
Philosophical Counselling: an Interview with Lou Marinoff

In the ancient world philosophy was a guide to life and better living. An intriguing recent development is the advent of philosophers taking philosophy out into the marketplace to assist individuals, groups and organisations. The best selling book 'Plato Not Prozac' by LOU MARINOFF, signalled a huge public interest in philosophy and philosophical counselling, a phenomenon which has some therapists looking over their shoulder anxiously and others returning to exciting old ideas afresh. It seems that Socrates is still relevant today, as Marinoff explains in this interview. Lou Marinoff is a keynote speaker at this year's Psychotherapy in Australia Conference.

What are the main differences between philosophical practice and psychotherapy?

By philosophical practice one generally means a portmanteau term. It certainly entails counselling one-on-one with individual clients, and that is probably most reminiscent of what is generically called 'psychotherapy'. Secondly, we also work with groups in various ways, both informally and formally. Thirdly, we work for organisations; that can be professional groups, corporations and governments. All of that is philosophical practice. If we are talking about the philosophical counselling component, or 'philosophical advising' as it's sometimes called, and its resemblance to psychotherapy, we should bear in mind that in America the word 'therapy' has become a synonym for anything that is good for one - e.g. art therapy, music therapy, aroma therapy, and even *Retail Therapy* (the title of an in-flight magazine).

However, I don't like the term 'therapy' because the other half of the coin connotes a sort of medical or pseudo-medical intervention, and we are not identified with medicine. The difference is that most clinical psychologists and psychiatrists are attempting to diagnose according to the DSM. Philosophers are not diagnosing because we are not trained diagnosticians. If our clients are well and functional, yet have philosophical questions, then diagnosis isn't necessary. In ancient Greece, a 'theraps' was a generic attendant; while the word 'psyche'

denotes many things, including character, breath, and soul. Thus someone who helps you attend to your character, breath or soul is by definition a kind of 'psychotherapist'. This would include your philosophical counsellor, your flute teacher, your meditation master, and your minister, priest or rabbi.

Some therapies draw heavily from philosophy, so how is philosophy used differently in philosophical practice as opposed to therapy?

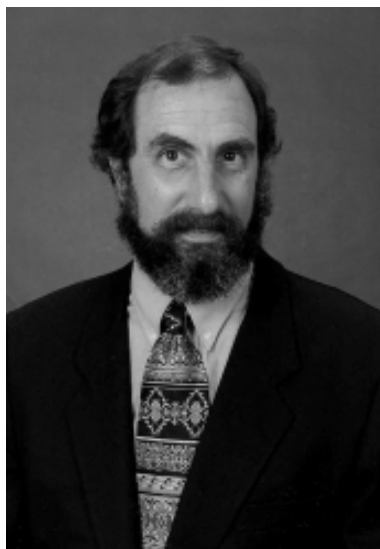
Many of the cognitive psychological therapies are philosophically based, either explicitly as in the case of Ellis' Rational Emotive Therapy which is based on Stoicism, or Existential therapy (and Frankl's logotherapy) which comes from Existentialism. Carl Rogers would also be a candidate for this; his client-centred school implicitly upholds what we as philosophers would call the Kantian notion that the individual is a secular agent to be treated with autonomy, dignity and respect. Kant goes on a great deal about that. Again, look at Erich Fromm's biophilic and necrophilic ethics. A lot of important psychological branches are traceable back to philosophical roots.

Plato was a great psychologist, as were Hobbes, Hume and so many other philosophers. In fact, one could not really do philosophy without doing some psychology, and one could not do psychology without making very important

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philosophical assumptions. So if psychologists can with efficacy and with good justification reach back toward more philosophically-based notions to inform and develop psychotherapy, why shouldn't philosophers do it as well? After all, we are the ones who are grounded there to begin with.

What counselling philosophers have to learn are a lot of other things that psychologists have already figured out about counselling itself; e.g. the nature of interpersonal and professional relationships, phenomena of transference and counter-transference, etc. But we have a pretty big toolkit of useful ideas to offer clients - 2,500 years of accumulated wisdom.



street corner. Then there must be something wrong with you. But if you're seeing a philosopher it's '*Oh you've hired a personal philosopher*', rather than '*You've cracked up*'. There's a whole other spin put on it. Philosophers are kind of cool or sexy. We're in vogue.

But to be serious, we've given the public a new way of speaking about their problems. They almost get a new identity, relocating their ideas and self-conceptions on a philosophical map, and that's really helpful to some people. e.g. '*I thought there was something wrong with me, but I'm actually just a nihilist.*' They compare notes at cocktail parties, not on what their analysts said, but on what their personal philosophers said.

