

# What is Philosophy as a Way of Life?

[forthcoming in *Parrhesia*]

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ABSTRACT: What is philosophy as a way of life? Is it a distinctive approach to philosophy? Is it closely aligned with continental philosophy? Does it offer a third way, distinct from both analytic and continental philosophy? Is all philosophy potentially life-changing? Do we lose something important if we conceive philosophy as a practical therapeutic exercise? I shall attempt to address all these questions, drawing on Lucretius for my final response.

## I. Introducing Philosophy as a Way of Life

In recent years there has been a gradual development of interest in the idea that philosophy might be conceived as a guide to life. The phrase ‘Philosophy as a Way of Life’ is closely associated with the French philosopher and scholar of ancient philosophy Pierre Hadot, whose work gained prominence in the English-speaking world in 1995 with the publication of a book called *Philosophy as a Way of Life*.<sup>1</sup> In the chapter from which the volume gets its title Hadot claims that in antiquity “philosophy was a *way of life*,” a “mode of existing-in-the-world, which had to be practiced at each instant, and the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual’s life.”<sup>2</sup> Philosophy was conceived as a

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), based upon, although not straightforwardly translating, Hadot’s *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1981; 2nd edn 1987; new edn Albin Michel, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 265. The essay, “La philosophie comme manière de vivre,” was first published in the *Annuaire du Collège de France* (1984-85), 477-87, and reprinted in the second edition of *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*.

love of wisdom, and wisdom, Hadot says, “does not merely cause us to know: it makes us ‘be’ in a different way.”<sup>3</sup>

Hadot goes on to illustrate the ways in which a wide range of ancient philosophers presented the task of philosophy as something therapeutic, something aimed at overcoming mental disturbances so that the practitioner can attain some kind of inner tranquillity. Hadot contrasts this with philosophy as it is usually practised today: “Ancient philosophy proposed to mankind an art of living. By contrast, modern philosophy appears above all as the construction of a technical jargon reserved for specialists.”<sup>4</sup> Having said that, Hadot also refers to a number of post-antique philosophers whom he thinks still hold on to this ancient conception of philosophy. He suggests that both Descartes and Spinoza held on to this way of thinking about philosophy, as did Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and Hadot thinks that it is no coincidence that none of these thinkers held university positions.<sup>5</sup> The important point in the present context is that this is not only how philosophy was once conceived long ago, but also a live metaphilosophical option that has been taken up by philosophers throughout the history of philosophy and can still be taken up today.

Can we flesh this notion out further? I take it to involve the following things: first, that the ultimate motivation of philosophy is to transform one’s way of life; second, that there ought to be some connection and consistency between someone’s stated philosophical ideas and their behaviour; and third that actions are ultimately more philosophically significant than words. It is often conceived

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 272.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 271-2.

as something therapeutic, but it need not be. It usually aims at a good life, but again this may not be necessarily so. It is transformative, though perhaps one ought not to assume that this will always be for the better. It resonates with what Isaiah Berlin called “the power of ideas,” that is, the ability of philosophy to transform the life of an individual, or even an entire society.<sup>6</sup> As he put it, the concepts and categories with which people think “must deeply affect their lives.”<sup>7</sup> One of the best definitions of Philosophy as a Way of Life, however, can be found in Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Schopenhauer as Educator*:

I attach importance to a philosopher only to the extent that he is capable of setting an example. ... The philosopher must supply this example in his visible life, and not merely in his books; that is, it must be presented in the way the philosophers of Greece taught, through facial expressions, demeanor, clothing, food, and custom more than through what they said, let alone what they wrote.<sup>8</sup>

Or, as he put it a little later on in the same work, “the only possible criticism of any philosophy, and the only one that proves anything, is trying to see if one can live by this philosophy.”<sup>9</sup> Or again, from his notebooks, “the product of the philosopher is his *life* (first, before his *works*). That is his work of art.”<sup>10</sup> This

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<sup>6</sup> See Isaiah Berlin, “The Purpose of Philosophy,” in his *Concepts and Categories* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1978), 1-11.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 10.

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer als Erzieher* § 3 (*Kritische Studienausgabe* [hereafter *KSA*], ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: De Gruyter / Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch, 1999), 1: 350,23-31; *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche 2: Unfashionable Observations*, trans. Richard T. Gray (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 183-84).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* § 8 (*KSA* 1: 417,26-8; *Complete Works* 2, 246).

<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche, *Nachlass* 29[205] (*KSA* 7: 712).

Nietzschean image was taken up by Michel Foucault when he wrote, “couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?”<sup>11</sup> It is this way of thinking about philosophy that we find articulated by Hadot, Nietzsche, and Foucault, that I want to examine further in what follows.

