

## On the questions and struggles of everyday life and the people who live them. Interview with Jacob Needleman

JACOB NEEDLEMAN was born October 6, 1934 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In his books —*The Heart of Philosophy*, *Lost Christianity*, *Money and the Meaning of Life*, *A Little Book on Love*, among others— Needleman invites us to be aware of ourselves in the midst of ordinary life. He illustrates his ideas with daily experiences. The philosopher reminds us that we are all the same. His self-recognition of human flaws is shaking. In *Money and the Meaning of Life*, Needleman quotes Donald Trump's autobiography to illustrate a man running away from his inner world. Needleman recognizes he mirrors that extreme case within himself: "How did you get inside me, Trump? I don't remember letting you in."

Sadness and happiness occur simultaneously in human life in slightly different proportions, at different moments. Part of the art of living is to deal with these two extreme situations. The only thing of value in the world is the active soul that transmutes life into the art of living. Since this process is not uniform for everybody, men perceive everyday experiences and each book differently. In this context, Alan Greenspan's comment about *Money and the Meaning of Life* applies to this interview: "This book (conversation) might be either too short or too long for the subject it deals with."



**In the first lines of *The Heart of Philosophy* you say that everybody is a philosopher. When did you discover that you could be a professional philosopher?**

When I was in the university I wanted to be a scientist, a doctor. I took courses in science. But I took courses in philosophy too. There, I started reading great philosophers like Plato and Kierkegaard. While I was reading these philosophers, I realized that this was my passion. They were talking about questions that I always was deeply concerned about when I was younger. Big questions about the meaning of life, soul, God. The science I was studying seemed to be just technical. I realized that the reason I was studying science was because I wanted to understand truth, and not just solve equations or produce new inventions. The science that I was being taught did not give enough place to the feeling of wonder. That is what real philosophy touches directly. So I decided to concentrate on philosophy.

**What science you were studying ?**

Genetics.

**Going from genetics to philosophy was a drastic change, don't you think?**

It should not have been a drastic change. Many people go into science because of the feeling of wonder, not just for practical reasons. There is something inside every human being, some yearning, some wish, some sense of things that one cannot understand. That is why I say we all are philosophers, we all have that striving in us.

**Which philosophers have been your teachers, beside Plato, of course?**

Sören Kierkegaard, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Benedict Spinoza, Immanuel Kant.

**And which philosophers from the 1960s up to now?**

I do not think there are any great philosophers now. Philosophy has tended to become more deconstructionist, more analytical or cynical, more relativistic. In the USA philosophy is becoming very cynical about the possibility of knowing, of really having knowledge of the truth; philosophy is becoming more like a purely academic discipline,

not too much touching the sense of man's universal questions. In Europe, except for Levinas who was a French philosopher who learned from Heidegger, but he also tried to go beyond Heidegger, I must say that there are no great philosophers after Heidegger. The great thinkers now are not strictly speaking philosophers; they come from places that are not exactly philosophy. They speak from within spiritual teachings like Eastern religions or the mystical teachings of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. I do not think that professional philosophy is very deep at the moment.

**Why did you decide to write *Money and the Meaning of Life*?**

For many years I studied the different religious teachings of the world. I have come to the conclusion that there is a wisdom that exists, that is common to all the great spiritual teachings, East and West. For years, in all the books I have written, I have been trying to look at what you may call the primordial wisdom which is the root of every great religion, to see how it can throw light on the problems of contemporary people. I am trying to make a bridge between the wisdom of the ages and the problems of the present. I have written books about psychiatry, medicine, science, education. But I realized that one of the biggest problems in everybody's life is money; everybody is driven crazy by the problem of money. The question was, how can the great wisdom of the past help us face the problem of money. It took me years to write this book. Nobody had ever written about money in this way. I was trying and trying. It took me two years to get even the first sentence.

**Was it, as Bertrand Russell says, that you just thought of one thing and let the unconscious do the job?**

It was not as peaceful as that sounds. Maybe, to some extent, the process was going on in spite of myself. It is like writing a song. I write my books a little bit like some people write music. If I hit the first note, I try to hear what the next note should be, and then go on like that. Some people have the whole thing in mind. I do not; I have a feeling, then, I want to hear the first note, then the second note.

**After you write the first sentence, do you go through the whole book in order?**

First I write a chapter, then another chapter. I have to see what the next note should be and then come to a point where comes a complete line or set of notes. Then I have to stop to listen for the next note.

