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# Playing with Ideas

## An Interview with Lou Marinoff

Lou Marinoff is Professor of Philosophy at the City College of New York, where he also teaches courses in Asian Studies. Trained originally in chemistry, computing technology, and theoretical physics in Canada, he studied at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and obtained his doctorate in the philosophy of science from University College London. At City College he practices what he calls “stand up philosophy” as he teaches a variety of courses that include decision theory, ethics, Buddhism, Chinese philosophy, and philosophical practice. Marinoff is founding president of the American Philosophical Practitioners Association and editor-in-chief of its journal *Philosophical Practice*. He is the author of, among other works, *Plato Not Prozac: Applying Eternal Wisdom to Everyday Problems*; *The Middle Way: Finding Happiness in a World of Extremes*; *Therapy for the Sane: How Philosophy Can Change Your Life*; and *Fair New World*, a novel. He is a classical guitarist, nature photographer, film director, and three-time Canadian Open Table Hockey champion. In this interview Marinoff discusses his playful approach to philosophy, the rise of humorlessness and the decline of hilarity, censorship, virtue, and the counseling profession he helped invent—philosophical practitioner. **Key words:** applied philosophy, ethics, philosophical discourse, philosophical practitioner, play, political correctness

**American Journal of Play:** How did you play as a child?

**Lou Marinoff:** “How *didn't* I play as a child?” might yield a shorter answer. My parents were very playful, in addition to being hardworking, so my younger brother (Sid) and I were exposed to many forms and facets of play. We took to it like ducks to water. Outdoors, I spent days on end in the park, from the sandbox to the swings to the ball fields. Once I was old enough, I played in park and school sports leagues: football, hockey, baseball, rugby, volleyball, basketball, and swimming. Indoors, our parents taught us or bought us dozens of board games and card games, from chess, checkers, backgammon, Parcheesi, Monopoly, Careers, Scrabble, Clue, and Risk to

poker, cribbage, hearts, bridge, canasta, whist, gin rummy—you name it. We also had a kind-hearted but eccentric housekeeper who, to our great amusement, cheated at solitaire. We had birthday parties at bowling alleys. We also played table hockey, Ping-Pong, and music. We engaged in toy and game fads, from Hula Hoops to Frisbees to—much later, with my son Julian—Nintendo. On summer vacations, we played all day at the lake or at the beach. As a teenager, I learned Go; as an adult I learned serious tennis and rudimentary golf. We also played lots of pool, snooker, and pinball.

**AJP:** Did Canadian children like you enjoy play that kids miss elsewhere?

**Marinoff:** Canada is a vast country, with variegated geographies. Growing up in Montreal, we had four distinct seasons, and so we played many sports and seasonally. Canadian children on average played more winter sports than our American counterparts. What else can you do with more winter? Skating, skiing, sledding, tobogganing, snowshoeing, outdoor ice hockey, and street hockey—not to mention making snow angels and snowmen, and having snowball fights—were and are still commonplace winter pastimes for Canadian kids, and obviously harder to come by here in most of the United States. By the way, my mother retired at age eighty and took up duplicate bridge with my aunt, then ninety, as her partner. Within a few years, the two of them became bridge masters! My son Julian is currently a professional game designer. Need I say that play runs in my family?

**AJP:** Is it true that you founded the National Table Hockey League that schedules international competitions, and does the philosopher in you find virtue in table hockey?

**Marinoff:** I cofounded the National Table Hockey League along with current world champion Carlo Bossio from Montreal and Quebec City champion Burt Brassard. The league sanctions seven or eight tournaments each season, in Canada and the U.S.A., and we aspire to grow North American table hockey worldwide. And yes, the philosopher in me finds that table hockey engenders the exercise of many virtues, including sportsmanship, perseverance, and time management.

**AJP:** Did your own play history have anything to do with your decision to study philosophy or to begin to think philosophically?

**Marinoff:** Initially, my own play history probably contributed more to my *avoidance* of serious study for as long as possible. Then again, in so far as philosophy can be construed as a *play* of ideas—subject, like all games, to rules—in that light, there must be some connection between my play his-

tory and subsequent academic research and publications in game theory. My PhD thesis was based on a computer tournament of competing “families” of strategies for the iterated Prisoner’s Dilemma: a synthesis of work and play to be sure.

