

Psychology is the Child of Philosophy

Interview with Lou Marinoff, Philosopher, Professor, Counselor, Speaker, Writer

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Abstract

Dr. Lou Marinoff is the founding president of the *American Philosophical Practitioners Association* and the founding editor of its Journal, *Philosophical Practice*. Eminent academic, he is professor of philosophy at The City College of New York. He collaborates with think-tanks and leadership forums such as the World Economic Forum of Davos, and has counseled celebrities and Nobel Laureates. Universally recognized as author of international bestselling books including "Plato Not Prozac!", translated into twenty-seven languages. But beyond these achievements Lou Marinoff is a man who loves wisdom and enjoys rendering philosophical counseling to anyone who wants to follow a path to a fulfilling life. In this interview, we review some of these ways.

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New York

For a conversation about ancient philosophies between a Canadian philosopher based in New York and a European psychologist trained in Manhattan, I am in the perfect setting. Lou Marinoff would point out: "Well, nothing is *perfect*, but probably it is *optimal*". Everything surrounding me is complementary: oriental kindness, occidental design. Minimalism, technology, symmetry, innovation, silence, art and functionality perfectly merged. I'm waiting for Dr. Lou Marinoff in a hotel which used to belong to the Rockefeller family and is currently run by a Japanese one. A bronze sculpture of a dog carved by Fernando Botero adorns the lobby of this tiny slice of Japan in the center of Manhattan, an oasis of tranquility just few blocks away from one of the most crowded areas in the world, Times Square.

I'm feeling pleased at the chance of having a chat with the author of "Plato Not Prozac!". This book inspired and impelled me to seek in the field of psychology a theoretical and practical approach whose philosophical foundations collected the knowledge from the great pundits of ancient times. This is the way I got to Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy. The first thing I say to Marinoff is that what keeps me surprised is the huge progress people experience when they understand that the real change consists of changing our life philosophy.

Marinoff's smile and eyes get wider while he nods effusively:

LM: Yes, of course, for us that's natural. I say "of course" because to us it's obvious, but not to other people necessarily. You know, philosophers think this way but most people are not philosophers, 99% are not. It is a great (re)discovery for them and I think it is important for psychologists also to know it. In recent decades, fortunately there has been a predilection for cognitive psychology, even from governmental institutions and not only in USA, but also in Europe. I'm not a psychologist but I'm glad that cognition is recognized as essential to change. Not just behaviorism, that was a disaster, to treat people like rats, you know. Cognitive change will produce behavioral change, so they are working together, but cognitive change is essential. You can't just program people, they have to understand and then, change.

MR: This is one of the main premises in Ellis' Rational Emotional Behavioral Therapy.

LM: I know a little about REBT, but I didn't meet Ellis. I had clients who worked with Ellis and told me about his peculiar way of conducting sessions. His ideas were great and he based his method on Stoicism, which is very powerful and I think one of the best ways, but there are many other tools. To change one's philosophy is what makes the difference to one's personal evolution toward a fulfilled life.

MR: As a psychologist, I use ideas coming from philosophy, like the ability to transform ourselves from what we are just now. Sartre said something like: "I am what I'm doing with what I am".

LM: Can you repeat it in French?

Marinoff's question leaves me astonished and I try to remember my rusty French.

MR: I think he said: L'homme n'est rien d'autre...

Dr. Marinoff reacts in a funny way and I remember he has an extraordinary sense of humor.

LM: I'm just kidding. You are talking about Sartre's quote: "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself... he exists only in so far as he realizes himself". This is one of the main ideas from Sartre: We are in essence the values we choose to define us: What we value in life and how we behave according to these values. When we realize that they are inappropriate we can change them. So, it is true that we are what we do along with what we are, because that leads us to transform ourselves. Sartre thought that we are free to choose our values, and we are free to decide how to behave in consonance with them. We have a responsibility because of this, so freedom and responsibility are linked. In philosophical counseling, I think that is important for our clients to be able to assume responsibility. If people can't do this, they are not ready for philosophy.