**When you publish a new book, do you feel afraid of not meeting the expectations of people who have already read your previous books?**

I used to feel that more than I do now. I used to be concerned with people saying, “I like your first book better.” It does not bother me any more. I just write the best book I can each time. I try to play the melody, sing and listen to the song the best I can. When you start in the academic world you have to publish in order to get promoted. Years ago, as a young professor, I said, “I do not want to write only for academic people, I do not care what they think.” So, I tried to write books that can reach the people, not just professors. I decided to express something to ordinary people. So far, I am very pleased that I am reaching the people.

**What about *Money and the Meaning of Life*?**

I am surprised and very happy with the way it touches people. Sometimes, when I read my own writing, I think, “Did I write that? That is an interesting book, I would like to read it!”

**It seems that you did a nice exercise of remembering your past in *Money and the Meaning of Life*. Are the episodes real?**

Absolutely. The Paul Meyer character, my childhood friend, is absolutely true. William Cordell and the woman, Alyssa, are based on true characters; they are real people. The thing with the gold actually happened, but I fictionalized it. [it refers to Needleman’s rejection of half a million dollars that William Cordell offered him.] I like to write a book like a novelist.

**The first time you met Bill Cordell you could easily see his life and character “in his face, his posture, his name.” What messages did you receive from Cordell’s physical**

**presence to have an immediate knowledge of his personality? Please describe how you discovered the sad little child, Paul Meyer, within Bill Cordell's self-pity**

It is hard to say; there is no method; it is not scientific; it is something in the intuition. You feel something in a person in what they irradiate, what they emanate, a kind of quality. I could feel "I know this man, I know his kind of suffering. Sometimes a man who meets a person will feel that he has no weight or has a great deal of weight. Bill Cordell had no presence, he had very little weight. With almost everybody you meet you feel a quality. It is very important to see that when two people meet, immediately something does or does not respond. It is something behind the person. We perceive this by a feeling in our own body. We can have knowledge through feelings. Knowledge is not only in the head but also in the heart. And also you can feel "this person is authentic and this person is not." I realized that money for him was a drug, cutting him off from others, like a person that drinks too much.

**In *Money and the Meaning of Life* there is a story, the fisherman story, that resembles Socrates' wife, Xanthippe. Her bad mood was proverbial. Is that a message for married philosophers?**

Socrates had a wife, a difficult wife apparently, but most people's wives are difficult at certain moments. Xenophon says that a disciple asked Socrates, "If you are such a great judge of the character of people, how could you have married such a terrible woman." He answered, "I always felt I wanted to have good relationships with people. I married her because I knew if I could have a good relationship with this person, I could have a good relationship with anyone." When a young man asked him if he should get married, Socrates answered, "By all means get married. If you have a good wife you will be happy, but if you have a bad wife you will be a philosopher." I am a professional philosopher, but I have a good wife.

**How you work with difficulties in your relationship?**

It is part of the art of living. Every good love, every good relationship has difficulties; nothing goes easy for us. Money is not easy, to write is not easy . . . to love is not easy. I just published a book about love. It fits to this question. Love may start by being

automatic, it happens by itself, it is attraction, pleasure, happiness. But at a certain point love becomes work, you have to struggle.

**It is not easy to understand your books *Money and the Meaning of Life* or *On Love* if the reader does not have a clear idea of “inner” and “outer” world. What do they mean?**

There are moments in your life, very painful moments, or very joyful moments, when you feel you are completely there; you are present; you exist, you are conscious, you are aware in yourself. Suddenly, time is different, you are aware of yourself in a very powerful open way. Some people call this a spiritual experience, but it does not have to involve God. There are just moments when you are there. That is a moment of great inner awareness too. In that moment you exist consciously as a human being, with feeling, with sensitivity, with power, with humility, your body is more alive, quiet, more relaxed, you are open to love, to compassion. Some times when someone close to you dies, then you are in grief, but you also are very open to people, you are not petty, you are not irritated. Those are moments when you see we have something inside of us. It is a moment when you can see a real possibility, a real power that is in us. In such moments we are more human, we are closer to what a human being should be. Can we keep that? Could we have that? But there is also the part of us that deals with the world of money, our obligations and actions, that is, the outer world. Those are the two worlds: the inner world, which is world of a new kind of consciousness, and the outer world which is the world of obligations —I have to take care of my family, to take care of my body, to have my pleasures—. But, usually we sacrifice or lose our inner world when we go out. The question is, Can we make a relationship with those two worlds to adjust together? It's what brings me the meaning of life. Money is the means of organizing life in the outer world. Nowadays, money is the principal means of organizing and structuring the outer world. We have to understand money. That is what *Money and the Meaning of Life* is about.

