

What Else Can You Do With Philosophy Besides Teach?¹

Elliot D. Cohen, Ph.D.

Elliot D. Cohen, Ph.D., is the Executive Director and co-founder of the National Philosophical Counseling Association, editor in chief and founder of the *International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, and the inventor of Logic-Based Therapy (LBT). Author of numerous books and articles, his recent books on LBT include *The Theory and Practice of Logic-Based Therapy* (2013) and *The Dutiful Worrier: How to Stop Compulsive Worry without Feeling Guilty* (2011). He also writes a popular blog for *Psychology Today* called “*What would Aristotle do?*”

Abstract: This article traces the rise of philosophical counseling in the United States, from its roots in the applied philosophy movement to the establishment of the National Philosophical Counseling Association, including a code of ethical standards for practitioners and a program for certification of philosophical counselors. The article demonstrates, through a brief discussion of the philosophical counseling modality of Logic-Based Therapy (LBT), how individuals who have Masters or Ph.D.’s in philosophy can become certified members of this burgeoning new profession.

Graduate philosophy degrees have generally been seen as useful for teaching philosophy or for use in some other area that might utilize the analytic skills that training in philosophy cultivates. However, this contrasts areas such as psychology, medicine, and law. Thus, the Ph.D. in clinical psychology prepares one to be a psychologist, not just a teacher. The J.D. prepares one to be a lawyer; and the M.D. prepares one to be a physician. Of course, further training is also needed. Thus, a physician must do his residency to obtain his medical license; a lawyer must pass the state bar before being able to practice; and a psychologist must obtain supervised clinical experience in order to be licensed or certified. So, can a Ph.D. (or an M.A.) in philosophy prepare an individual to be a practitioner of philosophy, and subsequent training certify her to practice? In fact, I will suggest that this is not only possible, it is also a reality, although one that is not widely known or acknowledged as is the case in the aforementioned areas. But as poet and musician Bob Dylan prophesized, “The times they are a changin.”

Applied Philosophy and the Emergence of the Philosophical Counseling Movement

In the 1980s, I published a section of the *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* called “Reports on Applying Philosophy.” My purpose was to showcase the credible work in philosophy that non-academic philosophers were doing. Some of these philosophers were working as business managers, others as computer programmers, others as journalists, still others as social workers. Some had gone back to school to earn degrees in medicine and law and they wrote articles about how their training enlightened their practice as doctors and lawyers. However, there were no philosophers who held themselves out expressly as philosophers doing philosophy. Rather, these nonacademic philosophers sought to “blend in.” That is, they were business managers, computer scientists, journalists, doctors, and lawyers rather than philosophers in their own right.

¹ This paper was presented at the National Philosophical Counseling Association session held at the 2014 Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Philadelphia, PA, December 29, 2014.

During these early years, “applied philosophy” was not well accepted among academic philosophers who tended to view it as second rate philosophy.² In the workplace, there was little recognition given to a degree in philosophy as a marketable degree outside the academy. IJAP’s “Reports on Applying Philosophy” aimed at helping to change this perception as well as provide a forum for nonacademic philosophers to discuss how they were making genuine contributions to the world outside the proverbially “Ivory Tower.”

Flash forward to 1991 when I and my colleague, Paul Sharkey, conceived the National Philosophical Counseling Association (NPCA), then known as the Society for Philosophy, Counseling, and Psychotherapy (ASPCP). The founding of this Association, under the auspices of the American Philosophical Association (APA), marked a milestone in the United States for nonacademic philosophical practice, wherein philosophers could practice philosophy without being business managers, journalists, social workers, doctors, lawyers, and so forth. True, there were, at the time, philosophers who were doing medical ethics in hospitals and serving on ethics committees. There were also philosophers who went to Washington to work as congressional aides. In fact, there once was a program sponsored by the APA that arranged for such internships. Programs of this kind also helped to add credibility to the idea that philosophers could make contributions to practice outside the academy.

Shortly after the founding of the NPCA, a number of philosophers from Europe, Israel, and South Africa, among other nations, contacted the NPCA Board. These philosophers were indeed philosophers in their right. They had opened up philosophical practices aimed at helping their clients explore their problems of living from a philosophical perspective. Some considered their services to be therapeutic while others considered it to be educative.³ Nonetheless, here was a new breed of philosopher who provided a model to be emulated by other philosophers in the U.S. who were attracted to the idea that philosophers could actually be philosophers without being academicians at colleges or universities.