**AJP:** So, what good is philosophy?

**Marinoff:** That depends on what you mean by “good.” Henri Poincaré once proposed this toast: “Here’s to pure mathematics. May it never be useful for anything!” I know many theoretical (i.e. analytic) philosophers who would say pretty much the same of philosophy. For them, the “goodness” of philosophy lies precisely in its noetic constructs, philosophy’s preoccupation with matters of mind and intellect, a kind of exclusivity in its concerns with internal and self-referential issues, fascinating and valuable to the analytic community but largely inaccessible and irrelevant to ordinary people. Thus analytic philosophy belongs to a family of conceptual pursuits that includes pure mathematics and logic. While it is vital to the higher reaches of human understanding that people be perpetually engaged in such fields, there are other meanings of “goodness” that must be considered. One such meaning is pragmatic, which usually associates goodness—in the sense you intend—with usefulness, or utility. But if we ask a similar pragmatic question—what utility has mathematics?—we see immediately that while pure mathematics is useful for relatively few people, applied mathematics is useful for a great many. Broadly construed, applied mathematics includes much of physics, engineering, probability, and statistics. Thus applied mathematics touches everyone on the planet, whether they are aware of it or not.

**AJP:** Would applying philosophy do the same thing?

**Marinoff:** Yes. If we consider the influence of the Enlightenment on American Founding Fathers such as Jefferson, for example, we can read the Declaration of Independence as an exercise in applied philosophy. The same is true of the Bill of Rights. One can hardly assert the greatness of these works and deny the goodness (qua utility) of philosophy. Similarly, and of much greater antiquity, India’s civilizational DNA is composed largely of its indigenous philosophy, and so, for that matter, is China’s—different philosophy, comparable longevity. As Bertrand Russell observed, “Some kind of philosophy is a necessity to all but the most thoughtless, and in the absence of knowledge, it is almost sure to be a silly philosophy.” In my opinion, that scandalously few Americans these days are ever exposed to philosophy in the course of their entire lives helps explain the thoughtless-

ness, heedlessness, inattentiveness, and moral depravity that plague contemporary American culture. So what good is philosophy? In its absence, too many things have become “doubleplusungood.”

**AJP:** What’s the difference between philosophizing and psychotherapy? Don’t both put us more at ease?

**Marinoff:** A short answer is that certain kinds of problems—for example, moral dilemmas or professional ethical quandaries or dealing with injustices—are distinctively philosophical; and many other kinds of problems—for example, phobias, OCDs, or personality disorders—are distinctively psychological. But certain classes of problems—for example, dissatisfaction with life, search for meaning, managing change—can be approached, albeit in different ways, by philosophers or psychologists.

**AJP:** Would philosophers and psychologists regard satisfaction and health in the same way?

**Marinoff.** A significant difference between philosophizing and psychologizing arises in that a good many schools of psychotherapy appear wedded to the myth of the “healthy ego,” whereas philosophical teachings from Buddhism, Taoism, and Stoicism concur in identifying the ego as a primary source of “dis-ease,” in ourselves and with the world. While easement of discontent and alleviation of suffering may be ultimate goals of philosophical counseling and psychotherapy in general, the paths to these goals sometimes lead through thorny ground. When John Stuart Mill opined, “better Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied,” he was echoing ancient philosophical sentiments. That said, to apprehend the true source of one’s dissatisfactions and to expunge them from one’s psyche is a goal well worth attaining. Socrates did so and attained serenity, because he cultivated wisdom. A fool’s satisfactions are transient and lead inevitably to renewed dissatisfactions, because a fool cultivates folly.

**AJP:** What’s the difference between a philosopher and a philosophical practitioner?

**Marinoff:** Sometimes there is no difference. A philosopher is a person who enjoys any or all of the following activities: sustained solitary reflection, writing and publishing, talking or consulting with others, perhaps teaching and mentoring, and conceivably engaging in public service. Professors of philosophy and philosophical practitioners may place different emphases on these activities—or not. Some professors of engineering also have engineering practices; of law, legal practices; of medicine, medical practices.

Similarly, some professors of philosophy have philosophical practices. And a good many philosophical practitioners work at it full-time and are not professors of philosophy. Practitioners like me promote philosophical awareness. We counsel individuals. We facilitate group discussions. And we consult with organizations and conduct educational programs. We ask questions that help clients toward the “examined life,” a time-honored philosophical ideal; we help them think more clearly.