**Did you refer to Donald Trump's story to illustrate how a person dedicates his whole life to the outer world?**

Donald Trump is the extra-clear example. Most people, most of us, are like that. Our culture, at least in the USA, has no respect for the inner world. People running away from their own inner world do not have any idea about it. I have asked many people who are very successful in business, How much money is enough? They have more money than they can ever spend in a hundred life times. They just look at me and say, “I never thought of it, I do not know, I never asked that question.” That is part of the problem.

**In *Das Kapital*, Marx tries to describe the capitalist personality. He says that a capitalist is an attitude, a way of life. Do you agree with Marx?**

Economics is about people's well-being. Economics is really foolish when it leaves these things out, when it does not take the whole human being into account. So, philosophy is very foolish if it does not take money and the material world into account. Marx, a very brilliant thinker about the outer world, made a mistake when he stated that the human problem can be corrected by improvements in the outer world. In the long run, the inner world has to change in some way; otherwise, the outer world just moves things around. If the inner world stays the same, it only brings temporary relief.

**How do you relate your idea of power in the inner and outer world with Galbraith's sources of power: persuasion, organization, physical force, economics (money)**

Real power is moral power. Somebody can be powerful physically, but he has no power over himself. Somebody can have a lot of money, but he is very weak inside. He is a slave to his desires, fears, ambitions. That is not power to me; real power is inner power. Galbraith talks about outer power; money is a source of outer power. To me, real power is inner power.

**What is moral power?**

Moral power means you are aware of your conscience; in the conscience you know yourself so you can be aware always in your conscience. Your ego does not overpower you. When the ego is powerful, the human being is weak. If vanity is powerful, I am not powerful, my vanity is powerful. Many powerful men are inside very weak, like Hitler.

Inside they are full of fear. Plato writes about that in *The Republic*. He says that the most outwardly powerful man can be the weakest inside.

**But most people create a functional moral, a distortion of values to reach a certain goal. What do you think about it?**

We, all of us, are like that sometimes. People, when they are not in touch with their conscience or are so attached to their own view, can become very ugly. The worst crimes in the world could be committed and make a caricature of morality. Some historical examples are the crusades and the inquisition.

**I know you teach a course on “philosophy of money and work” to students in international business. What it is about?**

In this course I try to present something deep and big about the human condition, not just about making money.

**What is your most recent book about?**

I just finished writing it. The title is *Time and the Soul*. It is the first draft; I do not know if it is going to go this way or not. It is about time; time is terribly stressful, there is nothing we can do. People have been driven crazy by time. The only way to face the problem of time is to deepen the search for yourself. Nowadays, the problem is nobody has any time anymore. Most middle class people in the “affluent society” have a terrible sense of always being too busy, of having too much to do; everything is scheduled, planned; everything is going fast. In America, almost everybody, even children, are feeling the stress of pressure of time. It is like a time famine. Everybody has things, but nobody has time. It is a poverty of time. Human time is time just to be, to exist, to be present, to feel the sense of space, life, perception and relaxation. The way I face the problem of time has to come inside, and I try to discover or make some kind of contact with the sense of *I am*. This *I am* is a self presence inside. In moments of love, joy or wonder, we discover that time stops or goes slowly. This feeling is because the real self inside has appeared leaving another kind of time, sometimes called eternity; it is a different quality of time.

**In your book *Money and the Meaning of Life* (1994: 15) you state: “A superficial understanding of the place of money in a spiritual life, and of its relation with religion through occasional and impersonal giving, is no longer much help. Without a long work on oneself, it is impossible in contemporary conditions to be generous and free in regard to the force of money . . . To use the force of money in uniting human beings in service to the highest.” Would you say that an educational model for entrepreneurs is close to that description?**

Yes. What I refer here is not only for entrepreneurs, but it is also for everybody in our society. Our habits with money are very deeply engraved in this culture. To use money for human purposes requires a long struggle with oneself to come to see one’s true nature and to face one’s weaknesses and contradictions. You cannot just be innerly free with money because it is supposed be a good thing to do. Our habits with money are deep down. It requires a lot of struggle, engagement with the question of money. It is like you cannot say to a person just “love you neighbor.” He has to struggle to be able to love another person, particularly one’s neighbor. Our problem with money is very deep; it requires a deep inner struggle. This is not just a question for entrepreneurs, but for every man and woman in the society.

