

## PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE AS POLITICAL ACTIVISM

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### INTRODUCTION

Aristotle correctly classified man as a *politikon zoon*, a «political animal» (*Politics*, 1253a1). In so far as practitioners of philosophy conduct their everyday transactions partly or wholly in a given *polis*, they work within the political, theological, and ideological constraints of that polity. These, in turn, pre-configure and partially predetermine the nature of any professional practice, and also pre-define some of the kinds of issues that practitioners are likely to encounter in their clients. But practicing philosophy according to its inherent guiding lights – reasoned inquiry, love of virtue, and so forth – may well brush up against political, theological or ideological constraints in a given *polis*. And when they do, philosophical practitioners become, of necessity, political activists.

### THEORETICAL PHILOSOPHY VS. PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

Virtually every discipline in the Academy has both theoretical, and empirical or applied branches. One can study pure or applied mathematics, and theoretical or experimental sciences of every kind. This is also true of Humanities and The Arts. One can study Critical Theory or Creative

1. Thanks to David Sumiacher for inviting this paper for the CECAPFI conference, Mexico, 2016. An English-language version will appear in «Socrate à l'agora. Que peut la parole philosophique ? », ed. Mieke de Moor, VRIN, Paris, 2017.

Writing, Musicology or Performance. But what about Philosophy? The current dominant schools in Philosophy – Analytic in the US and Continental in the EU – diverge in salient substantive respects, but share at least one common denominator, namely their lack of practical application.

In the US and Canada at least, and perhaps increasingly in the EU and Asia, Applied Ethics has become the most successful exception to this leaden rule of inapplicability. Applied ethicists are trained not only to think philosophically, but also to practice philosophy itself. Out of the noetic ether of pure contemplation (divorced from all but its own preconditions and presuppositions) applied ethicists distil normative analyses of real-world scenarios involving transactions with palpable consequences to potentially or actually large constituencies. It has taken only a few decades for Applied Ethics to become a self-sustaining and indeed a revenue-generating growth industry within the Academy, and to demonstrate that Philosophy is capable of diverse applications beyond the Ivory Tower.

One might be tempted to assert that Feminism is even more successful in this exact regard: insofar as it consists of the study of Feminist Philosophy on the one hand, and its applications on the other – by Feminists of every stripe in every stratum of society – it is a union of philosophical practice and political activism. There is, however, one salient difference: Applied Ethics is practiced by philosophers for the betterment of the human estate most generally; whereas Feminism is practiced by female philosophers in the main, for the advancement of Feminist political agendas primarily.

The main aim of applied ethics is to resolve moral problems that arise in the practice of professions, problems which one way or another affect virtually everyone in the body politic. Applied Ethics does not entail political activism per se, but may segue into it. Whereas Feminism entails political activism from the very outset. Applied Ethics aspire to rational discourse in the interests of justice; many Feminisms aspire to neo-Marxist dialectic in the interests of redress<sup>2</sup>. One can be a devoted Applied Ethicist without ever engaging in political activism; whereas one cannot be a devoted Feminist without constantly engaging in political activism. Therein lies a ponderable distinction.

Philosophical practice falls between these two stools: Most philosophical practitioners set out to benefit the human estate, broadly construed, by rendering useful services to their clients – individuals, groups, and organizations – which span a diverse array of constituencies.

2. E.g. see C. Hoff Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism?*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1995.

Most philosophical practitioners do not have an ideological agenda; rather, a normative, hermeneutic, or maieutic one.

Philosophical practice is not to be conflated with legal, medical, or psychological practice. Its over-arching aim is educational. However, when governments or university administrations themselves require education as to the nature of philosophical practice, then practitioners must be prepared to engage in political activism. Why? Because governments and university administrations are at times among the slowest learners, and may require remediation in order to digest the essential educational lessons.

In general, applied ethics tends to be a reactive discipline: normative issues arise whenever new sciences, technologies, or human interventions are being anticipated or implemented, or after catastrophic accidents (e.g. Bhopal, Exxon Valdez, Chernobyl, and Fukushima) mandate multi-disciplinary assessments of, and corrections to, standard operating procedures. Applied ethicists help inform public debate, and ultimately influence policy formation, regulation, or legislation pertaining to ethically appropriate applications of a given science or technology, as well as prevention or mitigation of disasters. Thus normative inquiry ends up having political implications, so applied ethicists can indeed become political activists.