**AJP:** Then is clarity therapy?

**Marinoff:** Clarity renders therapy unnecessary.

**AJP:** Is philosophical discourse a kind of play?

**Marinoff:** Yes, in fact, philosophy is to some extent a play of, and with, ideas. Many canonical texts from the ancient world are dialogues, which also suggest plays—if you don’t mind the play on words. We know that plays played an important role in Hellenic culture and that Plato himself was something of a dramatist, or playwright, in that he chose this dialogical medium to transmit the ideas of Socrates, as well as his own. My friend and colleague Andrew Irvine, who teaches philosophy at the University of British Columbia, has successfully rewritten and staged the trial of Socrates, uniting these twin meanings of philosophical discourse as a play of ideas in a theatre. Although not to my knowledge staged as plays, the *Analects* of Confucius and the *Bhagavad Gita* provide further examples of seminal philosophical dialogue from the ancient world. Indian philosophy also contains the idea of *lila*—improvised and implicitly playful dialogue, intended to mirror the notion that the universe itself unfolds as a kind of grand theatrical spectacle.

**AJP:** If philosophers ask the ultimate questions, can they afford to be funny?

**Marinoff:** If one asks these kinds of questions, how can one afford not to be funny?

**AJP:** Can comedians help us think through philosophical questions?

**Marinoff:** Yes, comedians can provoke or inspire us to think more clearly about the philosophical underpinnings of the issues they tackle with their jokes. Said another way, many years of teaching philosophy have taught me that lectures peppered with levity make students more attentive to substance, if only because they do not want to miss any jokes. Thus, again, I often practice “stand-up philosophy” in the classroom, telling students that the more philosophy they learn, the funnier they will find my jokes. This certainly provides some of them with incentive.

**AJP:** Can philosophers help us laugh at death?

**Marinoff:** I have written a few pieces on gallows humor, with examples culled from philosophers, poets, and politicians, among others. Of course, philosophers can help us laugh at death. Epicurus said, “Death does not concern us, because as long as we exist, death is not here. And when it does come, we no longer exist.” And when Voltaire, a notorious freethinker, laid deathly ill, the priests came to him to make the usual speech, calculated to intimidate, “Now is your final chance to renounce Satan and all his works.” Voltaire replied, “This is no time to be making new enemies.”

**AJP:** Should philosophers help us laugh at death?

**Marinoff:** This is another matter entirely. I know a seriously adept philosopher of physics—Stephen Gimbel—who chairs the philosophy department at Gettysburg College and is also a leading philosopher of humor and an extracurricular comedian. He says that when he’s doing what he *should* do, he’s neither writing about philosophy of humor nor performing stand-up comedy. That in itself may be a jest at normativity. In general, philosophers are far from agreed about the proper pursuits of philosophers. Socrates was a gadfly; Diogenes, a wise-cracking social leper; Lao Tzu, a civil servant; Hume, a diplomatic envoy; Locke, a physician; Mill, a member of parliament; Nietzsche, a prophetic madman. I see no reason why a philosopher should not be a comedian. But to answer your question more pro-actively: our final futile breaths have one great power—not to joust grimly with death, as in *The Seventh Seal*, but rather to jest with it. This a true philosopher’s calling: to skewer the Grim Reaper with such a rapier wit, as to grant him eternal second thoughts about harvesting future philosophers, at least while they have their wits about them. Nothing is more serious than death; hence nothing is more worthy of our humor.

**AJP:** What do philosophers have to say about the ethics of telling jokes in a eulogy?

**Marinoff:** I don’t recall any books or courses about “Eulogy Ethics,” so this question obliges us to break new ground, so to speak. I am not the first philosopher to pick up this spade, so allow me to credit Richard Richards, a long-time, if not founding, member of the former Lighthearted Philosophers Society, a group who still gather annually, though their program has become politicized over questions of correctness, of what should be funny, and what should not and of who may tell what to whom and thus, alas, much purged of mirth. Richards once appeared at one of these conferences wearing a t-shirt with the caption *Let’s put the ‘fun’ back in ‘funeral’*—and

as the elder statesman of this group, he had seniority for the job. I think it can be both wise and ethical to tell jokes in the course of a eulogy. Also, damned funny. As Mark Twain once quipped at an undearly departed foe: “I couldn’t attend the funeral, but sent a nice note saying I approved of it.” He certainly put the “fun” back in that funeral!

**AJP:** Does politicizing humor hurt the jokes?

**Marinoff:** It does, yes. “Lightheartedness” used to be fun. Lightheartedness politicized has degenerated into spiteful rant about how white male heterosexual patriarchal hegemonic humor has been a tool used to oppress the hilarity challenged on the basis of class, gender, and race. Every joke has a butt. But “ethically correct” humor insists that only a member of the “butt group” can tell jokes about the butts. On this view, only Jews can tell Jewish jokes, only Italians can tell Italian jokes, and—were we to be consistent here—only the dead should be allowed to tell jokes about death.

