

Marinoff's Therapy:
A Critique of His Books on Philosophical Practice

Shlomit C. Schuster

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Shlomit C. Schuster is a practicing philosophical counselor. She has written several scholarly articles on philosophical counseling and is the author of Philosophy Practice: An Alternative to Counseling and Psychotherapy (Praeger, 1999) and The Philosopher's Autobiography: A Qualitative Study (Praeger, 2003). Her home in cyberspace is www.geocities.com/centersophon

Lou Marinoff, *Therapy for the Sane: How Philosophy Can Change Your Life* (also published as *The Big Questions: How Philosophy Can Change Your Life*), New York, Bloomsbury, 2003, pp. 400, \$24.95. ISBN 1582342539

Lou Marinoff, *Philosophical Practice*, New York, Academic Press, 2002, pp. 411, \$69.95. ISBN 0124715559

Lou Marinoff, *Plato, Not Prozac; Applying Eternal Wisdom to Everyday Problems* (also published as *Plato, Not Prozac; Applying Philosophy to Everyday Problems*), New York, HarperCollins, 1999, pp. 308, \$13.00. ISBN 0060931361

Lou Marinoff, author of the bestseller *Plato, Not Prozac*, and a professor of philosophy at the City College of New York is not only a controversial figure at his university, but also among his philosophical counseling colleagues; some of the latter even consider him dangerous. This is because he has attempted to present himself as the international leader and legislator of this new type of counseling. My aim in this review essay is to expose and challenge some basic problems in his writings and practice.

In 1999, when Marinoff, presented his first book on philosophical counseling, *Plato, not Prozac*, its aim was to reach the masses. At his publisher's request Marinoff created the acronym "PEACE" for the five stages of the process that his clients go through: "Problem identification," "Expressing emotion," "Analyzing options," "Contemplation," "Equilibrium." Yet, in *Philosophical Practice* (p. 167), Marinoff discloses that when he worked with his clients in the period preceding the publication of *Plato, not Prozac*, he "eschewed the very notion of a method

as antithetical to philosophical inquiry into personal problems.” He further mentions that when he reflected on his practice for the purpose of differentiating it from what psychologists and psychiatrist do, he discovered that he actually had worked methodologically with the approach he later named the PEACE process. Then Marinoff claims, in a rather paradoxical manner, that PEACE is “a contentless form that suggests some contours of philosophical counseling, without prescribing any particular methodology” (*Philosophical Practice*, p. 167). Nevertheless, he still calls it a meta-methodology that can be applied for working with organizations, as well with individuals. (*Philosophical Practice*, p. 168).

Like many other philosophical counselors, Marinoff found his inspiration for his counseling practice mainly in the pioneering work of Gerd B. Achenbach. In 1981, Achenbach, a German philosopher, opened the first philosophical counseling practice in the world. He is briefly mentioned a few times in *Plato, not Prozac*, *Philosophical Practice*, and *Therapy for the Sane*. Except for applying the term “philosophical counseling” to his own counseling practice, Marinoff’s approach has nothing in common with Achenbach’s. Additionally, Marinoff distorts the history of philosophical counseling in the USA: In 1995, I read a paper at the American Philosophers Association, in a special session sponsored by the American Society for Philosophy, Counseling, and Psychotherapy, in New York. This gave me the opportunity to interview (and I kept the recordings of these interviews) some of the USA pioneers of philosophical counseling, e.g. Professor Elliot Cohen and Professor Paul Sharkey. They both said that at that stage no philosopher in the USA had hung out a shingle with the name “Philosophical Counselor,” but they were preparing and organizing themselves to begin this new type of counseling as professionally as possible. Both philosophers had been working in other institutional frameworks (respectively, in psychotherapy, and as an ethical consultant in a hospital), jobs that they felt had something in common with that of the philosophical counselor, but no more than that. Nevertheless, in *Philosophical Practice* Marinoff names Professor

Sharkey and other USA philosophers and psychotherapists as early pioneers and visionaries of contemporary philosophical practice, i.e. as if they were predecessors of Achenbach (p. 68, and note 3 at p. 105).

Marinoff – and presumably his APPA organization as well – makes inappropriate use of the term “therapy” as applied to philosophical counseling. He claims to have discovered the new meaning of this term, which is simply a reversion to one of its old etymological senses: “to attend to”. (*Plato, Not Prozac*, pp. 35, 36, and *Philosophical Practice*, pp. 84 and 85). This etymological word game seems good enough to him to turn many kinds of “attending” activities into therapy. His “attending” to his clients’ problems is therapy, my “attending” to his books as a critical reviewer is without doubt therapy, and the finance minister attending to the financial affairs of his country is practicing therapy and so on.

