

## Plato or Prozac?

*He may not dress as nicely as your therapist; he prescribes Socrates instead of Xanax; he doesn't take August off; but he still charges \$100 per hour. Yes, Manhattan, the personal philosopher is here to cure what ails you. Alex Kuczynski spends a few days with men and women who might not resolve your commitment issues but know what "hermeneutics" means.*

Dr. Louis Marinoff may bear a certain resemblance to Sigmund Freud, and he charges \$100 an hour to people seeking emotional guidance—but don't call him a therapist. No, Dr. Marinoff is a philosopher. And, joined by a number of his peers, Dr. Marinoff, a professor of philosophy at the City University of New York's City College, is trying to take philosophy out of academia and onto the couch. Depressed? Try Plato, not Prozac. Marriage trouble? Kant's your man. In short, if you're worried about the lack of progress you made with your Jungian analyst or feminist psychotherapist or Freudian-Lacanian psychopharmacologist—maybe it's time for your very own personal philosopher.

There were plenty of them to choose from in New York at the end of July. More than 60 "philosophical counselors," as they like to call themselves, gathered at the CUNY Graduate Center, across from Bryant Park, for the Third International Conference on Philosophical Practice. The philosophers—who are mostly university professors—were there to discuss how they would wrest the world of neurosis away from psychiatrists, psychotherapists, marriage counselors and social workers who make their living off New Yorkers' angst. And why not? How many Ph.D.'s make \$100 an hour?

It was the afternoon of July 23, and the chianti was flowing, the wheels of brie bore plastic-knife bite marks, the classical guitarist was working his way through a Hungarian rhapsody. A crowd of philosophy professors, graduate students and a handful of curious psychotherapists were eagerly awaiting talks such as, "Which Philosophers or Philosophical Concepts Are Particularly Suited to a Philosophical Counseling Session?" The women wore flowing skirts, sandals with socks, silver jewelry; the men favored saggy khaki pants, ponytails, sandals with socks—or Hush Puppies.

"Driese!" shouted a tall blonde woman with swinging silver jewelry as she ran toward a short man with blonde curly hair, wearing a tweed suit. "I haven't seen you since the Second International." He turned out to be Driese Boele from the Netherlands, editor in chief of one of the movement's first journals, *Filosofische Praktijk*, and a bona fide conference celebrity, a sort of Mick Jagger of the world of philosophical counseling. They started discussing theorists, which they pronounced "tea-orists."

Nearby, a doctor of philosophy from Hawaii named Russell was arguing that psychotherapy and psychiatry just don't cut it, particularly on the midlife issues. "Someone going through a midlife crisis is not suffering from a pathology," he said. "They are having a crisis of values. Up until a

certain point in one's life, X, Y, and Z were important. Now that you *have* X, Y, and Z, who will tell you what is important? You don't need a psychiatrist for that. You need a philosopher."

"A philosophical counselor will grapple with questions that your therapist won't—questions like, 'does God exist?' 'Should I undertake political action?' 'What happens after death?' and 'What is the nature of love?'" said Dr. James Elliott, a grandfatherly figure who wore a Greek fisherman's cap throughout the conference and who, with his wife, Dr. Kathy Elliott, counsels about 20 patients a week in Lafayette, LA. A psychotherapist will say, 'Sorry, that stuff is all up to you.' A philosophical counselor will delve deeper into the question and give you more help with those big, whopping existential problems."

But therapists aren't buying.

"Would you go for treatment of your health to someone who was way, way outside the training modes you are used to?" asked Dr. Dorothy Cantor, former President of the American Psychological Association and a psychotherapist in New Jersey. "Some people would say Yes. I would say *caveat emptor*—let the buyer beware."

"The whole history of medicine and psychology is littered with overblown efficacy claims," argued Dr. Randall Marshall, an assistant professor of clinical psychiatry at Columbia University's New York State Psychiatric Institute. "Why did people apply leeches for 500 years?"

Between lectures, Dr. Marinoff gave a reporter an example of how philosophical counseling works. He said he had recently treated a woman who complained that her dead brother's spirit was bugging her.

