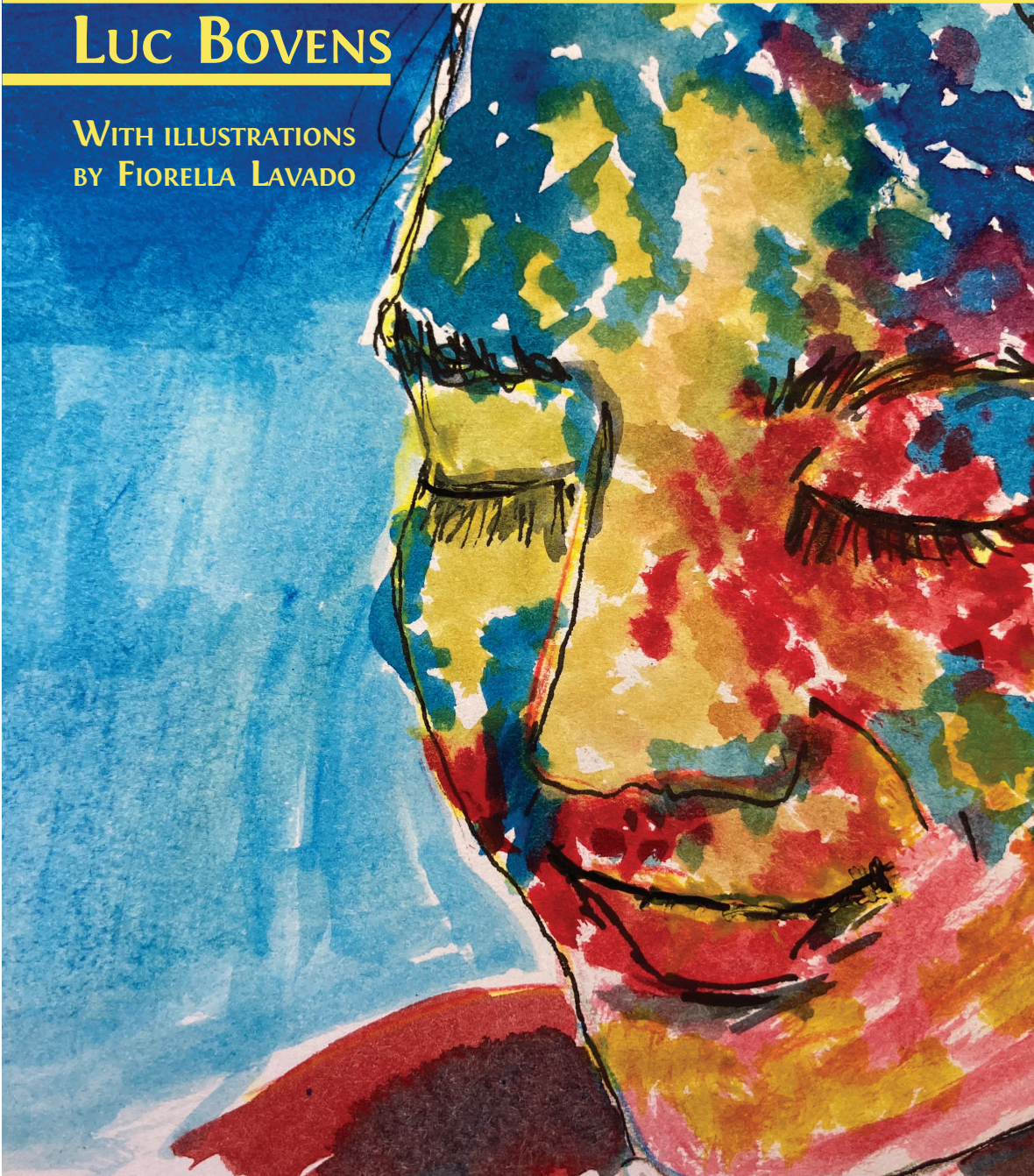


COPING

A PHILOSOPHICAL GUIDE

LUC BOVENS

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS
BY FIORELLA LAVADO





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Why This Book?

