

PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE

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Philosophy as a Way of Life

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Preface

The e-book you are, hopefully, about to enjoy is a collection of essays in practical philosophy originally published at Figs in Winter, my Substack newsletter.

I've been writing about philosophy as a way of life for a good number of years now, beginning with my first book on the topic, Answers for Aristotle: How Science and Philosophy Can Lead Us to A More Meaningful Life, continuing with the well received How to Be a Stoic: Using Ancient Philosophy to Live a Modern Life, and a number of others.

This series of e-booklets (free to download) collects essays that are thematically related and, I think, interesting and useful.

Enjoy, and remember, *Philosophia longa, vita brevis!*

~Massimo Pigliucci

I—How to run a philosophical school

Whether we realize it or not, we all have a philosophy of life. Often it consists in whatever religious creed and practices one has been raised with. At other times it is the result of a conscious choice. Even those who don't think about philosophy or religion still have a certain understanding of the world and how to act within it—which means that they have a (implied) life philosophy.

If this is the case, we may as well be conscious of what kind of philosophy we practice and why. And at least occasionally we may want to question whether such philosophy is really what we want. If the answer is yes, good. If it's no, then perhaps the time has come to consider possible alternatives.

A good number of the possible alternatives on the table belong to a cluster of Greco-Roman philosophies of life developed during the millennium between the 5th century BCE and the fifth century CE, give or take. It's hard to imagine a better guide to those practical philosophies than French scholar Pierre Hadot, for instance in his book *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. The series of essays of which this is the first installment is devoted to a summary and

discussion of Hadot's ideas as put forth in that book, in the hope of being helpful to people who are either in the process of choosing a new philosophy for themselves or are practicing one already and want to get better at it.

Hadot reasonably suggests that ancient philosophical schools thrived—and have therefore come to be known to us—when their founders established them as institutions: Plato's Academy, Aristotle's Lyceum, Epicurus' Garden, and Zeno's Stoa. (By contrast, for instance, we know little of the Cyrenaics.) In addition to these we have what Hadot calls two spiritual traditions: Skepticism (in two forms: Pyrrhonism and Academic Skepticism) and Cynicism.

From around the third century Platonism began a process of synthesis of Aristotelianism and Stoicism, while the remaining traditions gradually faded away. The resulting Neoplatonism will come to dominate the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, setting the stage for the modern era. In other words, Greco-Roman philosophy did not die with the end of the classical period, but shaped western thought (and beyond) for another millennium and a half after that, and is still very much with us today.

Hadot says that to philosophize meant to enact a deep rapture with *bios*, that is, the normal life conducted by most people. Philosophers, in other words, rejected commonly accepted priorities in favor of rather unusual ones, like virtue, or mental tranquillity, or the suspension of judgment. As a result, philosophers were seen as strange and potentially dangerous, and made fun of by the public and by comics like Aristophanes, who in his *The Clouds*

(423 BCE) made fun of a certain Socrates, often referred to as atopos, meaning unclassifiable. This strangeness and unclassifiability may have contributed to Socrates' trial and execution in 399 BCE. (Certainly Plato held Aristophanes in part responsible for that unfortunate turn of events.)



Pierre Hadot, from modernstoicism.com

Part of what made practical philosophy a bit “strange,” from the point of view of the person in the street, so to speak, was that the various schools conjured their own version of the sage, a hypothetical individual whose ideal life was, again, a stark departure from the life of common people. Consider, for instance, the Stoic sage, who never gets angry or upset, and always tackles problems by way of rational analysis. Moreover, the Stoic sage has very different priorities from the rest of humanity. For her things like

health, wealth, reputation, and career are “indifferents,” meaning that they have value but do not affect the most important thing of them all: our character.

It’s not clear whether the Stoics thought that sages actually exist. Seneca tells us (in his 42nd Letter to Lucilius) that they are as rare as the mythological phoenix, which rises from its ashes once every 500 years. Nevertheless, the figure of the sage is crucial because it plays a role analogous to that of Jesus in Christianity, or Buddha in Buddhism: it represents an ideal toward which we ought to be striving, regardless of how challenging it may be.

In order to help us practitioners each school devised “spiritual” exercises aimed at ethical self-improvement. I will devote a separate post to exploring this notion in some detail, but the two major kinds of exercises are concerned with self-control and meditation.

Self-control is about paying attention to oneself, learning to better handle anger, speech, love of wealth, and all the other “externals.” The goal is to develop a stable and good character. Socrates, in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* (IV.5) argues that self-control is the key to all the other virtues.

Meditation, by contrast, is about exercising reason. It’s very different from its Buddhist counterpart and it consists in reflecting on and assimilating the rules of conduct according to each school. The goal, ultimately, is to change one’s entire view of life and what it is about.

The philosophical practitioner makes progress by learning to keep a series of basic precepts always “at hand”

for use in whatever situation presents itself. The entire *Enchiridion* by Epictetus is a collection of such handy recommendations.

