

# PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

## Journal of the APPA

Volume 7 Number 1 March 2012

### Interview

*APPA Interviews Irvin Yalom*

### Articles

*Disciplinary Turf War:*

*Philosophical Counseling in an Era of Psychological Hegemony*  
Anthony Falikowski

*Disrupting the Normalization of Clinical Discourses of Trauma*  
Kate Mehuron

*Humanities-based Philosophical Therapy in North Korean Defectors' Korean Social Adaptation*  
Sun-Hye Kim

*Clinical and Ethical Conflicts in Diagnosing and Treating Behavioral Problems in Children*  
Matthew A. Butkus & Matthew S. Mutchler

### Reviews: Philosophical Practice in Recent Fiction

*The Philosophical Practitioner*  
John Wehrle

*Two Days of Dying*  
Leslie C. Miller

*Grave Markers, Bird Feathers, and the Aegean Sea*  
Bernard Roy

*The Spinoza Problem*  
Lou Marinoff

### Biographies of Contributors

**Editor**  
**Lou Marinoff**

**Reviews Editor**  
**Nancy Matchett**

**Managing Editor**  
**Francisco Iracheta**

**Associate Editor**  
**Dena Hurst**

**Technical Consultant**  
**Greg Goode**

**Legal Consultant**  
**Thomas Griffith**

### Book Review

Irvin Yalom, *The Spinoza Problem*, Basic Books, 2012, ISBN: 0465029639, 321 pages.

REVIEWED BY LOU MARINOFF  
THE CITY COLLEGE OF NEW YORK

*The Spinoza Problem* is the third and most recent novel in Yalom's trilogy of philosophical fiction. He had previously and imaginatively treated Nietzsche (1992) and Schopenhauer (2005), and has lately turned his creative attentions to Spinoza. But in this case Yalom encountered a fascinating twist. In the process of researching the life and times of the redoubtable Jewish-Portuguese-Dutch philosophical genius, which drew Yalom eventually to the Spinoza Museum in Rijnsburg, Yalom discovered that the Nazis had a special interest in Spinoza too.

Given his love of *double-entendre* (evident for example in previous works, from *Lying on the Couch* to *The Schopenhauer Cure*), Yalom lit upon the perfect title for this work. "The Spinoza Problem" is actually a *triple-entendre*. Its most obvious denotation is the problem Spinoza's modernistic philosophy and theology posed to his orthodox theocratic Jewish community, which culminated in his excommunication. A second problem became apparent to Yalom early on in his research: while Spinoza's philosophy speaks richly and amply for itself, we know precious little about the man. There is a dearth of data about the private life of Baruch Spinoza — a paucity of personal correspondence, journals, biographies by contemporaries, and so forth — and there exists not even one authenticated image of him: neither a painting, nor a lithograph, nor a sculpture that can be confirmed as genuine likeness. The third meaning of "the Spinoza problem" was unearthed by Yalom in the written record kept by an assistant to Nazi Party ideologue Alfred Rosenberg, who expropriated Spinoza's library during the Nazi occupation of Holland. This third meaning gives the novel its true bite, and deep-seated purchase not only in the foundations of psychoanalysis, but also in the history of World War II in Europe, and perennially in the possibility of transcendent moral response to persecution.

In terms of literary structure, Yalom has artfully pulled off a feat that could easily backfire in the hands of a less-gifted novelist; namely, the interleaving of two temporally-separated plots. Spinoza's story unfolds in 17th-century Holland; Rosenberg's, in 20th-century Germany. The novel's chapters alternate back and forth between these two settings, each focused on a different facet of the problem Spinoza's life and legacy posed. Thus the reader is led by alternating stages down two historical paths, separated by three centuries yet conjoined by a common philosophical denominator. These paths ultimately converge in the epilogue, in which Yalom reveals how his variations on *The Spinoza Problem* emerged from his researches. So the novel's rather unique structure presents the reader with alternating flashbacks (to the protagonist Spinoza's life and times) and relative flash-forwards (to the antagonist Rosenberg's life and times), yet with the overarching contextual awareness that the narrator himself occupies a further-future time (namely our own). The overall effect is dramatically pleasing, and wonderfully crafted.

