Shrink Rap Radio #672 - Philosophical Counseling with Philosopher Daniel Fincke Ph.D.
Issy Clarke interviews Daniel Fincke, Ph.D.
(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by E.E. Nobbs)

Introduction: UK broadcast journalist Issy Clarke is guest host, interviewing philosophical counselor, Dr. Daniel Fincke. Dr. Fincke is certified in philosophical counseling by the American Philosophical Association. For more information about Daniel Fincke, Ph.D., please see our show notes at shrink wrap radio.com. Now, here's the interview.

Issy Clarke: Daniel Fincke got his Ph.D. in philosophy from Fordham University. And then spent 11 years teaching in university classrooms. Now though he operates as a freelance philosophical practitioner. He teaches philosophy online, he writes a blog and he offers philosophical advice. So Daniel Fincke, welcome to Shrink Wrap Radio.

Daniel Fincke: Thanks. It's great to be here.

Clarke: Before we get on to the philosophical advice, which I do think is intriguing, could you tell us a little bit more about why you made this transition from the ivory towers of academia to this online Agoura where you act as a kind of cyber Socrates.

Fincke: I got into philosophy for very personal reasons, as part of my own religious thinking. I just wound up always drawn in to philosophy, to the practical dimensions of it. Even the most theoretical aspects of philosophy fascinate me because I have a personal grasp of why this would be relevant. And so I'm interested in the whole of philosophy and even in the more technical and arcane aspects of it. But it's because I always have a sense for how it's a practical topic. And Nietzsche was my dissertation topic. And he's one of the great practical philosophers in the sense of one of the people who's writing about how to live well, and how to do philosophy in a way that's relevant to our lives. And so that was my impulse. And I had been writing my dissertation for quite a long time. And I felt very remote from the public discussion in that process, And I got frustrated with that and started a blog and got sucked into that by the blog success. And eventually, I had accumulated enough interest in my work from the blog that there were people coming to me and saying that they were inspired to study philosophy based on things I was writing. And then I realized these could be people who could be my own students if I just offered the classes and the next thing you know, I was in business for myself. And with the way I like to do philosophy, I was wanting to put my ideas straight out there to be relevant to a

public discussion, to not get bogged down in the more arcane kinds of disputes that get you published to get you on an academic track. I'd already been diverting my energies into doing public work instead of putting together the kind of resume that would get me a tenure track job. Once I realized that I could build a business of teaching independently, and doing these philosophical advice sessions with people independently, it just seemed a no brainer that's where I'd rather be doing this kind of public engagement philosophy, rather than trying to write in a technical way that would be interesting only to a small number of people. So I want to just go into business for myself. That was six years ago and my classes haven't abated since, and I've got a loyal cadre of students who are there just year round, and it's been terrific.

Clarke: Because I think a lot of people do have that idea that philosophy is something arcane and esoteric and can't imagine how it could possibly be used as a way to help people in the way that philosophical advice is targeted in helping people. Could you explain to me a little bit about what philosophical advice is and how that works?

Fincke: What philosophical advice is about is, first of all, just to be clear, it's not a licensed therapy. It's not treatment of mental illness. The idea is that a lot of our problems don't stem from our being mentally sick in any particular way.

Clarke: You're giving us a nice tour of your home at the moment as well. So thank you for that. You really are the philosopher.

Fincke: I'm trying to make sure that we can't hear the crying baby.

Clarke: Real life problems, real life issues.