Although the idea was no less ancient than Socrates himself who brought philosophy to market, a new movement in applied philosophy was hatched. This does not mean that there were not philosophers here and there in the U.S., at the time, hanging out their shingles. (In fact, I was

² By “applied philosophy” I mean the use of philosophical theories and methods to help people address practical matters. These matters can range from specialized matters such as ethical problems arising in the practice of medicine (for example, end of life questions) to problems of everyday life (for example, relationship problems, midlife crises, and loss of a loved one). A common criticism of applied philosophy is that it is not as rigorous as “pure” philosophy. However, this criticism is confused. Applied philosophy has *both* an empirical dimension as well as a conceptual one. Applied philosophers, after all, address practical matters and therefore need to be mindful of empirical realities (for example, what is the prognosis of a cancer patient?). On the other hand, pure philosophy proceeds “purely” in terms of conceptual analysis, which is largely a priori. To be good, applied philosophy must not only get the facts straight, it must also get the concepts straight. The fact that applied philosophy also has an empirical dimension should not serve to downgrade it as a form of philosophy. Arguably, it makes it that much more challenging.

³ Saying that philosophical counseling is therapeutic does not mean that it is psychotherapeutic. The latter takes a social scientific approach that attempts to identify the underlying causes of mental processes, including dysfunctional ones. In contrast, philosophical counseling is concerned with epistemic justification of beliefs and values. It examines clients’ reasoning, and checks to see if this reasoning is sound. For further discussion on this distinction, see the NPCA statement on the distinction between philosophical and psychological practice. NPCA, “Philosophical Practice,” NPCA website <http://npcassoc.org/philosophical-practice/>

among those who did.) However, it was not until this point in the history of American philosophy that an actual movement came into existence. This is also not to deny the influences of American pragmatism, existentialism, and other philosophical approaches that helped direct the development of applied philosophy and (eventually) give it greater respectability among academicians. However, this did not equate to an association of philosophers in the trenches working as philosophers.

The birth of this new movement was consummated with the NPCA's endorsement of the *Standards of Philosophical Practice*, which I drafted, and the *Standards of Certification in Philosophical Practice*, which Paul Sharkey drafted. Here was the beginning of an exciting new profession in the U.S. in which philosophers could be philosophers and not just business managers, journalists, social workers, and so forth.

As a pioneer of philosophical practice who had been working on my own brand of philosophical practice or counseling, namely Logic-Based Therapy (LBT), since the mid eighties, I can attest to the forlornness of attempting to plow new territory against the currents of status quo perspectives on the nature and merits of philosophy, especially against the popular myth that philosophy can bake no bread. The organization of philosophical practice that the NPCA offered was truly revolutionary. For the first time in the history of applied philosophy, there was a code of ethics for philosophical counselors, and standards for certifying philosophers as practitioners.

Today, the NPCA partners with the Institute of Critical Thinking in offering intensive training workshops in LBT that lead to certification. There are a growing number of philosophers who have received this certification and are taking on clients. The certification program is also offered as a six-week distance learning option. There are presently LBT centers in the US at Purdue University-Northwest and overseas, in Taiwan. Moreover, philosophers throughout the world are now being trained in LBT.

LBT itself grew out of the amalgamation of philosophy with the psychotherapy known as Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), the world's first form of cognitive-behavior therapy invented by psychologist Albert Ellis in the 1950s.⁴ Ellis astutely recognized the great utility of philosophy for psychotherapy, and accordingly built many of the insights of Stoic philosophy into his psychotherapeutic modality. He was extremely supportive of the idea of philosophical counseling, especially LBT.

Philosophy that *Can* Bake Bread: The Applied Philosophy of Logic-Based Therapy

I have always regarded philosophical counseling as the grass roots of applied philosophy, and LBT exemplifies this claim. By becoming an LBT counselor, you are shown how to practice philosophy. This is because LBT provides a coherent, systematic procedure and framework for applying the methods and theories of philosophy in the context of helping people address their

⁴ To say that LBT is an amalgamation of philosophy and psychotherapy does not entail that LBT is itself a form of psychotherapy. This would be to commit the fallacy of composition. The more reasonable conclusion to draw is that it is a form of applied philosophy. This is because LBT uses some ideas of REBT in addition to some from other psychotherapeutic approaches to help adapt its philosophical approach to the context of helping people who seek counseling to overcome problems of living. For example, LBT uses bibliotherapy, a technique used in REBT. However, it uses *philosophical* bibliotherapy; that is, as appropriate, it gives clients assignments to read pertinent philosophical literature.

problems of living. This should become apparent by virtue of the following brief description of the six steps of LBT.