Lou Marinoff has made an extraordinary contribution presenting the practical side of philosophy to the public. He did it previously with other great philosophers and now with Lao-Tzu in "The Power of Tao". When I express to him my gratitude for that, he stares at me and starts answering in Spanish:

LM: "De nada". I'm very happy. I had to write it. It's close to what I had envisioned and people have understood it. Chinese philosophy is very powerful and very different from western philosophy, radically different. You have to think completely differently to understand the Chinese mind. They have a great civilization, not only in population but also in longevity: five or six thousand years, maybe even seven for the more prehistoric peoples of the region.

MR: In "The Power of Tao" you talk about the Axial Age and describe that time like a cradle of wisdom.

LM: Yes, but this term was coined by Karl Jaspers. It just so happened that at the same time three great philosophers coincided in the bosom of three different civilizations: Pythagoras in the Hellenic world, Buddha in India and Lao-Tse in China. All of them, same time, same time! Imagine!

When Lou Marinoff talks about philosophy his countenance glows. His words and gestures are so passionate that makes me feel he's not just teaching but performing his knowledge.

MR: Could we say that the knowledge we currently use for our personal evolution, comes from those ancient sages?

LM: Sure, it does! Humanity has made great scientific and technological strides. We have travelled to the moon and that's amazing. But you see, it does not automatically improve our moral life. If people who lived a hundred years ago came back today and could see what we do with a smartphone, they would think it's magic. But in terms of moral progress things are very different. Scientific progress continues for every generation, you don't have to go back to the beginning. Each generation can resume where the previous one left off. But moral progress or spiritual progress is a journey everyone has to start by themselves. Every generation has to start from scratch to develop their capacities, and to behave and to think in a healthy way. That's very important for us, as philosophers. But you are right, I also believe that we can learn from these sages everything that conduces to a good life, for individuals, families, communities... every great moral teaching has roots in that Axial age.

"The ideas of the Tao are like tapas for the soul"

MR: So everything is changing except the wisdom from philosophy and we only have to decide how to live the changes.

LM: Everything changes. Every day! Change is the only constant thing. Life, world, the universe, are in a permanent state of change. How many choices do you make in just one day? We change our humor, emotions, ideas, beliefs. Life is change and decision, we are constantly confronting alternatives that move us to choose.

MR: Does the Tao help us to make the correct decision?

LM: Not necessarily the perfect decision, but always the better rather than the worse. Everything is complementary. The Tao gives rise to yin-yang and all their manifestations. This symbol has two complementary parts joined in a balanced and inter-penetrating way, so complementarity implies integrity. In Western philosophy, we look at opposites; we fragment and polarize. Day and night, light and darkness. But opposition is an illusion. All opposites belong to a greater whole. There are better and worse choices; nothing is ever completely perfect or completely imperfect. Even in a bad situation you can find something good, some hope or some lesson. And even in a great situation there's always something wrong. People think: "Oh, this moment is perfect", and two minutes later think: "Now there's a problem". No matter how great everything might be there is always something less than perfect. So, people get irritated because instead of appreciating the 99% they look at the 1% of imperfection.

MR: Human beings have the ability to change, but we are always afraid to fail.

LM: And sometimes we are even more afraid to succeed! In each situation, we have to try to choose the better option, the wiser one; that's what the Tao teaches us. But if we choose the worst way, we also will learn. Confucius says that there are three ways to learn, and the bitterest one is from experience: making the wrong choice, you will learn the hard way.

MR: And the other two?

LM: We can also learn by reflection, which Confucius calls the noblest way; or by imitation, which he calls the easiest.

MR: Are you saying that the Tao is very practical?

LM: Yes, it is. One of its teachings is paying attention to the little delights. The matter of fact is that Lao-Tzu poems are also delightful, like the Spanish tapas, they are "tapas" for the soul. But the Tao has also a mystical dimension, because you can't even say what it is: by definition, every definition of Tao is incorrect. Lao Tzu begins with this: "The true Tao cannot be named".

MR: Okay, we can't say what it is, but maybe you can talk about the tools to practice it. I think that the breath is one of them.

LM: Yes, and it is fundamental. If you look at the martial arts, they come from the Tao and you will see that in the first place they don't learn to move but to breathe. It is the same in Yoga. Breath is fundamental for life. Life starts with the first breath, life ends with the last breath. You can go days without water and even longer without food, without breathing not very long.