Some do come because they have had a lot of psychotherapy, maybe too much of it. But others come because they have already learned and been helped by reputable professionals. They have learned something important about themselves, psychiatrically or psychologically, and now they need to learn something important about themselves philosophically.

Psychotherapists usually have a theory to guide their practice, some notion of what constitutes mental health and healthy relationships. Do philosophical practitioners also have some background theory about what constitutes the good life?

This is a philosophical question to begin with! Socrates famously asserted '*The unexamined life is not worth living.*' And Plato, his student, initiated an ongoing philosophical conversation in the West about the meaning of goodness, and of a good life. Other philosophical traditions, from Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism and Buddhism to Virtue Ethics, Materialism, Romanticism and Existentialism are continuously grappling with just this question. I think Socrates was right. It makes us uncomfortable at times to learn certain things about ourselves, and possibly in general about the species, and some people neglect going there for one reason or another, either through ignorance or willful omission. But people carry a lot of conceptual baggage around with them, and the bags have to be inspected eventually.

In the ancient world philosophy was a guide to life and better living. Philosophical practice brings this back into play. So we think we're doing a very ancient thing, albeit in a novel way.

Do clients of philosophical practitioners come in part because they are disillusioned with psychotherapy?

It's partly true but not the whole truth. If one looks at the spectrum of individual clients that philosophical counsellors attract, some of them have never had counselling and want it, but wouldn't go to psychiatrists or psychologists because in America there's a stigma attached to that. Interestingly enough, it's not so stigmatic to take medication in America. Consuming some kind of drug, either illicit or prescription drugs or alcohol, Americans don't have a problem with that. And they don't have a problem telling you their most intimate secrets on the street corner. But there's a stigma if people know that you've been to see somebody who's not on a

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How do philosophical practitioners treat matters of love?

There's a tremendous amount of philosophical insight brought to bear on this issue. I just had a client this morning who wants to look at the ethical implications of divorce and of custody. He's not going to get this from his psychologist. He's going to get some valuable things on coping and other understandings on how his past life has contributed to this situation, and he's going to get some very important legal advice from his lawyer on how to arrange the paper work, but what he needs now are some philosophical views on attachment and separation. So we deal with these things philosophically as we deal with everything else.

I understand that you use groups a lot. What is the role of group dynamics?

I work with groups informally and formally. Informally, I

go into a large bookstore once a month in Manhattan, and conduct a 'Philosopher's Forum' (or a 'Café-Philo', as it's called in Europe). It's a two-hour unscripted public discourse, and it can go anywhere. It's really very exciting. People come with issues, and we discuss them. We discuss things that one can't even talk about in universities (because of political correctness), and things that one never sees on television. It's a very good way for people to air their views, to have them criticised by others, to defend what they believe in, and to examine the reasons they have for believing. And that's one of the old traditions - philosophy in the marketplace (the agora of Athens), being a very public thing.

We do more formal things with groups in the settings of goal-oriented kinds of activities, where a particular subset of managers in a company, or a group of people in government, who are charged with a task and are having trouble executing it, need philosophical tools to bring to bear. Either they need to work better as a group to attain consensus on issues, or they need a philosophical tap tool, like *Dilemma Training* or *Socratic Dialogue*, for actually coming to grips with a particular problem to manage it more effectively. There the role of group dynamics is very important. People often get mired in personal problems and they spend too much time cloistered together, just as in the academy where committee meetings are famously prone to quarrels and outbursts, where people who are thought to be very rational end up throwing chairs at each other because the group itself is not being managed properly.

What the philosopher can do with such a group is to be a conductor, to understand that, notwithstanding each individual's role or voice, there is an overall score that should be rendered as harmoniously as possible. So, even though the conductor has no explicit voice in the score, without the conductor you have chaos and noise, and with the conductor you have order and music.

The ancient philosophical schools, especially the Stoics, focused mostly on problems of living. What differences are there between how you might approach a problem and how someone in ancient times, like perhaps Epicurus or Socrates, might approach the same problem?

Today people are much more receptive to it than they once were. Philosophers have had perennially difficult times. If you look at Socrates as a model, here is a guy who was put to death for doing what we are doing today. In the back of *Plato Not Prozac* you will find a little entry on Socrates that says that secularly speaking, he redeemed philosophers from unemployment by virtue of his sacrifice. He's supposed to be a great model for us.

A lot of other philosophers had hard times too. Confucius tried to sell his services to warlords. His basic idea was that government by virtue will be more effective than government by coercion, but he was, of course, way ahead of his time. He did make some inroads in this and his influence is simply enormous. But if you look at the Greeks particularly, you'll

find that if Aristotle were brought back for a day he wouldn't understand anything about modern science at all. His biology and physics and astronomy and cosmology are all simply wrong. He would have to start on page one of any undergraduate science text in order to relearn what we now know about the world. Whereas with Socrates, if you brought him back for a day, and he were to watch the evening news, I'm sure he would turn around to you and say 'Well nothing has changed'. Human nature is still what it was back then, and basic human problems are still the same (with additional complexities of course). But any philosophy that worked well as a guide to life in the ancient world, works just as well today.