**AJP:** Do you practice what you preach?

**Marinoff:** Let me share two personal examples, about my late brother Sid. Like too many beloved comedians, Sid died tragically young, in his mid-thirties. But his sense of humor was divinely—some say, diabolically—inspired. Sid kept us all in stitches much of the time. He managed to crack up a funeral party at age three. Precocious, without a doubt. In hindsight, maybe also ominous. In adulthood, one of Sid’s favorite “priest, minister, and rabbi” jokes went like this: The inimitable triumvirate was discussing what they did with the collection. The priest said, “I draw a circle on the floor and throw the money up in the air. What lands inside the circle is God’s; what lands outside, Man’s.” The minister said, “I draw a line on the floor and throw the money up in the air. What lands on the right is God’s; on the left, Man’s.” The rabbi said, “I just throw the money up in the air. Whatever God wants, He takes.” It transpired that a close, lifelong friend of ours, the Canadian poet, Bernard de los Cobos, who had shared many humorous escapades with Sid and me, actually told this joke verbatim at Sid’s funeral. His novel twist was to add, “Apparently God wanted Sid, and so He took him.” I found this wise, ethical, humorous, and in the very best of taste. But Sid got the last laugh, from beyond the grave. A pillar of his suburban community, in addition to a stellar civil servant, his town council posthumously named a street after Sid: “Marinoff Way.” The gesture was sincerely touching, but the street itself is a dead end. I kid you not. I can hear Sid chortling over that one, in the next world.

**AJP:** Is humor effective in philosophical argument?

**Marinoff:** In a logical sense, humor or the lack thereof are irrelevant to the validity or soundness of an argument. But in a rhetorical sense, humor will certainly play on emotions that condition one's attraction to or repulsion by an argument's premises or conclusion. Ask any trial attorney what moves a jury more: evidence or emotions? You might not be amused by the response. A range of rhetorical devices, including ironic humor, can prove decisive in jury trials and debates alike. Philosophers originally trained lawyers in just such arts, and a good many philosophers season their arguments and polemics with poignant humor. The real punch line is that while everybody "gets" the doctor, lawyer, priest, and rabbi jokes, it is mostly and only philosophers who "get" the philosophy jokes. A room full of philosophers may laugh uproariously at a joke that non-philosophers simply wouldn't fathom.

**AJP:** Practically speaking, does humor help you teach philosophy?

**Marinoff:** Humor can and does have a discernible and salutary second-order effect on philosophical arguments. Some students at City College find my lectures hilarious, or at least funny, once they learn enough philosophy to find them funny. That's my challenge on day one: I tell the class a philosophy joke that no one gets, and the room falls silent. Then I promise they will soon begin laughing in proportion to how much philosophy they absorb. By the end of the term, most of them are laughing at all the right moments. So humor may catalyze the learning of philosophical argument. Even critical thinking or logic, dry as they are, can be drizzled with a little humor, at least to keep students awake—if not alert. Though I no longer teach these courses, I fondly recall introducing humor into both. When discussing ambiguity, my favorite examples included real newspaper headlines such as "Escaped Leopard Believed Spotted" and "Police Stoned in Hartford." This unfailingly begets laughter, and laughter begets attentiveness. Attentive students learn more than inattentive ones—and not just philosophy.

**AJP:** Does philosophy affect the satires you write?

**Marinoff:** My satirical fiction has fueled philosophical argument itself with humor. In a novel called *Fair New World*, I satirized political correctness and radical feminism by extrapolating their most ridiculous premises to their logical political conclusions. Some philosopher-reviewers wrote my ludicrous extrapolations succeeded in exposing the absurdities and inanities that are otherwise unchallengeable dogmas of the politically correct.

**AJP:** Do we think better answers or think them more quickly if we play with philosophical questions?

**Marinoff:** I doubt that it's a universal law, but a playful approach has borne fruits in the philosophy of physics and of mathematics, as well as in game theory. For example, thought experiments have a playful "what if?" aspect, and Einstein often used them to visualize physical reality before he derived—or located—mathematical expressions that captured his imagery. Classical probability theory was famously developed through a correspondence between Pierre de Fermat and Blaise Pascal, who were trying to compute the odds of a court gambler, one Chevalier de Méré, who was puzzled when small modifications to games of chance resulted in unanticipated losses. There is definitely something playful in George Cantor's method of denumerating countable infinities. And there's an apocryphal tale that John von Neumann's and Oskar Morgenstern's *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* emerged from poker tables at Princeton. If it isn't true, it should be. Then again, so many celebrated breakthroughs in science came about accidentally, or upon waking from a sleep, that playfulness cannot be the sole cause of ingenuity—just a fun way of teasing it out. As far as philosophy goes, its most impressive, if not persuasive, attempts at answering its salient questions have more often than not come about through trial, tribulation, sustained reflection, and prolonged effort. Sounds more like work than play.

