

**Synchronicities, Serpents, and Something Else-ness**  
**A Meta-Dialogue on Philosophy and Psychotherapy<sup>1</sup>**

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## Synchronicity I

In the summer of 2006, I read several books by well-known existential psychiatrist and insightful novelist Irvin Yalom.<sup>2</sup> They were all thought-provoking and mightily entertaining. Dr. Yalom sustains lively interests in philosophical aspects of psychiatry, as well as in psychiatric aspects of philosophy. Among other works, he has written two profoundly philosophical novels, namely *The Schopenhauer Cure* and *When Nietzsche Wept*, in which he has delved deeply and creatively into the psyches of these two outstanding thinkers via the refracting media of literary and historical fiction, and through lenses of eclectic existential psychiatry.

Yalom's fictive excursions are not confined to philosophical realms – far from it. In a delightfully ironic novel entitled *Lying on the Couch* (he is an inveterate punster in love with *double-entendre*) Yalom takes to task some perennially unfinished business of psychoanalysis, namely analysts' perpetual struggles with counter-transference issues. Even the most seasoned psychoanalysts, so Yalom artfully reveals, have not yet had their own egos sufficiently shrunk. In consequence, they are apt to experience all kinds of problems with patients, and not always of the patients' making. To be sure, patients are wont to deceive their analysts at times, whether subconsciously, diffidently, or maliciously. And analysts themselves are prone to all the vanities catalogued by Ecclesiastes in antiquity,<sup>3</sup> egoisms and egotisms alike that appear innately rooted in the human psyche, and which inevitably contribute to self-deception. If an analyst's vanities, self-deceptions, and unresolved counter-transferences were skillfully exploited by a professional con-artist posing as a patient, personal and professional mayhem would result. This is one of the conspicuous threads in the rich tapestry of untruths, vanities and self-deceptions that Yalom weaves in *Lying on The Couch*.

One particular episode in Yalom's novel rather jarred me when I encountered it in August 2006, because it coincided with an uncannily similar episode that was unfolding in my own life at precisely the same time. In *Lying on the Couch*, senior psychoanalyst and training supervisor Marshal Streider is cheated out of a substantial sum by an experienced fraud artist aptly named Peter Macondo. Posing as a grateful and wealthy patient, Macondo skillfully plays on Streider's vanities and ambitions, en route to separating Streider from tens of thousands of hard-earned dollars via an elaborate and well-crafted ruse. One stepping stone on this primrose path involved Macondo's supposed endowment of a lecture series, in Streider's name, at a prominent Mexican university, with an invitation to Streider to deliver the inaugural address. This had titillated Streider's ambition for international renown, and had endeared Macondo to him – choice morsels of bait for the trap.

While reading this in Yalom's novel, I discovered via email that parallel promises to me, made by a Mexican entrepreneur in that very spring of 2006, had similarly turned out to be entirely bogus. In my case the con-artist – call him Pedro Mentiroso – had promised to utilize both his wealth and his political connections to establish a graduate program for philosophical practice at a prominent Mexican university – which would serve as a focal point and hub for branching operations throughout Latin America – and to install me as its figurehead or titular director. There is no question that Mentiroso played skillfully, if falsely, on my ambition to see this happen, but in my case such ambition is grounded in empirical feasibility, as contrasted with Streider's self-deceptive vanity.

In the real as opposed to the fraudulently conjured Latin world, Yalom's books and mine have been well-received abroad, not only in Spain and South America,<sup>4</sup> but also around the Mediterranean. With respect to philosophical counseling, this has resulted in a substantial

demand on the part of readers for sessions with indigenous philosophical counselors, who are relatively thin on the ground at this time – except in Italy, where they have proliferated.

Because too many Latin universities (and far too many philosophers) are impenitently blind to philosophical practice, the Latin academy lags in consciousness of the extent of popular demand for philosophical services, and so (with the exception of the University of Sevilla<sup>5</sup>) has undertaken no widespread initiative to train and graduate a supply of philosophical counselors. I deplore wasted opportunity, and moreover (in conjunction with APPA) have evolved a blueprint for satisfying the demand. This is the ambition upon which Pedro Mentiroso played so skillfully, leading me to believe he would facilitate the decisive steps toward implementing the blueprint and constructing the edifice in question. While Pedro did not con me out of any money (this apparently was not his aspiration), he certainly cost me some time, as well as my professional support for some of his initiatives, none of which ever came to fruition.

So the bottom fell out of my ambition to inaugurate a graduate program for philosophical practice at a prominent Mexican university, just as the bottom fell out of Marshal Streider's ambition to inaugurate a lecture series for existential psychiatry at a prominent Mexican university. For me, these events coincided during one and the same week of August 2006. Along my timeline, Peter Macondo and Pedro Mentiroso both vanished into thin air that week, never to be heard from again. While Macondo left Streider to rue the price of unresolved counter-transference, Mentiroso left me to contemplate the phenomenon of Jungian synchronicity. For that was my immediate interpretation of the acausal linkage between these two events.

## Synchronicity II

About two months later, one day in October of 2006, I was flying back to New York from Lisbon, re-reading Jung's *Synchronicity* on the airplane. It was a longish flight, into the teeth of seasonal headwinds. After a few rounds of reading, thinking and dozing, I decided to watch the in-flight movie – something I almost never do. The feature presentation was *X-Men*. In the opening scene, a US Presidential advisor enters the oval office and alerts the President that “mutant events” have just occurred in Geneva, Montreal and Lisbon. That certainly got my attention. My three most recent trips, in chronological order, had been to Geneva, Montreal and Lisbon. This struck me as yet more synchronicity. And in case I needed a reminder, Jung's monograph on the subject still lay half-read in my lap.