For example, I recall having taught a course in Environmental Ethics in Vancouver, Canada, during a time of heated debate surrounding the logging of British Columbia's old-growth forests. Some protesters were «spiking» trees<sup>3</sup>; others, sabotaging logging equipment itself. There were violent confrontations between loggers and protesters, arrests, media coverage, and public discussion. My students uniformly opposed these logging operations, but at the same time they sought to identify ethically justifiable ways of voicing their opposition. Our course on environmental ethics became an ideal vehicle for the exploration of this issue, which led to a careful reading of Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*<sup>4</sup>. In the end, the students decided that spiking trees or sabotaging equipment was not ethically justifiable, whereas chaining themselves to trees was justifiable. And so they did. This example illustrates how environmental ethics can segue into environmental activism, which is a form of political activism.

3. «Spiking» a tree means driving a steel spike deep into the trunk, in an area where a lumberjack is likely to cut with a chainsaw. The hidden spike can violently destroy the saw-blade on contact, and this can also injure or even kill the lumberjack.

4. H.D.Thoreau, «Resistance to Civil Government; a Lecture delivered in 1847», in E. Peabody (éd.), *Aesthetic Papers*, Boston-New York, The Editor-Putnam, 1849, p. 189-211, reprinted in *Civil Disobedience and Other Essays*, New York, Dover 1993.

What is true of environmental ethics is true across the spectrum of applied ethics. When a controversial social or political issue – for example abortion, or euthanasia, or medical marijuana – is studied and discussed in the classroom, it is done under the aegis of applied (in such cases, biomedical) ethics. But when an individual person is trying to make a life-changing decision, be it whether to have an abortion, whether to commit rational suicide, or whether to move to a state where medical cannabis can be legally obtained, then the issue ceases to be abstract, and so the person may benefit from philosophical counselling. Applied ethics focuses on issues; philosophical counselling focuses on persons dealing with these issues. Beyond this, the person dealing with these issues may decide to strive for social or legislative change, in which case applied ethics and philosophical counselling may themselves segue into political activism.

#### HUMANITIES IN CRISIS

Philosophical practice emerges against a backdrop of humanities in crisis. In the US and the UK, if not in the broader EU as well, there has been a pronounced devaluation in the currency – and hence the funding – of Humanities. This tendency is driven by a host of factors, both external and internal to the Academy.

External factors include: the undermining and displacement of the written tradition by visual and digital traditions; the widespread but false belief that science and technology are panaceas for humanistic problems; the corollary pathologization and medicalization of the human condition itself; the ensuing diagnosis of symptoms (symptomology) reified as «illnesses» and the reflexive drugging of quotidian human complaints; the ongoing dehumanization and «mind-control» of citizens by bureaucratic and technocratic apparatuses of increasingly totalitarian Western governments and the commercial interests that control them.

These external factors among others have given rise to a cluster of culturally-induced epidemics, including attention deficit hyperactivity disorders, bullying, depressions, social anxiety disorders, obesity and eating disorders, sleeping disorders, chronic fatigue syndromes, sexual dysfunctions, and repetitive stress disorders. All these problems are diagnosed and drugged as though their root causes were biological (which they are *not*); and the net effect of this malpractice in many cases worsens the epidemics themselves. In Germany, these epidemics are called «diseases of civilization»; in Japan, «lifestyle maladies»; in Sweden, «diseases of affluence»; in the US «influenza»<sup>5</sup>.

5. E.g. see L. Marinoff, «Humanities Therapy: Restoring Well-Being in an Age of

Internal factors include politicization of Humanities curricula themselves, by radical neo-Marxist and neo-Trotskyite ideologues concerned chiefly with the transmission of toxic doctrines designed to undermine and destroy Western civilization; sponsorship of these doctrines – to the exclusion of all else – by totalitarian university administrations which impose regimes of political correctness on faculty and students alike, and which demand conformity to a congeries of misanthropic myths and dysfunctional dogmas, calculated to replace higher education with political indoctrination in the humanities, the social sciences, and beyond<sup>6</sup>.

These factors among others lead forensic accountants and misguided administrators to cut or eliminate funding to Humanities programs, which of course has a direct effect on philosophy programs as well. Purely analytic and purely continental philosophers alike, though themselves separated by an unbridgeable metaphysical chasm, are equally ill-equipped to shelter themselves from fierce fiscal storms. Completely self-absorbed in their own theoretical problems, which have no traction either outside their departments or in the larger socio-economic matrix from which they expect perennial support, they attract and graduate cadres of unemployable introverts or else (in the case of neo-Marxists and their feminist derivatives) indoctrinated ideologues and socio-political activists.

