WHEN PHILOSOPHERS BECOME THERAPISTS

The philosophical-counselling movement aims to apply heady, logical insights to daily life.

By Nick Romeo

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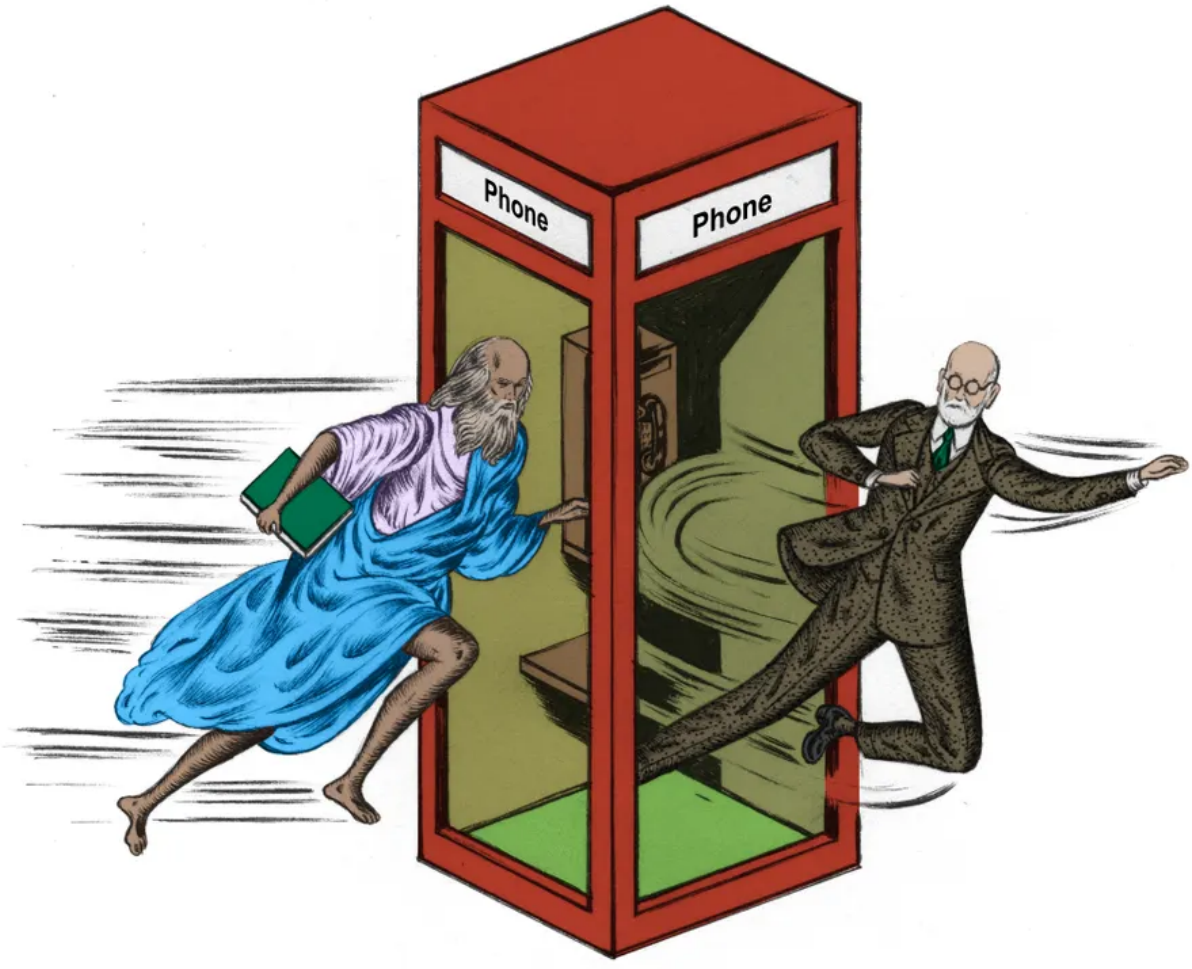

Around five years ago, David—a pseudonym—realized that he was fighting with his girlfriend all the time. On their first date, he had told her that he hoped to have sex with a thousand women before he died. They'd eventually agreed to have an exclusive relationship, but monogamy remained a source of tension. "I always used to tell her how much it bothered me," he recalled. "I was an asshole."