Persecution is an inescapable leitmotif of the novel, and (like its title) has three main facets. The first and third facets present persecution in its most rabidly murderous forms: The Inquisitorial purges of Iberian Jewry that led to the exodus of Spinoza's family (among many others) to tolerant Holland, and the Nazi genocide of European Jewry in the Holocaust (and the inability of most of them to flee at all). Sandwiched between these two historical outbursts of fanatical ideological hatred and heinous mass-murder, we en-

counter another form of persecution entirely: the physically non-harmful but socially devastating excommunication of Spinoza by his own people, who themselves have suffered, and whose descendents will suffer, persecutions of the most atrocious kinds.

Yalom explores two ironies behind Spinoza's ostracism by Amsterdam's Sephardic Jewish community. First and most obvious is their desire to preserve their precious but also precarious freedom of religious worship in their adopted nation, Holland, which entails a proscription against heretics arising in their own midst. For while the relative freedoms of 17th century Holland allowed religious communities in the Judeo-Christian tradition to adopt texts and liturgies more-or-less of their own choosing, no individual was free to repudiate the norms of his group without imperiling the group's "charter rights" and obligations to perpetuate its own internal theocracy, which actually conduced to the stability of the State via each group's theocratic exercise of social and political control. Perhaps the Dutch had read their Gibbon, who opined that "The various modes of worship that prevailed in the Roman world, were all considered by the people, as equally true; by the philosopher, as equally false; and by the magistrates, as equally useful." (Gibbon, Ch. 2).

Yalom — himself a free-thinker and self-described "iconoclast" (page *ix*) — keenly appreciates that Spinoza's "crime" against his own Jewish community was nothing other than being the first truly modern man in early modern Holland. Spinoza dared to worship God in his own non-anthropomorphic and naturalistic way, dared to interpret scripture as allegorical and not literal, dared to challenge the authority of the rabbis, dared to suppose that all religions were spiritual manifestations of a universal and transcendent humanistic yearning to merge with the cosmos, and dared to allege that the institutionalization of religions produced corrupt theocrats, whose chief interest was the sustenance of power through the maintenance of infantile superstitions and the imposition of irrational dogmas. In his portrayal of Spinoza as a prescient modernist, whose then-heretical views are utterly unremarkable within postmodern and post-Christian spheres today, Yalom makes an implicit case for methodological individualism: the thesis that significant historical changes stem from the minds of individual visionaries, and not from the blind forces of historicism (e.g. see Von Mises 1949, Popper 1957, Arrow 1994).

A second irony, craftily posited and cleverly exploited by Yalom, is that Alfred Rosenberg's anti-Semitic antipathy toward Spinoza arouses severe cognitive dissonance, precisely because of Rosenberg's unhappy realization that his noble "Aryan" hero Goethe credited Spinoza as his supreme mentor. The Nazi ideology with which Rosenberg had poisoned himself (along with so many others) proclaimed that Jews are "inferior." How then could Goethe, a cerebral *übermensch* of the "Master Race," have prostrated himself intellectually at the feet of this Jew?

A forlorn hope occurred to Yalom's Rosenberg: since the Jews had excommunicated Spinoza, he was therefore no longer a Jew, but rather an ex-Jew. This resolution speedily failed, however, because the Nazi ideologue was hoist with his own sanguinary petard, namely the myth of "Jewish blood." Since this hypothetical ratiocination springs from Yalom's fertile imagination, it may also be his way of rehearsing the perennial question "Who is a Jew?" (important to the Nazis for diabolical reasons, and to Jews for redemptive ones, in light of Israel's Law of Return) and of highlighting the enormous divide between ghettoized medieval observant Jewry and postmodern assimilated non-observant Jewry, a chasm that only a colossus like Spinoza could have bridged.