Gerd Achenbach and most of the European practitioners began practicing philosophy as an alternative to psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, but this is not a kind of therapy.¹ Early in his counseling career, Achenbach produced two books, *Philosophische Praxis*, and *Das Prinzip Heilung*, with elementary outlines that became stepping stones in the practice of many beginning philosophical counselors. Yet, in *Plato, not Prozac*, Marinoff claims that no two philosophical counselors’ work is methodologically alike: “philosophical counseling has at least as many permutations as there are practitioners” (p. 37). But in *Philosophical Practice*, he says that there are 3 types of philosophical counseling dialogue, and that his own original method (type A) is also the basis of Achenbach’s “spontaneous” manner of counseling, i.e. without any particular method (pp. 87-90). Marinoff’s one-sentence descriptions of Achenbach’s open-ended method are mistaken and misleading. Achenbach is not spontaneous in the sense that his way of philosophical counseling is without any methodological content. The basic points that Achenbach presented for philosophical counseling are: 1. Sincere communication between the philosophical practitioner (an academically trained philosopher) and the visitor or client, based

on a "beyond-method" *method*. 2. The importance of dialogue, as that which enlivens and flows from being. 3. "Auslegen" – a looking for explanations – in which the practitioner becomes united with the problem, not by imparting his own understanding of it, but by giving the visitor a fresh impulse to explain him or herself. This instead of "unterlegen" – explanations given by psychotherapists (or others!) to their patients's problems. 4. The innovative component of dialogue, the element of wonder in philosophical practice, which does not allow for fixed viewpoints, standard attitudes or permanent solutions.² Consequently, philosophical counseling is not about applying philosophy, as if placing a poultice of Kant on the soul, but it is philosophizing itself.

Marinoff's two approaches of applying philosophy, "PEACE" and "MEANS" are antithetical to any "spontaneous manner of counseling" or Achenbach's outline for practice. The MEANS method is presented in the last chapter of *Therapy for the Sane*. It is an approach towards examining one's life philosophically, and it includes some exercises. The acronym stands for **M**oments of truth, **E**xpectations, **A**ttachments, **N**egative emotions, and **S**agacious choices. As in Marinoff's first two books, the therapeutic goal here is apparently inspired by Buddhist, meditative, and spiritual sources, which he combines with the philosophy of Hobbes, Ayn Rand, and others. Hobbes is admired as the greatest philosopher since Aristotle! Unlike Marinoff's New Age cocktail, Achenbach's practice is derived from modernist, critical, and skeptical sources, and philosophizing with the client remains the ultimate goal of the practice.

Marinoff considers that the three first stages of his PEACE process are equivalent to what persons usually do autonomously, or in psychological therapy. Only the last two stages are philosophy (*Plato, not Prozac*, pp. 38, 39, 42). But a few pages further (on page 44) he writes that "the third and the fourth steps – analysis and contemplation – distinguish this method from what has gone before." His initial claim that psychotherapy is about identifying a particular problem for which a person goes into therapy, about expressing the emotions that relate to this

problem, and then finally analyzing the options to solve this problem, can only be based on inadequate knowledge of how most psychologists and psychotherapist, work. It is also surprising that although Marinoff vigorously attacks the DSM-IV and the superfluous use of psychoactive drugs, he seems unaware that not only do psychiatrists work with diagnostic manuals and believe in drug therapy, but most mental health practitioners also employ the DSM and condone the use of drugs in many cases. Yet, there are a few instances where Marinoff names psychologists as well as "experts at reifying syndromes and disorders," however the split he indicated between psychiatry and psychology is not much consolidated by these common applications of the DSM (*Plato, Not Prozac*, pp. 19, 20, 30, 32, 34).

Marinoff's misapplication of the term "philosophy" is also quite problematic: for example in *Plato, not Prozac* (p. 39) "contemplation" is considered philosophizing, in *Philosophical Practice* (p. 62) "meditation" is philosophizing. However, in the history of philosophy one finds that the terms "contemplation" and "meditation" seldom appear, and when they do, these terms are mainly used to mark theological and mystical kinds of philosophy. For example, Thomas Merton, one of the first and the most famous Catholic clergymen engaged with Buddhism, wrote in *The New Man*: "Contemplation is a mystery in which God reveals Himself as the very center of our own inmost self, intimior intimo meo as St. Augustine said."³ In the Catholic tradition contemplative prayer and the contemplative life have had for many ages, and still have, a similar function as meditation in the religious traditions of the Far East. Meditation as philosophy is usually that type of philosophy in which the philosopher observes and reflects on his own mind, for example the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius and Descartes. But most philosophy is profoundly non-contemplative and non-meditative in character because of its argumentative nature and dialectic attitudes. For Marinoff meditation has two "meanings" (stages), an active and passive one. The first is philosophy as taught in colleges ("it entails the thoughts of all the great philosophers"), the second is that kind of meditation associated with the

drug culture of the 1960's—anything that alters and expands consciousness: it is "inactive meditation, or bringing the mind to a quiescent state" (*Philosophy Practice* pp. 62-63).