**AJP:** Can play protect us against pernicious ideas?

**Marinoff:** It would be great to conduct a social experiment, determining the extent to which humor can mitigate or prevent brainwashing. We need three groups: one already thoroughly politicized; another well embarked but not yet there; and a third—if it could be found—of subjects who are politically neutral. They'd be immunized then exposed and might prove more resistant to perniciousness. But so far, the exquisite humor produced by the politically absolutely incorrect strikes only the immune as funny. Those infected with perniciousness either don't understand the humor or find it offensive. For example, in the linguistic domain, the excruciating Orwellian contortions of language needed to purge gender from ordinary speech, and to disguise inequalities as equalities, have resulted, for example, in the substitution of "chairman" with "chairperson." When I chaired the philosophy department at City College, I used the term "chairmammal." I also wore a red-starred Maoist cap and carried Mao's *Little Red Book* into divisional meetings. Even the Trotskyites at CCNY couldn't help laughing.

But most generally, humor seems to serve only to reinforce everyone's prior political commitments. Unfortunately, however, it follows that the converse of your question holds: Pernicious ideas can immunize us against a playful approach.

**AJP:** Which kinds of philosophical claims are most vulnerable to ridicule?

**Marinoff:** No claim whatsoever is invulnerable to ridicule, starting with the claims of philosophers themselves. As Cicero remarked in antiquity, "There is nothing so absurd but some philosopher has said it." Bertrand Russell echoed this sentiment in the twentieth century: "Philosophy is an unusually ingenious attempt to think fallaciously." But philosophy exercises no monopoly on ridiculous claims; it has long-standing serious competition from theology and politics.

**AJP:** Are playful nonsense and philosophical nonsense different?

**Marinoff:** This question itself is far from playful. Unfortunately, the answer is, "Yes, significantly so." Playful nonsense is both fun and harmless. It stirs up a range of salutary emotions, which are associated with laughter and the therapeutic benefits of laughter. Examples of playful nonsense include Edward Lear's *Nonsense Poems*, Marx Brothers' movies, and Monte Python's skits. Philosophical nonsense can also be playful in just this way, especially when uttered by nonphilosophers. A master of this art was Yogi Berra, some of whose most endearingly playful nonsense was also philosophically absurd. "It's getting late early" and "When I come to a fork in the road, I take it" are among my favorites. Again, they evoke positive, harmless, humorous emotions, and therapeutic laughter—all the more so because Berra's humor was largely unintended.

**AJP:** Yet don't philosophers usually mean what they say even if they don't always say what they mean?

**Marinoff:** The divergence you are pointing to arises because, while playful nonsense never takes itself seriously, philosophical nonsense often takes itself far too seriously, and dangerously so once it dons theological or political garb. Whenever and wherever philosophical nonsense is promoted to the position of theocratic or secular political dogma, it runs the catastrophic risk of being taken so seriously that it preempts, prohibits, and punishes laughter itself. In such cases, philosophical nonsense stirs up a malignant and potentially toxic set of emotions: self-righteousness, other intolerance, hatred, fear, anger, murderous rage, mob mentality, and all the heinous acts that flow from them. Most dangerous of all, as Buddhist philosophy so

patiently explains, philosophical nonsense taken too seriously engenders blindness to one's own deluded state of mind, which allows all the other negative emotions to arise, flourish, and propagate.

**AJP:** Can you give us an example of harmless, playful nonsense?

**Marinoff:** My mother—now ninety-two—never tires of telling this joke: Two inmates of a rural lunatic asylum are sitting on the porch one day, when they see a farmer pass by with a wheelbarrow full of manure. “Where are you going with that?” one asks. “I’m going to put it on my strawberries,” replies the farmer. Says the lunatic to his *confrère*: “We put cream on ours, and they call *us* crazy!”

**AJP:** And can you provide examples of toxic philosophical nonsense?

**Marinoff:** Watch the evening news, and discover the latest incident of terrorism, where some self-righteous suicidal psychopath violently murders as many innocent people as possible. Why? Because he was persuaded by his belief system's malevolent ethics or by a fulminating imam to participate in self-induced slavery, suicidal brainwashing, and ritual death-worship. Examples of toxic philosophical nonsense also appear in secular garb. Spend some time as a faculty member in the contemporary Western university, where absurd but politically unchallengeable prohibitions on thought, speech, and kindred academic freedoms have taken hold. The politically correct apparently feel so insecure in their roles as reason's executioners that they need to control and preapprove what everyone thinks, says, and does.