Just a shade over two months later, early in 2007, I was contacted by Claire, a clinical psychologist. Claire said she wanted to discuss a case with me, and elicit my philosophical views in two different dimensions. One dimension pertained to the content of the case, which she was in the process of writing up for a keynote presentation at a conference. Claire wanted me to validate her interpretation of – guess what? – nothing other than a ostensible occurrence of Jungian synchronicity in her practice. Another dimension of discussion, said Claire, pertained to her management of the case itself. I agreed to work with Claire, and did not disclose to her my recent sequence of synchronistic encounters, of which this was the third in six months.

## Serpents I

Claire told me she had a client – call him Jason – whose problem was ophidiophobia, or fear of snakes. Like arachnophobia (fear of spiders), ophidiophobia is widespread. Jason was unusual because, according to Claire, he was not only terrified of snakes, but also claimed to

encounter them on a regular basis – “manifesting” them, as he put it. Since Jason lived and worked in Manhattan, and frequented neither exotic pet stores nor zoos, it seemed unlikely in the extreme that he would he would find regular opportunities to cross the paths of meandering serpents (at least of the footless variety). So Claire told me that she took Jason’s ophidiophobia seriously, but remained quietly skeptical of his ability to “manifest” snakes on a regular basis. She didn’t challenge him on this point, and tried instead to treat his phobia.

One afternoon, during their fourteenth session, Jason was telling Claire that he had recently “manifested” another snake, which had terrified him. Claire told me that she was about to challenge him on this issue of “manifestation,” when suddenly she noticed – to her shock and disbelief – a six-foot python stretched out on her bookshelf, behind Jason and out of his line of sight. Claire had been counseling clients in this Manhattan office for eighteen years, and had never seen a snake appear. She was also quite certain that Jason had not brought it in with him. Claire told me that she swiftly regained her composure, and almost as swiftly decided to usher Jason out of her office before he noticed the python. Claire explained that she was deeply worried that Jason might experience a panic attack – or even a heart attack – if he suddenly confronted a six-foot python at such close quarters.

So Claire invented (or decanted) a pretext to terminate their session prematurely, and she escorted Jason out of her office, making sure to steer him toward the door without allowing him to glimpse the snake stretched out on her bookshelf. She breathed a deep sigh of relief when, without further incident, he took his leave.

Claire then phoned 911. The emergency service dispatcher summoned the New York Fire Department, which handles these kinds of situations in Manhattan, retaining herpetologists (and assorted snake-handlers) on call. In fact, many New Yorkers keep pet snakes (among other

reptiles) in their high-rises, and some reptiles are also excellent escape artists. Serpents on the lam typically crawl into ventilation ducts among other tempting apertures, and re-emerge via the ductwork into neighboring apartments or offices, startling the residents or other inhabitants. While such occurrences are not unusual from the perspective of the NYFD, the odds of any particular New Yorker encountering a snake in this way are very long indeed. Most New Yorkers have never had this happen to them, including Claire – during her eighteen years in that office.

At their next session, Claire began by telling Jason the truth about the python. She had terminated their previous session out of concern for his well-being – she hadn't wanted him to confront the snake, whether he had “manifested” it or not. Jason responded by terminating Claire as his therapist, then and there.

That is the sum and substance of Claire's narrative to me, which certainly afforded food for thought. In light of Jason's case, her two questions seemed quite appropriate. Recall, Claire wanted first to elicit my view as to whether this was (as she supposed) an instance of synchronicity; and second, she wanted to solicit my professional opinion on her handling of Jason's case itself.

### Synchronicity III

On the first question: Having had the benefit of recent encounters with synchronicity myself, as well as contemplations ensuing therefrom, I believe both that Jung's concept bears weight, and that the appearance of the python in Claire's office was indeed synchronistic with Jason's claims of regularly manifesting the object of his phobia.

To make what philosophers of science (e.g. Lipton 1991) call “the inference to the best explanation,” let us briefly review the plausibility of alternative explanations as to the python's

appearance. The two standard modalities of explication are causal, and probabilistic. Did Jason “cause” serpents to manifest, as he asserted repeatedly to Claire? According to our current understanding of the laws of physics, chemistry, biology and (to the extent that it is lawful) psychology, I know of no causal mechanism that withstands rational scrutiny in this case. Any claim that Jason *caused* serpents to appear – whether by his fear or by some other means – but which remains mute on the mechanism of causation itself, belongs to the realm of parapsychology, which is more conjectural than scientific. For example, one might conjecture that Jason’s phobia radiated into the noosphere, or permeated the psychic space in his surroundings, and that the python was attracted to his “phobic aura” – but such putative causal attraction, for example in terms of a “phobic field theory,” lacks all the standard empirical supports: Such an erstwhile field cannot be observed, generated, replicated, simulated or measured by any known scientific means. Causation as we understand it is simply implausible in this case, or is at least incommensurable with the data.<sup>6</sup>

What about probability? I will eschew all attempts to fabricate rigorous computations, whether based on classical or frequentist interpretations. Consider instead this heuristic estimate. What are the odds, on a given day, of encountering an escaped snake in a Manhattan office? Millions of people work daily in Manhattan, in millions of offices. Perhaps a few tens of snakes per year escape and are encountered. Thirty six such snakes per year would mean one every ten days, on average. Given ten million people working in ten million Manhattan offices every day, and given one encounter with an escaped snake every ten days, and given that an escaped snake is equally likely to appear in any of the offices, then Claire’s odds of encountering an escaped snake on any given are one in one hundred million.