MR: Tao teaches us to focus the breath on the "hara". What is "hara"?

LM: It is the center of being. "Hara" is a Japanese word. Have you heard about "hara-kiri"? Japanese samurai used to commit ritual suicide by inserting a sword in the "hara". Inside there is the gate to controlling emotions. The hara governs our emotional life and our appetites; it is congruent with the Manipura chakra in Indian yoga.

MR: I am getting that the point is focusing on the "hara" when we meditate.

LM: That's right. The "hara" is the center of gravity of the body, and if you concentrate on breathing and imagine yourself centered there you'll feel a very good effect. The mind will become calm. When you just focus on the breath it can be superficial, especially if you

think too much. The reactive mind keeps grabbing onto thoughts and feelings. The Japanese call it a “drunken monkey”. In shallow breathing the grasping mind is still producing many ideas. But the mind will settle down if breathing goes deeper and you remain focused on your center, on your “hara”. Breathing and focusing are two splendid tools from Tao. You don’t need much more to feel fine.

MR: Some minimalistic philosophers state that human necessities are just a few and that people disturb themselves because they transform their wants into needs. Even radical psychologists reduce those needs to daily food and water. Don’t you think that this drastic minimalism devalues the human being to the category of a plant, and that there is a huge difference between living and merely surviving? A long time has passed since we lived in the jungle.

LM: We don’t live in a jungle, not anymore. And of course, we need more than food and water. I agree with you. But I still think is very important for people to distinguish between needs and wants. Ask people what they need and they will soon tell you what they want. “I want this, I want that”. Whatever you have you want something more, because wanting is not satisfiable. Whatever you want, you will want more. Desire is worse than need. But if we don’t get what we really need, we die. That’s the big difference. As organisms, we need food and drink, and also need sleeping and breathing. But we are human beings, and as humans we need more: we also need shelter, a place to live, a home; we need some clothes, and we need love and affection. Nobody can live without some kind of love. We are social animals and need more than other animals: we need love. Call it whatever you will, it gives us pleasure. I don’t mean pleasure as Freud did, it’s not about gratification of the ego. I think people need to be understood, they feel very good when know that somebody understands them, they feel they have a place and belong to it.

MR: If our wellbeing depends on our philosophy of life, do you think that philosophy can be considered as a need?

LM: Well, if you have the necessities of life, yes. If you don’t have those necessities... Look, you are pointing to a serious thing. There are too many people in the world who live below the poverty line, way too many. Talking to starving people about philosophy is mean. And these people don’t live only in underdeveloped countries; they are also in Europe and Spain and the USA. Too many young people have no work. This is a catastrophe, because the EU with all its bureaucracy and banking systems can’t find a way to employ them. Young people are our future, and if we can’t find something for them to do then we are losing our future. But if people have the necessities of life, when they have a home, a job and a salary to sustain their daily needs, then I think philosophy becomes very important, okay? But if you have not enough to eat, philosophy is not going to fill your stomach.

Lou Marinoff has been a rebel, confronting in front of some ideas that historically have been considered unquestionable. From his point of view these ideas have provoked too much pain in people. In his books and public speeches, he encourages people to discuss and question them.

MR: Psychologists use to say that depression is about too much past, and anxiety is about too much future. Tao reminds us that we find serenity in the present, and you say that someone who has too much history is unhappy.

LM: That’s according to Nietzsche. He said that happy people have no history. Maybe he was joking but I don’t think so. Look at psychotherapy sessions, everybody is telling an endless story about themselves. They have a lot of history, very personal history, and they want to say everything about it, and it takes a long time and never ends because we are accumulating history day by day. Does it make sense? Not always, and not in every case.

MR: You mean we don’t need our personal history?

LM: We need it, it is part of our identity. We are also cultural animals, we want to know where we come from. But sometimes nations, religions, societies, and families say: “you belong to us” and they try to force us to feel a certain way, to bend us into a form that may be strange for us. We assume this shape even though it has nothing to do with our most essential selves, the core of our being. The Tao says

that we have to return to the uncarved block, a state in which there is no unhappiness because the uncarved block is beautiful and peaceful.