Philosophical practice offers remedies both to external factors that drive culturally-induced epidemics, and to internal factors that drive the devaluation, if not the extinction, of classical humanities.

#### PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE: FORM VERSUS SUBSTANCE

There is a sizeable and growing literature on the substance of philosophical practice: its theories, models, methodologies, techniques, goals, clientele and so forth. But herein I wish to focus on the forms of philosophical practice, with a view to elaborating contexts in which philosophical practitioners may be obliged to play the additional role of political activists.

In general, practitioners work with individuals (as counsellors or advisors), groups (as facilitators of dialogue), or organizations (as

Culturally-Induced Illness», in *Proceedings of the 11th International Conference on Philosophical Practice*, Korea, Chuncheon, Humanities Institute, Kangwon National University, 2012, p. 27-48.

6. E.g. see A.Ch. Kors, H. Silverglate, *The Shadow University*, New York, Harper Perennial, 1999, R. Kimball, *Tenured Radicals*, Chicago, Ivan R. Dee (3rd edition), 2008.

consultants). Invariably, prevailing political conditions and regnant ethos determine initial receptivity to, or rejection of, different forms of philosophical practice.

People who travel globally for commercial or professional purposes are well-aware that while human nature itself is universal, interactions between and among citizens, as well as individual and collective aspirations of citizens, are conditioned if not governed from cradle to grave by local and national norms within each polis.

The net effect of these varying norms upon the global traveller is to convey an impression that every time one crosses a political border, one sets foot into a kind of hermetically sealed cultural bubble which predisposes its inhabitants not only to view the world in a particular way, but also to behave in ways which are consistent with their particular world-view, while quite possibly inconsistent with prevalent world-views in other – even neighbouring – cultural bubbles.

The implications of such differences are pellucid when it comes to philosophical practice, both in its conception by practitioners and their clients, and in its operationalization by practitioners and their organizations.

#### PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELLING AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Philosophical counselling has captivated public imagination in increasingly many different polities, world-wide, yet has met with varying reception by ruling authorities, depending once again on prevailing cultural norms.

In the EU, generally speaking, long-standing philosophical traditions embedded in the cultural substrate predispose the intelligentsia to recognize that certain classes of human problems are either inherently philosophical, or else amenable to philosophical (among other possible) approaches. Since EU countries are far less litigious than the US, and since health care in the EU's social democracies is mostly a right as opposed to a privilege, philosophical counselling has not in the main been obliged to wage « turf wars » against co-professionals, nor has it been targeted for political prohibition.

One or two exceptions, however, are certainly noteworthy. In Germany, during the late 1990s, the Bundestag drafted some rather clumsy and over-broad legislation in order to curtail the practices of organizations or « cults » associated with « mind control » (notably Scientology, and possibly the Moonies). But the wording of this legislation was so hyperbolic that it would have inadvertently criminalized philosophical counselling as

practiced by Gerd Achenbach and his colleagues. Gerd asked my advice in 1998, and I recommended that he take political action by informing his local Bundestag representative, and lobbying for suitable revisions to the draft legislation. Since Achenbach and his colleagues continue to practice to this day, and have not been legally prosecuted for doing so, I assume that Germany's anti-cult legislation was suitably amended so as not to outlaw philosophical practice.

More recently, in the UK, an overt «power-grab» was attempted by psychologists, who temporarily bamboozled legislators into drafting a bill that would have defined «counselling» as a solely psychological practice, to the exclusion of all else. In contrast with the aforementioned over-broad Bundestag bill, the UK legislation would have narrowed the meaning of «counselling» so drastically that licensed psychologists would have legally appropriated and monopolized the term.

This called for direct political action on the part of UK philosophical counsellors, who were fortunate to have Sam Brown as their leader. Sam wrote a brilliant paper on the meaning of «Counsellor», identifying in the process no fewer than sixteen types of counselling both historically and professionally recognized in the UK, none of them psychological *per se*<sup>7</sup>. Sam's paper single-handedly persuaded UK legislators not to grant psychologists a monopoly on the word «counselling».