These steps are:

1. Formulate the client's emotional reasoning;
2. Check for fallacies in the premises;
3. Refute any fallacy found;
4. Identify the guiding virtue for each fallacy found;
5. Find a congenial philosophy for each guiding virtue;
6. Apply each philosophy.

All philosophers are trained to formulate the arguments of others, carefully uncovering the assumptions needed to validate enthymematic arguments. LBT engages such logical training in the context of investigating clients' problems of living. Here the goal is to help the client formulate her "emotional reasoning." According to LBT, this reasoning, which takes the form of a practical syllogism (or a chain of such syllogisms), drives the client's behavior and emotions. The LBT counselor helps the client to formulate this reasoning first by listening to the client's problems; asking open-ended questions aimed at seeking greater clarity; and empathetically reflecting back with increased clarity the client's reasoning. Systematically, the LBT counselor facilitates the client's clear description of the problem she perceives, wherein this "report" serves to ground the empirical minor premise of the client's primary emotional reasoning. For example, the client may be distraught about getting passed over for a promotion at work. He may express his dismay about how such a thing could have happened inasmuch as he was a senior member of the firm and deserved it more than anyone else in the firm.

Second, the LBT counselor helps the client to rate or evaluate the perceived problem. For example, what is the client telling himself about getting passed over for a promotion? Is he telling himself that what happened is so dreadfully unfair that it cannot and must not have happened? According to LBT, it is such a value judgment that turns the descriptive content of the purported problem into an emotionally charged object of consciousness—in this case, the object of intense dejection or depression.

Formulation of the client's emotional reasoning is then constructed out of the emotional object and rating of the event or state of affairs in question. For example, the emotional reasoning of the client in the aforementioned example may be along the following lines:

1. People must never treat me unfairly, especially when it comes to things that are very important to me.
2. If people must never treat me in such unfair ways, then if I was passed over for the promotion, then this is so dreadful that I can never be happy again.
3. I was passed over for the promotion, even though I was a senior member of the firm and next in line for the promotion.
4. Therefore, what happened is so dreadful that I can never be happy again.

Once the client's emotional reasoning is formulated, the LBT counselor can exercise her knowledge of informal logic by helping the client check for fallacies in the client's premises. Here, LBT presents a set of "Cardinal Fallacies" that can infect the premises of clients' emotional reasoning and lead to self-defeating emotions and behavior. In the present example,

the client is engaging in demanding perfection as is evident from premise 1; second, the client is engaging in catastrophic thinking as is evident from premise 2.

LBT then helps the client to refute these fallacies by using the standard refutation tools that philosophers are trained in using in order to challenge the arguments of others. For example, it is clear that the demand for perfection in premise 1 is empirically bankrupt. Indeed, it is false to fact that people will never do unfair things to you, regardless of how important the stakes may be for you. Therefore, it is irrational to demand, contrary to fact, that such things must never happen, because such things can and do happen. Similarly, the catastrophic thinking in premise 2 can easily be shown to be irrational, for example, by showing how it leads to an inconsistency. “What about the time you told me about when you did not get hired for that job you wanted so badly? Did you not tell yourself that you could never be happy again? And did you nevertheless move on with your life and still manage to find happiness in the course of your life? So how can you insist in the present case that you will never find happiness in the future?”

In this manner, the refutation stage allows the client to see exactly why the premises in question do not hold water, and thus prepares him to look for arguments that avoid such pitfalls, which can shape more rational, forward-moving emotions. These positive measures are taken in the next two steps of LBT---Identifying the guiding virtue of each fallacy found; and finding a congenial philosophy for each of these virtues.

According to LBT, each “Cardinal Fallacy” of LBT has its “Guiding Virtue” that counteracts and redirects the client’s attention to a constructive, aspirational goal. Here, imbedded in LBT, is the Aristotelian idea of Eudaimonia as defined by the striving toward the attainment of virtuous habits through the exercise of willpower, cultivated in the course of practicing virtue in everyday living. For example, according to LBT, the guiding virtue of demanding perfection is “metaphysical security,” that is, security about reality itself, such as the disposition to tolerate disappointment in life, including being treated unfairly. And, the guiding virtue of catastrophic thinking is courage, such as the courage of rationally confronting and coping with such disappointment.