For Spinoza's excommunication did not transform him into a hermit; it merely uprooted him from his tightly-knit Jewish milieu, and transplanted him into a more freewheeling circle of tolerant Christian schol-

ars, natural philosophers, and intellectual admirers. Spinoza apparently sustained a few important friendships and correspondences in the Christian world (e.g. with Henry Oldenburg and Christian Huygens), among luminaries who, like himself, helped to awaken Europe from its ecclesiastical coma, and to usher in the Enlightenment.

Shifting to the future, as the novel does so adroitly, it falls to imaginary Freudian psychoanalyst Friedrich Pfister to attempt and ultimately fail to cut the Gordian knot in Rosenberg's psyche. The German psychiatrist Pfister mirrors the Spinoza-Goethe mentor-disciple relationship, in that his psychoanalytic mentor, Dr. Karl Abraham, is also Jewish (and is possibly Yalom's avatar in the novel). Yalom utilizes their hypothetical deliberations both to credit Spinoza as an unrecognized primogenitor of psychiatry, and to air a poignant ethical dilemma, reminding us in the process that the most conscientious psychiatrists are also conspicuously philosophical beings. The crux of their dilemma is that a "successful" cure of their patient Rosenberg (to which they are committed as doctors) would potentially empower him to wreak even greater havoc as a Nazi ideologue (to which they are opposed as humanists). But their dilemma is ultimately mooted by Rosenberg's resistance to treatment. Thus Yalom generously and selflessly implies that, at least once in a while, a particular failure of psychiatry might be a very good thing for humanity in general, or at least the lesser of two evils.

As Yalom suggests and methodological individualists argue, the delectable fruits of the Enlightenment sprang from seeds planted by a precious few Early Modern thinkers, including Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza, and Hobbes. Like his contemporary Spinoza, Thomas Hobbes ("the monster of Malmesbury") posited a material God, excoriated organized religion as "tales publicly allowed" (Hobbes 1651), and drew himself into mortal danger with the publication of *Leviathan*, his *magnum opus* and the cornerstone of modern political science and empirical psychology alike. As with Spinoza's works, Hobbes's *Leviathan* was immediately placed on Roman Church's *Index* of banned books, a sure sign of its importance. Hobbes's "atheism" and other "blasphemies" were also cited by the House of Commons as "a probable cause of the Great Fire and Great Plague of London" (Mintz, p.62). Only great philosophers, it seems, are capable of being praised with such loud and extravagantly convoluted damns.

Hobbes read Spinoza's *Tractatus*, which impressed him so mightily that he wryly wrote that Spinoza had outdistanced him "a bar's length" (Caitlin 1922, p.58). Spinoza's linguistic abilities were apparently "confined" to Hebrew, Latin, Greek, Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch, and we have no evidence that he read Hobbes's *Leviathan*. But Spinoza's library apparently contained Hobbes's *Elementa Philosophica De Cive*,<sup>1</sup> and Karl Jaspers (1974, p.73) is surely not alone in recognizing that Spinoza was clearly influenced by Hobbes, in whom he found a kindred, isolated, persecuted, fearless, prophetic spirit, a fellow intellectual pariah and social leper, similarly destined to scandalize regnant theocrats and shape the civic futures of yet-to-be emancipated masses. If, as Yalom takes pains to claim, Spinoza is to be credited as a primogenitor of psychiatry, then Hobbes certainly deserves parallel recognition. His 1651 *Leviathan* not only originates the entire substance of Freud's 1929 *Civilization and Its Discontents*; it also anticipates several of Freud's "ground-breaking" methodological insights, along with the DSM.<sup>2</sup>

Returning to the leitmotif of persecution, Yalom does yeoman's work in distinguishing two kinds thereof: lethal versus liberating. The pyres of the Inquisition and the ovens of the Holocaust were ghastly end-products of premeditated mass-murder, fueled by deranged ideologues who destroyed human lives and incinerated human flesh. By contrast, the persecution and excommunication of Baruch Spinoza was enacted for the preservation of his community from precisely these other kinds of perils, and moreover was not intended to terminate his life or annihilate his flesh. No Jew sought to be condemned and burned by the

Inquisition, or gassed and cremated by the Nazis; whereas Spinoza actively and willingly sought his excommunication and permanent ostracism by the rabbis, the better to liberate his rational mind from the fetters of irrational superstition and coerced indoctrination. Spinoza's persecution was necessary for his liberation, and he knew it.