This practice and progress, Hadot reminds us, emphasizes two practical objectives: living in the present, the only time where our agency is effective; and preparing oneself for death, so that one can live and enjoy life in full consciousness, mindful that such life is finite and that we don't really know when it will end.

In order to train in one of the Greco-Roman schools theory was obviously necessary, but certainly not as an end in itself (as it is, unfortunately, the case in much contemporary academic philosophy). Theory is valuable only if it aids practice, as Epictetus forcefully reminds his students in his inimitably sarcastic style:

“I want to know what Chrysippus has to say in his treatise about the Liar.’ Why don’t you go off and hang yourself, you wretch, if that is really what you want? And what good will it do you to know it? You’ll read the whole book from one end to the other while grieving all the while, and you’ll be trembling when you expound it to others. And the rest of you behave like that too. ‘Would you like me to read something out, brother, and you can do so for me in turn?’—‘My friend, you write astoundingly well.’—‘And so do you, splendidly, quite in the style of Xenophon.’—‘And you in the style of Plato.’—‘And you in the style of Antisthenes.’ And then, when you’ve recounted your dreams to one another, you fall back into the same old

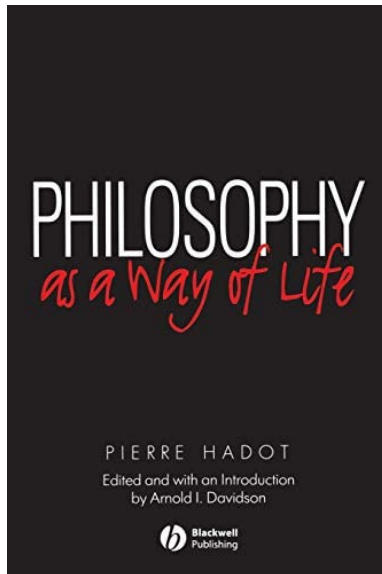
faults; you have the same desires as before, the same aversions, the same motives, plans, and intentions, you ask for the same things in your prayers, and have the same [misguided] preoccupations." (Discourses, II.17.34-36)

Ouch. A friend of mine once suggested that Epictetus must have sounded like Rocky Balboa's trainer, dispensing tough love to his students in Nicopolis. Just like an athlete picks a trainer and sticks with the choice, the first step to adopt philosophy as a way of life in ancient Greece and Rome was to choose a school (and a teacher) and try to stick to its principles in one's everyday life. Stoicism and Epictetus; or Peripateticism and Aristotle. But not both.

Nowadays, however, there aren't many opportunities to walk into an equivalent of Epicurus's Garden, or to stop by the local Stoa and listen to Zeno. Instead, we read the ancient texts and try our best to interpret them in a way that makes sense to modern audiences. One reason this may be challenging, at least initially, is because those texts were written in a manner that was still very much influenced by the oral traditions that preceded them. Don't forget that several philosophers, including Socrates and Epictetus, didn't write anything at all. As Hadot puts it:

"Quite often the work proceeds by the associations of ideas, without systematic rigor. The work retains the starts and stops, the hesitations, and the repetitions of spoken discourse." (p. 62)

When it came to teaching philosophy, the written word was chiefly seen as an aid to memory. The real work was done during conversations between teachers and students, as we can glimpse from the Socratic dialogues by both Plato and Xenophon, as well as by the Discourses of Epictetus, a collection of interactions of the master with his students put together by Arrian of Nicomedia. Indeed, often the texts were meant to accompany the teacher's lessons, as in pretty much everything that survived by Aristotle. That's why we can't read these works as if they were aimed at a general public, modern or not. And that is why the work of modern translators and commentators is so important in order to get the rest of us to appreciate Greco-Roman thought.



If you frequented one of the ancient schools, a major exercise for you and your fellow students would be to discuss a given theme either dialectically (i.e., in the form of questions and answers) or rhetorically (i.e., as a continuous exposition). The theme was often posed as a question to get the student started: Is death an evil? Does the wise person ever get angry? You can read this way Cicero, Plutarch, Seneca, and Plotinus, that is, the vast majority of the surviving ancient sources.

Another exercise for a student may be to read and engage in the exegesis of a given authoritative text, pretty much what I'm doing here with Hadot himself. After all, in order to explain it to others, you have to first understand it well yourself! This is why we have a large number of commentaries on Plato, Aristotle, and so forth surviving from antiquity.

