



PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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Book Review

Lou Marinoff. *On Human Conflict: The Philosophical Foundations of War and Peace*.
Rowman & Littlefield, 2019. ISBN: 978-0761871057. Pp. 523.

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Lou Marinoff has written an epic work which rivals Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869). Contrary to the Russian literary work, however, Marinoff's volume is thoroughly philosophical, yet it reads like a novel; and, significantly for a philosophical work, it is deeply original as it is "an experimental synthesis of metaphysical inquiry and scientific knowledge," whose explicit goal is "to excavate the cavernous philosophical foundations of war and peace" (p. 1). That which Marinoff humbly refers to as scientific knowledge includes, apart from various sciences and social sciences, mathematics and technology, and the metaphysical inquiry he undertakes spans the entirety of philosophy, east and west. Both aspects of the work, metaphysical and scientific, are enlightened by reflections on war and peace by various literary, religious, and political personalities. In short, there is no aspect of this mighty topic that the author has left untouched, and therein lies one of the reasons that reading this book is deeply rewarding.

War and peace are the most important topics a philosopher can address; and the most profound, as there is hardly any subject in human experience that they do not impact. Marinoff, whose philosophic and literary abilities have been proven in a life-long work of influential and engaging books, treats this topic masterfully, in a way that is erudite beyond accepted norms yet thoroughly enjoyable. The manuscript's 523 pages can be easily read but reward those who read it twice, as I did, not because its argument is difficult to follow—the contrary is true—but because it takes time to fully appropriate its message: after exhaustive excavation in all fields in attempt to find the foundations of war and peace, it is one's personal consciousness that has to, and can, change.

With this final message, Marinoff also justifies philosophical practice, whose emphasis is exactly on that personal aspect, which is deemed almost inconsequential by most philosophers. To take only one example, and from an author who has also contributed to acknowledging the significance of practical philosophy in academe, let's consider *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (1994). In summing up her monumental work, Martha C. Nussbaum notes her astonishment at the blind spot of Hellenistic philosophers, whose goal, rather than being to change the laws, aimed at perfecting "human consciences ... as it were one by one" (p. 399). Yet, this is what philosophical practice attempted and still attempts to do, and this change of consciousness may still be our best weapon in the peaceful war against war.

The current study is remarkable for its breadth and scope, which uses copious references to other thinkers to bring them into dialogue with the reader, yet it stands out also for combining both untimely (i.e. controversial) and timely concerns. It is the former feature, which Marinoff himself emphasizes in the very last page of his work (p. 523), "About the Author," that may marginalize this worthy volume in contemporary consciousness by alienating some of the readership it deserves. Yet one can always assess the arguments and the facts on one's own, and autonomously conclude as one wishes: by addressing successfully a critical audience, this book is profoundly philosophical; yet it is

also transformative, without being manipulative: it changes your own consciousness, and in doing so adds yet another proof to the main argument of the book—as all theories about the inescapability of war have been refuted, change in relation to war lies in your own consciousness and is within your power, because by reading the book your views have already been altered.

An “Epistle to the Reader: From Grounds Zero” serves as an Introduction to the eight chapters this work holds, the last chapter being also a conclusion, or rather, “Conclusions and Inconclusions, from Point Omega.” Chapter 1 presents an overview of the problem of war by discussing relations between philosophy, science, technology, and war, adopting working definitions and explaining philosophy’s role in relation to these issues. It advances a historiographical scheme presenting four phases of civilized human warfare, which distinguishes between scientific and moral progress and between knowledge and wisdom. The strength of the chapter lies in exposing some of the fallacies, misconceptions, and lies about war that we have been conditioned to believe, in order to begin with an undeluded philosophic-scientific inquiry. It argues that “organized group violence is a severe human problem, now a global problem, which admits of acute and chronic aspects,” and thus leads to the fundamental question, “does a solution to the problem of war exist?” (pages 1 and 427).

Chapter 2, “The Mathematics of Conflict—War Ill-described” (i.e. poorly-described), analyses three applications of mathematics to the modelling of conflict and their philosophical implications. It concludes that wars are not amenable to mathematical modelling as discrete entities: outbreaks of wars and outcomes of battles cannot be pre-determined, nor is there periodicity in war’s occurrence or probabilistic distribution in time of either war’s beginnings or endings; lacking a metric of axiology, game theory cannot be prescriptive of rational or irrational behavior, thus, no objective calculus of decision making under risk is possible. Differential equations, statistics, and game theory do attempt to capture deterministic, probabilistic, and rationalistic processes yet they are ineffective in modelling the conflict that war is. The conclusion is that war must admit of properties that are indeterministic, improbabilistic, and irrationalistic. Either human beings are not well-defined enough or their behavioral aspects lie beyond the purview of mathematics.

Hence, Chapter 3 addresses Thomas Hobbes’ natural philosophy, whose success in defining humans and describing war is summed up in its title, “The Hobbesian Conflict—War Well-described.” The Hobbesian account presents war as a continuous phenomenon, a natural phenomenon among human beings, a view that Marinoff discards, whilst agreeing with Hobbes that a fundamental cause of war is the ignorance of its causation.