Fincke: My son is only three weeks old, so he won't cooperate. All the time. Time today? No problem. A lot of people's problems are not mental health problems, a lot of people's problems don't have to do with what's wrong with them psychologically or they're not just problems of how to manipulate their own brain from a third person perspective of psychology. There are problems of the truth, of their beliefs or the rightness or wrongness of their values, their problems with how they're conceptualizing the world. So much of what people are trying to reason through in their problems. This could be problems about ethical choices, problems in relationships, value priorities, and how they organize their lives, struggles to deal with their emotions, struggles to make a coherent narrative sense of their lives. All these major decisions in their lives, all of these issues people struggle with not just because they have a mental health issue. They struggle with them because they involve critical thinking and analysis of problems. And a lot of these things will come down to how people conceptualize important things like love, or friendship, or morality, or politics or how they put their conceptual scheme together, what

their assumptions are, do their beliefs have logical contradictions to them, all of this is relevant. To making good decisions, to figuring out how to rank your values, figuring out how to make a difficult ethical decision. This is something that people could use, the sort of skills that philosophers have and analyzing concepts looking for logical consistency, thinking through theory, thinking through what makes for a coherent approach to life and coherent set of beliefs, etc. It makes sense.

Clarke: It brings two things to mind for me immediately. One of them is a salutary move away from the medicalization of a lot of problems. And the other thing is, it's as if you're offering the role of a wise elder in a community.

Fincke: I would be presumptuous to do that, obviously. Know rather than imagining myself as a wise elder when I'm that old.

Clarke: I mean, you're a young man still but that kind of role.

Fincke: It's definitely the role of an incisive conversation partner and unlike actual therapists, there's the outside perspective. Someone who's not in your shoes, not in your circle of friends. There's that element that's still there. And there's the ability to help someone dialectically reason through conversation, through the back and forth. That approach to help, getting that other voice to help you think through the steps of what you're thinking yourself. The goal isn't of course, just as with therapists, to tell people what to do. It's not to dispense wisdom that people don't have. Most of it is the process of helping someone work through their own, what they already know, inside. It's a very Socratic sort of thing. One of the things you find, and I'm sure therapists find this too, is a lot of times people will come to you and they really know the answer to what they need to do. And what they're going to do with you is ... sometimes they're looking for permission to accept what they already know. And sometimes they're looking for someone to bat it around with and get a confirmation that they have the right answer, and so a lot of times, the word “advice” is tricky. I say, do philosophical advice.

The reason I use that word is just to avoid the word “counseling”, because in some contexts, that's going to be a protected license word. You have to be very careful because of licensing issues. And I never want to give a false impression that I'm offering some sort of psychological, licensed practice. The reason I use advice has not been because I'm telling people what to do, from some place of superior wisdom, but it's because it's the process of advising someone and advising someone is listening to them, and helping think through what they are looking for, what they believe helped them understand their own perspective. And that's primarily the kind of advising I'm doing. And sometimes I have a strong opinion. And unlike a therapist, I'm free to give that so sometimes I do give advice but but I don't mean to imply that I'm any kind of a guru

with any kind of special wisdom, I do want to make that clear.

Clarke: What kind of problems have people come to you with? If there is anything that you feel that you're able to sprinkle with to give us a real life sense of how these these sessions go, that would be great.

Fincke: It could be anything. Sometimes somebody is trying to figure out what to do about a cheating partner, or it could be somebody talking to me about dealing with their differences and religious beliefs from their parents, or how to make a difficult decision about an overbearing boss or basically the same sorts of conflict resolution issues, the same sorts of issues with reconciling their beliefs. A lot of people come to me in particular, to work out philosophical categories after a loss of faith, because I write a lot about that stuff on my blog. A lot of people who are non-believers, need help instead of going to a priest, or a pastor of some sort, who's going to tell them they have to believe in things they don't believe in. There's this room for people who want to have conversations about religion or the free will; a lot of people come to me to talk about that, or the other or they want to think through a metaphysics or an ethics in a systematic way. And for a lot of people, you only have church for those topics for ordinary people; there's church, or you go to school and you can study philosophy, but who can you go to if you don't believe in priests and pastors?

Who do you go to to talk about these issues of synthesizing your views on metaphysics and your views on ethics and where meaning to be found, but how can all this be made of rational sense of? Do we have free will and and do our actions matter? These sorts of questions are deeply important, but for the layperson what institution or what person do you go to, if you're not going to a religious institution. There is this enormous wealth of wisdom from philosophy, from the philosophical tradition over centuries, millennia, even. So I see this wide open room for philosophers to help people reason through these things. And again, not by imparting some knowledge, some settled viewpoint that I have, but by debating it out with you and helping you see the connections and answering philosophical … explaining what the options are, and helping work through your take on things. People come to work out their philosophical worldview.

