

# PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

## Journal of the APPA

Volume 10 Number 1 March 2015

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### Book Review

Jules Evans, *Philosophy for Life and Other Dangerous Situations. Ancient Philosophy for Modern Problems*, New World Library (Kindle Edition). 2013. ISBN: 9781608682294. 304 pages.

REVIEWED BY NANCY J. MATCHETT  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO, GREELEY, CO

When Jules Evans graduated from university he was an emotional wreck. Despite a good job and an Oxford degree, he was suffering from panic attacks “and didn’t feel [he] could talk about what was going on inside [him]” (2). Five years later he was diagnosed as suffering from social anxiety, depression and PTSD, but aside from giving new names to his problems, psychotherapy wasn’t providing much help. While researching on his own, he discovered that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) could perhaps treat his problems. So he joined a local CBT group and they worked through a pirated workbook together (there was no therapist present). Those weekly meetings began to help; Evans “stopped having panic attacks ... and started to get more confident in [his] ability to reason with [his] violent emotions” (3). He also noticed that many of CBT’s ideas and techniques reminded him of things he had learned about ancient philosophy back in school.

In *Philosophy for Life and Other Dangerous Situations*, Evans explores the philosophical roots of CBT in particular, and psychotherapy in general. A recurrent theme is how Evans himself benefitted not just by following the behavioral techniques of cognitive therapies, but by studying the underlying philosophical ideas—one might even say truths—that help explain why those therapies work. Subtitled *Ancient Philosophy for Modern Problems*, the book also documents ways in which other individuals and small communities are “rediscovering” and being helped by philosophies first articulated by Greeks and Romans centuries ago. Along the way, Positive Psychology and other scientific approaches to well-being are aptly criticized for constructing methodological edifices atop many of those same ideas, yet ignoring the process of philosophical inquiry that is part and parcel of their practical value. The result is both an exercise in—and extended defense of—what Evans unabashedly calls “philosophical self-help.”

The book is organized as a single day at Evans’s “dream school“ (Preface). For me, this didn’t quite work. Though my Kindle says it took just over 6 hours to read, Evans himself is keen to emphasize that the kind of learning he is after often requires repeated practice in order to transform the patterns of reasoning into habits. Moreover, the voice is clearly Evans’s own throughout, and he tends to gloss over significant philosophical disputes that would surely arise in the break-room if not also the lecture hall. For someone interested in those debates, Anna’s *Morality of Happiness* (1995) or Nussbaum’s *Therapy of Desire* (1996) would be a better read. Still, Evans does not pretend his philosopher-mentors agree about everything (what they share is “an optimism in human rationality, and in the ability of philosophy to improve our lives” (Preface), and he does provide enough detail to help readers identify the concepts and patterns of reasoning most likely to be of help in their own case. In this respect, the tone of the book is quite similar to Botton’s *Consolations of Philosophy* (2000) or Marinoff’s *Plato Not Prozac* (2009) and *Therapy for the Sane* (2004), and it is no surprise to learn that Evans collaborates with Botton at the London-based School of Life ([www.thechooloflife.com](http://www.thechooloflife.com)).

The dream school approach does provide a sensible organizational scheme. After a “Morning Roll Call” where readers are introduced to Socratic teachings about the importance of dialog and the value of an examined life, there are three main parts. The “Morning Session” focuses on Stoic techniques for helping individuals take charge of their emotions. In the “Early Afternoon,” Mystics and Skeptics show how personal philosophies are informed by wider ideas about the cosmos. And the “Late Afternoon” discussions are centered on the complex interplay between individual and societal values and beliefs. Evans can’t pass up the chance to talk about “Savoring the Moment” with Epicurus over lunch (this is a signal that he does not find the philosophy of rational hedonism to be as compelling or plausible as the rest). And he concludes with a Graduation ceremony, again led by Socrates, which takes seriously the idea that philosophy is training for death (here Evans is much more sympathetic).

In each of the twelve chapters Evans pairs a contemporary figure with a Greek or Roman philosopher in order to showcase a specific philosophical “art.” Several of the contemporaries are fairly well known, but some are not. And while some came to live by a specific philosophy only after reading a classic text, others have adopted philosophies quite similar to one of the ancients, yet appear to have developed those worldviews, or at least stumbled upon their central ideas, more or less on their own. In Chapter 6, for example, we meet Apollo 14 astronaut Edgar Mitchell, and the philosopher Heraclitus, while being introduced to the “Art of Cosmic Contemplation.” Mitchell was overcome by a “deep ecstatic experience” as he travelled back to earth from the moon, and his desire to make sense of that experience led him to found the Institute of Noetic Sciences dedicated to “exploring and promoting the expansion of human consciousness” (100). It’s never quite clear whether Mitchell has read Heraclitus, but his life does seem animated by the thought that some kind of Logos governs and links human beings and the whole of nature. In Chapter 12, by contrast, we are introduced to a thirty-four-year old from Dallas, TX named Alexander, who is paired with Plato and a lesson on the “Art of Justice.” As a young man Alexander apparently “searched far and wide to try to find something more to believe in than capitalism” (169); he eventually came to read Plato, whose ideas he found “far superior” to anything else. Alexander is not exactly an elitist (though he does say, “Most people are not intellectually and emotionally available to put all their thoughts on the table” (171), and is definitely not angling to become a philosopher king (he works as an operating room nurse). But he does get together regularly with “The Platonists of North Texas,” a small meet-up group he founded in an effort to “try to comprehend the Whole” (171).