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All the stuff that Plato reveals to us about the Socratic teachings is still relevant today. In a sense we have come full circle, never having gone. Human nature is the same notwithstanding our increase in knowledge. We have not necessarily become wiser beings. So philosophers are there to help, not that we are wise but that we can help to induce wisdom in our clients, and this is basically our role. I see myself in this tradition, and it is as if no time at all had elapsed really. I don't see myself as approaching problems any differently actually, from not only the Socratics but also the Stoics, the Cynics, the Sophists, the Epicureans - there are a huge number of schools which are very useful today because people are much the same today as they always have been.

Suppose a client came who was a bigot. Do you take a stance on an ethical position or are you relativistic?

I do take a stance, and in fact it's a legal position here. If someone comes to a counsellor in New York State and threatens clear harm to somebody else, we have to report that. We have a primary responsibility to serve our clients or patients as best we can, but we also have a secondary responsibility to the community at large. I'm a relativist insofar

as it allows no harm to come to others, but if a Nazi came for counselling I would try to convince him that he shouldn't be a Nazi. That's not relativism. Technically, I'm a meta-ethical relativist: I think that some ethical systems work better in some situations, while others work better in other situations. That's different from saying that all ethics are relative. For example, I happen to believe that harbouring hatred for others is never good in any situation. So there's an absolute for you. There are also many ways to avoid harbouring hatred. That's relative.

Was there a greater demand for your services after September 11, and if so, what were the main issues you dealt with?

September 11 has changed a lot of things in America, and there have been global repercussions, not the least of which was the relocation of the World Economic Forum's annual meetings to New York this year from Davos, for the first time in thirty years. I played a substantial role in that program. There is now a greater demand for philosophical services worldwide, precisely because, like it or not, we all inhabit the global village. We are all interconnected in increasingly complex ways. One effect of globalization is that both great good and great evil are neither localized nor localizable. We need to deal with other people's discontents, because everyone in this village is potentially everyone else's neighbour. We also need to deal with mass-hallucination, fanaticism and terrorism. One large philosophical question concerns what people are encouraged to believe they are entitled to do to one another.

What were (are) the main issues? Well, many sectors of the American economy have been adversely affected by September 11, so one finds a greater discontent owing to economic downturns and other kinds of instabilities. Normal human problems are exacerbated by economic and other kinds of situations, when they go bad. People's problems are cast in a worse light. There's more anxiety about travel and a lot more critical examination about the meaning of September 11. Who are 'we'? Who are 'they'? What is this exactly symbolic of? There is a lot of philosophical work to be done there.

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association trains and organizes philosophical practice in the USA. Is there an international body for philosophical practitioners?

The APPA is an international body based in America so our ethos is more or less American, but we do have members in more than twenty countries. In the first instance this is because *Plato Not Prozac* is going into more than twenty languages and scores of countries worldwide, and this fuels awareness so that people start asking for our services. Then philosophers come out of the woodwork and say 'I've been doing this already for ten years but I didn't know this was going on in an organised way.' Or other philosophers step forward and say 'I'd really like to do this, I think I have a knack for it, how do I do it?' So the APPA has been training

and certifying people in the United States and from abroad for a few years now.

We are also having demands placed on us from Latin America, Europe and Asia to come and do trainings there as well. We're not the only national association with an international membership, but we are the only certifying and accrediting body, so far, and I think we're probably the leading organisation. Then again, purely national organisations and national considerations are important. Philosophical practice is bound to be conditioned by a given national ethos. There are differences between one country and another in terms of expectations, in terms of training and the profession and its practice. So we can't possibly speak for everybody and for all philosophers, but what we can do is impart some useful skills to philosophers who want to do this, and then they can go home and adapt themselves to their home countries. Our training and certificate still have meaning for foreign practitioners who belong to their home nation's association.

Do therapists show much interest or do they tend to be threatened?

Yes, to both. The APPA is an inclusive association with a category of membership called 'Affiliate Members', who are practitioners from other professions. We have many psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, social workers, lawyers, people who are licensed or registered by states to practice in non-philosophical ways, who have very deep philosophical interests, abiding interests in the interface between what they do and what philosophers do, who are obviously philosophical beings. Some of them wanted to be philosophers but also wanted to earn a living. Twenty years ago it was very clear that you should do anything but philosophy if you wanted to earn a living, so they went into other professions, but they still have in their hearts tremendous philosophical interests. We also have opponents, because there are many people who do see themselves as locked in some kind of turf war, and who feel that we are encroaching on 'their' turf (your mind!). I must also add that many psychiatrists and psychologists have been regarded as usurpers of the soul, because no-one really owns it. I think that those who view us as poachers are obviously on the defensive. Maybe they could benefit from philosophical counselling actually. I don't think we're a threat to anyone.