But, as Aristotle admonished, building such virtues requires living according to the “first principles of right reason.” Now, while Aristotle believed that such principles could be grasped by rational insight or “intuition,” LBT takes a constructivist approach, hence permitting a myriad of philosophies that conduce to virtuous conduct. Here, in the structural edifice of LBT is an excellent opportunity for philosophers to engage their philosophical talents by helping the client to find a philosophical line of thinking that conduces to the respective guiding virtues that have been identified. This allows LBT counselors to draw from their training in the great ideas of both Eastern and Western philosophy. For example, pursuant to his “Second Noble Truth,” Buddha admonishes us that cravings and demands for things outside ourselves, including the demand that we never be treated unfairly, is a royal road to needless discontent or suffering; wherein looking for peace and happiness within oneself will avoid such suffering. Similarly, Stoics such as Epictetus instruct us not to try to control things that lie outside our control, such as an employer’s decision about an employee’s promotion. Instead, Epictetus tells us to focus on what we can, indeed, control, which is our cognitive-emotive reactions to external events.

According to LBT, such philosophies are not to be forced upon a client but rather the client may be assisted in finding a “congenial” philosophy, that is, one that fits within the purview of his own belief system. For example, while Nietzsche’s idea that “God is dead” might be useful in

helping a client to more courageously confront the “evils” of life without looking for guidance from all high, the suggestion of utilizing such a philosophy would be a serious mistake if the client in question was deeply religious. In such a case, it might be better to suggest Aquinas or Augustine (or even Plato) to help the client realize that this material world of ours is an imperfect place and that, therefore, evil is something to be reckoned with here on earth. As such, through the LBT process of suiting clients with philosophies, philosophers can find “cash value” in their philosophical training, and do so in a way that recognizes philosophy in its own right as a profession that can and does provide a service outside the academic arena.

Finally, in the last step of the LBT process, the final “payoff” comes in applying the philosophies used to help guide the client to virtue. In this final step, the LBT counselor helps the client formulate a suitable behavioral plan to practice the philosophies in question, and not simply pay lip service to them. Here, LBT joins cognitive-behavioral approaches in psychological practice (as well as Aristotle) in maintaining that constructive change generally does not occur unless the philosophical ideas that are embraced are also practiced. The client is thus instructed to live the philosophy in order to overcome the cognitive-emotive sway of the faulty reasoning that conduces to self-defeating, negative emotions such as depression, anxiety, guilt, and intense anger. For example, the client might decide to concentrate his efforts on performing his job-related activities in his present position with professionalism, honing his skills, and taking pride in a job well done; for, indeed, these are things that may still be left for the client to do without getting caught up in the demands and cravings for external vindication pursuant to the philosophies of Buddha and Epictetus; and he might take consolation in the Nietzschean idea that, like the tight rope walker in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he can exercise great courage in confronting the challenges of his current job, even if, in the end, he never gets promoted. Alternatively, he can muster the courage of an authentic existence and find another suitable job, even if there are risks of the new job not working out. Here, the idea is to walk the philosophical walk, not just talk it.

Becoming a Philosophical Counselor

As should be evident from this brief discussion of LBT, such practice can offer individuals with Masters or Ph.D.s in philosophy another option besides teaching that allows them an opportunity to practice philosophy in its own right; wherein training leading to certification, as in the case of LBT, provides the framework for applying philosophy in helping others confront their problems of living.

Today, full-time teaching positions in philosophy are difficult to get. Many who are attending this APA conference are doing so in order to find a place in this competitive market. For those who do, there is still an opportunity to expand their horizons by starting a philosophical practice on the side. Such a side practice can also be very useful for teaching philosophy because the practitioner can then bring to class a fund of instructive examples of how philosophy can be useful in everyday life. Students are often impressed and engaged by such examples. Indeed, students are looking for a convincing answer to the question, “Why study philosophy?” While there is merit in arguing that philosophical activities are intrinsically valuable, this is not inconsistent with showing how it can also be *extrinsically* valuable.

For those who do not land that coveted full-time philosophy position, there is still philosophical counseling practice. Again, such a practice can breathe life into the classroom for those who are part-time philosophy instructors. However, philosophical practice also has its own meritorious

legs. Arguably, there is intrinsic value in skillfully helping clients to uncover their emotional reasoning, spot and refute their fallacious premises, identify the respective guiding virtues, evoke philosophical ideas to reach for these aspirational goals, and then put these philosophical ideas to work in the world of everyday life. This is an art that one can take great pride in. No doubt, Socrates would have approved.

If you are interested in *being* such a philosopher in private practice, we at the NPCA would be happy to assist!