**AJP:** Can philosophy itself thrive if thinkers easily take offense?

**Marinoff:** People who easily take offense are not thinking at all. Many have been conditioned to believe, mistakenly, that offense is the same as harm. If someone offers them an offense, they are obliged to accept it; then the offender deserves to be punished; and offeree should be rewarded. In consequence, everyone becomes responsible for everybody else's state of mind, and no one for his or her own. Not being responsible for one's own state of mind represents a scandalous preemption of the possibility of thinking for oneself, and hence of philosophizing. Bertrand Russell wrote, “Some kind of philosophy is a necessity to all but the most thoughtless.” And he also warned, presciently, that the effect of philosophy ungrounded by knowledge would leave us “divided into rival groups of fanatics, each group firmly persuaded that its own brand of nonsense is sacred truth, while the other side's is damnable heresy.”

**AJP:** Some governments take philosophy seriously enough to ban it, right?

**Marinoff:** Yes. Western philosophy is banned in Saudi Arabia, for example, where the rulers do not want their citizens asking Socratic questions that might challenge their own thinking. Muslims around the world rioted over a Danish cartoon satirizing the prophet Mohammed, while the Charlie Hebdo massacre in Paris illustrated the murderous rage of those who take offense far too easily. Those fragile perpetrators tolerated neither independence of mind nor freedom of expression.

**AJP:** As a practicing philosopher, can you tell us about teaching what you call social judo?

**Marinoff:** Social judo is a kind of insensitivity training. In spirit, it's my somewhat playful, almost satirical response. In most martial arts, including judo, one of the guiding ideas is minimalism: defending oneself by deflecting or reflecting as much of the attacker's force as possible, away from you and perhaps right back at him, while expending as little of one's own energy as possible. Similarly, social judo deflects or reflects an intended insult away from oneself and back to the aggressor, with no umbrage taken. Social judo disarms offense by transmuting it into humor. Incidentally, the title of my second book, *Therapy for the Sane*, offended the politically correct editor who declared it "offensive to the *insane*." But my riposte—"You're evidently well-qualified to know"—apparently went over her head.

**AJP:** Do you regard that technique as a kind of play?

**Marinoff:** One of my favorite examples comes from Herbert von Karajan, the legendary conductor (and therefore master of orchestral play). Walking briskly in downtown Chicago one day, he collided with an equally fast-moving walker. The two had been on a perpendicular collision course, concealed from one another by a corner office building. "Imbecile!" the man yelled at Von Karajan. Nonplussed, the maestro merely doffed his hat and with a bow replied "Von Karajan." Now *that's* social judo, demonstrated by a "black belt."

**AJP:** Is lightheartedness key to social play of this kind?

**Marinoff:** In Von Karajan's case it is a lightheartedness that possibly comes from taking oneself extraordinarily seriously—and no one else at all seriously. Buddhist humor is equally effective against intended offense, because, there being no essential "psychological self" in Buddhism, it likewise takes nothing personally. Buddhist humor is not only light-hearted but also kind hearted.

**AJP:** What about refusing to take offense—is that a kind of play?

**Marinoff:** It can certainly become a kind of game. That's how I present it during insensitivity training: "Go ahead, try to offend me!"

**AJP:** Should we distinguish between offense and harm?

**Marinoff:** Obviously. As I have argued until blue in the face—yet they still call me "white"—offense and harm are two different kinds of things. Refusal to distinguish offense from harm is one pillar of political correctness. Such refusal is, moreover in my opinion, anathema to the individual rights and obligations upon which our fundamental freedoms are founded and harmful to the interests of a functional society and prosperous polity. In brief, one can feel offended without being harmed as by the odor of spoiled food or harmed without being offended as by slipping in the shower. One can also both be harmed and feel offended as, for example, if swindled by a crooked investment broker. Being cheated out of savings is both a harm to one's means and an offense to one's trust in others. This is precisely why we have the saying "adding insult to injury"—a succinct way of distinguishing offense from harm. Harm, whether by forces of nature or human acts, is injury inflicted upon consenting and unwilling victims who are powerless to prevent or avoid it. Offense is never inflicted; it is merely offered. If accepted, it inflames the mind rather than injuring the body, in which case it is not the same as harm. If rejected, intended offense loses its power to offend, in which case there is no offense.

