it that gratitude can have a positive effect on our emotional well-being?
3. Gratitude is about not taking favors for granted after the fact. Saying 'please' is about not taking favors for granted *before* the fact. *The Bright Hour: A Memoir of Living and Dying* (pp. 75–6) is a memoir by Nina Riggs about her last year of life struggling with breast cancer. She writes a list to her children's future selves—a list they won't possibly understand for twenty to thirty years—trying to make them see why it's good to say 'please' in this world. The presentation is quite lyrical, but can you state in plain language what reasons she offers?



4. Here is an argument that we might hear from an Effective Altruist. If we have a well-paying job, we should not be volunteering in a soup kitchen. We could work overtime instead of working in the soup kitchen and send the money to charities that are recommended by Effective Altruist websites, such as GiveWell and Giving What We Can. If we have a choice between saving one person and saving five people, we should clearly do the latter. Similarly, more lives could be saved by working overtime and donating to the Anti-Malaria Foundation than by working in a local soup kitchen. So, we ought to do the former. Is this argument convincing? (A similar argument for career choice can be found in William MacAskill's 'Replaceability, Career Choice, and Making a Difference.')
5. There is some wisdom in the advice that one regrets not trying, more so than one regrets trying and failing. In Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Fermina Daza is considering a marriage proposal, and her aunt counsels her: 'Tell him yes. [...] Even if you are dying of fear, even if you are sorry later, because whatever you do, you will be sorry all the rest of your life if you say no.' Can you think of real-life cases in which the same reasoning might apply? How does this advice square with our discussion of disappointment versus regret?
6. Throughout history, artists have used their art to express their pain, ranging from Edvard Munch's 'The Scream' to Demi Lovato's four-part YouTube documentary 'Dancing with the Devil' about their struggle with addiction. Pick your favorite work of art in this vein as an example. What is driving this self-expression? How does the public react? What does the artist hope to gain?
7. In 'Against Catharsis: Writing is not' (*Literary Hub*, 2019), T. Kira Madden argues that writing is not catharsis. How does she conceive of her art?
8. The African American author and social activist Toni Cade Bambara conceives of religion as 'a technology of living.' Religion incorporates various coping mechanisms that aim to

make life manageable and joyful. Now many religions impose dietary constraints on their followers. What is the purpose of these constraints? Do they serve similar purposes as dietary constraints in secular movements? Or are there different motivations at work?

9. What does Tamar Adler find out about Intuitive Eating in 'All You Can Eat? Inside the Intuitive Eating Craze.' (*Vogue*, 2020) What is driving these ideas? Do you agree?