She had been working in that office for eighteen years – roughly 4,500 working days –

and prior to the day in question she had never seen an escaped snake. Hardly surprising, since her odds of encountering one during that period were only about 4,500/100,000,000, or 1 in 22,000. To put that in perspective, she'd have to work 396,000 years to attain probabilistic certainty of encountering a snake.

Next, what are the odds of one person telling another person, on a given day in a Manhattan office, that he makes snakes manifest? I would be surprised if more than one person per year ever made such a claim – even in New York – and we could conduct a survey to find out. On the assumption that this claim is made on average once per year in a Manhattan office, and given ten million offices, then the odds of a person hearing it in her office on a given day are about one in 3.65 billion,  $1/3,650,000,000$ .

Absent a casual connection, the absence of which we have already argued for, then the chances of a person encountering an escaped snake in her Manhattan office on precisely the same day as another person tells her he makes snakes manifest, is just the product of the odds of the two events:  $1/100,000,000 \times 1/3,650,000,000$ , or one in 365 quadrillion. That is an improbably small chance, rendering the probabilistic hypothesis untenable.

So what's the inference to the best explanation? If Jason did not cause the snake to appear, and if the snake did not appear by chance while Jason was claiming to Claire that he made snakes manifest, then how can we explain what happened? Jung's acausal (and also a probabilistic) synchronistic hypothesis – that related events can achieve resonance in space-time – is the most rational explanation available to us.<sup>7</sup> Or so it seemed to Claire upon reflection, and so too it seemed to me. Thus I was able to answer Claire's first question with an affirmative, validating her Jungian interpretation of these events. This by no means proves anything. But

having disqualified causality and chance alike as un-explanatory, then the prudent inference is to seek acausal and aprobability explanations. I know of no better candidate than synchronicity.

However germane, I still did not disclose to Claire my (then) recent and antecedent encounters with synchronicity, which may well have predisposed me to viewing her invocation of it a favorably biased light. As well, I did not disclose to Claire a parallel hypothesis that had crystallized in my mind much earlier, and of which she now provided unwitting but clear corroboration. I have as yet no name for this particular phenomenon, a species of counselor-client resonance, but it may be related to synchronicity. The characterization is as follows.

#### Synchronicity IV

Have you noticed the sometimes uncanny physical resemblance between dogs and their owners? This resemblance can be temperamental or behavioral as well as facial or corporeal, but first and foremost one often observes striking features of congruent appearance. I am not positing any “lawful” relation that mandates any such resemblance; far from it. To the contrary, there are manifestly many more instances in which dogs and their owners do not resemble one another at all. Yet the relatively fewer number of remarkable resemblances cannot be denied.

Similarly, I have noticed a sometimes uncanny resemblance between clients and their philosophical counselors – not a physical resemblance, rather a noetic resonance. Time and again, I have been working to resolve some issue in my own life, when suddenly I encounter a client struggling with virtually the same kind of issue, who seeks my advice in resolving it. As with dogs and their owners, I am not positing any lawful relation. My colleagues and I have handled any number of cases in which there is no noetic resonance at all. At the same time, one

cannot deny the cases in which such resonance obtains; they make vivid impressions, and stand out starkly in memory.

Whenever this occurs in my practice, and I hear a client reciting out of the blue – as it were – a set of circumstances that resonate closely with my own at the time, I cannot but feel that some unexplained but significant phenomenon is unfolding. At such times I have even come close to formulating a variant of Jason’s hypothesis: that I am somehow manifesting these clients, the better to help them and myself alike to resolve our respective yet resonant situations. Seeking at the same time to avoid lapsing into solipsism, I can imagine that – were I to disclose these resonances to my clients – they could just as well imagine, equally solipsistically, that they are manifesting me. At any rate, this was the larger significance to me of Claire’s manifestation, and her questions to me regarding synchronicity. She played precisely the role to which I am here alluding: that of the client who comes to a counselor to discuss an issue that he himself is grappling with.

Except that in Claire’s case the phenomenon is recursive: Our particular client-counselor resonance was focused on Jungian synchronicity, while at the same time the more general explanation I am advancing for all such client-counselor resonances is nothing other than Jungian synchronicity. Beyond affirming and validating Claire’s interpretation of synchronicity in Jason’s case, I disclosed none of these other considerations to her. Instead, we moved on to Claire’s second question, which pertained to her handling of Jason’s case.

## Serpents II

Recall that Jason terminated Claire in the session following the one in during which the python appeared. He terminated her as soon as she told him that she had seen a python, had feared for his well-being, and so had ushered him out of her office on a pretext.

There is a substantial philosophical literature on the generic ethics of truth-telling and deceit, as well as a corpus of more specialized case-studies in biomedical ethics that address this thorny problem.<sup>8</sup> Deceits can be generally justified when they benefit patients, as with the placebo effect. Untruths tend to be less justifiable, both intrinsically on Kantian grounds, and consequentially as well, because they tend to be less demonstrably beneficial. Be that as it may, with respect to Claire's handling of Jason's case, the crux of the matter as I see it does not lie in her professional ethics at all; rather, is centered in her treatment of Jason himself.

Phobias are, by nature, irrational. A phobic knows this full-well in his rational mind, yet is powerless to dispel a phobia by the exercise of unaided reason alone. Some forms of irrationality remain immune to rationality, and phobias are prime examples. Thus philosophical counselors do not and should not attempt to treat phobias. Two recommended ways of dispelling phobias are hypnotherapy, and behavior modification therapy (i.e. desensitization). Both are empirically efficacious in treating a wide range of phobic disorders. Hypnotherapy bypasses rational mind and accesses the subconscious, where hypnotic suggestion has purchase in reprogramming associative affective processes that trigger irrational fears. Desensitization gradually displaces irrational fears with neutral or functional if not pleasant encounters with things formerly feared.

