# Comments on Professor Elliot Cohen, "Philosophy With Teeth"

## James Stacey Taylor

**ABSTRACT:** This paper comments on Cohen's "Philosophy with Teeth" (also in this issue), and raises four questions surrounding the relationship between philosophy and psychology, most of which are requests for clarification from Cohen but two of which are more critical in character: Against Cohen's claim that APPE disavows any *intrinsic* connection between philosophical counseling and psychology, it is suggested that this still leaves open the possibility of an *instrumental* connection. And against Cohen's claim that pure philosophy is "grist for the classroom" or for "stimulating discussions over coffee," it is maintained that pure philosophy may have more "teeth" than what this suggests.

In his excellent paper "Philosophy with Teeth" Professor Cohen outlines his influential approach to philosophical counseling, the differences that exist between ASPCP and the American Philosophical Practitioners' Association, and the relationships that exist between philosophy and psychology that this latter Association's focus is likely to miss. Finally, he outlines how the methods of philosophy can enable philosophical counselors "to explore the rationality of their clients' belief systems" (p.10).

There is much to commend in this paper. Indeed, I found that there is so much in this paper that I am in agreement with that I found it difficult to produce a constructively *critical* commentary! Nevertheless, I think that there are four main areas of Professor Cohen's paper that I think it would be fruitful for us to discuss. In order of attention, these are, first, the claim that "many of the behavioral problems that people suffer from are the result of bad logic" (p.1). Second, I think it would be useful to discuss the claim that the American Philosophical Practitioners' Association has "explicitly disavowed" the link between philosophy, and psychology and psychotherapy (p.4). Third, I think it would be useful critically to assess Professor Cohen's implicit claim that "pure" philosophy is just "grist for the classroom" or for stimulating discussions over coffee (p.5). Fourth, I

think that we should look more carefully at some of the philosophical claims that undergird psychological approaches to therapy.

My first point is simply a request for clarification. Professor Cohen claims "many of the behavioral problems that people suffer from are the result of bad logic." On the face of it, this seems plausible. However, it would be useful were Professor Cohen to provide some concrete examples here. Presumably the relationship of Othello and Desdemona could be used to exemplify a marriage that "went awry from the commission of faulty thinking errors," but some more down-to-earth examples would be welcome (p.1). My second point is more critical—although, I stress, *gently* critical, since I recognize that there might be a history of engagement between the ASPCP and the APPA that I am not aware of. Writing of the Mission Statement of the APPA Professor Cohen claims that

> The link that the ASPCP had tried to establish with psychology and psychotherapy was…explicitly disavowed, and what remained was a didactic, intellectual pursuit that was alleged to "benefit" clients. All the years of progress in helping clients in the psychological practices was left out of this new pursuit of the mind framed by philosophers for people who sought help with their problems of living. (p.4)

I think that Professor Cohen is right to lament the loss to both the profession and humanity at large that would result if the APPA did disavow the link between psychology, psychotherapy, and philosophical counseling. However, I don't think that the

section of their Mission Statement that he quotes supports his claim that they do so disavow this link. (Although I recognize that such a disavowal might occur elsewhere in the literature of this group, or might have been made verbally by its officers of members—so my comments here should not be construed as anything other than a conditional defense of the APPA against this charge.) The section of this statement that Professor Cohen quotes reads "The activities [of philosophical practice] are non-medical, non-iatrogenic and not allied intrinsically with psychiatry or psychology" (p.3). But this claim is compatible with holding there to be an instrumental link between philosophical practice as conceived by the APPA and psychiatry and psychology. All this statement commits its proponents to claiming, then, is that there is no necessary connection between these fields. And that leaves open the possibility for psychology-orientated philosophical counseling as conceived of by Professor Cohen. All this statement closes off is that the APPA will focus *exclusively* on this approach to counseling.

With this point in hand I would now like to take issue with Professor Cohen's implicit claim that philosophy on its own is just "grist for the classroom" or for stimulating discussions over coffee (p.5). I will not elaborate this point since this it is the topic of my own paper "The Future of Practical Philosophy" that is also published in this issue of the *International Journal of Philosophical Practice*. However, I would just like to note that philosophy, even "pure" philosophy, has more teeth than this suggests. Indeed, philosophers are engaged in a wide variety of discussions that have direct import in people's lives; discussions over euthanasia, over the moral legitimacy of using financial incentives to procure human transplant organs, and over the moral legitimacy of various business practices (such as persuasive advertising) being just an obvious few.

Finally, I would like to take issue with some of the philosophical claims that under gird certain approaches to psychotherapy. (I must stress here that my following points are intended to be suggestive only; Professor Cohen is right to warn against philosophical arrogance!) According to Professor Cohen, "the classical behaviorists…proclaimed that human subjectivity—thoughts, desires, hopes, etc.—were merely a byproduct of biological processes, which had no efficacy in determining human behavior…[they] defended a science of behavior control as a practical and prudent goal" (p.6). It seems, however, that as Professor Cohen has characterized it the behaviorists' approach to psychotherapy is incoherent. On the one hand, they disavow the efficacy of human "thoughts, desires, hopes", and yet on the other hand they attempt to *think* of ways to satisfy their *desire* to affect the behavior of others, and *hope* that this will work. It seems, then, that they are committed both to holding that their thoughts, desires, and so forth should be efficacious, and also to denying that such mental states are causally efficacious. Perhaps Professor Cohen could say more to dissolve this apparent difficulty? I would also like to take issue with the claims made by the proponents of Existential Therapy. According to the proponents of this approach, "human beings…[define]…their own nature through their own freely chosen courses of action," and so should be encouraged to "stand up to their anxieties about making choices" (p.7). However, in order to make choices, rather than just aimlessly pick between alternatives, persons need to have a stable value-set from which these choices can be made. But this presupposes that, *contra* the view of the Existential Therapists, persons do have stable natures to ground their choices. Thus, the proponents of this approach are committed to denying that

persons possess that which is necessary for them to engage in making choices, and so that which is necessary for them to engage with this therapeutic approach.

The latter two points are not, of course, criticisms of Professor Cohen's paper, but of the positions that he outlines within it (and to which he does not commit himself). Indeed, my comments in this brief response have primarily been requests for Professor Cohen to elucidate his views further. And that his paper drew such a response from me is, I think, a testimony to its interest.