**AJP:** How does this play out in rough sports?

**Marinoff:** Even in that class of professional contact sports where inflicting harms is essential to victory—as in boxing, football, and the like—these harms are inflicted mostly in the absence of offense. Competitors in violent contact sports go out for drinks together afterwards. No one takes offense at playfully-inflicted harms; in fact, such games entail players' prior, if tacit, consent to be harmed as part of fair play. Game rules usually mean to limit physical and emotional harm. The National Football League (NFL) penalizes both unnecessary roughness and taunting. The former is far more frequent, and it is penalized because it can be harmful. The latter is penalized because it can be offensive but not harmful. The NFL, its players, and its millions of fans, effortlessly recognize this distinction between harmful acts and offensive speech or gestures. Why does recognizing this distinction pose an insurmountable challenge to so many university administrators? And why do they cripple the capacity of students to *defend* themselves, by forbidding dissenting viewpoints—all the while trumpeting their Orwellian

slogan “Diversity,” which compels subscription to a monolithic narrative.

*AJP:* Can play be cruel and still remain play?

**Marinoff:** I was unaware until recently that the term “dark” play had become fashionable, but I should have guessed. Dark play is a contradiction in terms. Most people used to know the difference between teasing and bullying, just as they used to know the difference between deceiving and lying, or between offering offense and inflicting harm. I imagine that a similar distinction obtains in sexual play, between “light” bondage and full-blown sado-masochism. In sum, cruelty has no place in play.

*AJP:* What’s the connection between play and liberty?

**Marinoff:** Liberty is practically a precondition of play. Children whose societies lack fundamental liberties and human rights are more likely to be forced to work, or steal, or worse and are therefore deprived of opportunities to play. Adults also need play time, and once again lack of liberty compromises both quality and quantity of play. Liberty of thought, even in the presence of physical restraint, is not merely good for philosophy; it is essential. Then again, constraints on physical liberty have not always been bad for philosophers themselves. Some of the most enduring works have been penned by men in the throes or aftermath of adversity, including political imprisonment.

*AJP:* How can what philosophers tell us about pleasure help scholars think about play?

**Marinoff:** Good question. Intuitively, one might posit that practicing, playing, and summoning a successful performance in a highly competitive sport shares many similarities with practicing, playing, and summoning a successful performance in a highly refined art. On reflection, their pleasures admit of undeniable congruencies. (That’s a philosopher’s elliptical way of saying “yes.”) This similarity extends beyond the players, to their respective audiences and fans who also experience pleasure by partaking in memorable performances. This in turn enhances the pleasure of the performer, who may then attain greater heights. And so forth. Moreover, these are not momentary pleasures. One’s best performances live on as cherished memories and also as standards to be equaled or surpassed by oneself or by others.

*AJP:* You have recorded both Bach and rock; does that require a playful sensibility?

**Marinoff:** It seems to me that all musicians possess playful sensibilities. Flex-

ibility, or versatility are key to fluency across musical idioms, as they are to fluency in multiple languages. Classical training itself provides a solid technical foundation that facilitates the acquisition of other idioms, but that is not enough. One also requires a sensibility or attunement to the essence of a given idiom, cultivated by exposure as a listener and performer. Florence Brown, my first classical teacher, once said that she found me “sensitive to everything that is beautiful in life.” That may be too generous, yet Florence fingers something vital, namely appreciation of beauty. Every musical idiom—from classical to jazz, from raga to rock, from indigenous forms world-wide to Homo neanderthal’s greatest bone-flute hits—contains elements of beauty. To perform any idiom authentically and well, one must be sensitive to its particular beauty.

**AJP:** How can pretending or play acting help us examine our true selves?

**Marinoff:** Pretending or play acting can assume many forms, not only for children but also for adults. Psychologists use role-playing techniques to elicit what patients may truly wish to say to significant others—for example, parents, spouses, friends, foes, and so forth—but have hitherto refrained from saying that this kind of role play conduces to discovering or examining facets of our “true selves.” For children, play is an instinctive and vital activity serving multiple purposes, including learning, creativity, socialization, and rehearsal of adult roles. While humans are not the only animals that play—far from it—human play has been strongly favored by natural selection, such that we witness universal features of play among human children and simians in general, including relaxed “play-face,” effortless concentration, unselfconscious absorption in the game, and so forth. Social purposes served by play include balancing competitiveness with cooperativeness, abiding by rules, discovering one’s abilities and limitations, among other things. Rightly, most children take play as seriously as most adults take work. While the contents of play, that is, the game, may vary with geographical and cultural factors, play itself is universal.