It is worth pausing to observe that methodological individualism is not entirely incompatible with weaker versions of historicism. For example, Japanese Buddhist leader Daisaku Ikeda (2012) avers that the persecution of seminal philosophical, religious, and political reformers is inevitable — a “law of history” that has operated ubiquitously, in virtually every generation and corner of the world.

What Yalom's novel strongly implies, but leaves unsaid, is the following psychological hypothesis: That tribes of religious fanatics or political ideologues who resort to hating or murdering others must be suffering from monumental inferiority complexes themselves (as was clearly the case with Rosenberg). By contrast, tribes of believers who keep to themselves, who do not proselytize or otherwise seek converts, and whose worst punishment for indigenous heretics is ostracism, must think correspondingly highly of themselves, and are therefore bound to attract persecutions of the hateful and murderous kind, and especially from proselytizers. This has been the fate of the Jewish people from time immemorial. Self-worth has demonstrable survival value, albeit at a horrific price; whereas self-hatred is but a prelude to other- and, inevitably, self-destruction. Nietzsche (1974, p.317) recognized that the Jewish people “possess the art of adaptability *par excellence*,” which applies with equal force to Spinoza's Sephardic-Dutch community, and to the outcast Spinoza himself. But Nietzsche (1968, p.134) also observed that “The Jews are the most remarkable nation of world history because, faced with the question of being or not being, they preferred, with a perfectly uncanny conviction, being at any price.” Yalom's tale emphatically instantiates Nietzsche's observations, both in Spinoza's times and — far more horrifically — in Rosenberg's.

One might also wonder whether Yalom's strong identification with Spinoza, whom he unreservedly portrays as a kind of secular saint, is impelled by more than historical and philosophical fascination. Perhaps Yalom too has been persecuted by his “tribe” — in his case rank-and-file psychiatrists, as wedded to their dogmas as any other group of “true believers,” possibly scandalized by Yalom's iconoclasm, or reminded by his brilliance of their ordinariness. If so, then writing this novel about Spinoza would have had therapeutic value for Yalom himself, just as reading Spinoza had similar value for Goethe.

Finally, I would be remiss not to mention that Yalom has also cast Spinoza in the role of a philosophical practitioner. How so? At the very outset, and with some historical justification, Yalom narrates a scene in which a Portuguese refugee named Franco, whose father was murdered by the Inquisition for practicing Judaism in Portugal, cannot at the same time subscribe uncritically to the same Judaism he is mercifully free to practice in Holland. Wishing to honor his father by observing Judaism, while at the same time seeking to nurture his own intellectual curiosity by challenging dogmatic Judaism, places him in a difficult bind. Spinoza helps him to resolve his dilemma. So philosophical counselors owe a debt to Yalom, both for his imagination and his acumen in casting Spinoza in this salutary role.

Beyond this, it transpires that Franco was “referred” to Spinoza by a treacherous and vengeful Jewish compatriot, for the purpose of eliciting heresies that could then be used to justify his excommunication. When discovering this, the saintly Spinoza seeks only to help Franco further, befriending him more closely, alleviating his crisis, and encouraging his embarkation on a rabbinical path. Here Yalom portrays Spinoza as the consummate philosophical practitioner — someone who not only helps others attain their potential, but who moreover leads an exemplary life, unsullied by negative emotions, immune to mental toxins, compassionate to a fault. Yalom depicts Spinoza as a kind of bodhisattva — a role model for us all.