Clarke: And people can then take ownership of those views, which would generate even more meaning than adopting the view of someone else I would imagine.

Fincke: That's exactly it. And that's one of the things that's so wonderful, even when you talk about the arcane technical philosophers philosophy as philosophy teachers, as a practice of philosophy, there's such an ethos of emphasizing the dialectical process by which we mean, reasoning is a process of conversation. It's a process of a back and forth working with your particular mind. For example, some people wonder, why do I need to take your philosophy

classes because I can just go read the books ? The reason for the philosophy teacher is not because I have all the right answers. I tend to think I do but not because I'm just going to say - Oh, here's the right answer. Do you have free will? Yes. There you go. There's your answer. Something like that. It's going to be instead of that when you read other people's books. If you have a bunch of prejudices that you haven't analyzed, or you have a firm viewpoint on the world, you're going to be very easily inclined if you're an ordinary person, and even if you're a philosopher, you're going to be very easily inclined to think you see why this or that position is foolish. It takes talking to somebody who is really skilled at philosophy, to be able to show you your own prejudices, why arguments that you think are easily dismissed, or maybe more complex, maybe have more going for them than you thought. When you need someone to respond to the way you're responding to philosophy to unearth your prejudices, unearth your assumptions, open up clarifications that you're blind to as someone who's locked in your own viewpoint, and that's what we do.

That's why, for example, I teach my philosophy classes. They're not there for - Here's a bunch of material for you to go memorize and it's a static material. These are the things Descartes said, these are the things Socrates said. It's not like that. What it is, is we'll explain an idea. And then it's what do you think of that idea. And then here's your, your opinion then gets analyzed and challenged, so that it's constantly forcing going to another level, and that those texts can't necessarily do that themselves. For most people, we need new people who have been around the block and know how the arguments work, and can help us get out of our own blinders. And it helps to have that kind of personal guide to do that. That's what I do in my classes.

Clarke: That reminds me of one of the key aspects of psychological health being psychological flexibility, and it sounds as if there's a sort of thinking of cognitive or philosophical flexibility that's coming through there. One of the aspects of philosophy that's become very popular these days, as far as leading a good life is concerned, is stoicism. Could you tell us a little bit about what stoicism actually is, and whether you feel that it does offer lay people a good guide to a good life?

Fincke: Stoicism is a philosophy tradition that goes back to the Roman times as a formal school. And it's a tradition that's focused on, it's really best summed up by - I think it's a neighbour in the 20th century who formulated the Serenity Prayer, which was - God give me the courage to change the things I can, and the serenity to accept the things I can't, and the wisdom to know the difference. And I think that actually encapsulates what stoicism is about. It's about seeking the wisdom to know the difference between what you can change or what you can't, and to come to reconcile yourself to what can be changed. And to not indulge emotions that will ultimately be futile because you can't change the circumstance, that it's about living as rationally in harmony with reality as you can. So it's a matter of training your emotions to accept realities that are

inflexible, to not spend futile emotional energy on those things. That's really what I think to be the core insight of stoicism, and it's really about a habit of men meditating on - What's the rational response in every situation? And to prioritize virtue, of course, to prioritize reason to understand the bad things that happened within the context that's most constructive. Sometimes you read the stoics and they can tend a little bit towards rationalization. There's this one - it's like a coping mechanism for harsh truths by finding the positive in them. Or whatever method of resigning you can. Now to me the stoics are insightful in some ways and not helpful to me in other ways. I'm not by any means a devout stoic or dogmatic stoic or doctrinaire stoic, but it's what the stoic approach to things taught me. When I was reading the stoics and internalizing them, what's been most valuable to me, has been the analysis of every emotional response. And to think about every emotional response and to think through what's the most rational way to feel here, and what's the most rational thing to do here?