**In the book *The Little Prince* by Saint-Exupéry, there is a story that teaches that things that somebody possesses have to make sense for both the owner and the thing being owned or possessed. The story is about the little prince who meets a business man who is very busy counting stars. It seems that this idea is useful to educate an entrepreneur. What good does business do for the things it deals with? What is the virtue of private property in general?**

There is no simple answer to that. The people who work for the boss, in a certain sense, are owned by him; they are paid and under his control. If he takes care of people, he will have a better business in the long run; but if he is not good to people, if he tries to force them, to exploit them, in the long run, he will lose. In an ideal capitalist society, the business that survives longer is only the one that takes care of the employees. Most bosses are not like that, but most bosses do not survive; their business goes down. On the other hand, what good does anybody do for the things in the world? The sense of quality is pretty missing nowadays. We do not really care for things, like this cup of coffee we

are drinking. People just look at the use of it: to drink coffee. There is a movement that goes back to crafts production, based on making things carefully. But nowadays most people do not really care for or appreciate the quality of things we consume. In general, man is here to give careful attention to the world and take care of it.

**Does the Socrates' entry at the end of *The Heart of the Philosophy* suggest the need of a guide to find the way in our lives, like Virgil in Dante's *Divine Comedy*?**

Yes. At a certain point we need a real guide; we cannot do it all by ourselves.

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- In this section the style of the interview changes. Based on *A Little Book on Love*, the interviewer presents the following statement to get Needleman's comments on specific issues: **"We must learn the art of living recognizing our human condition, accepting and forgiving our sins and trying not to offend God. In this way, we should not try to reduce our imperfections to zero, but just to control them to facilitate our communion with other people. As far as other people also share the same human condition, our imperfections may facilitate understanding among men."** This argument is broken down in three parts and a preliminary conclusion to have Needleman's comments step by step.

***First. We must recognize our human condition.***

—*Interviewer.* In the *A Little Book on Love* (1996: 84), you wrote: "We are not saints, we are not angels; we are embryonic souls immersed in a badly educated body being pulled along by a love-starved lonely horse called the emotions."

—*Needleman.* What can I say? I agree with that and I wrote it.

***Second. We must be aware of our limits and accept sins as a part of our ordinary life.*** Let's remember that:

- Even Solomon the Wise, having his kingdom at stake, could not control the temptation of "knowing" foreign women (the queen of Sheba, among others).
- Ecclesiastes says that even wisdom is vanity, a sin.
- Sins are part of our ordinary life. Shakespeare illustrates the human flaw:

HAMLET ( to OPHELIA). Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest. But yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious; with more offenses at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What

should such fellows as I do, crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves all; believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery.

*Hamlet. Act III, Scene I*

—*Needleman.* The *Old Testament* just shows a few stories about Solomon. It says that Solomon, although he was very wise, had his own weakness; it says that *even* Solomon made mistakes. But if you look at the other literature about him, the legends, you get a very different picture. The legends of Solomon present us a picture of a man who can play with all the energies of life, including sex and money, without being captured by those forces. Most of us cannot deal with all the forces of life, but he could. To say that wisdom is a sin depends on how you use that word. Real wisdom cannot become a sin because it makes you humble. Wisdom is not just knowing. Sometimes knowing things, knowing a lot, being wise in *certain ways* is not wisdom; it is knowledge that puffs you up. Wisdom is to know what is good and to act according to it. On the other hand, Shakespeare's dialogue is a very beautiful quote about the human condition.

—*Interviewer.* It is clear that we are not justifying human imperfections. We are aware that beyond certain limits they reduce our inner worth. In *A Little Book on Love* (1996: 50) you wrote, "At the core of the great spiritual traditions of the world, however, we are advised not to seek to destroy these emotional reactions [pride, anger, lust, avarice, gluttony, envy, sloth], but to allow their existence within the light of our free awareness." Do you mean that, if we fight every day against our imperfections, we are condemned to a never-ending defeat?