Revisiting Yalom's philosophical trilogy, we immediately perceive a salient distinction between his novels about Nietzsche and Schopenhauer on the one hand, and Spinoza on the other. Their common denominator is, of course, the immense solitude each of these philosophers inhabited, the unbridgeable chasm that separated each from the bosom of family, the embrace of community, and the pale of society. Periods of solitude are necessary for every philosopher at one time or another, for our deepest contemplations cannot surface amidst the interminable hubbub and commotion, conflict and chaos, of turbulent human relationships. Philosophers from every conceivable school (along with spiritual aspirants from myriad traditions) have derived enormous benefits from periods of solitary meditation and contemplation.

Yet our primate origins underscore an evolutionary need for the company of others. Primatologist Robert Yerkes quipped "One chimpanzee is no chimpanzee" (Midgley 1978). The human equivalent of this observation was uttered long ago by Aristotle: "To live alone, one must be either a beast or a god"; though God-slayer Nietzsche added a third (self-evident) possibility: one could also be a philosopher (Nietzsche 1968). Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Spinoza all produced their enduring works in solitude. But the distinction, well-reflected in Yalom's novels, is this: Nietzsche and Schopenhauer suffered from their isolation, terribly at times, which exacerbated their arrogance, resentment, misogyny, and misanthropy. But Spinoza delighted in his solitude, which liberated him to develop his clarity, humanity, compassion, and love of reason to the full.

Perhaps it boils down to the realization that Nietzsche and Schopenhauer excommunicated themselves, whereas Spinoza was excommunicated by others. Yalom's novel on Nietzsche left me with the impression of a stand-off: Nietzsche's scathing intellect, monumental egotism, intense solitude, and prophetic powers prove all-but-insurmountable defenses to the prying psychotherapist Breuer, while at the same time Breuer's own unresolved creative ambitions, and his boredom with an insufferably bourgeois family life, are stirred up by his contact with Nietzsche. Yalom's novel on Schopenhauer conveyed the distinct message that, from a psychiatric perspective, Schopenhauer was emotionally disturbed and socially dysfunctional but — unlike Nietzsche — might have been curable by psychotherapy.

On that basis I confess to having misjudged Yalom, for his treatment of Schopenhauer struck me as continuation of the legacy of posthumous analyses of historical figures great and terrible (e.g. Luther, Gandhi, Stalin) by ambitious psychiatrists and psychologists alike (respectively Erikson 1958, Erikson 1969, Fromm 1973) who were possibly bored with their own more pedestrian patients, and yearned to hitch their psychoanalytic wagons to the stars of human history, possibly in order to "prove" that psychological theories resemble scientific laws, in terms of their general applicability over cross-cultural space-time, and thus to repudiate relativistic charges that (for example) Freud's theories were products of his peculiar clientele and their Victorian Viennese ethos. (E.g. "Freud was a product of his Zeitgeist, of fin-de-siecle Vienna," Kurzweil 1998, p.13)

*The Spinoza Problem* has irrevocably altered my previous judgments of Yalom's philosophical fiction, and of his possible motives for writing such works. I believe he truly seeks to plumb the depths of the human mind and its myriad workings, and so he is compelled to dive as deeply as the deepest thinkers, some of whom turn out to be philosophers, and to explore with them the profundities and mysteries of human mentation in its remotest (and even most foreboding) regions. And because Yalom is unafraid to conduct such explorations, he is able to discover that Spinoza's "bodhisattva way" enables man to endure the unendurable with equanimity and grace, and without a need for psychotherapy, while the unexamined delusions and malignant mind-states of religious and political fanatics misguide men into inflicting unimaginable injustices upon their fellows, and ultimately upon themselves, while remaining beyond the reach of

psychotherapy. If only more people could or would live Spinoza's philosophy, at least as Yalom portrays it, then the world would see fewer fanatics, need fewer psychotherapists, and would abound with more self-perfected beings.