I like one simple thing for example, very simple thing is once missing my bus and then asking myself - Was there some reason that this was my fault? And if it wasn't, letting go of the emotion - that negativity about kicking myself; and if it was my fault, instead of beating myself up, thinking in terms constructively of how do I prepare to not do that next time. In other words, instead of getting overwhelmed by an emotion, analyze - Is there anything I could have done? And if you realize there's nothing you could have done, letting go of that anxiety as though somehow it's your fault. And if there was something your fault, then thinking through next time - How do I avoid this emotion in the future? There's a set constructive approach to your emotions. Another thing is letting go of things you can't have, not spending emotional energy on things you can't have. Once you realize you can't have it, it's over and we move forward, and you only focus on what's available. And this sort of thinking for me, and I know we've talked about this before, but I wrote an article in 2013, where I had taken an approach to things, where I said it was, and I saw it as inspired by the stoics, where I took what I called a "no expectations".

Clarke: I read this article and I thought it was very powerful. I wrote down actually a little passage towards the end, that session section - Feel your helplessness without confusing it with hopelessness; you don't have to be all powerful to be powerful. I was struck. You write beautifully and it's well worth people diving into your blog to get a sense of the way that you write in the issues that you address. But if you go into that aspect of expectations a little bit more deeply, that would be great.

Fincke: Because it's this cliche and this is the thing about wisdom - most of it sounds cliche, because it's well known, wisdom is not something you need to go seek out a philosopher to find. You can find it everywhere, but the problem with it is internalizing it; most of the wise sayings are cliches, but when they strike you, when you internalize them, when they hit you at the right moment, the right time, they become life changing truths that you really appreciate the

profundity of. And for me, the whole idea of having no expectations just really struck me from a stoic perspective. In 2013, what I realized was, or I hypothesized, that what we do in life is we wind up taking what we expect to happen - like when we when we expect something good to happen. We wind up attaching ourselves as though it's something we already have. There's this disproportionate tendency we have to get upset about things we've lost, then about things we've never had. There are plenty of good things we don't have, and we're not upset about it. You're not upset about it. You could write just a long list of things that could be in your life that aren't that you're not daily upset about. But if we lose a particular thing we already have, then we tend to get really obsessed with it. And what I realized was when it comes to taking chances in life, when it comes to trying things in life, what I think we wind up doing is as soon as we say - I'm going to apply for this job, or I'm going to try and become friends with that person, or I'm going to try and land this client. Or I'm going to save up money for this vacation - we wind up putting our emotional investment in this one possible good thing as though it's one of the things we already have and is stripped from us. And because of that, we take less chances because we emotionally invested in each of the chances and each one now is a referendum on our desirability, whether this friend comes through or this client comes through or this opportunity comes through.

Whereas, if we recognized that what we're aiming for is not ours already, it's nothing already belonging to us that if we don't get it, it'll be taken away. It's one of a huge number of possibilities. If we actually recognize the vast number of things we could do if we were imaginative every day, and we recognize that any particular thing we try is just one attempt, and there's many other attempts we can make. Then it opens up our eyes. And it was this philosophy, for example, that got me to start my business, because I thought to myself, all I have to do is tell my Facebook friends and teaching classes, and what happens if they don't come? I've lost nothing. If I saw myself invested in - either they come or I'm a failure - then if nobody came, I would have given up. But when I said - If nobody comes, it's okay. My thoughts weren't - I didn't have online students yesterday, so I won't have them tomorrow. Then when they came, then I said to myself, okay; if I now say - I'm expecting all the people who come on the first day to stick with it, then I'll be devastated as they leave. So instead, in the beginning ... I've gotten better now. But in the beginning, I didn't even keep records of who was coming. Because I didn't want to get fixated on them. As - Oh, this person belongs to me; they are now my students; they're my clients. It was if they come back, they come back; if they don't, they don't. That attitude made it so that all the rejection that comes from half of the people not coming back, only half the people come. I didn't feel the rejection because I didn't psychologically lock in, that this person has to come back or it means something important. You take what comes, and so I spent a whole year taking opportunities as they came and looking for more opportunities. And then every time I took an opportunity, forget about it, don't think of that one has to pay off, just go on to the next one. And opportunity after opportunity started opening up. And within a year, I had a full time

business and went off on my own and started taking more and more chances. And the next thing you know, I wound up in France and getting married and … things started to fall into place by just taking more of the opportunities and the way I did that was by putting less expectation on each one. So that was the awakening for me.