Personally Marinoff prefers meditation that has its roots in the ancient Far East, as he quotes abundantly Chinese and Zen sages. For example, his citation of Lao Tzu: "the Sage carries on his business without action, and gives his teaching without words.... He governs by non-action; consequently there is nothing ungoverned" (*Philosophy Practice*, pp. 63).

Marinoff perceives himself as a kind of mystic; he asks his readers to call him "a mystical pragmatist" (*Plato, Not Prozac*, p. 304), in addition he calls himself the 21st century Hobbes, and compares himself to Julius Caesar (*Philosophy Practice*, pp. xxiii, 243). As Caesar, Marinoff believes that he -- actually, he addresses himself here in the first person plural pronoun, or possibly he includes in his "we" his APPA membership combatants -- will be victorious on the battlefield, i.e. in his battles for the sake of legislating philosophical practice. Marinoff envisions as his enemies all those highly qualified professional philosophers, counselors, and other academics, which oppose his persistent attempts at licensing philosophers. He calls his opponents charlatans and amateurs. (*Philosophy Practice*, pp. 227, 243, 244).

Yet, Marinoff encourages the application of any school of thought, and as in most New Ages approaches, critical reasoning is absent. Madame Blavatsky, Bhagwan Sri Rajneesh, Chogyam Trungpa, and other dubious and esoteric thinkers, are described as meaningful thinkers for philosophical counseling sessions and self-help. Marinoff even advises his readers and clients to visit gurus and astrologers without exercising any philosophical discrimination (*Therapy for the Sane*, p. 7, *Plato, not Prozac*, p. 54). This advice seems to be grounded in his own perception of pragmatism: "If something's good for you, it's good" (*Plato, not Prozac*, p. 72). Marinoff himself has practiced *I Ching* for more than thirty years and helps his counselees and readers to get acquainted with this ancient Chinese method of "philosophical counseling": "The coins may simply even out the odds. But no matter which chapter you hit, your active conscious mind will

find something meaningful and useful in the text, which is actually a reflection of what is meaningful and useful in your submerged thoughts. There will be a resonance between its wisdom and yours, for the *I Ching* mirrors what is in your heart” (*Plato, not Prozac*, p. 301). So far, in all his books are sections explaining the *I Ching*, and case studies in which the *I Ching* is the chosen instrument of therapy. However, one cannot consider, as Marinoff does, Chinese philosophy to consist mainly of Confucianism, Taoism, and the *I Ching*, and one cannot claim that Chinese philosophy has as its central tenet “that everything changes” (*Plato, not Prozac*, p. 56).

In *Therapy for the Sane*, the title and main question of Chapter 10 is “Are you a spiritual being?” And as in the other chapters of this book the therapist has an answer at hand. The answer in this chapter is given immediately, in the first sentence of the chapter: “If you neglect, ignore, or deny the spiritual aspects of your being, you will fail to live life as fully as possible. And that can produce dis-ease and disease alike” (p. 262). Accordingly, although it seems that Marinoff does not consign the unspiritual minded to the flames of an eternal hell, he nevertheless envisions secular people as a kind of invalid, invoking through their unspiritual living dis-ease and disease on themselves; or in other words, hell on earth!

I personally appreciate Marinoff’s quest for spirituality, but his predictive warnings, even if well intended, are no positive encouragement to spirituality, nor are his predictions necessarily true.

Why would the type of practical spiritual guidance that Marinoff advocates, be a part of philosophical counseling? Especially if the philosophical counselor is not an expert in these matters like the professionally educated spiritual director, or pastoral counselor. Usually spiritual guidance is given by priests, pastors, rabbis, and like religious leaders. Philosophical practitioners with adequate knowledge in the areas of religion, spirituality, or mysticism, can

philosophize with their clients on these matters, but should take care not to lower themselves to the level of second-rate gurus.