An Israeli man now in his mid-thirties, David felt conflicted about other life issues. Did he want kids? How much should he prioritize making money? In his twenties, he'd tried psychotherapy several times; he would see a therapist for a few months, grow frustrated, stop, then repeat the cycle. He developed a theory. The therapists he saw wanted to help him become better adjusted given his current world view—but perhaps his world view was wrong. He wanted to examine how defensible his values were in the first place.

One day, a housemate showed him a book called "Philosophy, Humor, and the Human Condition," by the French Israeli philosopher Lydia Amir. Amir, the housemate explained, was his cousin. In addition to teaching part-time at Tufts University, she offered "philosophical counselling" to private clients. David had never heard of philosophical counselling. But over the next few weeks he read and enjoyed Amir's book. He watched an episode of an Israeli current-affairs TV show, "London and Kirschenbaum," in which she debated the merits of philosophical counselling with the hosts. "She actually looked like she enjoyed it when they tried to take her down," David said. He decided to contact her, and they arranged some online sessions. During their first few meetings, "I kind of tested her," David told me. He steered the discussion to abstract ideas from one of his favorite thinkers, the seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza. They discussed Spinoza's ethics and his views on God and the infinite. Amir's depth of knowledge

impressed him, but she was also quick to acknowledge when he made insightful points. He started revealing more about his personal dilemmas.

David worked with Amir for several years, sometimes meeting a few times each week. Usually, they discussed a personal issue in his life with the aim of posing a philosophical question. Uncertainty about monogamy, for instance, generated the question "What does freedom mean?" Worries about money led Amir to ask, "What role does wealth play in a good life?" Amir would guide David through multiple philosophical approaches to such questions. "Lydia is smart," he told me. "She just presents you with all kinds of things and lets you see what you connect to. You have a whole bank of knowledge, with thousands of years of experience from philosophers." The sessions were a hybrid between therapy and an academic seminar. Between meetings, Amir sometimes gave him reading assignments: Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Hume.

David gradually reconsidered his view of monogamy. "Lydia put me in the mind-set of, Let's imagine you get what you want. Your wife goes off and has ten orgasms with a handsome basketball player. How do you feel? Do I really want polygamy for both of us, or do I just want absolute freedom for me combined with control over her?" After conversations with Amir about Stoicism, Nietzsche, and other philosophers, he understood freedom in a new way—not as the ability to do whatever he wanted but as a conscious decision to live in a certain way. "You can actually make a choice to limit yourself," he told me. "I stopped looking at my wife as someone limiting my freedom. I took responsibility for my choice."

While we spoke, David, an intense, dark-eyed man, grew excited. "So Nietzsche said something cool, right? He said that everybody searches for power, but the weak search for it everywhere, while the strong will search in very specific places." David applied this insight in his own life by noticing his drive for power and expressing it more selectively. He no longer tried to win every argument or prove that he was right in trivial situations; he and his wife—they married five years ago—began fighting less often. Meanwhile, he

focussed on pursuing power in the financial sphere, shifting from a job in digital marketing to commercial real estate.

Amir is one of a small but growing number of philosophers who provide some form of individual counselling. In the United States, two professional associations for philosophical counsellors, the National Philosophical Counseling Association (N.P.C.A.) and the American Philosophical Practitioners Association (A.P.P.A.), list dozens of philosophers who can help you with your problems. Italy has multiple professional organizations for different forms of philosophical counselling, and similar organizations exist in Germany, India, Spain, Norway, and several other countries. In Austria, Italy, and Romania, universities offer master's degrees in the field. Everyone should study philosophy, Amir told me; since few people do, she argues that philosophical counselling fills an important need. "If he changed, it's because he got educated," she said of David's transformation. "And he got educated because he wanted a philosophical education. If something good happened to him, it happened because of philosophy, not me. I just enabled the encounter."