In “The power of Tao” Marinoff explains that once the block is sculpted it has a unique and fixed shape, and this process excludes an endless list of other forms. But the uncarved block has the potential to include any possible shape. When we revert to the uncarved block we become open to every possibility. According to Lao-Tzu the uncarved block means that perfection consists of the unlimited possibility to encounter anything, and remain serene.

MR: If we think that the present moment is the perfect one, how do we look at the future from the uncarved block?

LM: Oh, the future is open but I see what you are saying. You mean to be outside of the present. In the present moment there is no past, no future. People are carrying the past, so it is full of attachment, which is the problem. Attachment to the past makes people suffer. Attachment to the future also makes people suffer: we call it “expectation”. So, if I have some expectation and I worry it won’t be fulfilled, I’m suffering about the future. It is not here yet, but it is making me suffer because I have an attachment to some future state. I’m carving the future into a shape already.

MR: In psychology, we say that although past has an influence it is not determining. I’m able to change now by looking forward, not backwards.

LM: Yes, but you know there are still psychological approaches trying to help people to understand the past, and this entails too much attachment, do you understand? That’s a problem. So, there are psychologists attaching people to the past, and religions attaching people to the future.

MR: Between them, we all become neurotic?

LM: Oh yes! Some psychologists say: “The origin of your suffering is in the past, you are suffering now because of your past”. Religions say: “you are suffering your whole life but don’t worry, after that you will reach paradise”. Is all this suffering necessary? I think it is not!

“Religions and psychology focus on the bad things that happen; Tao focuses on the good things happening here and now”.

Lou Marinoff explains to me that he thinks psychology is really the child of philosophy:

LM: If the child doesn’t know the parents this is an unfortunate situation. In the last hundred twenty-five years psychology and philosophy have gone in different directions, and both of them have lost something. Psychology is a science that has discovered a lot of things, but psychologists who are working with people still need to look at their philosophical roots.

MR: For at least two thousand years in the West we’ve been living under the influence of religious and (lately) psychological ideas that, -as you point out- are attaching us to the past or to the future. How can we reconcile them in the present?

LM: Those influences have names: I call them theodicy and psychodicy. Religions all have a fundamental moral question they need to answer. Philosophers call it the “theodicy problem.” If you believe in an all-powerful and all-loving God you have to explain why God permits evil in the world. This is the number one problem for religions. They have to explain it, otherwise people will not believe. If God is good, God is all-powerful, and God knows everything, then why does God allow such horrible things to happen? And only in the twentieth century did some people find the courage to say: “Well, maybe there is no God, maybe this story does not make sense; there are so many horrible things in the world, why doesn’t God prevent them?” Anyway, in the past it was not possible not to believe; nowadays it’s possible to not believe. But if you believe, you have to answer this question. And the way religions answer is: “In the future, everything will be fine”. Aha! You’re suffering now because you will be happy in the future”, okay? That’s the explanation. You have to be guilty now, you have to be unhappy now, but don’t worry: heaven will be beautiful.

MR: I see what you mean. But psychology has a very different way to explain emotional suffering.

LM: Yes, but not all the psychologists have the best answer. Many of them just say: "Do you want to know why you suffer now? The answer is because of the past". So that's what I call psychodicy. Theodicy is solving problems in the future and psychodicy is trying to solve problems in the past. And I'm saying there's no end to it. The more you live, the bigger your past and more psychotherapy you need. Irvin Yalom said this to me. He said: "There's always something else". And I say: No! Sometimes there's nothing else! And when there's nothing else you heal, when you have nothing else, you're fine. That's the distinction. The philosophies of Taoism, Buddhism, and Stoicism, teach us how to live now. Never mind the past, never mind the future, now is the moment for all the good things to happen.

MR: May we apply the similar point of view when we worry about death?