During my misspent youth, I inadvertently acquired considerable experience as an amateur "desensitizer," coincidentally (or not) helping many people overcome irrational fears of

snakes. I kept pet snakes on and off for years; grass and garter snakes as a boy, boas and pythons as a young man. One boa in particular, named Larry, was a beloved pet who had the run (so to speak) of my apartment. I placed him in his cage mostly when entertaining ophidiophobic guests, but not always for long. I quickly discovered that most ophidiophobes had rational curiosities about snakes as well as irrational fears of them, and that most proved willing – albeit after a little coaxing – to take a look at Larry provided he remained in his maximum security lockdown. Observing Larry in his cage (from a safe distance), they asked questions about him. After a time they voluntarily moved closer to the cage, within a foot or two of him. This led by easy stages to most of these ophidiophobes being willing to stand within arm's length of me while I handled Larry, to being willing to touch him, then to pet him, and – for those who were fully desensitized – to handle him themselves, and moreover to enjoy the experience.

Beyond this, once Larry had grown to a sizeable length and weight – 8 feet and 35 pounds – he became a sufficiently impressive specimen to be paraded around schools and similar venues. Ecce applied herpetology 101: I gave the standard snake talk, encouraged the audience to handle the standard snake (Larry was a common boa, *Constrictor constrictor*), and invariably desensitized some of the inevitable ophidiophobes lurking at the rear.

Common boas make this process easy. They are gentle by nature (except of course when feeding), and rather enjoy being handled. Larry instinctively mirrored the temperaments of those who handled him: He was nervous with nervous types; active with active ones; docile with docile ones.<sup>9</sup> As I was a private music teacher, and my wife a private tutor, all kinds of visitors and their children traipsed in and ended up handling Larry.

The most memorable handler was an autistic boy about nine years old, fascinated by Larry and – unlike his petrified mother – fearless of him. Larry himself became so relaxed in the

grasp of this child that he permitted the boy to hold him by the tail and swing him in great loops at full length. I have never seen anything like it, neither before nor since.

Bearing all this in mind, I asked myself a hypothetical question: What would I have done had Jason been *my* client? Answer: I would have referred him to a hypnotherapist or a behavior modification therapist. I would not have referred him to a clinical psychologist, or for that matter to an existential psychiatrist – even to a great one like Yalom. Moreover, I would have disclosed to Jason that I had personally helped many people overcome their fear of snakes, by the process of desensitization, and so I could vouch strongly for the efficacy of behavior modification.

Then I asked myself a more searching question: What would I have done had a six-foot python manifested in *my* Manhattan office during a session with Jason? Answer: I would have seized this perfect opportunity to initiate Jason's desensitization. If anything, our session might have run a little longer than usual. So my hypothetical handling of Jason's case was a polar opposite of Claire's actual handling of it.

Even so, Claire's second question to me was not concerned with my hypothetical handling; rather, with my evaluation of her actual handling. And so I reframed her narrative in the following way.

### Serpents III

Jason came to Claire because he sought a cure for his ophidiophobia. This in itself is a very positive sign, because many phobics succumb to their fears and never surmount them. It takes courage, effort, will power, and self-preservative desire for wellness to seek a cure for one's phobia, and those are the very virtues, faculties and instincts that catalyze the therapist's cure itself. At the same time, Jason's claim that he repeatedly "manifests" snakes is highly

significant. To me, it signifies that he avidly persists in his courage and willingness to summon and confront the object of his fears, the better to overcome them. Another very positive sign. Jason was practically inducing his own desensitization.

So he comes to Claire, a clinical psychologist, for help. She does not refer him (as I would have); but instead subjects him to thirteen sessions of psychotherapy. With what result? Thirteen sessions of psychotherapy have no result on Jason, except perhaps to intensify his desire to summon and confront the object of his fear. His ophidiophobia is not alleviated, and is probably not even diminished.

Claire, by contrast, has been noticeably affected by these thirteen sessions. In the process of failing to cure Jason's phobia, she has successfully contracted her own fear – not of snakes, but of her patient's ophidiophobia. When she sees the snake on her bookshelf, she becomes terrified of Jason's possible reactions should he see it too. She fears the worst. He may have a panic attack. He may have a heart-attack. So after thirteen sessions with Claire, ostensibly devoted to treating Jason's fear of snakes, she now fears that he will drop dead if he encounters one in her office. In a word, she now suffers from *ophidiophobiaphobia* – fear of her patient's fear of snakes. This looks to me like the antithesis of effective treatment.

Of course Claire's narrative spins this differently. She claims to be acting out of deep concern for the well-being of her client. But had this been her primary motive at the outset, then she should have referred him for appropriate help. It certainly did not abet Jason's sense of well-being when, at the beginning of their fifteenth session, she informed him of what had transpired in their foreshortened fourteenth. Again, the opposite reaction ensued: Jason became so upset that he foreshortened their fifteenth session even more radically, terminating Claire there and then.

So my honest if uncharitable appraisal was that Claire should not have handed this case at all – as her mishandling of it soon enough revealed, at least to her patient. The mitigating circumstance is that Claire was willing to subject her conduct of Jason’s case to philosophical scrutiny, and (hopefully as a result) to reconsider her position on treating future patients who present with phobias.