Amir was born in Paris, in 1955, the daughter of a Jewish Holocaust survivor. When she was an infant, the family moved to Israel. Her father, a diplomat, travelled frequently for work, and her childhood was spent in Israel, France, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Algeria, and Senegal. Her mother was a political journalist, and their houses were full of books; when she was seventeen, she found a volume of Plato and became captivated by the dialogues. She initially studied math and philosophy as an undergraduate, at the University of Tel Aviv, but much of her interest in math was philosophical. (What's "natural" about the natural-number series?) She decided to focus solely on philosophy, eventually writing a dissertation on concepts of personal redemption in Spinoza and Nietzsche.

Amir's doctoral adviser encouraged her to supplement her theoretical

analyses with concrete personal examples, and she recognized two major things in her life that she wanted to change. First, she wanted to quit smoking. Though she was writing about personal freedom, she often felt controlled by the pleasure of cigarettes. Most of the advice that she read involved reducing temptation: the idea was to spend less time around other smokers, and to get rid of cigarettes and ashtrays. Amir did the opposite, carrying cigarettes with her everywhere. "I wanted it to be a free choice at every moment," she recalled. "The question was: What kind of vision of yourself do you want to have?"

Amir was also afraid of flying. She's still afraid, travels frequently, and swears that each flight will be her last. "I've accepted that I feel as if I'm going to die before every flight. I don't try to fight that feeling," she told me. When she finished her Ph.D., she hadn't flown in a decade; she concluded, philosophically, that death was preferable to a life in which her freedom was limited by fear, and flew to Paris despite her anxiety. It seemed unacceptable to her to study philosophical ideas of freedom but not to live by them. "I decided that anything is better than to live like that," she said.

In the late nineteen-eighties and early nineties, Amir taught philosophy at various universities in Tel Aviv and lectured in a continuing-education program for adults. Some of her adult students wanted to talk to her about their personal issues, and she gave them her phone number. They started referring friends. A journalist covered her work, which brought more clients. As more strangers began asking for time, she started charging for private sessions on a sliding scale. (Her current rate is around a hundred and fifty dollars an hour.)

Philosophy is both a natural and a strange resource for helping people resolve the problems of life. Ancient philosophical traditions such as Stoicism and Buddhism focussed on practical ethics and techniques for alleviating suffering, but much modern philosophy seems to aim to express suffering, rather than reduce it. "Life is deeply steeped in suffering," Schopenhauer

wrote. “At bottom its course is always tragic, and its end is even more so.”

“My view is that it’s about thinking,” Amir said, of her counselling work. “It’s not developing skills of listening and being empathic, which philosophers are not especially trained to do. It’s personal tutoring in philosophy.” There is, she claims, “no other discipline that teaches you how to think better when it relates to your life.”

To really understand philosophical counselling, Amir suggested, I would need to try a session. As it happened, she’d soon be attending an international conference on philosophical counselling, in Timișoara, Romania. We met in the high-ceilinged atrium of the Romanian Academy near the city’s historic downtown. More than fifty philosophers from over a dozen countries had gathered, and the conference felt like the reunion of a large and eccentric family. Amir spotted me from across the room, but was intercepted by Spanish, Romanian, and American colleagues before she reached me.

I asked about her flight.

“Ah, you remembered,” she said, smiling. “Not good, but I am here.”

We made our way into a small auditorium, where Amir would be giving the conference’s keynote address. Her goal, she told me, was “to get people excited.” Pacing before the lectern with a microphone, she threw some shade on traditional psychotherapists: “They cannot offer you ideals. They cannot offer you a world view,” she said. She suggested that philosophy alone was capable of sparking transformation by exposing people to many viewpoints and increasing their capacity to assess them rationally. The crowd seemed delighted.