Clarke: It sounds as if you feel that this kind of critical reasoning and logical thought through issues has actually helped you a great deal in your life. Do you think it's helped you in areas where traditionally people might regard them as emotional problems rather than I mean, that isn't it? I appreciate that that is an emotional problem in terms of investing in expectations. But the more traditionally related emotional problems, have you experienced the benefits yourself?

Fincke: Oh, yeah, that's exactly it. It's because our emotions are and this is where I am less stoic, and more Aristotelian, and then Aristotle is more of an affirmer of the emotions and their value, the stoics tend in a direction of mistrust of the emotions. And I think we need a healthier understanding than that, and a more balanced picture. The emotions are immediate intuitional responses to the world and they're driven by intuitions that are rational, deeper down. I think the emotions are either a particular different emotions are different, but some emotions are that we have an ingrained response to certain kinds of things that are appropriate to cause a sadness, or appropriate to cause us anger or appropriate causes. Yes, this is reminding me of David Hume and saying that reason will always be slave to the emotions. I differ strongly with him about that. I don't think that reason is a slave to the passions. I am far more of a rationalist than him on that.

What I'm actually saying is that the passions are a kind of reason. There's one of two kinds, either what they represent is a right, so there are some things that are of the kind of value that it's appropriate that we dislike, and there are some things that it's appropriate that we like. And we have certain immediate responses of liking and disliking that are rationally evolved, like we have evolved to have immediate emotional connections to certain things because they are usually very good for us or usually very bad for us. We don't even need reason to be explicit. We've been set up to have an immediate response to certain good things and immediate negative response as a shortcut that's been evolved into us.

Clarke: Like mother's touch compared to pain, for example.

Fincke: Yeah, exactly. You have an immediate emotional negative response to pain because it's so regularly correlates with something bad for you. It's a warning system. And so you've been set up to not go through the cumbersome working, abstractly thinking about that. Pain is a warning signal that you don't have to then abstractly figure out. It gives you the immediate information. And so emotions are a rough and ready, quick, quick detection system of value, of appropriate responses to value. It's just that it's a crude system. And it needs to be refined through thinking

and through lots of conceptual understanding of the world. And we have more refined emotional reactions often. And some of our emotional reactions then are based on lots and lots of thought. If you, like I would ... I have very strong feelings in favor of the freedom of speech. And so if I have ... very angry and outraged at somebody denying someone their freedom of speech, it's not just some evolved tendency. That's a reflection of a lot of thought. I have a lot of abstract values that have been argued to me; it's based on a lot of experience. And so, but even though I have all this abstract thinking, yes, I will emotionally respond as the click mechanism. Right. And to me, the key is that even our quick responses, I think, do reflect either a rational setup that's quite natural between us and ordinary environmental experiences, or even learned rational relationships that we have these effective ways of manifesting our realization of them.

And so to me, the question with the emotions is - Are they rationally aligned with reality? The emotions are not the enemy. It's just that - Are they proper? Are they a fit to the situation? Are they reasonable? And so the key with the emotions is to ask - Okay, why did I have this emotion? What rational reasons might be there? And then in what ways might be a mistaken emotion ... what ways is it unreasonable? So to me, the question with the emotions is train them, so that they respond to reason as much as possible, rather than to minimize emotion as some sort of external thing. That's at odds without reason. Does that make sense?

Clarke: Yeah, that gets back to the Bernard William virtue ethics - Doesn't the application of an appropriate response to a situation ... gradually become ingrained? And then doesn't Aristotle say that virtue ceases to become something that feels like a duty. It becomes a pleasure, because that becomes the habitual response.

