

Interview Questions for Professor Lou Marinoff

1-How do you define your roles of a social entrepreneur and a commonwealth scholar? Please describe your vision and your mission.

Commonwealth Scholarships are awarded to promising young scholars by the British Council and the Association of Commonwealth Universities, to undertake PhD studies at leading universities in Australia, Britain, Canada and other participating nations. A grateful beneficiary of this award, I earned a PhD in Philosophy of Science at University College London (UCL). The commonwealth of nations, and its encouragement of scholarship, are valuable cultural legacies of the former British empire. Sound investment in intellectual capital, and cross-pollination of ideas from diverse cultures, are of paramount importance to human progress.

My role as a social entrepreneur has been chiefly to awaken people, organizations and cultures to the importance of philosophy in their everyday lives. This has been achieved through popular books, articles, films and media coverage; also through the American Philosophical Practitioners Association (APPA), which I co-founded in 1999. The APPA trains philosophers and other professionals to render philosophical services to individual and organizational clients, world-wide.

My vision is to contribute to the evolution of a global human paradigm for the 21st century, a paradigm that celebrates different cultures while aligning them on the basis of universally shared human values. My mission is to harness and channel creative energy – via philosophy, literature, music, film and sport – to educate people, and to ameliorate the human estate.

2-Are there many US and/or EU people think economy and/or financial crisis is the phenomena of fundamental culture crisis in a long run?

In my view, not enough people in the US or EU think sufficiently about the long run. Most CEOs think in terms of the next quarterly report, while politicians think about re-election every 2 to 4 years. Consumers struggle to pay their bills every month, while celebrities and star athletes think about tomorrow's media scandals and next year's contracts.

A few years ago, a senior executive at Accenture asked me how long it might take for APPA to attain its major political and educational goals. I replied that it could take ten to fifty years. He said it was inconceivable that anyone should

look that far ahead. I replied that it was inconceivable that anyone shouldn't.

From the perspective of long-term cultural dynamics, Western civilization is in decline. Like Rome, the US has evolved from a republic into an empire and, like the late Roman empire, it is corrupt, decadent and vulnerable. Rome took centuries, and Britain only decades, to lose their global dominance. To my surprise, too many Americans have no idea what is happening to them – or rather what they have brought upon themselves. Riven by internal faction, bereft of a common good, driven by consumerism and media circuses, Americans have lost touch with the cultural values that once made them great.

3-What do you consider the key issues or problems of Western culture and Eastern Culture?

I repeat that many citizens of the US and EU are unaware that their economic supremacy, and relative prosperity, cannot endure forever. Their vital signs – political, civil, demographic, educational – are all weakening. This is happening to them partly because they have been steadfastly unwilling or unable to confront the causes of their decline and apply the necessary remedies.

Eastern culture is waxing, and so its problems lie in developmental issues and socio-political “growing pains.” As Eastern cultures absorb and reinvent Western economic models, they would do well to study and avoid many of the cultural by-products of modernization, which can have corrosive effects on the social fabric. As Western cultures are succumbing to post-modernism or regressing to “New-Age” primitivism, many Westerners have turned to Eastern wisdom traditions – notably Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism – to compensate cultural decline with spiritual growth.

4-From views of culture, what do you think Western can learn from Eastern, and what do you think Eastern can learn from Western?

We can learn a great deal from each other, over many generations to come. The West is absorbing numerous cultural refinements from Asia and especially China, including philosophy, acupuncture, herbal medicine, martial arts, culinary arts, calligraphy and painting (to name a few). The West is also absorbing Buddhism, in great measure thanks to China's two pivotal roles: First, via ancient and enduring Chinese transformations of Buddhism (e.g. Chan and T'ien T'ai) that migrated to Korea, Japan and finally to the West; and second, via migration of Tibetan Buddhism to the West.

Asians have already attained mastery of numerous Western cultural

refinements, from modern mathematics, science, humanities, engineering and information technologies, to allopathic medicine and classical music. East Asians have also excelled at grafting Western-style economies onto neo-Confucian cultures. Given that China is keenly interested in innovation and global branding, China could benefit from establishing think-tanks that concentrate intellectual resources and stimulate open-ended creativity.

Speaking personally, I would like to offer Chinese children an opportunity to learn and play the wonderful game and sport of table-hockey. This game develops important motor skills and virtues of sportsmanship in children, starting at around age five, and is played professionally at very high levels in North America and Europe. Table hockey is a sport for life: I was Canadian champion thirty years ago, and am still competitive today at the highest levels. Given Chinese dominance at table-tennis (ping pong), I would like to see world-class Chinese table hockey players emerge as well. With suitable collaboration in China, I could facilitate their emergence within fifteen to twenty years. This is one of my life-long dreams.

5-How do you compare with knowledge and belief, and their relations? Can we say belief is a unique type of knowledge? Shakespeare once said: “knowledge is the wings to heaven. ”

Yes, and in the same breath he also said that ignorance is a passport to hell. In classical Western philosophy, knowledge is a species of belief, namely “justified true belief.” Thus knowledge (in Greek, *episteme*) differs significantly from what the Greeks called “doxa”, or mere opinion. Since opinions are often unjustified or untrue beliefs, prejudices, or superstitions, they cannot be classified as knowledge.

However, if we ask what exactly makes a belief justifiable, we encounter many philosophical difficulties. And if we necessarily ask what makes a belief true, we encounter contending theories of truth which at bottom appear inconsistent or incoherent. In my view, knowledge is objective and factual, whereas belief is subjective and emotional. One may be tempted by seductive beliefs, but one must remain faithful to empirical facts.

6-Please explain the meaning of your conclusion-- “Buddha is ‘the middle way’ of Aristotle and Confucius”.