That afternoon, we sat at a table at a restaurant beside the Vega River for an individual session. Amir pushed her long blond hair away from her eyes, took

a sip of tea, and asked me what I wanted to discuss. For the past few years, I said, I'd been working on a book; now I was waiting for it to be published, and its fate was mostly out of my hands. I'd always known that its success would be judged partly by its sales. As publication loomed, this fact troubled me more and more. I felt almost queasy when I thought about it.

"Your first book will be published soon, which is wonderful," Amir said. "Its success may be evaluated based on the sales, which is ridiculous. If it doesn't sell well, this does not mean it's not good. But it's an element you cannot control."

"Yes," I said. "That's about it."

She took a sip of tea. "So. What is so maddening about not controlling something?"

I thought for a bit. "Well, if you perceive that other things you care about depend on what you can't control, that can be maddening."

"Yeah," Amir said. "But isn't it usually like that?"

"Like what?"

"With everything. You cannot control that a flight will go right. Then you can lose your life, your leg, your luggage, your wife. Usually, the things we cannot control are not just small things." She swept one hand through the air, as if to apply the point to the rowers in sculls slicing through the brown river, and to the people in cars buzzing across a bridge overhead. "Now—we have your notion of the uncontrollable. That is something to explore. We have your perception of success. Third would be the relationship between success and the thing that is not controllable." For a while, we discussed different definitions of success. Then she turned the conversation to Spinoza. "He says that the person who wants to live without fear needs to live without hope. Most people want to have just the bright side of things, without the

dark side. But it's the same coin," she said, her eyes narrowing. Gaining peace of mind, she suggested, would come at a price. If I achieved detachment, I wouldn't care if the book sold well.

We were near the end of our hour. "My first book was sold out eight months after it was published," Amir said. "It's an academic work, but after that I had multiple contracts for future books. I lost something. I became chained to my writing desk. You may think success just means more possibilities, but, once one possibility is realized, many other things are no longer possible. You may look back on these months as a time of freedom." If I were to undertake more sessions, she said, we would go deeper into these ideas; I might read from Seneca and Epictetus. There was no moment of shattering insight during the session. But, afterward, I felt a pleasant broadening of perspective.

On my second day in Romania, I observed a philosophical-counselling session between Adam Lalák, a thirty-year-old man from Prague, and Lou Marinoff, a seventy-two-year-old professor of philosophy at the City College of New York and a co-founder of A.P.P.A. Lalák had finished a master's degree in philosophy at Cambridge, then held various private-sector and nonprofit jobs. He was now aspiring to become a philosophical counsellor. Lalák and Marinoff sat facing each other in an empty conference room. Pale sunlight spilled through a high window onto the wood table between them.

"So I turned thirty about a month ago," Lalák began, stroking his dense blond beard. "And it feels like I have been pulled in two very opposing directions. I'm feeling like this age is bringing a lot of responsibility, like I'm supposed to be grownup and get a job and a family. And I'm feeling like I really want to cut all the bullshit. I want to get to the things which I find very important, which is, for example, philosophy. And philosophy is not very practical."

Marinoff, who had a salt-and-pepper beard and mobile, bushy eyebrows, held a pen and jotted notes as Lalák spoke. “So this is partly a clash of values,” he said. He asked Lalák about his girlfriend, his parents, his past jobs and future prospects. The crux of Lalák’s dilemma was that he wanted to do something interesting and make a decent living. Both might be possible, but getting a doctorate in philosophy and hoping for the best was financially risky.

“Have you had any encounters with Asian philosophy?” Marinoff asked.

“I like to read the Tao Te Ching, but I haven’t really studied it,” Lalák said.