Some forms of psychotherapy, particularly the existential humanistic dimension, have a very close attachment with philosophical thinking and if you meet existential therapists, most of them are kind of part-time philosophers...

Of course they are. How could they be otherwise?

But if you go into other traditions they're not...

If you're eclectic then you are whatever you need to be on that day. Existential therapy is very big; it's also called 'Daseinsanalysis' in Europe. In England, Ernesto Spinelli is

the leading Existential Psychotherapist, and works very well with philosophers. But in America you will find a number of clinical psychologists who are very vocal in opposition to anything that anybody wants to do to help another person, and this is simply a gross kind of misrepresentation of what a helping profession should be, in my view. It has become far too politicised. Psychologists have had a monopoly on licensed conversations; literally, a legislative monopoly on talk-therapy for decades. There is so much hubris that many have forgotten where they came from. There is a generic sense in the US that if you have any kind of problem at all, it must be psychological. People think that *Genesis* featured Adam, Eve, a serpent and a psychologist in the Garden. They've forgotten just exactly where we were 50 years ago. But we get along pretty well with the existential folks, with many of the shrewder clinicians, and with many scientific research psychologists too.

Who is your favourite philosopher?

Well, I wish there were only one, but if you really must know who my favourite philosopher is I will tell you. Where do I go when I need philosophical counselling? I have colleagues who give me excellent advice. If I need to speak to a human being, I have two or three colleagues who are very close advisers, and I find their advice and counsel very useful and helpful. So I do have real human beings to talk to.

But if I had to turn to a source of perennial wisdom it would be that great book written by Anonymous, *The I-Ching* or *Book of Changes*. I have been consulting this book for more than thirty years. I use only the Wilhelm-Baynes edition, published by Princeton University Press, with the brilliant foreword by Jung. There are many editions of the *I-Ching*, and some read like gibberish. I don't use it on anything like a daily basis, but I do consult it from time to time and I've never had a bit of bad advice out of it. It's the book that, if one believes mainstream historical account, influenced both Confucius and Lao Tse. It is rooted in the idea that at any juncture in our lives we have to make certain choices based on changing circumstances; and that we do not have perfect knowledge, but we have at least the capacity to do a better or a worse thing. If we are wise, of course, we strive to do the better. This book provides persistent advice to me on what constitutes distinguishing between the better from the worse, so that I can choose the better if I wish. It's a sort of Rorschach test for one's own heart and mind, revealing some deep principles that guide us. So I find it very, very useful.

Do you think that philosophical practice is an idea whose time is ripe?

Actually it's been ripe for a very long time, and it's only in the twentieth century that philosophers devoted their considerable intelligence to making themselves irrelevant. This is what has changed. People have always recognised that society needed its share of poets and prophets and artists of various kinds. I think it's needed its share of philosophers too. But in the twentieth century philosophers became mostly

incomprehensible and irrelevant. This has given rise to a lot of very bad jokes about philosophy students and so forth. Well, we're changing that. So it's not so much an idea whose time has come again. I call philosophy 'the world's second oldest profession', and it managed to marginalise itself because it forgot about its own relevance. This is a grassroots thing that drives philosophers now into the open, into the media's eye, and into public and professional spheres of activity. The very fact that the culture demands it is the key indicator that it's ripe. Fortunately, the onus is not on us to market ourselves to anybody. Believe me, I never took a marketing course.

How many client hours would you have a week?

Well, it varies because I try to practice across the spectrum. I see individual clients but I've cut down a lot. I don't really have more than three or four per week, and I refer out because I just don't want to take that many. It's a serious responsibility. I also have a job as a professor. I'm an author as well, and I travel an awful lot. I also do consulting work with governments and the corporate world. So I try to do a bit of everything - General Practice, if you like. It takes a lot of energy to do that. I have to be careful to ration my energies, so as to be good and fresh.

Lou Marinoff, a Commonwealth Scholar, earned his doctorate in Philosophy of Science at University College, London. After holding research fellowships at University College and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, he became a Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of British Columbia. Currently an Associate Professor, and Chair of the Philosophy Department, at the City College of New York, he is author of the international bestseller 'Plato Not Prozac: Applying Eternal Wisdom to Everyday Problems', and 'Philosophical Practice'. Lou is a philosophical practitioner and publishes in decision theory, ethics, philosophical practice and other scholarly fields.