I believe that Claire’s handling – or mishandling – of Jason’s case is indicative of larger patterns in America’s lucrative industry of psychotherapy. Since the medical and psychological professions have been effectively colonized by insurance and pharmaceutical companies, emphasis is increasingly on paint-by-numbers DSM diagnoses and mood-enhancing prescription drugs. Talk-therapy is suspiciously regarded – by insurers and drug companies – as a waste of time and money. “Old school” psychiatrists like Irvin Yalom, who was rigorously educated and meticulously supervised while training as a psychoanalyst and existential psychotherapist, rightly bemoans the new generation of “molecular psychiatrists” who are reared on the “magic bullet,” and who thus have no conception of the therapeutic value of dialogue. Yet at the same time, legions of psychologists among others licensed by states to offer counseling suffer from the hubris of a deconstructed education, bereft of philosophical foundations, and blithely assume that perpetual psychotherapy is a panacea for all possible patients. The result is that some people need psychotherapy but don’t receive it; while others (such as Jason) receive psychotherapy but don’t need it. Why doesn’t the system train gatekeepers to disentangle this inefficient web, and to direct patients or clients to the most appropriate service provider? And in some cases – not Jason’s, but evidently Claire’s – the appropriate service provider just might be a philosopher.

“Something Else-ness”

By late August 2007, this twelve-month cycle of synchronicities had, in one significant respect, come full-circle. Recall that it had begun with my reading of Irvin Yalom’s *Lying on the Couch*, and the synchronistic episodes involving his Peter Macondo and my Pedro Mentiroso. Now, a year later, I found myself sharing this story with Yalom himself, over double espresso in a North Beach coffeehouse. I was in San Francisco for a few days, and Irv had graciously agreed to meet me for coffee. Although we each had at least one bone to pick with the other, we also saw eye-to-eye on various issues, and beyond that each of us had reasons to solicit the other’s opinion. At least Irv’s opinions mattered enough to me for me to seek him out, and by the end of our meeting I believed that some of my opinions mattered to him as well.

In both *The Schopenhauer Cure* and *When Nietzsche Wept*, Yalom evidences three talents above all: First, he is a gifted creative writer, utilizing the medium of historical literary fiction to exercise his fertile imagination and extrapolate his psychotherapeutic perspective. Second, he has done his philosophical homework, demonstrating familiarity with if not mastery of both Schopenhauer’s and Nietzsche’s respective world-views and ethos. Third, he has continued a practice established (as far as I know) by Erik Erikson, namely posthumous psychoanalyses of historical figures, with the mission of extending so-called “laws” of psychology into the past, the better to instantiate or “retrodict” their universality.

Erikson (1958, 1969) had the temerity and acumen to subject both Martin Luther and Mahatma Gandhi to posthumous psychoanalyses. He was determined to show that Freudian analysis was not just a product of Freud’s particular and peculiar ethos – late Victorian Vienna – rather an instrument that can accurately gauge any psyche of any historical period. To some philosophers of science, this mission appears to be motivated by a deep but unwarrantable

commitment to positivism, which seeks relentlessly to establish “universal laws” of social science in order to imbue the notoriously value-laden social sciences – psychology, sociology, economics and the like – with the more value-neutral epistemic status of nomothetic natural sciences – physics, chemistry, biology. Psychology has long-sought recognition as the foundational social science, just as physics is justly regarded as the foundational natural one. Physicists like Newton, Maxwell, Bohr and Einstein won physics its objective spurs, by deriving from first principles well-formed laws that operate universally in given domains, and moreover which are understood to have been operative since the inception of space-time as we know it. Pace the remarkable contributions of Freud, Jung, Erikson, Yalom and psychologists of similar stature, psychotherapy’s “first principles” are not a settled matter, and their psychological models do not appear to possess the universality of physical ones. In many salient respects, Indian and East Asian philosophical models of mind (and the Buddhist threads that connect them) make more credible candidates for the mantle of universality. Thus proponents of positivism such as Erikson, whose posthumous psychoanalyses of Luther and Gandhi are transparent if brazen attempts to illustrate the universality of Freud’s model in psychological space-time, also attract ironic “diagnoses” of “physics envy” from philosophers who straddle the unbridgeable chasm between the natural and social sciences.<sup>10</sup>

Yalom is partly in Erikson’s camp. In *The Schopenhauer Cure*, his patient Philip conceals unresolved emotional problems behind a mask of Schopenhauerian clarity, poignancy, misanthropy and misogyny, only to be “cured” by existential group therapy (of which Yalom is a pioneer). Philip becomes so strongly “converted” to this psychotherapeutic model that he ends up running the group following the death of the group’s leader, an existential psychotherapist and conscientious healer named Julius, Yalom’s avatar in the novel. (Most of Yalom’s works are

conspicuously pre-occupied with death, which radiates throughout them like veins through a leaf.) In the process of writing *The Schopenhauer Cure*, Yalom read (and cited) much of the popular literature on philosophical counseling, and so perhaps this novel can be construed as his reply to, or even rebuttal of our nascent field. Yalom, in effect, is asserting that Schopenhauer was “mentally ill”, but might have been “saved” by existential psychotherapy. My hunch is that we shall never know. Although Schopenhauer’s avatar Philip eventually takes to Yalom’s cure for “SPD” (Schopenhauerian personality disorder), it is by no means given that Schopenhauer himself would ever have consented to participate in existential group therapy. Yet he stands posthumously diagnosed by Yalom, and his avatar Philip is cured / converted / healed / saved / reprogrammed (choose one or more) by Yalom’s dying avatar Julius.