You have probably heard Reinhold Niebuhr's serenity prayer in some version or other: 'God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.' It's clever and touching, but there is a bit of a false dichotomy. There is often very little we can do to make changes to the world, and yet we do not just simply sit back and accept. There is something in the space between courage and serenity. We try to cope and there are a range of strategies to make the world around us easier to bear and, dare I say, even enjoyable.

I cover six themes: *hope*, *death*, *love*, *reconciliation*, *self-management*, and *counsel*. Clinging to *hope* is one way to cope. Hoping for better times keeps us in the game. And even in the face of *death*, hope does not dissipate and comes in many hues. From the end of life, we move to the springs of life, and give some thought to *love* in its many variants and with all its trials and tribulations. When there are breakdowns in the social fabric, we need rituals of *reconciliation*—offering and accepting apologies and asking for and granting forgiveness. To make life more palatable, we can also focus on making changes within ourselves. These are strategies of *self-management*. And to conclude, there are all kinds of *counsel* on offer, aiming to boost our spirits and make life more joyful. Let us look at each of these themes in turn.

Hope. What is it to hope for something? A core feature of hope is that the prospect engages our imagination. Should we give free rein to hope? Emily Dickinson, in her poems 'Hope is the thing with feathers' and 'Hope is a subtle glutton,' was of two minds. When is it a thing with feathers—or, in other words, when is it wise to hope? When is it foolish to hope—when should we banish that subtle glutton? Can we only hope for things that we truly want? Or might we sometimes find ourselves

with shameful and petty hopes that do not match our genuine desires? There are many attitudes in hope's neighborhood: How is hoping different from, say, being hopeful? And finally, what's with the audacity of hope in the title of Barack Obama's book? What is so audacious about hoping?

Death. What is there to hope for when the grim reaper knocks, and there is no telling him to come back later? Some religious people hope that with the closing of our earthly life, a door opens for a new life to come. But there are also distinctly secular hopes in the face of death. One might hope that one's life was worthwhile. But what makes life worthwhile—is it a mode of living, is it about having made a mark and, if so, what kind of mark? One might hope to die well, but what makes for a good death? One might hope to be missed by loved ones. But why would one wish the pain of loss and grief upon them? And we may have hopes for a posthumous future, but why would we care about a future in which we are no more?

Love. 'What is this thing called love?' the Cole Porter song asks. There is the curious feature of love's constancy—its unwillingness to trade up for new partners, and its endurance in the face of change. There are three grand old models of love: Socrates' *eros* model, St. Paul's *agape* model, and Aristophanes' *fusion* model. How do these models account for love's constancy? These are all models of love that portray it as the kind of thing that is worth having. In contrast, there are cynical models of love, which are the mirror images of their venerable cousins. What can this array of models of love tell us about the flipside of constancy—about the heartache when love fades? How do we cope with love lost on the *eros*, the *agape*, and the *fusion* models, and what kind of cure do cynical models have in store?

Reconciliation. Social life can drag us down. It carries the yoke of the past, and what is done cannot be undone. This leads to the curious practices of apologizing and forgiving. A genuine apology requires acknowledging our wrongdoing, feeling remorse and empathy, resolving to change our ways, and doing all this in a humble manner. Each of these components raises a gamut of questions. What distinguishes apologies

from saying that we are sorry about what happened? Can we apologize while standing by what we did, as Zidane did in an interview after he head-butted Materazzi in the 2006 World Cup final? Is there too much apologizing going on in today's world? Can we accept apologies without forgiving? Can we forgive without accepting apologies? And finally, what determines the proper measure of amends that should accompany an apology?

Self-Management. Sometimes it is no use trying to change the world since, try as we may, the world won't change. It is the wrong place to engage the will. So why not engage the will where there is less resistance? Can we set out to desire what we can get rather than what we cannot get? Can we set out to frame things so that they seem more palatable? Pretense is a tried and proven recipe: Fake it until you make it! But there are certain attitudes, such as self-forgetfulness and spontaneity, that are hard to cultivate. Can we set out to believe what we would like to be true? This seems more problematic. Isn't that wishful thinking or self-deception? But what could be wrong with talking ourselves into believing that we will succeed, even against the odds?