Whatever the form, writings from the ancient schools always have the aim not just to expound on a particular topic, but to help readers along their spiritual journey, as Hadot explicitly reminds us:

"One must always approach a philosophical work of antiquity with this idea of spiritual progress in mind." (p. 64)

Ultimately, according to the traditions we are discussing, we only need ourselves (not externals) to find happiness, here and now, no need to worry about either the past or the future—both of which are outside of our control anyway. The corollary is that if you can't be happy

now, you'll never be happy. Happiness, in a very important sense, is an inside job. Accordingly, Hadot concludes his analysis of how the ancient schools were run with the following observation:

“The concern with individual destiny and spiritual progress, the intransigent assertion of moral requirements, the call for meditation, the invitation to seek this inner peace that all the schools, even those of the skeptics, propose as the aim of philosophy, the feeling for the seriousness and grandeur of existence, this seems to me to be what has never been surpassed in ancient philosophy and what always remains alive.” (p. 69)

And those are precisely the reasons we still very much engage the Greco-Romans and keep learning from them.

II—Spiritual exercises

A crucial part of my practice as a Stoic-Skeptic is a set of spiritual exercises, without which I would simply be doing armchair philosophy. The notion of a “spiritual” exercise may be a bit off putting, as it is associated with Christianity or with fuzzy sounding new age mysticism. But Pierre Hadot, in his *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, argues that there really isn’t any better term to capture what is meant, so we’ll stick with that.

The term comes from Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, who wrote *Exercitia Spiritualia* in 1548. The approach, however, much predates not just Loyola, but Christianity itself. Exercises of this kind contribute to what Hadot’s refers to as “the therapeutic of the passions,” which is a crucial component of Greco-Roman philosophical training. According to the ancients, the passions—meaning unhealthy emotions, like anger and fear, but also lust—are the main source of our suffering. Hadot refers to them as “unregulated desires and exaggerated fears.” They get in the way of a serene life founded on reason, which is why we need to train ourselves to handle them appropriately.

The Greek word for the resulting practices is *askesis*, from which the English word *asceticism* comes, though the

Greek meaning was broader than the modern one, applying to a general approach to train oneself to live a more meaningful life. As Hadot puts it:

"[Philosophy] raises the individual from an inauthentic condition of life, darkened by unconsciousness and harassed by worry, to an authentic state of life, in which he attains self-consciousness, an exact vision of the world, inner peace, and freedom." (p. 83)



Image from jesuits.org

As much as we talk with some confidence about ancient spiritual exercises (the pertinent literature in modern Stoicism is now considerable!) we don't really have any systematic treatise from antiquity on such exercises. The closest we come are two lists by the Platonist Philo of

Alexandria (20 BCE-50 CE). The lists are found in *Who is the Heir of Divine Things* (section 253) and in *Allegorical Interpretations* (section 3.18). The items are partially overlapping, and Hadot conveniently groups them into three categories:

Meditations: comprising philosophical journaling (including but not limited to the *premeditatio malorum*, or premeditation on adversity); attention and the fundamental rule of life; gratitude exercises.

Active exercises: self-mastery; therapy of the passions; accomplishment of duties.

Intellectual exercises: listening, reading, and inquiring.

Let's take a closer look. Philosophical journaling consists of writing down, on a daily basis, if possible, our analyses of our own ethically salient actions. The objective is to learn from our mistakes as well as from what we have done well, and the trick is to use objective, not emotional language. Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*, written in the second person in order to help putting some emotional distance between the agent and his own actions, are a splendid example.

The *fundamental rule* of life comes from Epictetus, and it is often unfortunately referred to as the dichotomy of control. (Unfortunately because the word "control" is highly misleading in this context.) The idea is that some things are up to us, meaning that we are ultimately responsible for

them, and some are not. And that a good life is the result of focusing on the first group, where our agency is maximized, while developing an attitude of acceptance and equanimity toward the second group. If my flight is cancelled, that is not up to me. What is up to me is to act reasonably while looking for a plan B (e.g., don't yell at the customer agent, who is not at fault either!), and then spending whatever idle time I'll have to endure doing something good, like reading a book.

Book I of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* is a model of *exercises in gratitude*. We all have something and someone to be thankful for in life, and it is therapeutic—also according to modern science—from time to time to pause and explicitly acknowledge it to ourselves.

Self-mastery has to do with any practice of the cardinal virtue of temperance, which Socrates thought was essential to the virtuous life. For instance, pay attention to what and how much you eat and drink, every day, as suggested by the Stoic teacher Musonius Rufus in his *Lectures*.

To engage in a *therapy of the passions* means to remind ourselves that “externals,” like health, wealth, reputation, and so forth, are of secondary importance in life, compared to our character and judgment. As modern cognitive behavioral therapists would say, let us not “catastrophize” every setback and instead focus on what, if anything, we can do about it. Did you just lose your job? Not the end of the world, give yourself a break and then start looking for another one.

Accomplishment of duties is a major exercise which reminds us that we have duties toward other human beings, beginning of course with our family and friends, but extending to all of humanity. Even a simply phone call or text message to check in with someone will be appreciated. So do it.

Listening means to engage, whenever possible, in Socratic conversations with other people. These days, you may be tempted to carry out this exercise using social media. Don't. Instead, reconnect with people in person. It's much more human.