Fincke: Exactly, exactly. And it's this, it's this habituation to where you embody the virtue; you don't just do an honest thing, you are an honest person. And you are so habituated that being honest in the right time and the right way, the right reasons give you pleasure.

Clarke: So do you feel that an understanding of such wise character advice, having role models, having the opportunity to be involved in those kinds of dialectics can, in a sense, enhance people's characters, develop their personalities, and bring forth a generation of people who are more attuned to what virtue serves. Such an old fashioned word, but for want of a better one, I'll use it.

Fincke: That's exactly what it is if you have people who are reflective and everybody's doing this, to some extent; unfortunately, philosophy is something people even who are unlicensed get to do ... everybody does philosophy, everybody's working through - Are my emotions reasonable? Hopefully, they're thinking about this. Are my responses proportionate, rational, are they reasonable for the circumstance? We all do it to some particular extent. And philosophical

reasoning is bringing in even more fine-tuned analysis of the concepts and our behavior. So it's doing what or what we already are well equipped as ordinary thinkers, lots of ordinary people are having particular specializations in philosophy and can be wonderful moral thinkers. What philosophy gives us is some theoretical help to untangle certain confusions that even good people might still have, intellectually. And so that's where we can help.

Clarke: I was going to ask you, are there any other philosophers particularly that you have found helpful when you've been investigating your own idea of the way to lead a good life? And the way to think more clearly about the things that matter to people in life?

Fincke: Obviously, I wrote my dissertation on Nietzsche. And there's a myriad of directions that pulled me, obviously the stoics, Aristotle, contemporary philosophers. I really enjoyed the perfectionist tradition. People like Thomas Furka. But then there's also ... and again, you and I were just talking about this before meeting. There's a wonderful new book by Iddo Landau about meaning, and meaning in an imperfect world. And was a wonderful book that summed up a lot of what I was already saying myself, and then gave tremendous extra insight. There are too many people to mention.

Clarke: That's a wonderful book if you're feeling feeling low, or feeling that sort of existential angst or midlife crisis, and it strongly helped me to feel that a life that ... I don't have children, for example, and children, I think, as a woman, I feel that that children give huge value to your life. And that book really helps me to feel that there are so many other aspects to life that I disregard and overlook and don't really value. I value them in the moment, but then I think - Now sunset, and actually, it does matter. And it did help me to change the way that I was thinking about those things.

Fincke: It's funny, because when you try and think like, what really motivates you in life and one of the things that really motivates everything I do, is anti-nihilism, an aversion intellectually and emotionally to nihilism; that there's this view that nothing matters, or the denigration of the things that matter. Minimization of how much things matter. And so there's, I spend a lot of time with people who think life is meaningless and come to me as a foil, laboriously working through with nihilists. But it's a fun back and forth, because I'm constantly sitting down with nihilists. And they throw everything they've got at me. And, if I can persuade them, I don't know. We'll see. But again, that's the process. That book was so great for deflating many of the temptations to nihilism; many of the illusions that people or the confusions that people get into conceptually that leads to nihilism. So, I've done a couple close readings of that book with students who are struggling to figure out how value works, if anything could be a value And particularly a lot of people who come to me are perfectionist in the bad sense. There are two sets of perfectionism. There's perfectionism as the philosophical tradition, which says that at least one of the most

important things of value is the attainment of excellence, for example, Aristotle could be read as a perfectionist and that is his philosophy. His ethics is about realizing our excellence, to live an excellent human life, realizing the various human excellence is including the excellence of virtue, but also beyond just moral virtue, virtues of skill. So this idea of a contrast with for example, hedonism, which says that the only thing of value is pleasure. And the only reason music is valuable is because it gives us pleasure. The only reason that technology is valuable is because it gives us pleasure, or knowledge is only valuable if it brings us pleasure. That's a common reductive view - that the only thing of value is pleasure. The perfectionist argues that no, the excellence of performing a musical instrument well is good in itself. Or the excellence of scientific discovery or knowing things are excellent in themselves. And a perfectionist might be a perfectionist in addition to believing other things have intrinsic value or perfections ... Intrinsic value is our realization of our excellences is that the idea that excellence is important and sometimes a more important value than pleasure, or a more fundamental value than pleasure or other competitors for fundamental value. That's a tradition of perfectionism, which I belong to.