*When Nietzsche Wept* is another exposition of this theme, a marvelously creative enactment of a hypothetical counseling relationship between Drs. Breuer and Freud on the one hand, and their patient Nietzsche on the other. In order to submit to psychotherapy, Nietzsche has to be deceived into believing that he is actually giving philosophical counseling to Breuer, and later to Freud himself. To perpetrate such a monumental deceit, via false appeal to Nietzsche’s monstrous ego, Yalom sagely enlists a woman, fictionalizing Nietzsche’s Salome for just this purpose. Of course Yalom is historically and psychologically correct in portraying Nietzsche as an incurably mad genius. Dr. Breuer (Yalom’s avatar in this work) is once again a conscientious but wounded healer, suffering existential crises of meaning in his marriage and his life, and is (for a change) pre-occupied with death. His encounter with Nietzsche is also – if ironically – curative, since Nietzsche’s impenetrable isolation and incurable madness give Breuer good cause, in the end, to celebrate his own banal, boring, predictable but also comfortable upper middle class bourgeois existence.

Yalom's first remarks to me, over coffee, pertained to my critiques of psychology's and psychiatry's excessive medicalization of the human being and the human condition. Certain members of psychotherapy's trade union, so Irv informed me, had taken exception to some of my criticisms. In reply, I mouthed the homily about breaking eggs to make omelets. (It gained empirical force in the café, as people all around us were having brunch.)

So we shifted to common ground. As I mentioned, Yalom himself is unapologetically critical of the new generation of psychotherapists and molecular psychiatrists, a technocracy that dispenses paint-by-numbers diagnoses and mood-enhancing formulations, and that dispenses with psychotherapeutic dialogue as a primary vehicle of healing. Irv and I both deplore postmodernism's deconstructions of humanity and the affronts of technocracy to it, and we share a healthy skepticism of the DSM.

At the same time, I jested with Irv that – according to his own published disclosures – some of his patients are healed not by his insightful interpretations of their dreams, rather by his resolution of his own counter-transference issues with them.<sup>11</sup> They feel better when he stops loathing them, and starts accepting if not loving them. I think he acknowledged this with a wry smile.

When I probed him about *The Schopenhauer Cure*, and suggested that Philip had merely relinquished one worldview (Schopenhauer's) for another (Julius's), Irv became more ardent in his defense of existential psychotherapy as a healing modality. I do not think Irv fancied my further suggestion, that some psychotherapeutic models resemble religions as much as they do sciences, and thus that "healing" under such conditions bears ponderable resemblance to religious conversion.<sup>12</sup> Irv's resistance could have been evidence of Erikson's syndrome, and in any case one can readily imagine the following snippets of hypothetical dialogue:

Erikson (to Martin Luther): “Would you care to be psychoanalyzed?”

Luther: “To what end? Aren’t you just another kind of priest, seeking to obtrude dogma and hijack dialogue between man and God?”

Or imagine Freud psychoanalyzing Schopenhauer:

Freud (to Schopenhauer): “Tell me about your mother.”

Schopenhauer: “Read my essay *On Women*.”

When Irv appealed to me, as a “fellow healer,” to be more charitable in my assessments, he rang the very bells of *When Nietzsche Wept*. I had to wonder whether Irv was now humoring me, just as Freud had humored Nietzsche in Irv’s fertile imagination. (I even glanced around the café, to see if I could spot the requisite *femme fatale*.) That wonderment was reinforced by Irv’s genuine delight at my gift to him of *Philosophy and Psychiatry* (Schramme & Thome 2004), which contains among things my essay *Thus Spake Settembrini*, inspired by Nietzsche and Thomas Mann alike. Has anyone yet dared to psychoanalyze Mann? A Freudian would have a proverbial field-day with the Eros and Thanatos that jointly ooze from every pore of *Death in Venice* (Mann 1912). I would like to read another Yalom novel about group therapy – the group being Nietzsche, Mann, Wagner and Spengler. These “four horsemen of the apocalypse” all prophesied, or “diagnosed,” the demise of Western civilization. In their wake, Irv and I among others have become Nietzsche’s “physicians to culture.” Perhaps we are all humoring each other, in a daisy-chain of incarnations, while our civilization somnambulates toward what Mann (1924) called “the foul humors of the grave.”

Irv and I are both descended from Russian Jews, are both creatures of the Enlightenment, and are both appalled by the postmodern West’s precipitous decline, driven by the USA’s neo-Roman version of “bread and circuses,” namely junk-food and trash-culture. Thus we discovered

authorial common ground: His books, like mine, have more readers in foreign editions than they do in the US. That, we agreed, is because so many countries lag the US in cultural decline. The rich matrix of intellectual history, scientific literacy and philosophical tradition that Irv and I both presuppose – and draw upon – in our respective works has all but vanished from the American mindscape, which has been transformed into more of a moonscape: airless, lifeless, and inhospitable to contemplative beings.

The wounded healer – whose prototype is the satyr Chiron – surfaces time and again in Yalom's works, and traces its origins to Jung (1989), the prototypical wounded healer of psychotherapeutic orientation. Jung also saw his patients as creatures whom life had wounded spiritually, and (thanks to his religious upbringing) he conceived of healing as a spiritual activity. This conceit permitted him to transcend (or to imagine he had transcended) corporeal as well as ethical boundaries, to the point of having sex with some of his female patients. Therapist-client sexual relations – like generic doctor-patient or cleric-choirboy relations – are taboo in professional, vocational, legal and ethical spheres alike, but precisely because they are taboo they also occur with alarming frequency. Yalom's *Lying on the Couch*, which for me precipitated among other things this article, spins webs of cautionary tales on psychiatrist-patient sexual relations, which counselors of every kind – philosophers included – should also take to heart. Jung included sex in his repertoire of healing practices; whereas legions of reputable psychotherapists exclude it rigorously.<sup>13</sup> Why? Primarily because it always ends up harming, and never helping, the patient. Just as there is no conceivable context in which parent-child sex is ever beneficial to the child, as Freud reminds us with nomenclature borrowed from Oedipus, so there is no conceivable context in which therapist-patient sex is ever beneficial to the patient.