Reading specifically refers to primary texts by ancient authors like Plato, Cicero, Seneca, Epictetus, Plutarch, and so forth. You don't need to do a lot of this, just a few paragraphs a day will do. The goal is to remind yourself why Greco-Roman philosophy is still so relevant to us denizens of the 21st century. Think of it as the philosophical equivalent of a religious person reading Scriptures.

Inquiring can be done in a variety of ways, but for most of us it is a second exercise in reading, this time aimed at modern literature in science and philosophy. The goal is to keep learning about the world and how it works, which in turn will give us a better idea of our place in that world.

Although Hadot himself does not do so, I link the three groups with the three disciplines of Epictetus, respectively: desire and aversion; action; and assent. After all, meditations are meant to help us re-orient our values and priorities (desires and aversions); active exercises are about

how to act in the world; and listening, reading, and inquiring have to do with refining our knowledge of the world and of our abilities to reason about it, thus leading to better judgments (assent) on our part.



Young Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Company of Jesus, Wikimedia

Overall, these exercises, especially the meditative ones, are attempts at taking control of our inner discourse, so that we are more consciously aware of our choices and can

guide ourselves to act accordingly. They are also meant to create and reinforce habits, because that is how we can mindfully become more virtuous, as both Plato and Aristotle have argued.

There are a number of specific books from the Greco-Roman literature that expand on these practices, including but not limited to: Seneca's *On Anger*, *On Benefits*, *On Leisure*, and *On Peace of Mind*; as well as Plutarch's *On Brotherly Love*, *On Envy and Hatred*, *On False Shame*, *On Garrulity*, *On the Love of Children*, *On the Love of Wealth*, *On Peace of Mind*, and *On Restraining Anger*.

While nowadays we associate spiritual exercises with Stoicism, the Epicureans adopted the same idea. As the founder of the school put it: "We must concern ourselves with the healing of our own lives." (Epicurus, *Gnomologium Vaticanum*, §64. See also *Letter to Menoecus*, §122) The Epicureans, like the Stoics, recommended frequent meditation, for instance on their famous four-fold cure, the *Tetrapharmakos*:

"God presents no fears, death no worries. And while good is readily attainable, evil is readily endurable."
(Philodemus, *Adversus sophistas*, 4.10-14)

Hadot, however, contrasts the way Stoics and Epicureans carried out the spiritual exercise of trying to live in the current moment. For the Stoics it meant constant attention to the moral dimension of everything we do; for the Epicureans it translated into an invitation to relaxation

to achieve serenity, as in the famous “Carpe diem” by Horace:

“Life ebbs as I speak / so seize each day, and grant the next no credit.” (Odes, 1.11.7)

I mentioned above the famous Socratic dialogue. It was meant as a form of communal spiritual exercise, as Socrates himself explains:

“I did not care for the things that most people care about—making money, having a comfortable home, high military or civil rank, and all the other activities, political appointments, secret societies, party organizations, which go on in our city. ... I set myself to do you—each one of you, individually and in private—what I hold to be the greatest possible service. I tried to persuade each one of you to concern himself less with what he has than with what he is, so as to render himself as excellent and as rational as possible.” (Plato, Apology, 36b4-c6)

Similarly, the famous Delphic injunction, know thyself, which Socrates takes too heart and attempt to teach to his friends, means to know that we are not sages, and yet that we strive to become wise, which is possible through the constant and honest examination of our conscience.

Meditation can be understood as another form of “dialogue,” this time with oneself. It was widely practiced by Socrates’ disciples. Hadot tells us that when Antisthenes

was asked what profit he had derived from philosophy, his response was: "The ability to converse with myself."
(Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, 6.6)

The point of the sort of practices we are talking about was not to set down doctrines to memorize and blindly follow, but rather to nudge the student toward developing a mental attitude of self- and cross-examination. This is philosophy, after all, not religion! Accordingly, notice the use of dialectic, that is, the art of persuasion. We need to convince ourselves—first and foremost—of what we are doing, so that we do it willingly and effectively. Talking to others, however, does not have the direct aim of convincing them that we are right, but rather of stimulating in them the same sort of self-reflection in which we willingly engage. The caveat lies in Hadot's remarks:

"Dialogue is only possible if the interlocutor has a real desire to dialogue: that is, if he truly wants to discover the truth, desires the Good from the depths of his soul, and agrees to submit to the rational demands of the Logos." (p. 93)

There is another, major goal behind spiritual exercises. According to the Greco-Romans, philosophy prepares us for what Seneca called the ultimate test of character: our own death. In this respect, Hadot reminds us of what Socrates says to one of his friends just before taking the hemlock:

“It is a fact, Simmias, that those who go about philosophizing correctly are in training for death, and that to them of all men death is least alarming.” (Plato, Phaedo, 67e)

We find similar sentiments in Seneca, Epicurus, and all the way to Montaigne and beyond. One way to engage in this training is summarized by Horace:

“Believe that each day that has dawned will be your last; then you will receive each unexpected hour with gratitude.” (Letter 1.4.13-14)

Three interrelated key concepts are pertinent to training for death:

(i) Adopting of a universal view of things; (ii) Reflecting on the cosmic insignificance of human affairs; (ii) Regarding death as natural and unproblematic.