If philosophical counselling can encounter potential legislative prohibitions even in nations like Germany and England, whose robust philosophical traditions so fertiley informed the Enlightenment, imagine the obstacles it can meet in the contemporary US, from competitions over markets to confusions with psychology to suppressions by totalitarian university administrators terrified at the prospect of people thinking for themselves. In the US, pioneering philosophical counsellors encountered a minefield of opposition, and were compelled to engage in political activism from the very outset.

#### PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM, AMERICAN STYLE

Ironically, an original *definiens* of the American polis was its celebrated lack of an *ancien regime*. Having no indigenous political institutions that required uprooting (unlike the case of France), the thirteen colonies were united by revolutionary political activists who, with justification, might also be called philosophical practitioners. Thomas Jefferson effectively embodied central tenets of John Locke's political

7. S. Brown, «The Meaning of 'Counsellor'», *Philosophical Practice*, 5.1, 2010, p. 549-66.

philosophy in his 1776 *Declaration of Independence*, an ultimately fruitful admixture of philosophical practice with political activism. It should not be forgotten that Jefferson was also a member and later president of the American Philosophical Society. In a more populist vein, Tom Paine's pamphleteering, in particular his 1776 monograph *Common Sense*, sparked a popular embracement of the principles and values that catalyzed the American Revolution.

However, contemporary America presents a different picture: no longer reminiscent of the early Roman republic, rather of the collapsing Western Roman empire. The US today affords an unremitting spectacle of culturally-induced epidemics, dysfunctional and bankrupt governmental institutions, corrupt and avaricious financial establishments, economic polarization, interminable culture and gender wars, public education in free-fall, with neo-Roman *panem et circenses* – e.g. junk food and trash television – to stupefy the masses. If this were not enough, Americans still hold the unenviable position of policing rogue states, and so the Stars and Stripes have become primary targets for terrorists world-wide.

One silver lining behind all these clouds was the impetus given to the global movement of philosophical practice, following the 3rd International Conference held in New York in 1997. In its aftermath, the New York media got hold of the idea of philosophical counselling, whereupon media in many countries world-wide copied and re-disseminated their reportage<sup>8</sup>.

The fly in this ointment was the US media's constant need to engender controversy. While bad news always sells well enough in its own right, good news (apparently) needs to be larded and salted with hullabaloo to titillate the palate of the *hoi polloi*. So, the US media seized on a mantra that achieved their commercial purpose, but which did a profound disservice to our educational one. They repeatedly trumpeted that philosophical counselling is «a controversial new form of psychotherapy»<sup>9</sup>.

Is philosophical counselling inherently controversial? Not to our many clients who have derived benefit from it. Is it new? Hardly. Many of our theories and techniques date back 2500 years, to ancient Hellenic, Indian, and Chinese philosophical traditions. Is it psychotherapy? No, it is education. Viewed in this light, the media have it exactly backwards: much contemporary psychotherapy is a controversial new form of philosophical counselling.

8. The seminal article, an advocacy piece, was written by Alex Kuczynski, «Plato or Prozac?», *New York Observer*, August 4, 1997, p. 17.

9. E.g. see L. Marinoff, «One Philosopher is Worth a Hundred 'C-Words'», *Philosophical Practice*, 1.1, 2005, p. 1-10.



With a few noteworthy exceptions, attempts to educate the US media have largely failed. While governments and university administrators are merely slow learners at times, the media earns its livelihood by feeding a daily diet of distorted sound-bytes to a credulous body politic. Soviet Russia had two main daily newspapers: *Pravda* (meaning «Truth») and *Izvestiya* (meaning «News»). And the Russians used to say: «V *Pravde* net izvestiy, v *Izvestiyakh* net pravdy». In *Truth* there is no news, and in *News* there is no truth. American neo-conservatives, with justification, have nicknamed *The New York Times* «*Pravda*».

The US media's incessant decade-long mantra – that philosophical counselling is «a controversial new form of psychotherapy» – was absorbed uncritically by Americans, because most Americans themselves are psychologized from infancy to senescence, and never encounter philosophy in their entire lives. Thanks to successful political activism, the profession of counselling psychology enjoyed unrelenting sponsorship from universities and governments during the 20th century, in the form of graduate programs and licensure, such that (until recently) Americans imagine that every non-medical human problem is by default a psychological one.

Given this impoverished state of affairs, many counselling psychologists themselves were predisposed to view philosophical counsellors as unlicensed «poachers» in the territory of the human psyche, and some of them proceeded to alarm ignorant university administrators by claiming, without a shred of evidence (for none exists), that people who see philosophical counsellors are likely to develop psychological problems, and perhaps even commit suicide.