LM: Yes! Epicurus has a beautiful answer to this question: "Where death is, I am not; where I am, death is not". So why do I have to worry? I mean at any moment any of us can die -- by heart attack, by accident... anything can happen. You never know, right? But if you are alive, who cares about that? You are living! Don't worry, don't think about it, live! And when our time comes, because we all die, only at that moment suddenly you are close to death and you can think about it. But even then, you're still alive, right? And when you are dead, presumably you don't care. So that means there's no reason to be concerned about death, neither in life, nor in death itself.

MR: In fact, we are dying from the moment we are born, but it seems we have an enormous resistance to admitting it. We don't want to leave this place and go to a mysterious one; we don't even want to think about it.

LM: This is attachment to life. Buddhists call this the kind of suffering that comes from too much attachment to life. "I'm very special, how can I die? My ego is so big, I must resist". There are a lot of psychological explanations. But you have to let go; it's natural. To be born is natural; to die is also natural. In between, life is a kind of gift. You have to give it back one day. But that doesn't mean you have to spoil the gift now.

MR: How does a philosopher define the ego?

LM: There are many different conceptions of ego. Maybe it does not even exist. Maybe it is some fictitious idea about ourselves. Freud introduced a very special meaning. Ever since psychoanalysis came about, everybody talks about the ego, the superego, the id. A lot of psychotherapy seems grounded in the ideal of a "healthy ego," which Taoists and Buddhists would say is a contradiction in terms. The ego is by definition unhealthy, and cannot be "made" healthy by talk or drugs. Woody Allen transformed his neuroses into art, with great artistic gifts, but I don't believe his therapists or his films made his ego "healthy." He just utilized his suffering to make people laugh. That's very laudable in itself.

MR: Laughter is a great therapy.

LM: It is! In India, there are people who practice laughing yoga. And Buddhism can be very funny too; for example, Zen poets have a great sense of humor.

MR: I encourage my clients to laugh but not everybody takes it seriously... We should laugh about half an hour every day.

LM: At least. That's the minimum; more is better. But you know what? Also laugh at yourself. Don't just laugh at others, or at a comedian's jokes. If you don't take yourself too seriously, if you can laugh at yourself, then you will be happier. A lot of people suffer because they take everything too seriously. That's the ego! The ego is self-centered, taking everything personally.

MR: So, laughing is another way to practice the Tao?

LM: Sure!

MR: Focusing, breathing, laughing... anything else?

LM: How many do you need?

Lou and me, we both laugh.

“The Tao is a path that we can follow”

MR: In psychology, we see that most emotional suffering has to do with daily dissatisfaction. You say that human beings have been pathologized for having everyday problems.

LM: Absolutely. Every complaint, every dissatisfaction, every problem in life has been labeled as a mental illness. It’s a scandal. Only recently in the US are relevant cultural entities beginning to recognize this scandal. For example, in 2013 the National Institute for Mental Health, which is the biggest scientific organization in the world for studying mental illness, rejected the DSM V. They said: “No more”, “no más”, “basta -- they said it is only symptomatology, diagnosing symptoms, not showing biological pathways. If you say you are unhappy then according to the DSM V you have a “depressive disorder.” If you feel anxious you have an “anxiety disorder”. The system only wants to diagnose and drug you, and does not want to look into the root causes of your unhappiness or anxiety. This generation of psychiatry is called “molecular psychiatry” and they don’t even talk to people. Fortunately, there are now many psychologists and psychiatrists who don’t want to work under this corrupt model. A lot of people only need to talk to someone who understands and guides them.

MR: You say that thinking of all the personal problems as mental illness is an illness itself.

LM: Yes, it’s an illness of the culture. Look, this is a huge issue with children. ADHD is a fraud. In the US, around 12 million children per day as being drugged. They call ADHD an “epidemic,” yet nobody has identified its etiology or epidemiology. That’s because ADHD is a culturally-induced illness, one of many such “illnesses” that afflict the developed world. The real epidemic is predatory capitalism by the pharmaceutical companies and the medical professions they have colonized. But I ask: How did the western civilization survive two thousand years without drugs for attentiveness, drugs for unhappiness, drugs for anxiety, drugs for chronic fatigue, drugs for eating, sleeping, and sexual performance? How did we ever manage? I think we parented children. I think we gave them love, and understanding, and discipline, and a lot of things that came from a human being, not from a pill bottle. You can’t have a pill for the meaning of life. You can’t have a pill to make you a good person. You can’t have a pill to assume responsibility for making choices. All the qualitatively beautiful things about humanity don’t come from pills. I’m a big fan of science. Where people have access to good air, good water and good medicine, life expectancy has doubled in the last century. I think that’s fantastic. But as you said, not every human problem is a pathology, and the human being has been totally pathologized in the West.