"Psychotherapists would say she's re-creating the guilt triggered by her brother's death, that it's some deep-seated unresolved psychological problem," he said. "But it may be possible, according to some philosophical systems, that there was something there. I am there to help the client better understand her belief system and not to offer criticism as a psychotherapist might, to pick out any inconsistencies."

"People go to philosophical counselors for the same reasons they go to anyone in the counsel-dispensing professions, with a view to getting a meaningful dialogue going, and with some end in sight," he said.

Then Dr. Marinoff took the stage. He spoke darkly of the scarcity of academic positions for students in philosophy; he discussed the American Society for Philosophy, Counseling and Psychotherapy, of which he is president, and the society's plans to open a national headquarters in New York this year. "And remember," he said, "there are hundreds of potential clients for every philosophical practitioner." A tiny, hopeful shudder of applause went through the audience.

Later, two doctoral students from Canada, Stephen Hare and Alexander Boston, chatted about whether they might become philosophical counselors—a job choice driven largely by the fact that, in academia, there are literally hundreds of applicants for each teaching job in a university philosophy department. Mr. Hare—tall, oxford shirt, gold aviator glasses, eager, gap-toothed David Letterman smirk—said "I understand that, in the United States, business ethics counseling—a related field to philosophical counseling—is a \$3 billion-a-year industry. I'm very excited about that."

Mr. Boston—*Men in Black* baseball cap, earring, Ray Bradbury paperback—agreed. "Yeah," he said, "I'm not really sure what the future is for your average Ph.D. in philosophy."

Did the young men see themselves sitting cross-legged at the top of a remote mountain and receiving visitors?

"I'm thinking more along the lines of Woody Allen movies," said Mr. Boston. "I could be one of those wise old guys he consults when he's thinking about death."

Did the philosophers have any other plans besides helping rid New York of psychiatrists?

"Maybe see some musicals," said Mr. Boston. Is *La Cage* still playing?"

Philosophical counselors are not covered by insurance and have yet to be licensed by the state, but Professor Marinoff will begin lobbying the State Legislature this fall to change that, and is also planning to hold "philosophers forums" at Barnes & Noble stores starting in September to introduce the public to the notion of philosophical counseling.

According to *Essays on Philosophical Counseling*, the movement's nominal handbook, philosopher-counselors enter into dialogue with a patient, using examples from recognized philosophers to answer questions such as: "What does happiness consist of? How should friendship be conducted? How is one to educate? How should one deal with one's enemies? What do sickness and death mean? What does it mean to be a man or a woman?"

The book also offers handy legal guidelines ("Sex with a client or even a former client is unethical, malpractice, and, in some jurisdictions, a felony, i.e. a criminal act . . . Disaster hovers over the tempted philosophical counselor") and trial sessions. In one, the counselor applies the philosophical rules of the Hypothetical Syllogism and Material Implication to a series of complaints from his counselee, who is, tellingly, a philosophy professor just denied tenure. "I am denied tenure [therefore] I am forced to get some menial job [therefore] all my graduate school years are wasted [therefore] I am a damn waste of life." The counselor points out that the counselee is a victim of "fallacious thinking." Problem solved.

In another case study, a patient can't bring himself to buy a car because he believes "All car dealers are slimeballs"; the counselor points out that the patient has therefore concluded that "I

will be made a fool of [if I attempt to buy a car]." After the counselor again points out the patient's error of fallacious thinking. "He was satisfactorily able to purchase a car."

But what if your problem is something less existential—say, a marriage falling apart?

"Well, you would come in and say 'My marriage is falling apart'," said Professor Marinoff. "We would have a talk about what is expected from one another in marriage, what are the obligations of marriage, what rights if any, what claims does one have over another. Are there intellectual conflicts, emotional conflicts? And of course, different counselors have different philosophers, so every approach would be different."

"That sounds just like—marriage counseling," said Columbia University's Dr. Marshall. "Some of this sounds suspiciously like cognitive therapy"—a traditional psychotherapeutic approach.

James Elliott of Louisiana admitted that philosophical counseling does have an element of "psychophobia"—but that makes it perfect for people who are afraid of discussing their private feelings with a psychotherapist, "because you can just enter into a rational debate—should I get married?—should I do this or that?—as an objective viewer."

