



THE NEW INSIGHT

Today's practical philosophers are finding a public hungry to dust off and discuss the big issues looming since Socrates' day.

Bettijane Levine, Times Staff Writer

On the night of the recent blackout in New York, Chris Phillips left his sublet apartment and wandered into nearby Washington Square, where hundreds had gathered to share their anxieties in the dark. Phillips, a philosopher by trade, did what philosophers have done for nearly 2,500 years: He engaged the crowd in Socratic dialogue.

“We discussed the nature of community,” Phillips says. “Dozens joined in to explore their own thoughts and connect with their neighbors. It was wonderful.”

Phillips, of Williamsburg, Va., spends his days roaming the country, bringing such discussions to schools, prisons, libraries, bookstores and coffee shops. He’s part of a burgeoning movement to make philosophy more relevant in the modern world, more useful for ordinary people, and more fun.

Toward that same end, two Stanford University philosophy professors just launched “Philosophy Talk” on National Public Radio. Their motto: “We question everything but your intelligence.” Modeled on NPR’s zany “Car Talk” show, hosts Kenneth Taylor and John Perry say they’ll discuss current dilemmas along with such timeless subjects as: what is truth, happiness, beauty, and when is it acceptable to hate.

Colleges and universities have begun offering courses that link philosophy to popular culture. And philosophy forums now take place regularly at bookstores and coffee shops around the country, where dozens show up to debate the world’s problems and their own.

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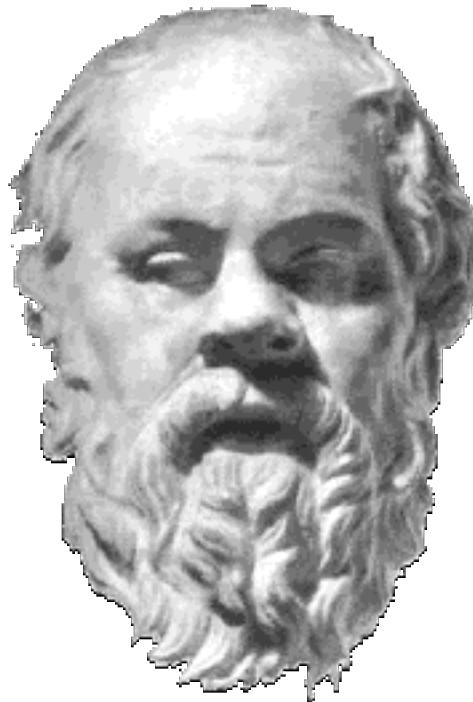
PHILOSOPHERS' CHESS

For those whose problems are way too personal for open discussion, there’s philosophical counseling—a form of therapy in which philosophers, not psychologists, help explore a client’s angst. Even

huge, multinational corporations have taken a shine to philosophy and regularly invite philosophers to top-level discussions on corporate ethics.

In the minds of many people, though, philosophy is still a calcified subject best suited to Ivory Tower types whose teachings never leave the university. For them, the old joke still rings true: “How do you get a philosopher off your porch? Pay him for the pizza.”

All that is beginning to change. The new practical philosophers are bringing critical thinking directly to the people. They are translating the dense, ancient writings of Socrates, Plato, Lao Tzu and Confucius into modern lingo and accessible wisdom. They are writing self-help books based on philosophical principles—books sometimes mocked by academicians for their dumbed-down approach but bought by the same hordes who seek answers from meditation, Oprah, psychologists, Dr. Laura and Dr. Phil.



Philosophy, its proponents say, is an alternative to all that. It’s a way to think for yourself and to find satisfying guidelines for living. It’s a way to analyze complex issues through the prism of values, ethics and character. Philosophy (which means love of wisdom) is a search for answers that have made sense through the ages.