Physics, in the broad sense of science, then becomes a contemplative activity, good for the soul because it helps us to put things in perspective. This can take the form of an imaginative exercise of flying over the world, looking at it from a distance, the famous “view from above” that we repeatedly find in Marcus Aurelius (e.g., Meditations XII.24). Hadot says:

“[There] is a parallelism between physical and spiritual exercises: just as, by dint of repeated physical exercises, athletes give new form and strength to their bodies, so the philosopher develops his strength of soul, modifies his inner climate, transforms his vision of the world, and, finally, his entire being.” (p. 102)

It is no coincidence that philosophy was taught in the gymnasium, the same place where people carried out physical exercises. Imagine if we could conceive a modern gym in the same way: *mens sana in corpore sano* indeed! (If you happen to have the capital to give the idea a try, drop me a note...)

Given all the above, it is fair to say that the ultimate goal of spiritual exercises is a search for authenticity, if you will, with the goal to liberate our true self. This being our moral self, open to a universal perspective, participating in universal nature. And the way to achieve this is to practice philosophy, the love of wisdom. Constantly, every day.

Spiritual exercises of the kind we have been discussing imply the rejection of common values, such as the importance of wealth, reputation, and pleasures, in favor of virtue, contemplation, and a minimalist life style. No wonder philosophers have always been considered to be on this side of weird! Hadot goes so far as to state:

“It is impossible to understand the philosophical theories of antiquity without taking into account this

concrete perspective, since this is what gives them their true meaning.” (p. 104)

How is it, then, that much modern philosophy has become a (more or less sterile) exercise in hair-splitting, almost entirely devoid of practical utility? Hadot blames the Christians. From its beginnings, Christianity presented itself as a philosophy, steeped as it soon came to be into Greco-Roman culture. However, after Christianity had taken over the Roman Empire, and after antiquity had given way to the Middle Ages, the advent of Scholasticism brought about a distinction between theology and philosophy.

Philosophy was reduced to the status of “handmaid” to theology, providing the latter with conceptual, and therefore purely theoretical material. According to Hadot, when philosophy regained independence at the dawn of the modern age, it did not shake this heavily theoretical bent, not until the well known exceptions provided by Nietzsche and the existentialists, among others. And, I would add, by modern Stoics. Epictetus was openly scornful of philosophy conceived as a purely theoretical exercise:

“Come and listen to me read my commentaries. ... I will explain Chrysippus to you like no one else can, and I’ll provide a complete analysis of his entire text. ... If necessary, I can even add the views of Antipater and Archedemos.’ ... So it’s for this, is it, that young men are to leave their fatherlands and their own parents: to come and

listen to you explain words? Trifling little words?"
(Discourses, III.21.7-8)

Let us then go back to philosophy as a way of life, a search for our authentic selves, and a preparation for our own inevitable demise. Philosophy is love of wisdom, not love of trifling words.

III-Socrates and the finest state of the human soul

I'm going to bet that it is going to be hard to find anyone who has never heard of Socrates. Even in this world of social media and alternative realities the name of Socrates is essentially synonymous with philosophy. Which doesn't mean one necessarily knows anything about the sage of Athens, or about philosophy. (Which is fair enough. I can name Taylor Swift, for instance, but not a single one of her songs...)

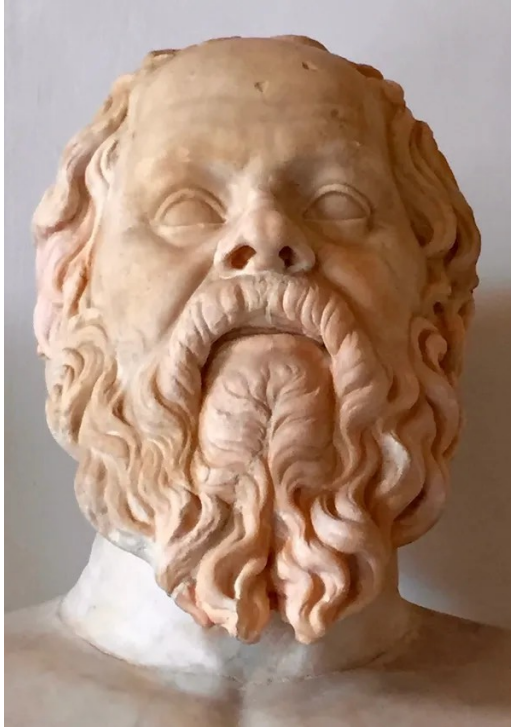
Pierre Hadot, in his influential *Philosophy as a Way of Life* is interested in Socrates, not necessarily the historical person, about which it is hard to say much anyway, but the philosophical figure, which has become a symbol for philosophy itself.