A devotee of daily Zen meditation, Dr. Marinoff said he uses mostly Eastern philosophy, as well as game theory and decision theory, to help his clients tackle problems—"but," he said "there are people who love Heidegger and who will find a way to apply his ontology to their lives. It's really an art form. If you were seeing a philosophical counselor, you would ultimately find the counselor with whom you had a rapport, who identified with philosophers you comprehend."

*Essays on Philosophical Counseling* says that some philosophers are better suited to certain crises than others. The work of Immanuel Kant crops up in the chapter on marital counseling. The dark Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard pops up in the discussions of death. In one of the conference's sessions—"The Role of Philosophical Counseling for Drug Users"—a professor from England discussed how he used Socratic dialogues and Plato's *Republic* to teach drug addicts how to relate to the world in a responsible way.

"I will piss off psychologists by saying this," said Professor Marinoff, as he sat in a darkened auditorium during the conference. "But this is a parent discipline to psychology. We study psychology; they don't study philosophy. There is a philosophy of psychology; there is no psychology of philosophy. We encompass what they do. We came first."

Therapists contacted by *The Observer* said that the philosophers had an out-of-date image of psychotherapy.

"One of the beauties of our field is that psychotherapy is always evolving," said Dr. Cantor, the former president of the American Psychological Association. "If you start with an erroneous premise—like they seem to be doing—you can build all kinds of logic on it. I think they are looking at some very old modalities of therapy. Freud would not recognize what is happening in

psychotherapy today any more than Socrates would recognize what they are doing. They sound very fringe."

Dr. Cantor said she believed that philosophical counseling could be harmful. "It reinforces people's defense against feeling and denying a whole part of the human condition," she said. We are not just governed in our actions and relationships by intellect."

"It's clearly on the fringes of her understanding," said an un-Zen Professor Marinoff in a later telephone conversation.

On the Thursday after the conference began, Stanley Chan, a social worker and philosophical counselor at the Ontario Cancer Institute Princess Margaret Hospital in Toronto, led a workshop titled "On Time and Dying." The conference program described Mr. Chan's lecture this way: "The terminally ill who are confronted with the truth of the inevitability of their impending nonexistence are said to be acutely conscious of their temporality. Why is this so?"

Outside the 18th-floor conference room, the sun was shining. You could look out the windows and see people walking down the street, sitting in Bryant Park, eating sandwiches, talking, laughing. They did not seem aware of their temporality.

"If you can deny the existence of time," said the excited Mr. Chan, explaining a theory of time espoused by philosopher John E. McTaggart, "then there is no change, and if there is no change, there is no death."

He placed clear sheets on a projector. The words "The Dying" flashed up on the screen. Another sheet illustrated a passage from the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus: "So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since to long as we exist death is not with us, but when death occurs, then we do not exist."

Mr. Chan's voice boomed: "The greatest fear of dying is ..." He paused. "Being—out—of—sight!" he shouted. "Being out of mind! Being buried! And most important of all"—he lowered his voice—"being forgotten."

"We do all sorts of things to assure that people will remember us," he said. "Write a book, teach classes, have children, make museums, build libraries"—he gestured out the window toward the New York Public Library—"and it is all in vain. But I tell my patients, What should we be worrying about what happens after the last breath? Did you worry about what happens before you were born? Sure, your parents told you stuff about what life was like before you were around, but do you really remember any of it?"

"Of course," he said, "it is up to the dying person if they really buy this stuff."

And if the patients are there because their spouse has run off with the next-door neighbor, it's up to them if they really want to discuss some philosopher they never read in college. And in New

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York City, a nexus of psychobabble that is host by some estimates to at least 300 schools that teach various forms of psychotherapy, philosophical counseling may be just another employment for bruised egos and thwarted ids, a psychic placebo, a sympathetic ear.

But Professor Marinoff remains stalwart.

"It's already in demand," he remarked in a telephone conversation the week after he had closed up the conference, after the sock-and-sandals crowd had dispersed, after the tweedy philosophical celebrities had flown home to the Netherlands, after the doctoral students had caught at least *Reni*. "The world is more complex now and that is why philosophers are in more demand," he said. "Philosophy doesn't belong in the classroom any more. It's only an historical accident that it got institutionalized. Let's hope it can go into remission and become useful again."