Most philosophical counselors worldwide are not very enthusiastic about *Plato, not Prozac*, to put it mildly.⁴ Neither are *Philosophical Practice*, and *Therapy for the Sane*, more appreciated.⁵ Yet, there have been some philosophical counselors and psychotherapists who appear untroubled by Marinoff's errors in historical-philosophical facts, his curious arguments, contradictions, irrational guidance, and the banality of method and superficial examples, and these will praise *Plato, not Prozac*, and his other writings.⁶ However, Marinoff's many errors have not gone unnoticed by critics.⁷

These and additional reviews only present a limited number of Marinoff's errors. I found other mistakes in *Plato, Not Prozac* and in *Therapy for the Sane* in the sections entitled "Hit Parade of Philosophers" and the "Hit Parade of Ideas," where over fifty philosophers are sketched. Among these Marinoff mentions St. Augustine as having invented the doctrine of original sin (*Plato, Not Prozac*, p. 275 and, *Therapy for the Sane*, p. 339). However, Augustine may have coined the phrase "original sin", but he could not possibly have invented the idea or the doctrine of such sin. The idea that human beings are born in sin is not Augustine's invention; the idea's origin can be traced, for example, to Hindu scriptures, to the Bible, and the Talmud.

Marinoff most of all errs when he writes about religion, in particular, about the relation between philosophy and theology. Since Philo, around the beginning of 1st century, and ever after, Western philosophy has been the "lowly handmaiden," if not the lover of theology. Evidence thereof is found in Judaism, Christianity, and later also in the Muslim tradition. Also the Far East religious traditions have their great theological philosophers. Theologians defined the alliance between the two professions often differently. Only a few of the early Church fathers, e.g. St. Jerome, rejected all philosophy as vain deception. However, through St. Ambrose and St. Augustine philosophy became a valuable tool for Christian theology. Nevertheless, in

Marinoff's view the history of philosophy looks different. He defines the relationship between philosophy and theology as fundamentally opposed: "theology, which requires faith, and philosophy, which requires doubt, often makes the two fields incompatible, as they certainly were for more than a millennium, until the Reformation and the eventual beginning of the Scientific Revolution" (*Plato, Not Prozac*, p. 60). Thus, Marinoff omits from the history of philosophy the ages of Scholastic glory. One may not agree with, or one even may dislike the Scholastic tradition, but one cannot say that the Doctors of the Church were not doing philosophy.

In the light of all the errors referred to so far, I cannot recommend Marinoff's writings as textbooks for colleges, or as profitable reading material for the philosophically uneducated; nor are they suitable for philosophical counselors, psychotherapists, and others. Still, there are people who believe that popularizing erroneous knowledge about philosophical counseling--or other areas--is to be preferred over no knowledge. Fortunately, there are also a number of books on the market that give the reader a better, or even an excellent understanding of this new profession in philosophy. And, indeed, if a novice in philosophy wants to apply philosophical ideas, or wisdom to his life, I suggest reading Bertrand Russell's *Wisdom of the West* or just any good contemporary introduction to philosophy. Through these books, and not through Marinoff's, a person is likely to benefit more.

Endnotes

¹ Achenbach, Gerd B. *Philosophische Praxis*. Cologne: Jürgen Dinter, 1984.

Achenbach, Gerd B. & Thomas Macho. *Das Prinzip Heilung*. Cologne: Jürgen Dinter, 1985.

² Shlomit C. Schuster, *Philosophy Practice: An Alternative to Counseling and Psychotherapy*, Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 1999, pp. 34 - 42.

³ Thomas Merton, *The New Man*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999, p. 19.

⁴ Many of my colleagues in Europe, Israel, and the USA-- including members of APPA-- which I met at conferences, or am in contact with through email, told me about their "disappointment," or even "disgust," with Marinoff's books. But most of these colleagues will not say so publicly. When Marinoff is challenged in public, as for example at the 2004 conference in Seville, he does not answers to questions or comments, or at another occasion his reply to criticism was: "I have written a best seller, so it is natural that such criticism should arise." (In the Hebrew weekly Mekor Rishon, <<http://www.geocities.com/centersophon/mikorishon.html>>, last accessed 31.1.2005).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ For example see the reviews of Alex Howard, Christian Perring, and Ben Mulvey, at The Metapsychology Online Book Reviews Website <<http://www.mentalhelp.net/books>> (last accessed 31.1.2005), or Paul W. Sharkey's Foreword to Marinoff's *Philosophical Practice*, pp. xv-xviii.

⁷ For example see Daniel Duane's article "The Socratic Shrink" in *The New York Times Magazine* (March 21, 2004), Peter B. Raabe's review of *Philosophical Practice* in *Practical Philosophy* (Spring 2002, Vol. 4.2) <<http://www.practical-philosophy.org.uk>> (last accessed 31.1.2005), Roger Scruton's "The Return of the Sophist", in *The Times* (London, 11 August 1997), Alessandro Volpone's "Plato, Not Viagra! The Comedy of Errors May be Continued" <<http://www.geocities.com/centersophon/PlatoNotViagra.html>> (last accessed 31.1.2005), and Tudor B. Munteanu's review of *Plato, not Prozac!* <<http://www.friesian.com/munteanu.htm>> (last accessed 31.1.2005).