Thus, in the year 2000, at the very moment when news media were engendering demand for philosophical counsellors, my own university, CUNY (the City University of New York) suddenly shut down my research in philosophical counselling at The City College (CCNY), overnight and by fiat. There was no discussion, and no reason offered. The senior CUNY administration unilaterally and improperly overruled a Federally-approved research program, allegedly because some psychologists had complained. I was never permitted to know the identities of those who levied accusations, nor the substance of the accusations themselves.

I had been counselling research subjects on campus without incident or complaint, and with the express permission of the college's Institutional Review Board (IRB), a body constituted and empowered by Federal regulatory law. In America's litigious climate, IRBs are designed to protect both human subjects of research, and the institutions in which the research is conducted. CCNY's IRB had determined that philosophical

counselling poses no risk to subjects, and indeed my pioneering research protocol has subsequently been adopted successfully by practitioners at several American universities<sup>10</sup>.

At the same time, the Diaz Bill to sponsor the licensing of Philosophical Counsellors in New York State was being sponsored in the New York State Legislature by then-Assemblyman and currently Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr.

Since CUNY was unwilling to speak with me in person, and unwilling to reinstate my Federally-approved research, I eventually sued the City College signatories of CUNY's illegal prohibition orders in Federal court. Under oath, each defendant sold out his superior, until the CCNY Provost's duly sworn testimony pointed to the office of CUNY's Vice-Chancellor for Legal Affairs. At this the judge balked, and dismissed the case. He was bought and paid for anyway, and would not permit a mere Associate Professor to unhorse a lofty Vice Chancellor, if not the Chancellor himself. But I won an appeal, and so my attorney discovered even more damning evidence, which panicked the judge into throwing the case out yet again.

Meanwhile, the assorted miscreants were all defended by Eliot Spitzer's office. At that time, Spitzer was New York State's Attorney General, before becoming elected Governor and soon thereafter resigning in disgrace for transporting prostitutes across state lines, from New York to Washington D.C. While some New Yorkers admired Spitzer's loyalty to his state, they could not ignore the multiple felony offences incurred in his frequent expressions of fidelity. In lieu of a prison term, Spitzer was «sentenced» to community service: he was compelled to teach for a year at The City College! (Law and Public Policy, not Ethics). Having him as a colleague was a measure of poetic justice at least.

But in truth, I remain a political prisoner at CUNY, serving an apparent life sentence for failing to love «Big Brother». I am not alone. Any professor who resists the fatuous tyranny of political correctness that has infected higher education from coast to coast, is likewise a political prisoner of the American Gulag.

10. Professors Kathy Russell and Andrew Fitzgibbon at SUNY Cortland, Kate Mehuron at Eastern Michigan University, and Nancy Matchett at the University of Northern Colorado, have all successfully conducted IRB-approved research in philosophical counseling based on my CCNY template.

## THE TURNING TIDE

Some years later, at this writing, progress has been made. Philosophical counsellors are now active in dozens of states in the US. Philosophers at numerous universities are teaching, researching, and practicing philosophical counselling. There is a burgeoning professional literature. Most importantly, a critical mass of young philosophy students aspire to become practitioners themselves, and demand for graduate programs is surging. Such programs have been, and are being established, predominantly in the EU and Asia.

In the US, even some psychologists who initially and stridently opposed us now concede that we have furrowed a credible professional field, and that we are not «trespassing» on their «turf».

So the tide may now be turning. 2013 was a «watershed» year, during which several salient events aligned to favour the growth of philosophical counselling in the West. For example, in March 2013, *The New York Times* identified pharmaceutical industry propaganda as the «primary cause» of ADHD<sup>11</sup>. In April 2013, the powerful National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) rejected the DSM V, demanding sound aetiology as opposed to diagnosis of «clusters of symptoms»<sup>12</sup>. In June 2013, the World ADHD Congress debated the question «Is ADHD a Valid Diagnosis?»<sup>13</sup>. Also in June 2013, the Association for the Advancement of Arts and Sciences (AAAS) submitted a report to the US Congress, citing marginalization of Humanities as a leading cause of cultural decline and social malaise<sup>14</sup>. In sum, things that philosophical practitioners got in trouble for saying fifteen years ago, are now being said by everybody.