He begins with his (alleged) physical appearance. Socrates was ugly, by universal agreement of all the available sources: Plato, Xenophon, and Aristophanes. As Nietzsche put it: "Everything in him is exaggerated, buffo, a caricature." (*Twilight of the Idols. The Problem of Socrates*, 3-4) Hadot writes:

"Alcibiades, in his famous speech in praise of Socrates at the end of the Symposium, compares Socrates to the

little statues of Sileni [a kind of ugly satyr] that could be found in sculptors' shops, which concealed little figurines of the gods inside themselves. Similarly, Socrates' exterior appearance—ugly, buffoon-like, impudent, almost monstrous—was only a mask and a facade.” (p. 148)

And it wasn't just his physical appearance. Socrates often behaved like a buffoon, pretending to be naive and not too bright. In Plato's *Symposium*, Alcibiades says: “He spends his whole life playing the part of a simpleton and a child.” (216e)



Socrates, Capitoline Museum, Rome, photo by the Author

Like children do, Socrates famously went around asking questions to people. But unlike those of a child, his questions were only superficially simple. The goal was not to obtain knowledge, but rather to trigger *aporia*, or confusion, in his interlocutors, so that people started doubting whether they really knew what they were talking about (usually, they didn't). If they got to the point of admitting their ignorance that was their first step toward wisdom. Know thyself, was the injunction of the Oracle at Delphi, and the starting point of self-knowledge is awareness of our own limitations.

After Socrates died, a whole literary genre arose, known as *logoi sokratikoi*, where the authors imitated the Socratic style and method. In these dialogues, Socrates himself appeared as a *prosopon*, a character, or mask. But one can argue that Socrates was already a character in Plato's own dialogues, which is why it is so difficult to distinguish Plato's philosophy from that of his teacher, an issue that scholars have labeled the Socratic problem.

Be that as it may, from a pedagogical perspective Socrates understood that one is not very effective by directly telling people the truth. In a sense, they have to be deceived into arriving at the truth themselves. Not through one-sided lectures, but through what we today call the Socratic method. That's why Socrates presented himself as a philosophical midwife:

"I am like the midwife, in that I cannot myself give birth to wisdom." (Plato, *Theaetetus*, 148e)



Alcibiades Being Taught by Socrates (1776) by François-André Vincent (Musée Fabre), Wikimedia

But that famous image is itself deceptive. While Socrates goes on in the *Theaetetus* to say that he doesn't really have any wisdom, which is why he cannot transmit it to others, that's plain nonsense. Even a superficial examination of the Socratic dialogues shows that Socrates knows very well were he wants to nudge his interlocutors. But he has to pretend not to know anything, so that they lower their guard and willingly let the midwife do his job. Nietzsche again:

"An educator never says what he himself thinks, but always only what he thinks of a thing in relation to the

requirements of those he educates. He must not be detected in this dissimulation." (Posthumous Fragments, June-July 1885)

There is no doubt that Socrates' self-deprecation was feigned, and this was clear already in antiquity. Just ask Cicero:

"By disparaging himself, Socrates used to concede more than was necessary to the adversaries he wanted to refute. Thus, thinking one thing and saying another, he enjoyed using the kind of dissimulation which the Greeks call 'irony.'" (Lucullus, 15)

But why would a teacher engage in this sort of sustained deception of his students? Because teaching is not a process of filling up otherwise empty minds with the wisdom and knowledge of the teacher. It's about the student learning how to think. The Socratic approach makes it possible for the pupil to experience in the first person what the activity of the mind consists of, what we refer to as critical thinking. The goal, again, is not knowledge, but mindful doubt. It's about the process, not the result.

Interestingly, in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* there is a bit where the Sophist Hippias loses his patience with Socrates and says that he (Socrates) would do well to stop asking questions about justice and, once and for all, just tell us what justice is. To which Socrates responds: "If I don't

reveal my views on justice in words, I do so by my conduct.”
(Memorabilia, IV.4.10)



Nietzsche, Wikimedia

Socrates is very conscious of his chosen mission in life. He states it explicitly in Plato’s *Apology*:

“I care nothing for what most people care about: money-making, administration of property, generalships, success in public debates, magistracies, coalitions, and

political factions. ... I did not choose that path, but rather the one by which I could do the greatest good to each of you in particular: by trying to persuade each of you to concern himself less about what he has than about what he is, so that he may make himself as good and as reasonable as possible." (Apology, 36b)

I just love the notion of becoming concerned less with what we have and more with who we are. Again, "know thyself," not "own as much crap as possible."

According to Nietzsche (in *Posthumous Fragments*, April-June 1885) Socrates' "irony," that is, passing himself for a simpleton while he was nothing of the kind, was what gave him access to people from all walks of life. They opened up to him because he wasn't pretentious and did not appear intellectually threatening.