Yalom is refreshingly eclectic, and so he draws from Freud, Jung and existentialism as he lists, and however they conduce to enhancing his healing arts (however packaged as sciences). He signed for me a copy of his textbook on existential psychiatry, and expressed interest in my philosophical views on it. That would be a challenging and worthwhile project. Any therapeutic position that weaves together such downright conflicting strands of metaphysical presupposition must be deeply incoherent, however demonstrably effective. I say this because my own philosophical position is just as deeply incoherent, even if demonstrably effective in its own way. My noetic “toolbox” contains plenty of conflicting metaphysical presuppositions, any one of which may be helpful to a given client on a given day. This is the Groucho Marx school of metaphysics. Groucho minted its very motto: “If you don’t like my principles, I’ve got others.” I generally endorse eclecticism wherever I encounter it. It may be inconsistent at times, and at bottom even incoherent, but it’s a sure-fire antidote to ideological and dogmatic and neurotic inclinations that haunt human mentation, whether in political, religious, psychotherapeutic or philosophical dimensions.

All of Yalom’s “fictitious” psychiatrists – clearly not fictions at all, rather thinly-veiled depictions of himself and colleagues – are wounded healers. That’s precisely why they continue with their own interminable analyses, and analyses of analyses, in supervision with senior analysts who themselves are in supervision with more senior ones, and on up the Freudian food chain, until we arrive at the apex and encounter Chief Executive Egos like Marshal Streider. They are so senior that they have no one to analyze their analyses of analyses of all the other analyses, in other words they have no one to heal them – or to pretend to heal them by temporarily salving their neural/spiritual/existential wounds with insightful interpretations or dissolved counter-transferences. They are so senior that their untreated egoistic inflammations

make them prey to top predators on vanity ungratified and ambition unfulfilled – i.e. to the Peter Macondos of this world. “Physician, heal thyself!”

Beyond these wounded healers, who doubtless help many but who remain immune to their own medicine – if they are not poisoned by it – are the persecuted, ostracized and isolated healers. Freud and Jung experienced persecutions of various kinds, as did Luther and Gandhi, among other historical figures who attract posthumous psychoanalyses by analysts manifesting Erikson syndrome. Schopenhauer’s bitterness was undoubtedly a byproduct not only of his penetrating intellect, but also of his isolation and ostracization. Nietzsche was even more insightful and more profoundly isolated, but utilized his unenviable circumstances as a scaffold from which to construct his Übermensch. The persecuted healer is also an archetype. We encounter him in every century and culture and religion. I told Irv about Martin Prechtel, the Mayan shaman with a price on his head in Guatemala, who found refuge in the USA and became a new-age healer-author (Prechtel 2002). Between the lines I asserted, and I believe Irv acknowledged, that persecuted healers – whether psychotherapists, philosophers, physicians or priests – are in the last analysis shamans.

Irv and I had time to exchange views on past cases and pending projects alike. He is writing another work of historical-philosophical fiction, this time on Spinoza – a worthy candidate, great philosopher and persecuted thinker if not healer, via whom Yalom can project his Erikson syndrome ever further into the past.

And of course I summarized for Irv the case of Claire and Jason, and solicited his professional opinion. Yalom’s eclecticism prevented him from rejecting synchronicity out-of-hand, while his professionalism prompted him to concur that desensitization – not psychotherapy – is a preferred approach to curing ophidiophobia. I then mentioned to him, *en passant*, that

although Claire had ostensibly approached me with two issues in mind – namely Jason’s synchronistic serpents and her questionable case management – I had the fleeting notion that there was something else, a third issue, probably something more personal, that Claire really wanted to discuss but which she never got around to broaching with me.

“Good instinct, Lou,” replied Irv approvingly. “There is always something else.”

And on that apocryphal utterance hinges a definitive distinction between psychotherapy and philosophical counseling. If indeed “there is always something else,” then the patient is never really cured, and neither for that matter is the wounded healer. If indeed “there is always something else” then there is always a pretext for another session, another invoice, another supervision, another meta-analysis, another inflamed ego, another insatiable ambition, another con-artist posing as a patient, another unresolved counter-transference, another violation of taboo. This is at root a Hobbesian view (and Freud was unwittingly an ardent Hobbesist): “Thus I put it for a general inclination of mankind, to seek power after power, that ceaseth only in death.” (Hobbes 1651).

That there may well have been “something else” in Claire’s case did not present, at least to me, a philosophical occasion for universalizing the particular. On the contrary, I have earned a reputation for short-term work, based on the mission of helping my clients to become more philosophically self-sufficient in the least possible time. When there is philosophical self-sufficiency, or better yet serenity, then there is also “nothing else.”

The presupposition of “something else-ness” is hardly existential, if conceivably eclectic. In its more notorious forms, it manifests as Augustinian original sin (necessitating weekly confession), Freudian original neurosis (necessitating as many weekly sessions as the patient can afford), or Marxist original oppression (necessitating universal agitation and revolution). As long

as there is a belief that “there is always something else,” there will always be “something else” to guarantee that psychic suffering persists. As long as the self-contradictory notion of a “healthy ego” rules psychology, along with the self-serving premise that psychotherapy is the royal road to its maintenance, there will always be “something else.” As long as there are analyses of analyses, there will always be “something else.” As long as there are wounded healers, there will always be “something else.” And as long as there are persecuted healers, and expressions of Erikson’s syndrome to psychoanalyze them posthumously, there will always be “something else.”