—*Needleman.* Yes. This is an attitude to assume. This is not a popular idea, but it is in the esoteric traditions of religions. Evil needs to be related to the good, needs to be seen and accepted as a part of our nature. This is an esoteric idea the orthodox religions do not accept. If you allow yourself to be whatever you are, you see your weaknesses and have compassion for yourself. You give your weaknesses attention in the same way you try to look at another person you care for. Through such self-acceptance, the forgiveness of God can come through. Sins are forgiven in the sense they no longer take you away from what you are. How has God, Jesus, forgiven us? It is not just externally; it is also through something inside of us.

***Third. Not to offend God***

—*Interviewer*. The art of living requires explicitly recognizing that “we are not saints, we are not angels,” that we do not want to eliminate our imperfections to zero, to take God’s place. We also should attend to the *intention* of our actions, the good will that comes from our moral power, rather than personal qualities. Kant says that moderation and self-control are not good by themselves, but good will.\* A deep recognition of our weakness and good will is expressed in the Catholic mass, during the prayer for peace, when the priest says: “Look not on our sins (that are many), but on the faith of your Church, and grant us the peace of your kingdom where you live for ever and ever.”

—*Needleman*. The good will is the only thing good; everything else is out of our control. I can will the good, then I can try to do. But what happens when I do, what becomes of it after I try, is not under my control. The *Bhagavad Gita* says that we have to work, but not be attached to the results.

*Therefore*, we have a **twofold conclusion**.

—*Interviewer*. On one hand, we may look out for our imperfections and control them in such a way that they should not be an obstacle to relate men to each other. And, on the other hand, we may take advantage of our imperfections if they facilitate our mutual understanding based on the principle of empathy (putting ourselves in other people’s shoes). To comprehend other people’s experiences is the first step to understand (explain and predict) their actions of love and conflict. We have some quotes to illustrate this concept:

SOCRATES. O Callicles, if there were not some community of feelings among mankind, however varying in different persons —I mean to say, if every man’s feelings were peculiar to himself and were not shared by the rest of his

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\* This argument is based on Kant’s *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*:

Moderation in the affections and passions, self-control, and calm deliberation are not only good in many respects, but even seem to constitute part of the intrinsic worth of the person; but they are far from deserving to be called good without qualification, although they have been so unconditionally praised by the ancients. For without the principles of a good will, they may become extremely bad, and the coolness of a villain not only makes him far more dangerous, but also directly makes him more abominable in our eyes than he would have been without it.

A good will is good not because of what it performs or effects, not by its aptness for the attainment of some proposed end, but simply by virtue of the volition; that is, it is good in itself, and considered by itself is to be esteemed much higher than all that can be brought about by it in favour of any inclination, nay even of the sum total of all inclinations. Even if it should happen that, owing to special disfavour of fortune, or the niggardly provision of a step-motherly nature, this will should wholly lack power to accomplish its purpose, if with its greatest efforts it should yet achieve nothing, and there should remain only the good will (not, to be sure, a mere wish, but the summoning of all means in our power), then, like a jewel, it would still shine by its own light, as a thing which has its whole value in itself.

species— I do not see how we could ever communicate our impressions to one another.

*Gorgias* (written circa 380 B.C.)  
Plato

As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation.

*The Theory of Moral Sentiments*  
Adam Smith

But the emphatic comprehension is not a generic exercise. Recognizing our imperfections may facilitate a *selective* communication with people we deal with. Karl E. Scheibe says that “One can dance with another mind only if one first learns how to dance, and then one can do only certain dances, and these only with certain partners.” (*Mirrors, Masks, Lies and Secrets*, 1979: 52)

—*Needleman*. I agree with your conclusion, but I would like to add that the only difference between people is to what extent I am aware that I am like that. When I judge you, which I do all the time, you are like a mirror to me. I mirror even the most horrible murder; I have that within myself too. We are all the same, in slightly different proportions. It is very hard to recognize and accept that nobody is that much better than anybody else.

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- Also inspired by *A Little Book on Love*

—*Interviewer*. Pity for (or sorrow for) somebody suffering a pain of love, although unavoidable, is not justified. Love (either sustained or ephemeral) has an immediate personal reward that positively counterbalances any future “pain of love.” That is why most people having a broken heart are ready to fall in love once again. In same way a hangover is the cost you pay for drinking so much, a pain of love is the cost you pay (when you pay it) for a deep love.

—*Needleman*. I agree with that argument. It is such as extraordinary joy, being in love. Most people would say it is worth it.