It must be noted that Socrates did not establish a philosophical school. He didn't build something like Plato's Academy, Aristotle's Lyceum, Epicurus' Garden, or Zeno's Stoa. Hadot comments (p. 157) that his philosophy was a spiritual exercise, an invitation to a whole way of life founded on active reflection and conscious living.

Famously, in the *Symposium*, Socrates and Alcibiades refer to what they are experiencing as *eros*, but the word has two very different meanings. One is the standard connotation of erotic love, which modern English has inherited; the other is love of beauty and wisdom. As a result of his love for Socrates, Alcibiades turns out to be in a wretched condition, as he says himself:

“I am the one who has been reduced to slavery, and I’m in the state of a man bitten by a viper. I’ve been bitten in the heart, or the mind, or whatever you like to call it, by Socrates’ philosophy. ... The moment I hear him speak I am smitten with a kind of sacred rage, ... and my heart jumps into my mouth and the tears start into my eyes. I’m not the only one, either; there’s Charmides, and Euthydemus, and ever so many more. He’s made fools of them all, just as if he were the beloved, not the lover.” (Symposium, 217-222)

Obviously, Alcibiades is in love with Socrates’ wisdom, not his physical appearance—since he’s very ugly. Nevertheless, Alcibiades confuses the two meanings of eros and concocts a scheme to have sex with Socrates by spending the night on the same couch. But Socrates behaves like a brother to Alcibiades, not allowing himself to be lured by the youth’s stunning physical beauty. Stunningly, the attraction Alcibiades, Charmides, Euthydemus and others had for Socrates spanned the centuries. In 1772 Goethe wrote in a letter to a friend: “If only I could be Alcibiades for one day and one night, and then die!”

It is hard to find a better way to end this essay, and at the same time express my hope for the future of philosophy, than by transcribing what Nietzsche wrote about Socrates in *Human, All Too Human*:

“If all goes well, the time will come when one will take up the *Memorabilia* of Socrates rather than the Bible as a

guide to morals and reason. ... The pathways of the most various philosophical modes of life lead back to him. ... Socrates excels the founder of Christianity in possessing a joyful kind of seriousness and that wisdom full of roguishness that constitutes the finest state of the human soul." (§86, vol. 2, pp. 591-2)

Amen.

IV-Only the present is our happiness

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe once wrote a letter to his long-time correspondent, the composer Carl Friedrich Zelter, to lament our inability to live in the present moment, to grasp its essential healthiness. The Greco-Romans, says Goethe, understood that the present is pregnant with meaning, and to them it was sufficient in itself. By contrast, Goethe continues, for us moderns the ideal is the future, while we consider the present to be banal.

“Then the spirit looks neither ahead nor behind. Only the present is our happiness.” (Second Faust)

Pierre Hadot—in his *Philosophy as a Way of Life*—reminds us of Goethe’s analysis, adding that the ancients articulated the concept of *kairos*, the favorable or decisive instant. To be able to grasp the *kairos* is the key to our accomplishments. For instance, a good general strikes when the *kairos* is right; a good artist fixes in marble or on canvas the best *kairos* of whatever scene she is working on; and so forth.

But Hadot also warns against idealizing the Greco-Romans, thinking that they somehow managed to live a life

of bliss and lack of stress. On the contrary, they were just as burdened by the past and preoccupied for the future as we are. And that's exactly what prompted the evolution of life philosophies like Stoicism and Epicureanism. In fact, to "convert" to a philosophical way of life means, to a great extent, to develop a renewed appreciation for the healthiness of the moment as a way to achieve serenity.

Both Epicureanism and Stoicism—otherwise so different from each other—insist on the crucial importance of the present and teach us not to worry about either the past or the future. One way they do that is by reminding us of the cosmic perspective, compared to which the span of a human existence is negligible. Adopting the view from above, there is no meaningful difference between the various moments of our lives. But our agency is effective only in the present. We can't change the past, and we can't control the future.

Hadot tackles first Epicureanism, reminding us that it is a philosophy conceived of as a therapy of anguish, whose goal is ataraxia, or peace of mind. The Epicureans train themselves not to worry about the gods, who are unconcerned about human affairs; or about death, since whenever she is we are not; or about satisfying desires that are unnatural and outsized, and which therefore are a cause of constant stress; or, finally, about being overly concerned with virtue, since we are imperfect beings bound to fail.

“According to Epicureanism, senseless people—that is, the majority of mankind—are tormented by vast, hollow desires which have to do with wealth, glory, power, and the unbridled pleasures of the flesh. What is characteristic of all these desires is that they cannot be satisfied in the present.” (p. 223)



Horace—he of “carpe diem”—portrayed by Giacomo Di Chirico, Wikimedia

The Epicurean solution is to reconceive pleasure so that it doesn't depend on quantity or duration. The focus is,

rather, on natural pleasures that are satisfied easily in the moment: quenching one's thirst, taking care of one's hunger, appreciating one's friends.