Counsel. I confess: This chapter is a bit of a cheat. By the time we get there, we will have discussed many types of counsels that help us cope. But there are a few additional ones that intrigue me. Here we go. First: Be grateful! This counsel is much broader than just being grateful to someone who did you a special favor. What should we be grateful for in life, and how does gratitude compare in a religious and a secular worldview? Second: Help your neighbor! What is so uplifting about helping in a local soup kitchen? Why is helping others a recipe to forget about our own troubles? Third: Don't cry over spilled milk! What is the difference between regret and disappointment? What can be said to dispel regret, and to dispel disappointment? Fourth: Express yourself! How can doing art offer clarity and relief? Why might keeping a diary help us with our troubles? And finally: Eat judiciously! That somber mood is doubtlessly due to too much gluten! But why might attention to diet be therapeutic? What is the causal route from dietary constraints to a better life?

When young adults leave home to go to college, life throws a host of new challenges at them. Philosophy curricula try to include courses that reflect on life's challenges and on how to cope with them. There is a recent move toward courses with titles like 'Resilience,' 'Philosophy of Life,' or 'The Big Questions.' Also, moral philosophy and moral psychology courses have come to include such reflection. There are many ways to use the material in this book in such courses.

The chapters are self-contained which makes it easy to integrate them in a broader syllabus. Or one could build a whole course around the book. A slower-paced way of doing this is to split up each chapter over two weeks. I have included discussion questions for each chapter. In a faster-paced course, one could read a chapter one week and then complement it with the suggested additional materials the next week. I selected materials that are accessible and invite philosophical reflection and discussion. With these materials, the book could also function as a textbook for philosophy and literature or philosophy and film courses.

Each topic is addressed in a series of short essays that are written with an eye to classroom discussion. My focus is on philosophical puzzles. These puzzles are found in ordinary life, in poetry and literature, and in current social problems. I draw on the complexity of our lives and muddle through various considerations that pull in different directions when dealing with the puzzles in question. So, if coping is a bit of muddling through, then this book is a philosophical muddling through how we muddle through life's challenges.

This is not a self-help book. Coping strategies tend to work best in the dark. Thinking too hard about them makes them less effective. It's like doing high-fives. You should focus not on the other person's hand but on their elbow. The philosopher describes the hands meeting in mid-air and creating vibrations—there is your clap. But don't think about philosophy when you are trying to get a nice, clean clap. Look at the elbows instead. Only listen to the philosopher if you are curious to know what is really happening. Philosophers are not therapists. Therapists heal. Philosophers edify. Granted, the two are not mutually exclusive: They may cross-fertilize—healing may bring edification in its wake and vice versa. But their primary purpose is different.

I have tried to shun philosophical jargon and make the writing accessible to students who are new to philosophy. This is not an academic

book with footnotes and references documenting that so-and-so said this-and-that. Many of the ideas in this book can be found in a more academic format in my earlier published work.

Chapter 1 draws on 'The Value of Hope' (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 59(3), 1999). Chapter 2 can be traced to 'Secular Hopes in the Face of Death' (in Rochelle Green (ed.), *Theories of Hope: Exploring Alternative Affective Dimensions of Human Experience*, London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018). A shorter version of Chapter 3 can be found in 'What Is This Thing Called Love?' (in Adrienne Martin (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Love in Philosophy*, New York: Routledge, 2019). Chapter 4 is based on ideas from 'Apologies' (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 108(1), 2008) and 'Must I Be Forgiven?' (*Analysis*, 69(2), 2009). Chapter 5 combines ideas from 'Sour Grapes and Character Planning' (*Journal of Philosophy*, 89(2), 1992) and 'The Intentional Acquisition of Mental States' (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 55(4), 1995). 'Don't Cry over Spilled Milk' in Chapter 6 is a popular rendering of 'The meaning of "darn it!"' written jointly with Wlodek Rabinowicz (in Iwao Hirose and Andrew Reisner (eds.), *Weighing and Reasoning: Themes from the Philosophy of John Broome*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

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