Aristotle’s great strength is his celebration of individual accomplishment, from Olympic medals of his day – and ours – to Nobel prizes of today. Of course the individual also needs a supportive social matrix to fully develop his or her

talents. Confucius's great strength is his transmission of time-tested virtues, conducive to viable familial and social matrices, and hence to cultural longevity. At the Aristotelian extreme, too much individualism leads to political fracture (rampant in the US, Canada, UK) and sometimes even to anarchy. At the Confucian extreme, too much collectivism leads to socio-economic morbidity, thus inhibiting the attainment of full cultural potential. Buddha's Middle Way recognizes the importance of both Aristotelian and Confucian strengths – the individual and the community – and seeks to balance their better interests.

7-Many anthropologists support “geopolitics determines a nation’s culture finally”, what are your opinions about this? India is on the “middle” way of Eastern and Western geographically, so can we say Buddhism will “moderate” the culture of Eastern and Western in a long-term perspective?

This is a fascinating observation, which has no doubt been largely true during most of human history to date. Geography and politics both exert undeniable influences on human character and identity. Even so, globalization appears to have the power to transcend or at least to redefine geopolitical contours. As a major evolution of economics, cybernetics, and consciousness, globalization is obliging each great civilization – Western, Islamic, Indian, East Asian – to adapt itself from within, and also to become more cooperative with the others.

Buddhism may be India's greatest “export,” with respect to its long-term effects on consciousness. Ironically perhaps, Buddhism is one of several “heterodox” schools of Indian philosophy, which both draws upon and rejects the authority of the Vedas, and which was re-absorbed effortlessly into the melting pot of Hindu philosophical pluralism. But Buddhism was significantly transformed after taking root in Chinese culture, and this Sinic transformation resulted in Buddhism's gradual elevation, in East Asia, to a status comparable with Confucianism and Taoism. Similarly, and thanks to China's re-exportations via Japan and Tibet, we are now seeing the gradual elevation of Buddhism in the West, to a status comparable with Judaism and Christianity. If Buddhism succeeds in harmonizing the Confucian values of the East with the Aristotelian values of the West, then as you suggest we will owe a philosophical debt to India, which happens also to be a geographic bridge that links us.

8-Ludwig Wittgenstein and some analytic philosophers argued that “the word ‘philosophy’ must mean something which stands above or below, but not beside the natural sciences. Then, most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical”. As a professional philosopher, what is your more positive attitude to the role of Philosophy at current world and human knowledge?

Analytic philosophy develops very sharp logical, critical and analytical skills, which have become institutionally confined to analyses of concepts, languages and texts. In other words, analytic philosophy is almost 100% theoretical and 0% practical. No philosophy can bear much fruit for humanity if it lacks empirical content and practical application.

As a professional philosopher, I am concerned to cultivate a more equitable balance between philosophical theory and philosophical practice. As pioneers of the nascent philosophical practice movement, my APPA colleagues and I are integrating practical philosophy into public and private organizational cultures, clinical medical settings, and educational institutions, as well as into the private lives of our individual clients.

It is my aspiration that practical philosophy will regain its ancient status: that of a guide to the art of living. Virtually every subject studied in humanities and sciences has both “pure” and “applied” aspects, which are complementary and mutually-reinforcing. Why should philosophy be any different?

9-Karl Popper didn't agree with Historicism, but he thought the powerful history-foretell and chanciness would change the human history. What are your views about this? What are your expectations for your own theories?

This brings us full-circle. My post-graduate studies in London unfolded in a distinctly Popperian ethos. Even though Popper himself was by then retired, he was still revered. I met him once, at a memorable lecture he gave on Darwinism at the Royal Society. Even in his eighties, he was a lucid thinker and dynamic speaker.

I believe that Popper was correct to distinguish between natural and social sciences, and critically between empirically falsifiable hypotheses (which characterize natural science) and untestable metaphysical assertions (which characterize much of social science and theology).

Popper's critique of “hard” Historicism appears justified. One cannot extrapolate the historical past to predict human futures in the same way as one can “crank” deterministic equations forward in time to predict future states of physical systems. Moreover, even physical systems (e.g. the weather) are subject to chaotic processes, whose effects are deterministic but nonetheless unpredictable.

By contrast, much social science tends to “retrodict” the present from the past.

For example, in Freudian psychology, an adult's present state of mind can be "retrodicted" from an excavation of his or her experiences in childhood. For another example, in economics, the current financial crisis can be "retrodicted" from a number of recent past factors: sub-prime loans, insufficient consumer savings, inadequate regulation, and so forth.

But retrodiction of causes is not the same as prediction of effects. As the Duhem-Quine thesis reveals, there is always underdetermination of theory by data: In other words, given any state of affairs (i.e. data), there are always innumerable possible explanations (i.e. theories) that account for these data. The core problem for science is to identify sound theories, and to discard unsound ones.

While Popper was correct to reject "hard" Historicism, I also believe that "soft" Historicism is more credible. Soft historicism asserts that there are discernible patterns in history, both of individuals and of cultures, and that these patterns have undeniable explanatory power, and possibly even predictive power.

For example, Arnold Toynbee's historiography traces the rise and fall of great empires as a function of yin-yang metaphysics, echoing the opening line of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*San Kuo Chih Yen-i*) "Empires wax and wane; states cleave asunder and coalesce." As the Spanish-American philosopher Santayana famously asserted: "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Even more chillingly, in his novel *Nineteen Eight-Four*, George Orwell revealed and cautioned against deterministic powers of political or ideological indoctrination: "Who controls the past, controls the future. Who controls the present, controls the past."

Finally, I do not harbor any expectations for my own theories. I simply aspire to make a positive contribution, and to promote practical philosophy for the betterment of humanity. Thank you very much for your insightful questions.