**AJP:** Is it ethical to fight gender stereotypes—to try to prevent boys from playing with swords and girls from playing with dolls?

**Marinoff:** Because so much of children’s existence is consumed by play (at least, in relatively good societies and harmonious polities), the content of games must be such that children value them and also feel valued playing them. Preventing normal children from expressing their natural gender differences is worse than unethical. It not only cuts against the grain of instinct,

but it also undermines the virtues that sustain civilizations as we know them and militates against an aesthetic sensibility of what constitutes a harmonious, as opposed to a discordant, society. Parents and schools alike must inculcate both ethical and aesthetic sensibilities in children, for ethics and aesthetics share a common root: axiology, or a philosophy of values. Where children are raised to feel valued and to discern value in others, society is good and polity, harmonious. Every culture on earth must find ways to channel the potentially dangerous energies of its adolescent males into constructive and at times playful pathways, or else self-destruct. Girls play naturally with dolls because they are rehearsing evolutionarily ancient adult roles as mothers and nurturers. It is therefore ethically appropriate, aesthetically agreeable, and socially salubrious to allow children to gravitate to whichever toys they naturally prefer. Whereas deconstructing or otherwise subverting their natures is inappropriate, disagreeable, and un-salubrious.

**AJP:** Can you tell us something about the organization you founded, the American Philosophical Practitioners Association?

**Marinoff:** The APPA was founded in 1999 by five American philosophers including yours truly. It's a non-profit educational corporation whose mission is to encourage philosophical awareness and to advocate leading the examined life. APPA members apply philosophical systems, insights, and methods to the management of human problems and the amelioration of human estates. APPA also trains and certifies accredited philosophers—ones with masters or doctoral degrees—to render services outside the academy and publishes a peer-reviewed journal. Philosophical practice is a world wide movement, with traction in many countries. APPA is the world's largest, and some say leading, organization of its kind. It is an inclusive association that welcomes all who wish to apply philosophy to their own lives and to help others to do so. It has attracted persons of all races, classes, genders, religious persuasions, political affiliations, and philosophical inclinations. I collaborate happily with a good many moderate feminists who wish to help women flourish without waging war on patriarchy. Unlike universities, APPA does not need to especially encourage members from visible minorities, or women, or historically disadvantaged groups, and so forth. Rather, APPA tends to provide a refuge from the toxic ideology of identity politics by treating all individuals as *persons* in the first place.

**AJP:** What does the APPA's motto *Nemo Veritatem Regit* mean?

**Marinoff:** Translation is simpler than explanation: It means Nobody Governs Truth. I translated it into Latin because mottos often sound more impressive, and authoritative, in a dead language. Two possible meanings spring to mind, which may in fact contradict one another. *Prima facie*, the intended meaning adopts a theory of correspondence, positing that truths exist in reality—as in mathematical proofs or scientific laws or empirical facts—and that such truths are necessarily either apprehended by reason, discerned by intuition, or deduced from experience. In any case, their veracity does not depend on religious or political authorities. Thus truths cannot be ordained or governed by us; rather we are governed by truths. And philosophers take it as their mission to inquire into questions of interest to them. Philosophical practitioners assist clients in enlisting such inquiry into question of interest. If and when such inquiry leads to an understanding of a matter, any associated truth will not have been ordained by an external authority—rather, illuminated by the powers of mind.

**AJP:** But if “nobody governs truth,” how can the client find an answer?

**Marinoff:** If you prefer to play a logical game with this motto, it can be interpreted as a variation on the Liar paradox: “This statement is false.” Is that statement true or false? Plainly, it can be neither. For if it is true then it is false; if false, then true. There is a large literature on this class of self-referential propositions. Similarly, if “Nobody governs truth” is true, then likewise nobody governs the truth of propositions about who governs truth, in which case “Nobody governs truth” just might be false. And if “Nobody governs truth” is false, then at least somebody, or possibly more than one person, or conceivably everybody governs truth. In the latter case, truth becomes subjective, or arbitrary. But in that case, nothing is universally true or false, and so “Nobody governs truth” could well be true—just in case it is false.

**AJP:** Do philosophers and players benefit from the give and take of play and philosophy?

**Marinoff:** Yes, they do. Let me illustrate this by drawing from my friend Bernard de los Cobos and quote from this poem of his about the field of play:

for coach Kelly

flexing, chanting flesh and brain  
all through the unchained greensong

ring their praise—  
such play that ever seeks to  
ease the ache that makes it sing

That was well-said of football, and we were adolescent football champions when Bernard penned it. On reflection near fifty years later, it seems apt for philosophy too.