And it’s a growing blip on the general public’s radar. Between 15 and 40 people show up at the monthly forums hosted at Barnes & Noble in L.A.’s Westside Pavilion shopping mall. Katie Layman, the store’s community relations director, organized the first one after she noticed the popularity of the book “Plato, Not Prozac: Applying Eternal Wisdom to Everyday Problems” (Harper Collins, 1999) by philosopher Lou Marinoff.

“People seemed desperate to discuss the deeper issues of existence that were troubling them,” she says. And the desperation has remained. “Last month we spoke about the nature of happiness. One person said people just want material things to make them happy. Another asked if it’s possible to have happiness without misery, and wasn’t sure there *is* such a thing as happiness. And one young guy asked, ‘What if what makes you happy isn’t what makes your family happy?’ ”



STANLEY WAS DEEPLY DISAPPOINTED
WHEN, HIGH IN THE TIBETAN MOUNTAINS,
HE FINALLY FOUND HIS TRUE SELF.

Volunteer moderator Georgianna Streeter, who’s working toward a doctorate in philosophy at Loyola Marymount University, “kept broadening and deepening the discussion, turning it like a diamond, to expose all its facets,” Layman says. And at the close, she says, “I think people felt a kind of joy that they’d delved into some things that had been bothering them. It’s a terrific mental workout.”

People are always searching for useful principles to apply to their personal lives, says Marinoff, a leading proponent of philosophical counseling and founder of the American Philosophical Practitioners Assn. “In ancient times, philosophy was a guide to the art of living—and all philosophers were counselors,” he says.

One of Marinoff’s clients, a 40-ish former entertainment industry executive who does not want his name printed, explains how the philosophical counseling worked for him.

“My wife wanted a divorce as I was being downsized out of my job. Then I learned she was having an affair with my brother-in-law. It was unthinkable. I felt naive and ridiculous, questioned everything I’d ever believed.” He took Prozac, consulted his pastor, his lawyer and went into psychotherapy. All were helpful, he says, but important questions remained unaddressed. He began counseling sessions with Marinoff to confront “the big issues”: What is life about? On what basis could he trust people? What was ethical for him to do in the divorce and in regard to his children?

“I had some huge insights,” he says. “I’d hate for anyone to go through this, but I saw there’s a silver lining. If this kind of bomb drops on you, and you hook up with a good philosophical counselor, you can find more clarity and meaning in your life than you actually had at the start.”

PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELING

Markate Daly began offering philosophical therapy about a year ago in Berkeley. It’s a part-time gig because clients aren’t all that plentiful, the philosopher says. “But when they come, they almost all say the same thing:” “I’m all messed up, I don’t know what to do, and I don’t want to talk about my mother anymore.” Most have already had psychological counseling, she says, but have no clue “what to do when their job or relationship goes wrong, their lives aren’t working.”

Daly doesn’t provide the right answers, she says, merely the right questions. “I help people think clearly about who they are, and then connect who they are to what they do.”

The traditional counseling professions, however, aren’t exactly embracing this approach. Dorothy Cantor, a psychologist in private practice and a past president of the American Psychological Assn., states the group’s concerns. “The general public doesn’t distin-

guish well among different types of counselors. The majority don't know the difference between a psychiatrist and psychologist, let alone between a licensed professional counselor and a social worker." Philosophical counselors are none of those and "don't have adequate training to recognize symptoms of mental illness in clients who come to them for help."

Marinoff, whose organization offers three-day courses to prepare philosophers to become counselors, counters that philosophical counseling is a kind of "therapy for the sane," and delves into those human dilemmas where philosophy, not psychology, would be clarifying.



They're the same kind of dilemmas that TV's "Seinfeld" and "The Simpsons" have dithered over. In fact, students nowadays can study "Seinfeld and Philosophy" at Humboldt State and "Philosophy and 'The Simpsons'" at UC Berkeley. And Brown University now offers a pre-college philosophy course based on "The Matrix."