Thus encouraged by external events, I have embarked on the Quixotic quest (or fool's errand) of establishing an M.A. program in Applied Philosophy at CUNY. Even without my particularly jaundiced history in America's largest, most corrupt, most bureaucratic, most unaccountable, most politicized, and most totalitarian urban university, establishing an M.A. at CUNY normally requires five years (a «Five Year Plan», comrades). Most of this time is consumed pushing hundreds of pages of documentation, meticulously-crafted in conformity with excruciatingly demanding guidelines, at obstructive bureaucrats who require these

11. [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/01/health/more-diagnoses-of-hyperactivity-causing-concern.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/01/health/more-diagnoses-of-hyperactivity-causing-concern.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

12. <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/side-effects/201305/the-nimh-withdraws-support-dsm-5>

13. [http://www.adhdfederation.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Congress\\_2015/Final\\_2013/V3.Final\\_Programme\\_ADHD2013.pdf](http://www.adhdfederation.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Congress_2015/Final_2013/V3.Final_Programme_ADHD2013.pdf)

14. [http://www.humanitiescommission.org/\\_pdf/hss\\_report.pdf](http://www.humanitiescommission.org/_pdf/hss_report.pdf)

reams of paperwork but don't bother reading it, or read it without comprehension, or read it with malice aforethought and objection at every turn. Even though the APPA and I are inundated with written requests for a graduate program, by earnest and hopeful philosophy majors from across the US and internationally, CUNY's uniform response to every proposal has been a truckload of red tape.

The City University of New York (CUNY) is a branch of the New York State civil service – a poor governance model for higher education, if ever there was one. The political and administrative apparatus of New York State itself is dysfunctional, corrupt, and bankrupt. CUNY controls 20 campuses (The City College, Hunter College, Baruch College, and the Graduate Centre, among others), with more than 450,000 students all-tolled. The City College of New York (CCNY) is the flagship campus, and was a free-standing storied institution from 1847 until 1960, when it was swallowed by CUNY. The autocrats who run CUNY treat faculty and students alike with brutal contempt. They routinely sabotage and arbitrarily destroy the internal careers of any professors who do not love «Big Brother».

I am merely one of countless casualties of CUNY's vindictive war against its own faculty, and CUNY is only America's largest urban example of the brutally stupid totalitarian administrative cultures which govern higher education from coast to coast. Day in and day out, we witness examples that become more surreal with each passing year, such that even Swift, Huxley, or Orwell would be hard-pressed to satirize them. My recent favourites include this one: On September 17, 2013 – US Constitution Day – students at Modesto College, California, were prohibited from handing out the US Constitution on campus<sup>15</sup>.

America's Maoist university administrators fear and loath the First Amendment. They don't want students reading it, and taking it as a license to harbour political opinions not pre-approved by the university, or – heaven forefend – to have dialogues about such matters with philosophical practitioners.

As a result of this systematic and decades-long destruction of free thought and free speech in American higher education, combined with incessant politicization of the curriculum, American culture itself is becoming irreversibly «brain dead».

15. <http://www.thefire.org/cases/modesto-junior-college-students-barred-from-distributing-constitutions-on-constitution-day/>

## PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN ASIA

Now let us briefly contrast the deplorable American state of affairs with developments in the Republic of Korea, and in China.

South Koreans are generally educated to a high standard. Korea boasts many fine universities, and Korean philosophers have demonstrated scholarly mastery over both analytic and continental philosophical traditions, in addition to indigenous Asian ones.

In the early 2000s, spurred by Korean translations of popular seminal works in Philosophical Counselling, a core group of entrepreneurial Korean philosophers turned their attention to this emergent field, excited by its potential in their own nation.

They began to attend international conferences and training programs with established Western practitioners, then formed their own national association and, in 2009, held an inaugural international conference on Philosophical Practice and Humanities Therapy, at Kangwon National University (KNU) in Chuncheon, organized by Prof. Young E. Rhee.

This conference was strongly supported by KNU, and by its visionary Dean of Humanities, Lee Dae-Boom. It attracted numerous participants, including leading practitioners from Asia and the West<sup>16</sup>.