## Notes

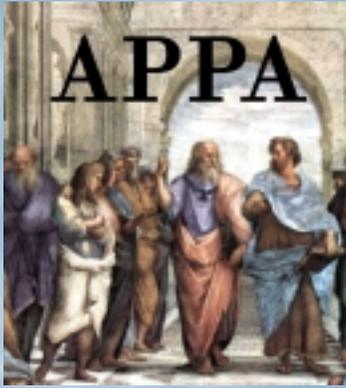
1. For the contents of Spinoza's library, see e.g. <http://www.spinozaetnous.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=24>
2. For representative quotes from Hobbes, see e.g. <http://www.rationallyspeakingpodcast.org/show/rs48-philosophical-counseling.html>

## References

- Arrow, Kenneth. 1994. "Methodological Individualism and Social Knowledge," *American Economic Review*, 84(2), 1-9.
- Catlin, G. 1922. *Thomas Hobbes as Philosopher, Publicist and Man of Letters*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Erikson, Erik. 1958. *Young Man Luther*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Erikson, Erik. 1969. *Gandhi's Truth*. New York: WW. Norton & Co.
- Fromm, Eric. 1973. *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Gibbon, Edward. 1776-89. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. London: Strahan & Cadell.
- Hobbes, Thomas. 1651. *Leviathan*. London: Andrew Crooke and William Cook.
- Ikeda, Daisaku and Marinoff, Lou. forthcoming 2012. *The Inner Philosopher: Conversations on Philosophy's Transformative Power*. Boston: Dialogue Path Press
- Jaspers, Karl. 1974. *Spinoza (The Great Philosophers, Volume 2, edited by Hannah Arendt)*. New York: Harvest
- Kurzweil, E. 1998. "Historical overview: a mosaic of psychoanalytic theories." In Paul Marcus and Alan Rosenberg (eds.), *Psychoanalytic Versions of the Human Condition: Philosophies of Life and Their Impact on Practice*. New York: New York University Press.
- Midgley, Mary. 1978. *Beast and Man*, Sussex: The Harvester Press.
- Mintz, S. 1962. *The Hunting of the Leviathan*. Cambridge: Cambridge at the University Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1968. *Twilight of the Idols (1889) & The Anti-Christ (1895)*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1974. *The Gay Science*. New York: Random House.
- Popper, Karl. 1957. *The Poverty of Historicism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Von Mises, Ludwig. 1949. *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Chapter 2: *The Principle of Methodological Individualism*.
- Yalom, Irvin. 1992. *When Nietzsche Wept*. New York: HarperCollins
- Yalom, Irvin. 1996. *Lying on the Couch*. New York: Basic Books
- Yalom, Irvin. 2005. *The Schopenhauer Cure*. New York: HarperCollins

**Correspondence:** lmarinoff@ccny.cuny.edu





# PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

## Journal of the APPA

Volume 7 Number 1 March 2012

### Aims and Scope

*Philosophical Practice* is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

#### Editor

**Lou Marinoff**

#### Reviews Editor

**Nancy Matchett**

#### Managing Editor

**Francisco Iracheta**

#### Associate Editor

**Dena Hurst**

#### Technical Consultant

**Greg Goode**

#### Legal Consultant

**Thomas Griffith**

### APPA Mission

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a non-profit educational corporation that encourages philosophical awareness and advocates leading the examined life. Philosophy can be practiced through client counseling, group facilitation, organizational consulting or educational programs. APPA members apply philosophical systems, insights and methods to the management of human problems and the amelioration of human estates. The APPA is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization.

### APPA Membership

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a not-for-profit educational corporation. It admits Certified, Affiliate and Adjunct Members solely on the basis of their respective qualifications. It admits Auxiliary Members solely on the basis of their interest in and support of philosophical practice. The APPA does not discriminate with respect to members or clients on the basis of nationality, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, age, religious belief, political persuasion, or other professionally or philosophically irrelevant criteria.

### Subscriptions, Advertisements, Submissions, Back Issues

For information on subscriptions, advertisements and submissions, please see the front pages of this document. For information on back issues, APPA Memberships and Programs, please visit [www.appa.edu](http://www.appa.edu).