Chapter 4 develops this view, arguing that there are not necessary causes of wars, only sufficient ones. To this purpose, the chapter delves into theories of causation, and causation of wars, into consideration of the nature of mind, and of brain. The Vedic and Buddhist theories of Karma are contrasted and the latter privileged for its emphasis on effects rather than causes; also because of its conservation of moral energy, Buddhist philosophy is offered as a “theoretical and applied science of peace” (p. 18).

Chapter 5 argues that warfare is a product of cultural rather than biological evolution, and thus, cannot be accounted by Darwinism, neo-Darwinism, and sociobiology. Human wars are distinctive in kind through their use and abuse of symbolic structures and technologies.

Chapter 6 continues the analysis of the cultural phenomenon of war by arguing that it is selected synthetically rather than biologically. It advances a theory that emphasizes the transcendence of nurture over nature, yet restricts the account of cultural evolution to war rather than to its guaranteeing peace. Psychic evolution, a third type of evolution, is posited, which transcends maleficent manifestations of cultural evolution and from which peaceful behavior proceeds. "Psyche transcends culture" in a neo-Hegelian way, Marinoff argues (p. 19): the main difference between the culturally-captive and the psychically-liberated, equally ignorant about life and death, lies in their attitudes toward ignorance itself (p. 361). Thus, "the important question is not what humans know, but how they cope with their ignorance. One way leads to war, another to peace" (p. 362).

Based on an assessment of the emergent field of peace studies, conflict research, peace technology, peace education and peace action, as well as a review of the roots of irenology, Chapter 7 celebrates the value of the individual. It concurs with the general system theory and with Mahayana Buddhism's emphasis of the individual will as a significant agent in determining patterns of human interactions. It thus answers philosophically (the philosophy lies "only in asking the right question" [p. 416]), the familiar and falsely desperate question often asked by the individual, "What can I do?" by replacing it by "What *will* I do?" (p. 416): "Lack of political will, and naught else, prevents the resolution of armed conflicts." As this "lack of political will" is "lack of individual beneficence, multiplied many-fold," Marinoff concludes: "If you will have peace, ask yourself how you will practice individual beneficence" (p. 416).

The answers that this study offers to its initial questions, "Can humankind end war before war ends humankind, and can humankind end war in any case? If a solution to the problem of war exists, under what conditions might it be realized; and if not, why not?" (p. 19) are summed in the conclusion:

In sum, we find no analytic truth, no mathematical rule, no natural philosophical deduction, no etiological necessity, no biological imperative, no cultural predestination, no systemic inevitability, which dictate that war must be; hence, we conclude that peace can be. (p. 429)

The rest of Chapter 8 speculates on possible solutions to the problem of war, each depending, among other things, on "each human" exercising "degrees of freedom of choice among possible thoughts or actions" (p. 429). While this "existence theorem" assumes freedom of the will and the possibility of moral choices, it precludes the prediction of the choices themselves.

The rigor of the critical study offered by Lou Marinoff will benefit us in reflecting about war even if we object to its positive thesis, that Buddhist philosophy can supply the "theoretical and applied science of peace" that many of us are seeking, or to Marinoff's view of a neo-Hegelian transcendence, of psychic liberation out of cultural-enslavement, to his view of the freedom of the will and of philosophy as asking the right questions. Moreover, the views he offers can be defended on other grounds than Buddhism. Finally, the empowerment of the individual through Marinoff's emphasis on the question, What *will* I do? is of value to any reflective being.

For all these reasons, as well as for the challenge of engaging with the range of topics this study addresses, including the commonly avoided controversial issues that Marinoff tackles, such as radical feminism and Islamic jihad, I recommend this book: What will *you* think?

References

Nussbaum, Martha C. 1994. *Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Lydia Amir is a French-Israeli professor of philosophy, currently teaching in the department of Philosophy at Tufts University and at graduate programs of Philosophy in Romania and Mexico. She also serves as a Research Fellow in the Institute of Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences at Beijing Normal University at Zhuhai, China. Amir has worked as a philosophical practitioner for the last 30 years. She is President of the Israeli Association for Philosophical Practice, a Director of the American Philosophical Practitioners Association, founding President of the International Association for the Philosophy of Humor, and member of various academic boards and committees. In addition to many articles and essays, Amir has published seven books, and is working under contract on several additional manuscripts. A board member of various journals, she serves as editor of two journals, one of which she founded, along with three book series; notably, the Lexington Series in Philosophical Practice.

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Aims and Scope

Philosophical Practice is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

APPA Mission

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a non-profit educational corporation that encourages philosophical awareness and advocates leading the examined life. Philosophy can be practiced through client counseling, group facilitation, organizational consulting or educational programs. APPA members apply philosophical systems, insights and methods to the management of human problems and the amelioration of human estates. The APPA is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization.

APPA Membership

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a not-for-profit educational corporation. It admits Certified, Affiliate and Adjunct Members solely on the basis of their respective qualifications. It admits Auxiliary Members solely on the basis of their interest in and support of philosophical practice. The APPA does not discriminate with respect to members or clients on the basis of nationality, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, age, religious belief, political persuasion, or other professionally or philosophically irrelevant criteria.

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