Encouraged by this success, and enjoying active support from both their university and their government, the Koreans simultaneously and swiftly deepened their foundations and broadened their horizons. In terms of deepening, they have established a graduate program in Philosophical Practice and Humanities Therapy at KNU. In terms of broadening, they have been funded by two different government ministries – Education, and Defence – to undertake research projects in Philosophical Counselling. The Defence ministry is sponsoring research on philosophical counselling for front-line troops in the Demilitarized Zone: young men who have been conscripted to face perennial military threats from North Korea. Undoubtedly, many of them have philosophical questions about the nature of this long-standing predicament, the values they are defending, and the values of the system across the border. The Education ministry is sponsoring research on philosophical counselling for political refugees from North Korea, who had successfully escaped and were granted political asylum in the South. They need a complete re-orientation of their world-view, in order to understand and make use of the fundamental freedoms and allied opportunities in the democratic South. Neither of these two client-bases is «mentally-ill», although both would no doubt attract asinine diagnoses from the DSM.

16. <http://www.ht21c.org/main.php>

Needless to say, these are groundbreaking projects for philosophical practitioners, which could not have been undertaken without three vital forces aligned: first, the social entrepreneurship of the philosophers themselves; second, the enlightened university administrations that support them; and third, the astute government agencies that further their research.

This rapid development of Philosophical Practice in South Korea has also been catalyzed by a political position taken by the philosophers themselves, one which certainly entails practice as a species of activism. Korean practitioners have observed that the «culturally induced epidemics» currently debilitating Westernized civilizations are produced by unhealthy lifestyles, unwholesome values, and overall failure to cultivate human potential. They view the diagnosis and drugging of these conditions as patently useless and absurd, and they stridently reject Western psychology as a kind of cultural or ideological imperialism which Asians do not require. Why? Because Asians have rich indigenous philosophical traditions – e.g. Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism – which are more profound and more efficacious than Western psychology in both preventing and reversing culturally-induced epidemics.

Similar interest is burgeoning in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China, where universities and governments are similarly expected to further philosophical counselling based on indigenous philosophical traditions.

Even in India, that most spiritual of Asian cultures, we begin to see both positive and negative ill-effects of Westernization. As an increasingly globalized India experiences rising GDP and a secularized middle class, it is becoming afflicted by similar culturally-induced epidemics, along with the usual trappings of Western psychology and psycho-pharmacology. In consequence, a philosophical counselling movement is slowly arising in India, although its acceptance by universities and governments may be less rapid than in East Asia<sup>17</sup>.

#### GROUP FACILITATION AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM

A second plank of philosophical practice is group facilitation. With adults, this often assumes the form of Socratic dialogue. There is also a world-wide movement of philosophy for children. Less formally, the Café-Philo (or philosophical café) still proves popular in many counties and cultures. To what extent does group facilitation entail or imply political activism?

17. <http://www.philosophicalcounsellingindia.org/>

*CAFÉ PHILO*

Consider the Café-Philo, the originator of whose contemporary model was Marc Sautet. He apparently left the Sorbonne to found the Café des Phares out of despair and disgust at the bureaucratic paralysis and lobotomized administrations of the contemporary academy, as well as the moribund state of so many philosophy departments – a view shared by many. Through his Café-Philo, Sautet was able to recuperate a sense of *doing* philosophy, and by so doing, inspiring others to think more philosophically. As this unfolds in a public space within the polis, akin to the agora, it is Socratic in spirit, and therefore also a species of political activism. More than this, Sautet's example apparently spawned a great many copies, such that at the height of the fad in Paris, one could barely step into a café without tripping over a philosopher. Relatively few philosophers running Café-Philos were of the quality of Marc Sautet, and very many – I am informed – were mere agitators: political ideologues rather than Socratic gadflies.

Nonetheless, Sautet elevated the Café-Philo to an art-form, and it has proliferated world-wide. A good many skilled facilitators, from Dries Boele in The Netherlands to Roxanna Kreimer in Argentina, proved able to earn their daily bread via this medium.

I ran a monthly «Philosopher's Forum» in a Manhattan bookstore for seven years, as a public service, and I can tell you that political debates were at the forefront of our participant-driven agenda. One can enjoy more frank and honest discussions in the public spaces of bookstores than on the campuses of America's politicized universities.

*PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN*

Thanks in no small measure to the pioneering efforts of Matt Lipmann (at Montclair State University in New Jersey), philosophy for children has also proliferated worldwide. Matt's original vision for this endeavour certainly entailed political repercussions, and it seems to have succeeded so well that it was doomed to fail. Matt's program was turning out miniature Socratic inquirers, children who – encouraged to be philosophical in the classroom – relentlessly questioned their other teachers as well as their parents, which made them more of a «nuisance» than the overall system was equipped to handle.