Marinoff wrote in his notebook. “Wonderful, wonderful,” he said. “I’ve been with that book for fifty years. . . . It’s been a great guide to me, personally, and the I Ching even more so. I’m going to sort of prescribe something that you could read that may help resolve this tension.” The first part of Marinoff’s prescription was Sartre’s essay “Existentialism Is a Humanism,” which Marinoff suggested could be a useful aid in recognizing whether one is acting authentically; the second was the I Ching, an ancient Chinese divination manual. “There’s a Web site that will allow users to consult it online,” Marinoff said. “So what happens is, you get a hexagram by random means. You’ll reach a phrase or a line or a sentence or two, and it will jump off the page and speak to you. And it will tell you what’s in your heart and your mind. It’s reflecting back to you the advice that you need to give yourself in order to take the better way forward.”

Lalák frowned and wrote something in his own notebook. He was mostly quiet as Marinoff reminisced about his youth, spent “doing unspeakable things with electric guitars and motorcycles,” and recommended meditation over psychedelics. I couldn’t decide whether Marinoff reminded me of an eccentric grandfather advising a young relative or a professor oversharing during office hours. After the session, Lalák seemed politely underwhelmed. “The prescriptions didn’t feel that tailored to me,” he told me. “It was more

like they were just his favorite books. I wonder if he'd assign the same things if I'd had different issues."

Later in the conference, he planned to have a session with an expert on existentialism, and another focussed on Socratic dialogue. "It's not very formalized," he said. "There are no real methods." During my time in Romania, I heard philosophical counsellors champion meditation, psychedelics, wine, and knitting, along with ideas from thinkers such as Foucault, Marx, and Aristotle, who themselves would agree on very little. Rick Repetti, an A.P.P.A. member and a philosophy professor at CUNY with a private counselling practice, told me that getting philosophers to agree is like trying to herd cats; counsellors certified by A.P.P.A. use everything from guided meditations to targeted explorations of existentialist, Kantian, and Stoic philosophy. The National Philosophical Counseling Association, by contrast, emphasizes a method called logic-based therapy. (Both organizations require members to have a master's or a doctorate in philosophy in order to become certified practitioners.)

Some think that the practice of philosophical counselling should be more standardized. Others worry that philosopher-counsellors will miss serious mental-health issues. The two major American professional organizations stress that philosophical counselling can't address certain severe psychiatric disorders, and urge counsellors to refer clients to mental-health providers when their issues do not fit a philosophical scope of practice. Angie Hobbs, a professor of philosopy at the University of Sheffield who doesn't do philosophical counselling, told me that she worries about whether philosophers will know when to make referrals. Lynn Bufka, a clinical psychologist in Maryland who works for the American Psychological Association, said that, as a psychologist with a doctorate, she had needed about four thousand hours of supervised training before she could apply for a psychological-counselling license. "Three days to get the certification, without ongoing supervised experience, would be very concerning for me," she said, referring to the length of training required by A.P.P.A. On the

other hand, some philosophical counsellors frame their work as aimed at resisting the creeping medicalization of life. Living involves many doubts, anxieties, and confusions, and not every perplexity is a pathology; for any human quandary, there's likely a philosopher who has wrestled with it in the past few millennia. Their insights may not confer the sorts of benefits that randomized clinical trials can study, but they're potentially profound.

On the last day of the conference, I met Amir for a late lunch. She wanted to convince me that, despite its heterogeneity, philosophical counselling did have a basic essence. All sorts of interventions, from psychedelics to meditation and fortune-telling, had the potential to help someone. But philosophy was different, because it addressed deep human questions about ethics, purpose, and meaning with logical precision. It was an underused resource. "Just look at a bookstore," she said. "You have shelf after shelf of self-help books, and then philosophy will be in some corner where no one goes."

After lunch, walking through the city, I thought of Wittgenstein, the twentieth-century philosopher. His work on the logical foundations of mathematics can seem impossibly distant from daily life, yet his aim in doing philosophy, he wrote, was "to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle." Philosophers can get stuck in the bottles of their own academic specialties. For them, too, philosophical counselling can be liberating—a way of freeing themselves by illuminating a path for others. ♦