MR: Abraham Lincoln said: “In the end, it’s not the years in your life that counts, it’s the life in your years”.

LM: Yes, it is about quality of life, not only quantity. Quality is the most important thing, absolutely. What’s the point of living one hundred years and having a terrible life? It is better to enjoy a shorter time with wonderful experiences. My colleagues and I got into trouble twenty years ago when we said these things. “Plato Not Prozac!” sounded the alarm about excessive medicalizing of human problems. I’m happy to know that there are many people today who realize that philosophy can help them.

MR: By dusting off the ancient philosophies from the shelves and using them in your books you have made philosophy available and useful for people.

LM: For a long time, philosophy has been considered too abstract. The idea that analytic philosophers have is that philosophy must never do anything, it must never solve anything, it must never be useful. So, philosophers are only supposed to contemplate. Whereas ancient Greek, Indian and Chinese philosophers were doing both: contemplating ideas, and helping people putting ideas into practice.

MR: There are people with no academic training who are really great philosophers. My grandmother used to say to me: “Don’t look at the sky searching for heaven, it is on earth”.

LM: Yes, indeed! My grandparents escaped from Russia and settled down in Canada. They were not well educated and never read a word of philosophy, but they transmitted very elevated moral values. They were hardworking, honest, kind, loving people. They didn't have too much money and never cared about it: They were grateful for a free life in the West. They made wonderful home-cooked meals for us. I remember that they always gave us grandchildren something sweet. You don't need a PhD to be a good person, in fact sometimes it's the opposite. You can encounter erudite people who are dishonest and ill-willed. Goodness comes from hearts, not from books. I live in a small village where there are no bookstores, but we have a library! My neighbors are honest people, and we help each other. I can leave my door open and there is no problem. New York City has bookstores everywhere, but also a lot of crime. A big city is a crowded place, but paradoxically many people feel alone.

MR: How would you say what Tao is to someone who has never heard about it?

LM: If you try to follow Tao, if you find the Way, everything will be much easier, and much happier. If you go against Tao you will have a problem. It is like swimming with the current, instead of against it. It's like cutting wood along the grain, instead of across it. In every situation, finding the Way is very peaceful, whereas going against the way produces conflict. Tao is a kind of truth that people can experience. If you find the Way, your life will be better. The Tao is a path that we can follow.

MR: During part of his life your father was a prospector, seeking gold. Dr. Marinoff, have you found the gold?

LM: Yes, I did. I found gold in philosophy. I would say that philosophy itself is the gold, and that everybody can find it.

After our conversation Lou and I get to the point of having to say goodbye. This time with him has been like a walk through The School of Athens, led by the hand of a master whose vision shows no end to wonder. A vision that covers centuries of knowledge and makes me feel that he looks at me from the dawn of wisdom. A philosopher from the 21st century, three-time Canadian Open table hockey champion, enthusiastic photographer, musician and songwriter who has composed in several idioms. I leave thinking that all in him is complementary. Marinoff is a living manifestation of yin-yang; the man who found the gold in philosophy.

Epilogue

Wisdom from ancient philosophers is more relevant than ever. As a psychologist, my current work is inspired by what is known as *cognitive change*. That doesn't mean focusing exclusively on thoughts, but also on beliefs supporting our way of thinking -- thus, our life philosophy. Dr. Lou Marinoff is a philosophical practitioner whose work has represented the biggest endowment to philosophy's travel from its ancient tabernacles to 21st century people's hands. His books teach us to follow the path towards happiness and wellbeing. Despite of what has been thought for years, there is nothing magical about philosophy; it usually trades in the effable, and resides in common sense. As a philosophy's heir, psychology is growing up in fertile soil.

For further information see:

<http://www.loumarinoff.com/>

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