I declare differently: It is not always the case that “there is always something else.” Sometimes, there is nothing else. When the ego dissolves, one confronts nothing else. When the oxymoronic premise of a “healthy ego” is rejected, along with the expedient presumption that psychotherapy makes the ego healthy, one confronts nothing else. When the assumption that sufficient supervision makes the wounded healer well is likewise repudiated, one confronts precisely nothing else. When one experiences that “oceanic feeling” which Freud (1930) could not discover in himself, one confronts exactly nothing else.<sup>14</sup>

Ancient Indian philosophy conceived of divine “self” (atman) as part of Godhead (Brahman).<sup>15</sup> There is nothing else. Ancient Greek philosophy construed mundane “self” (soul, psyche) as separate from the Gods, and so in need of “something else.” Abrahamic faiths likewise conceive of soul as separate from God, requiring redemption or salvation to rejoin the Godhead – thus in constant need of “something else.” As Western civilization began to reject God and replace religion with science, its secularized and increasingly isolated “self” became the solitary and illusory locus of consciousness, identity and purpose – a chimera condemned to pull the twin trains of existence and mortality alike. Deprived of contact with the mystical, the sacred,

and the divine, the isolated and inflamed illusory self twists in existential winds. The defunct (and sometimes defrocked) priest is displaced by the psychiatrist, the psychologist, the psychoanalyst, who attempt to heal the illusory self by transmuting it into a “healthy ego” – at the corollary cost of condemning it to Sisyphean “something else-ness.” In our current age, poor Sisyphus now rolls his massively unhealthy ego up the hill, enduring endless talk-therapy and/or refills of prescriptions for Prozac. But week after week he is prevented from attaining the summit of wellness by the “first law” of psychoanalysis: “There is always something else.”

Yet in ancient East Asian ontologies – Taoism, Confucianism, and (later) Buddhism – there is neither soul nor God. In consequence there is no illusory self to be subjected to “something-elseness” on the pretext of being healed. In lieu of self, soul and Godhead, there is *sunyata*,<sup>16</sup> *samadhi*<sup>17</sup> and serenity. There is also nothing else. As soon as one jettisons “something else-ness,” lo and behold there is nothing else. And when there is nothing else, then and only then does there emerge the certainty that there is absolutely everything else, with the possible exception of something else. Would you like an example of a case in which there is nothing else? Very well, here it is.

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank my friend and colleague Prof. Dr. J. Michael Russell for bringing Irvin Yalom's works (1989, 1993, 1997, 2003, 2006) to my attention, and thank Prof. Dr. Yalom for dialoguing with me.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. "I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity, and a striving after wind. That which is crooked cannot be made straight; and that which is wanting cannot be numbered." Ecclesiastes I:14-15.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. *Mas Platon y menos Prozac* (the Spanish-language edition of *Plato Not Prozac*) and *Preguntale a Platon* (Spanish-language edition of *Therapy for the Sane*) have enjoyed tremendous popularity and have stimulated an ongoing demand for philosophical services.

<sup>5</sup> Prof. Jose Barrientos Rostrojo has succeeded in founding an M.A. program for philosophical counselors, under the aegis of Education, at the University of Sevilla.

<sup>6</sup> Prof. Dr. Yvonne Freund Levi, a psychiatrist, suggested that "mirror neurons" might have caused Claire to have imagined the python in her office. Mirror neurons putatively cause some animals unconsciously to mimic the facial expressions and/or body language and/or linguistic functions of others (especially conspecifics) in their proximity, and thus have explanatory power vis-a-vis social evolution. (E.g. see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mirror\\_neuron#Notes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mirror_neuron#Notes)) That said, it seems less plausible that mirror neurons could also engender hallucinations in one party as a social response to phenomena repeatedly described by another party.

<sup>7</sup> "Synchronicity is the experience of two or more events which are causally unrelated occurring together in a supposedly meaningful manner. In order to count as synchronicity, the events should be unlikely to occur together by chance." <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synchronicity>

<sup>8</sup> Among legion treatments of this issue, see e.g. Mappes & DeGrazia 2006, Chapter 2.

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps this is explicable in terms of mirror-neurons (see note #6 above).

<sup>10</sup> E.g. see [http://tenser.typepad.com/tenser\\_said\\_the\\_tensor/2006/02/physics\\_envy.html](http://tenser.typepad.com/tenser_said_the_tensor/2006/02/physics_envy.html)

<sup>11</sup> E.g. see Yalom 1989

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, vituperative if secretive quarrels between fanatical adherents of incompatible psychotherapeutic schools bear strong resemblances to clashes between intolerant religious fanatics from competing denominations.

<sup>13</sup> E.g. see Peck 1980

<sup>14</sup> Freud 1930: "I cannot discover this 'oceanic' feeling in myself."

<sup>15</sup> E.g. see the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the *Upanishads*.

<sup>16</sup> *Sunyatta* is often translated as "emptiness," which fails to do it justice. The term is a corollary of the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination. All phenomena arise and dissipate, and the spatio-temporal manifestations that we perceive, conceive and capture with language have no perduring "essence" – that is, they are "empty" of essential or independent being. This also applies to ego, self, and identity. E.g. see Mitchell 2008.

<sup>17</sup> *Samadhi* means "Right Concentration" in meditative practice, which conduces to experiencing *sunyatta*, and gives rise to serenity. E.g. see Mitchell 2008.