Cultural context, however, does interesting things with and to philosophical practice. Philosophy for children is now taking off in Japan. This success was partly precipitated by the catastrophe of the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami that devastated the Tohoku region, and

compromised the nuclear reactor at Fukushima. Notwithstanding heroic efforts by Japanese workers, managers, and volunteers implicated in the nuclear and civilian crises, the government's evident lack of preparedness, its clumsy attempts at cover-ups, and the sheer magnitude of the disaster, left a lot of questions asked but unanswered.

Credit Japanese philosopher and educator Tetsuya Kono, at Rikkyo University, for initiating Socratic dialogues with children in schools, encouraging them to discuss and understand these issues in philosophical ways. It has been an enormous success.

Contrast this with the absolute lack of philosophical counselling in Japan, whose deeply-embedded ethos of group harmony («*wa*») precludes individual opinions being aired, at least until the individual knows what the group's position is, so he or she can voice views that are consonant with it. Some Japanese philosophical practitioners form the exception to this rule, and Japanese children have proved willing to question official pronouncements, and to express their own views, when encouraged by philosophers. In Japan, philosophy for children amounts to cultural if not political activism.

#### *PHILOSOPHY FOR THE ELDERLY*

Another Japanese constituency has proved amenable to group dialogue, namely elderly survivors of the disaster who lost their homes and were displaced into temporary government-built shelters. In 2013, I visited the former fishing village of Rikuzentakata, which had been inundated and largely destroyed by a 54-foot tsunami in 2011. There I encountered a lively group of senior citizens in their makeshift community meeting room. They had been in government shelters for two years, pre-fabricated rooming blocks up in the hills above the flood-plain, and were awaiting construction of permanent housing.

These elderly people were happy that an outsider was showing an interest in them, and were willing to speak – in a group – about their experiences. They said that during the first year following the tsunami, most of them stayed in their rooms and hardly spoke with each other. Now their community had coalesced, and they were helping one another get on with life. I was deeply impressed with their energy and enthusiasm, their ability to grieve for lost homes and loved ones in a constructive way, and their desire to resume more normal patterns of existence. They were also (especially for Japanese) unabashedly critical of the government's handling of the disaster.



Not one of these people would ever have considered speaking privately with a psychologist, but they were more than willing to speak publicly with a philosopher.

#### *ORGANIZATIONAL CONSULTING*

This potentially rich and diverse form of philosophical practice is, just like the others, unevenly distributed and highly dependent upon received cultural norms.

In many parts of the EU, it is a routine matter for philosophers to facilitate Socratic dialogues and dilemma trainings in the private sector, as well as for civil servants across all branches of government. In Japan, many corporations conduct strategic gaming sessions, some entailing models embodying rational choice theories, which could be facilitated by trained philosophers.

In the US, organizations are often too pre-occupied with survival, growth, and profit (or budget) to concern themselves with ethics or virtues. Some practitioners have made inroads into the corporate world, most notably Peter Koestenbaum and Tom Morris. Vaughana Feary has done extraordinary work bringing philosophy into the corrections system and the health care sector, as well as the corporate training arena.

The current generation of practitioners may be called on to render many kinds of beneficial services in an increasingly conflicted ethos. As a last resort, when all else has failed, philosophers will be summoned.

This kind of consulting work, with civil and public servants, draws philosophical practitioners – and/or their clients – toward political activism.

#### CONCLUSION

Even from this brief and anecdotal survey, it should be obvious that philosophical practice in its many forms – counselling, facilitation, consulting, and all their sub-specialties – lead to or manifest as political activism. This is not so much a feature of philosophical practice as it is an inescapable facet of the human condition itself. Whenever and wherever philosophers choose to work with people as well as with ideas, they may find themselves caught up in political actions. As long as practitioners remain faithful to their educational mission, and to their overarching goal of benefitting their clients, then presumably their (and our) inevitable forays into political activism will likewise confer educational benefits on the larger socio-political organism.

But this tale is also cautionary: If philosophers utilize practice as nothing but a means to attain political ends, and if such ends are misanthropic, deluded, or otherwise poisoned by toxic doctrines, then political correctness he instigated – philosophers will once again become apologists for the guillotine. Western civilization's head is on the block anew. I, for one, cannot stand accused of having stood idly by to watch it roll.

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