What do "Seinfeld" and Socrates have in common? "A lot," says William Irwin, a philosophy professor who edited the books those classes use. He explains that Socrates roamed the Greek marketplace about 500 BC, counseling youths that the unexamined life was not worth living. Jerry Seinfeld and his pals simply took that advice to comic extremes. Is soup a meal? Can you break up with someone over the phone? Can being the master of your domain bring true happiness?

Some of that self-questioning has the resonance of true philosophical insight, Irwin says. "When Seinfeld was offered a *ménage à trois*, he declined, because he didn't want to become 'an orgy person.' He knew his values and character would go against such an act. That's not the height of virtue ethics, but it's virtue ethics all the same."

Ethics and ethicists are making their way into other areas as well—hospitals and corporate boardrooms, for instance.

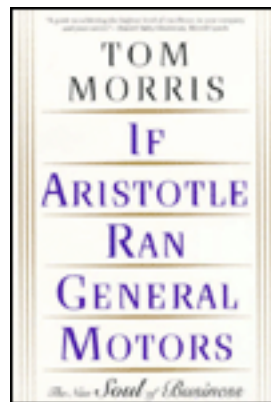
Increasing numbers of philosophers are signing on with hospitals as ethicists, says Ed Weiss, who works with hospitals in Chicago to help "apply philosophy to assist in making medical decisions:

Such issues as what should the protocol be for organ transplants? What conditions should exist? Why should Mickey Mantle, with his drinking, be able to get a liver transplant?"

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Tom Morris, a philosopher with a doctorate from Yale, left his job as a Notre Dame professor eight years ago to become a “public philosopher.” It was a job description he invented for himself, he says. “I’d always been an academic, teaching and writing articles that about 37 people could understand. I thought that was what my life would be.”

Then he was asked to speak at the Chamber of Commerce in South Bend, Ind. He led a session on ethics that unexpectedly opened a floodgate of speaking invitations. “People seemed starved for philosophy. They’d say, ‘We never talk about important things anymore, like we did when we were young and sat up late discussing good and evil, life and death, the meaning of it all.’ ”



Word of mouth spread. “Soon I was flying around the world. I had to hire a speaker’s bureau to represent me. There was this tremendous pent-up desire for ideas that have stood the test of time, ideas that people can trust.” Morris’ résumé now includes a book—*If Aristotle Ran General Motors*—and client lists that include huge multinational corporations, teaching, government and public-service groups.

“These people often lack time and resources to get the big picture, to reflect. What is success? Or fulfillment in work? What is ethics about? Is it about staying out of trouble or creating strength?” Morris says ethics “is not about rules and laws, it’s about character.”


A mainstay of his presentations is from the ancient Greeks—four foundations of sustainable excellence, without which, Morris says, no enterprise can succeed. They are Truth, Beauty, Goodness and Unity, philosophical concepts most corporate honchos are not exactly used to dealing with during business hours.

“But the necessity for truth and for the experience of goodness as a moral dimension in our business lives is ignored at great peril to any organization,” Morris says.

Those same foundations are the basis for all successful lives, says roving philosopher Phillips, who brings philosophical dialogue to maximum-security prisons, as well as schools and nursing homes. At one prison, convicts recently voted to discuss the topics What is good? and What is courage?

“One convict said, ‘It takes chutzpah to rob a bank, but is that courage? And is it courage if your goal is to get money you haven’t earned, versus courage it takes to rescue a drowning child when your goal is to save a life?’ ”

Phillips has been holding such dialogues with adolescents in the Mission area of San Francisco for a few years, he says. “My hope is, that when the time comes for them to make pivotal, fateful decisions relating to gangs and violent acts ... they will know how to think about what they are, or are not, about to do. These are kids whose family members are in gangs, who are expected to drop out of school and join. They are also kids who have by now discussed philosophically whether and why a gang is a bad type of group.”

Phillips says he started all this because “as a student of philosophy, it only takes a cursory look at human history to see that even the greatest civilizations have a shelf life before they go into a downward spiral. And that is because people stop talking to each other in meaningful ways, and get caught up in their own self-serving ends.” 

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