Academically minded philosophers may find the book to lack rigor in argument and explanation. Yet to criticize the book for this reason seems a little unfair, since Evans “doesn’t consider [him]self a philosopher, but rather a journalist who is curious about how people apply these ancient ideas in modern life” (22). The writing is lovely throughout, and Evans is at his absolute best when describing the personal histories of both contemporary individuals and ancient philosophers. That Rhonda Cornum’s psyche survived the experience of being sexually assaulted by an enemy soldier, in the back of the moving pickup truck transporting her to a hostile military camp, when she was suffering from a bullet in her shoulder, two broken arms and a torn ligament in her knee (the result of her plane being shot down), while her fellow soldier (also injured) could do nothing but watch, might well seem implausible to many, yet Evans renders her character both believable and, while remarkably Stoic, not at all cold (pp. 24-7). His summary of the slave-life of Epictetus (the corresponding philosophical figure in Chapter 2) is equally riveting and sympathetic, and these stories are interwoven with numerous other examples of how the “Art of Maintaining Control” can help

any of us “steer our way through the worst situations” (27). Though I found the formulaic chapter structure a bit tedious toward the end, it is skillfully deployed. Evans quite effectively shows, rather than tells, what it is like to live a life animated by each of the philosophical arts he takes up. With the possible exception of Pythagoras’s “Art of Memorization and Incantation” (Chapter 7), he also shows how each art depends on a particular way of conceptualizing human nature or the relationship between self and world.

Evans is also quite good at linking ancient philosophy with contemporary psychology, and it is when he uses what psychologists call “evidence-based” practice that his own arguments are most convincing. A primary example occurs in Chapter 1 (Socrates and the Art of Street Philosophy). Evans knows that many people are dubious about the ability of philosophy to bring about meaningful, practical change in people’s lives. But in response to psychologists inclined to suggest that too much of human decision-making is unconscious and automatic for us to ever “know ourselves,” he cites the voluminous evidence that cognitive therapies really do help people both to identify the “toxic” beliefs that drive problematic behavior, and to replace those beliefs with different and more positive ones. And to those scientifically minded critics who doubt that individuals can change their own habits (on the grounds that we are the products of social conditioning, brain chemistry or genetics), he cites the growing evidence from neuroscience that when we use reason to change our beliefs, this rewires and hence changes our felt emotional responses too. But empirical evidence does not always provide the crucial premise: he also criticizes cognitive therapies for being content to teach new “thinking skills” without taking the distinctively philosophical step of reflecting on what counts as a “flourishing” life. Evans never quite explains how he distinguishes a philosophical argument from a scientific one (presumably he has the intuition that both empirical evidence and what he calls “thinking skills” are distinct from something like deeper conceptual truths). But he has little patience for Martin Seligman’s (2004, 2006) claim that “Positive Psychologists, armed with their clipboards and questionnaires, could finally tell us what really makes us happier, stronger, and more resilient” (211), and he is wary of governments that increasingly use Seligman’s research to “roll out a specific vision of the good life to their citizens, while also claiming they are not being morally paternalist” (212).

As a corrective to this trend, Evans hopes to inspire more “street philosophy,” which he defines as “forums where strangers meet up to discuss various philosophies without having to commit to any one” (12). This is another way in which the philosophical content of the book is somewhat thin. Evans is good about presenting the standard arguments for and against each philosophical viewpoint, and is clearly enamored with all twelve of his philosophical arts. When it comes to choosing among them, however, Evans is content only to show “that Greek philosophy offers us not one model of the good life, but several” (215). It is no easy trick to bring philosophy to a lay-audience without coming off as objectionably “opinionated” or all knowing. But I think books like Hadot’s *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1995), Howard’s *Philosophy for Counseling and Psychotherapy* (2005), or Raabe’s *Issues in Philosophical Counseling* (2002) manage to do a somewhat more rigorous job.

Philosophical practitioners are unlikely to find any new insights about human flourishing here, yet there are at least three ways they might make use of the book: First and foremost, it can be read as a set of case studies (the book is peppered with real-world examples in addition to those presented at the start of each chapter), and mined for stories and patterns of reasoning that might help clients facing similar problems. Second, it could serve as an entry point for a course of bibliother-

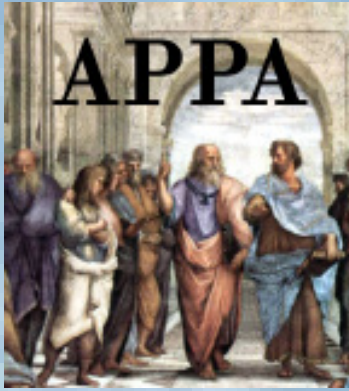
apy, providing an accessible overview before diving into more primary texts. And third, one could simply hand the book to a stranger or friend, which would constitute a sort of indirect advocacy for philosophical practice. It is a compelling yet easy read. And despite some philosophical hand waving, Evans is convincing when he says, “We need to empower people to consider multiple approaches to the good life, and then to experiment, innovate, and decide for themselves” (216).

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# PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

## Journal of the APPA

Volume 10 Number 1 March 2015

### 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.

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### 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.

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