Clarke: I understand. I hadn't understood that distinction.

Fincke: And, Landau acknowledges there's a difference to what he's talking about. He goes - That's fine. He's not against that tradition. But on the other hand, there's the kind of perfectionist that Landau was criticizing and that I would criticize. And that's the sort of person who has a distorted view of value that says - Unless what I do is perfect, it's worthless. So I am not as good a composer as Beethoven. So it's all crap. And that attitude of perfectionism where you're just beating yourself up, because the perfect has become the enemy of the good. That's the kind of perfectionism that a lot of nihilism engages. A lot of nihilistic ideas are people saying - Well, this isn't perfect, so therefore, it's worthless. And, Landau does a wonderful job of saying - Look, that kind of thinking is just false. It's too simplistic. It's too all or nothing.

Clarke: So philosophy can help us see a way to finding meaning when we've lost it. And that must be a key thing in a society where I was listening to the radio today and they've claimed that in the UK, the incidence of lost workdays from depression is likely to become the biggest cause of lost workdays overall in the country but in the next year, and it does seem to me that that the emphasis placed on expectations, on an unrealistic view of happiness and on it, certainly for people like me that kind of perfectionist train of thinking aside from any severe mental health issues. There is just a trend for people to find life tough.

Fincke: And now, you get into the issue of depression. And again, this is where it gets difficult is a low mood ...

Clarke: You mean that the people can have low moods without it necessarily being a clinical

situation, but it can still lead to people having lower energy, lethargy, and struggling with life. And it's still a problem for them, whether it's clinical or no.

Fincke: And even where it's depression, again, I can't treat mental illness, I'm not going to prescribe the drug and I don't. I don't look at people from the perspective of the third person perspective, the scientific perspective of what are the inputs and outputs of the brain that cause it to function certain ways. But, nonetheless, even when people are depressed, what I can give if this person is also seeing a mental health professional, what philosophers can give is - even depressed people are not simply victims of their brain; there is also reasoning, and their ideas are not all just generated by the depression. Some of them also come from reality; some people are depressed in part because of beliefs, and they have good reason for, or value judgments that they have good reason for. And even if they're not the correct beliefs and not the correct value judgments, there's at least reasoning involved that got them there. And that matters. It matters - the content of what we think and the danger is to... to people who are looking at the world as if it was half empty. They worry that any sort of positive message - No life has meaning. Oh, look, you have value - that this tends to be just platitudes. They tend to dismiss this as just things you say, to try and delude yourself and so, there's a sort of imperviousness that that can be entrenched. And the problem is that a lot of positive sayings could be pablum; they could be people just trying to talk themselves up.

So to me, it's really valuable, that people who are really, who don't just have a mental health problem, or even if they have a mental health problem, that in either case, their ideas are taken seriously. They don't think things have value. They don't think their lives are what they should be, etc. And those are real issues that could be rationally discussed, without being just dismissed as - Oh, that's your mental health problem. Well, it could be in part, but it's also your reason, and your reason should be respected and you really should be engaged rationally. And that's why one of the reasons that one of the things I do try, and avoid some of the stoic writings, for example, will sound like - They're just trying to interpret whatever way will make things sound good. And that BS thing is what I try to avoid, like I'm willing to face - Yeah, here are some hard truths.