"While we are talking, jealous time has fled. So seize the day [carpe diem], and put no trust in tomorrow." (Horace, Odes, I.11.7)

This famous verse by Horace is often misinterpreted as being about instant gratification of sensual pleasures, just like Epicureanism itself is often misunderstood to be the sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll of ancient philosophy. But in fact, carpe diem is an invitation to philosophical conversion, to become aware of the vanity of desires that cannot easily be fulfilled, of our mortality, of the uniqueness and brevity of our lives. Hence the focus on the supreme importance of the current instant, for which we ought to be grateful.

The Stoic approach, while in certain respects definitely distinct from the Epicurean, amounts to a similar emphasis on the present. We are encouraged to pay attention to the here and now, *hic et nunc* as the Romans put it. We need to be constantly vigilant, focused on the current moment so that we don't miss what's going on in our own life. This attitude is nicely summarized by Marcus Aurelius:

"Here is what is enough for you:

1. The judgment you are bringing to bear at this moment upon reality, as long as it is objective;

2. The action you are carrying out at this moment, as long as it is accomplished in the service of the human community; and

3. The inner disposition in which you find yourself at this moment, as long as it is a disposition of joy in the face of the conjunction of events caused by extraneous causality.”
(Meditations, IX.6)



Marcus Aurelius, bust at the Diocletian Baths, Rome, photo by the Author

Marcus engages in a spiritual exercise that he calls “delimiting the present.” It is based on a dual Stoic treatment of time. According to Stoic physics, time is infinitely divisible, which means that, technically speaking,

the present does not exist, as it is defined as the limit between past and future. To this metaphysically abstract notion of time, however, the Stoics added another one that is human-centered and consciousness-dependent. In this second case, the present acquires what Hadot calls “a certain thickness,” delimited by the attention span of human consciousness. When Marcus says that we should delimit the present and stick to it, what he deploys is this second Stoic conception of time.

The exercise, then, consists in focusing on the present, leaving the past behind, entrusting the future to the cosmic web of cause-effect, and making sure that we are acting, right now, as a decent human being would. The rest will come or not, as the universe disposes of things. We find something similar also in Seneca:

“Two things must be cut short: the fear of the future and the memory of past discomfort; the one does not concern me any more, and the other does not concern me yet.”
(Letters to Lucilius, XVIII.14)

Hadot summarizes the attitude by saying that happiness is a matter of now or never. If we are not happy now, by focusing on what is up to us—that is, our character, virtue, and judgment—then we’ll never be happy, regardless of how many material possessions and how much fame (both not up to us) we might accumulate. Moreover, there is a sense of urgency, because death approaches, and we have no idea when it will come. As Epictetus puts it:

“Keep in mind that now is the contest, and here right now are the Olympic games, and that postponement is no longer an option, and that your progress is saved or ruined by a single day and a single action.” (Encheiridion, 51)

You want to be a good person? Just be one, without delay. What are you waiting for? What better moment might there be? How many moments do you know for certain you will have? Marcus Aurelius says repeatedly (Meditations, II.5.2, VII.69) that we should get into the habit of living our lives as if today were the last day. Because it could be. And because if it isn't, then we've used every moment of this day in the best way possible. Nothing focuses our attention as the awareness that time is running out.

This may actually sound stressful, but the Stoic constantly resituates herself within the cosmic perspective, putting her life, troubles, and accomplishments in the context of vast space and time. If she is truly able to do this, then her anxieties will disappear because she will be able to perceive things from the point of view of universal reason, which tells us that we simply have to do our best while we can and that nothing else is up to us. Rightly, I think, Hadot says:

“One could speak here of a mystical dimension of Stoicism. At each moment and every instant, we must say 'yes' to the universe; that is, to the will of universal reason.

We must want that which universal reason wants: that is, the present instant, exactly as it is." (p. 230)

This congruence of Epicureanism and Stoicism when it comes to living life in the moment is remarkable. The difference between the two schools here is one of attitude: the Epicurean's goal is to enjoy the present moment, while the Stoic's goal is to align her will with that moment. Pleasure vs duty, if you wish. Is it possible to combine the two? Hadot claims that such a hybrid was exactly what Goethe practiced, enjoying the present moment like an Epicurean, willing it intensely like a Stoic.

It is important to note, however, that living in the moment does not mean ignoring either past or future. The idea is not to let our thoughts be dominated by regret for the past or anxiety for the future. We still wish to learn from our past experiences and plan for our future. But the best way to do the former is to use the present as context (what, about my past, is pertinent to me, now?), and the best way to do the latter is to exercise good judgment now.

This is what Socrates meant when he said that we ought to take good care of ourselves. And this is what our consumerist society gets in the way of doing, with its constant distractions and artificial worries about both past and especially the future. Let us instead go back to the true meaning of *carpe diem*, to the essential healthiness of the present moment.



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