To me, the only consolation is not a happy thought. It's a happy thought that we really believe is true; we have good reason to think is true. And so my idea of combating nihilism is not by wishing it away, or just trying to emote it away; the goal is to really critically analyze the claims it makes and treat them seriously. And to treat the person who is struggling with these ideas. It's not just a brain disease, even though that might help cause those ideas sometimes, and in some aspects of that, again, be treated by a mental health professional, that aspect of it that's rational, is what I want to get into and really treat the arguments seriously, not wave them away is - Oh, just not useful thinking. People care about the truth and and that's why it's helpful to talk to a philosopher; my goal is not just to make you feel better, it’s to help you think through the truth.

Clarke: That sounds like a wonderful place to end. I'm mindful of your time and your three week old baby who no doubt will be seeking your attention as well as your wife at some point later this evening. Yes, don't forget the two year old two year old, Dan. Can you tell us where people can find you online and we will have details and information in the show notes and if there is anything else that you think we haven't covered this evening? Please flag that up now.

Fincke: Yeah, you can find me at Daniel Fincke dot com; that's i n c ke Daniel Fincke -Fei NC ke people forget the C.

Clarke: So I did when I was looking for you.

Fincke: So it's a superfluous letter. I get it like a joke with them. So yeah. Daniel Fincke com slash what dash is dash philosophical dash counseling and the reason I send you to that specific page is that the my main page got screwed up and I can't get my web guy to fix it yet, but you can go to the main page. It might look a little disorderly but click on the philosophical advice there, but mainly just write me at camelswithhammers@gmail.com or reach out to me on Facebook at Dan Fincke. Again, f i NC ke. Probably I respond best on Facebook. They're the most ... as you figured out.

And if you friend me on Facebook and message me, tell me why you're contacting me and inquire about my classes. You can do a free session with me about anything. I offer an advice session or a class called pick my brain offer. So these one if you have one thing you want to talk to a philosopher about ... spend an hour; you can pick my brain. And then if you want, the classes are live, they're interactive, they're not some kind of pre-canned thing, just a few students and there are chances for people to, like what we talked about ... flows from what we're talking about. What my students and I are engaging about. And then we pick the topics based on what's interesting them, where our discussions have gone. And I wind up. I give no homework. We read text together in class. So you learn right there.

I designed my classes for busy working people, who just love to learn on their own and I minimize the stress of ... homework. Nobody does it and then they don't show up because they feel bad. It's not about what you have to do outside; we come in, we read a text together, we discuss it - why you don't have to be pre-prepared. And then, if you don't come, I never charge people who don't attend. So it's not like the gym membership where you pay and then you just wasted your money. If you don't show up, I try and do everything I can to cater things to the working person who wants a two hour slot that they can fit and have a stimulating discussion every week about ideas. And then it doesn't have to become a chore, doesn't have to become a money sink because they can't make the time for it.

Clarke: But it does become a community as well. And that's also bound to have benefits.

Fincke: Oh, it's wonderful. And again, the loyalty I've had from students and other people for years, years and years, same students, and it's been really gratifying the people who really stick.

Clarke: Thank you very much indeed for your time.

Fincke: Thank you so much. It's wonderful to see you again. Hope to see you back in class.

End of Interview

Clarke: I found it very stimulating, talking to Dan Fincke. And it seems to me that what he's offering under the banner of philosophical advice could be very useful. Indeed, it appears there's nothing quite like it out there. It could be very valuable to talk through a knotty problem, whether ethical, emotional, or whatever, with an outsider well-versed in critical thinking, reason, discussion, and more than two millennia of philosophical insight into how to lead a good life and how to think about what matters. Dan is passionate about what he does and incredibly committed to deepening and clarifying his thinking on important topics.

If you look at his blog, called Camels with Hammers, you'll see evidence of his elegant and crystal clear writing on atheism, gender and sexuality. us and far, far more. It's a mine of considered discussion that offers enlightenment and increased cognitive flexibility. And this interview, I hope, acts as either a reminder of or insight into the fact that we all do philosophy. When we think about ideas, as well as urging us to think more carefully, more objectively and more open mindedly about the issues of the day. I was very grateful that during this busy period, with a new baby, adding to the family, he was generous enough to give me his time, and I heartily recommend that you take a look at his work.

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