## II. Two Competing Images of Philosophy: Scientific versus Humanistic

I want to begin by drawing a distinction between what appear to be two quite different ways of thinking about philosophy. I shall call these ‘the scientific conception of philosophy’ and ‘the humanistic conception of philosophy’. Neither of those labels is ideal, but I hope they will do for present purposes. I think the contrast can be seen clearly if we compare the metaphilosophy of Socrates and Aristotle.<sup>12</sup> In drawing a distinction between them, I differ from Hadot, who, as we shall see, tried to present both Socrates and Aristotle as adherents of Philosophy as a Way of Life.

First, Socrates.<sup>13</sup> In the *Apology*, Plato has Socrates say that his principal concern is a desire live a philosophical life. This is implicit throughout the text but there are a few passages that stand out. The first of these is when Socrates tries to describe his philosophical mission. He presents it as a duty to *live* as a

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<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 1991), 340-72, at 350.

<sup>12</sup> On the claim that Socrates and Aristotle differ in their conceptions of philosophy see John Sellars, *The Art of Living: The Stoics on the Nature and Function of Philosophy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 33-6, and, more recently, John M. Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 70.

<sup>13</sup> I have discussed Socrates’ conception of philosophy at greater length in John Sellars, ‘Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*, A Metaphilosophical Text’, *Philosophy and Literature* 38 (2014), 433-45.

philosopher, examining himself and others.<sup>14</sup> Later, in response to his accusers who have condemned him to death, he says, “you have brought about my death in the belief that through it you will be delivered from submitting the conduct of your *lives* to criticism.”<sup>15</sup> This idea that the task at hand is to examine lives is repeated in another passage where he says that the best thing anyone can do is to examine themselves and others, adding – famously – that a *life* without this sort of examination is not worth living.<sup>16</sup> For Socrates, then, philosophy is an activity directed at trying to figure out how to live well, subjecting our current way of life to examination. This of course leads to a desire to *know* various things and attempts to define various things, not least what is and is not good, but the motivation, even if it remains implicit, is clear: Socrates wants to find out how to live well – and not just for the sake of knowing how to live well, but because above all else he actually wants to live well, to enjoy a good life, whatever that might turn out to be. This remains the motivation throughout the early Socratic dialogues. In the *Gorgias*, for instance, Socrates insists on the seriousness of their discussion by reminding his interlocutors that it is about “what course of life is best.”<sup>17</sup>

If we turn to Aristotle – or at least the Aristotle of the *Metaphysics* – we find a quite different image of philosophy. He presents the task of the philosopher as one of uncovering principles and causes. He defines wisdom as knowing the

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<sup>14</sup> Plato, *Apology* 28e (*philosophounta me dein zên*).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 39c (*elenchon tou biou*).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 38a (*ho de anexetastos bios ou biôtos anthrôpôi*).

<sup>17</sup> Plato, *Gorgias* 500c (*hontina chrê tropon zên*). One might argue that this concern with the best form of life, even when practically motivated, is directed towards the lives of other people rather than the life of Socrates himself. This is certainly possible. But as we saw earlier in the *Apology*, there Socrates says that he wants to examine the lives of both himself *and* others.

causes of things.<sup>18</sup> He then defines philosophy as “knowledge of the truth,” adding that the “end of theoretical knowledge is truth, and not action.”<sup>19</sup> He acknowledges that there is also practical knowledge that *is* concerned with action, but here he identifies philosophy with theoretical knowledge and prioritizes theoretical knowledge over practical knowledge because it deals with things that are unchanging.<sup>20</sup> The paradigmatic example of a philosopher that Aristotle has in mind here is not Socrates but instead Thales – the man who fell down a well because he was so engrossed in studying the stars that he failed to look where he was going, and also the man who could have made a fortune speculating on grain harvests using his ability to predict heavenly movements but chose not to<sup>21</sup> – in short, a man far more concerned with trying to understand how the physical world works than he was in learning how to live well within it. It is true that at a number of points in the *Metaphysics* Aristotle says that philosophy is a wide-ranging subject that embraces theoretical, practical, and productive questions; however, he also insists that the “first philosophy” that he is examining there is the most important part of philosophy because it deals with what is unchanging, namely the first principles that underpin Nature.<sup>22</sup> For Aristotle, then, the motivation is not to learn how to live well but rather to understand the way the world works.

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<sup>18</sup> See Aristotle, *Metaph.* 1.1, 981a30-b6; note also 982a1-3.

<sup>19</sup> See *Metaph.* 2.1, 993b19-21: *orthôs d' echei kai to kaleisthai tèn philosophian epistêmên tês alêtheias. theôrêtikês men gar telos alêtheia praktikês d' ergon.*

<sup>20</sup> See *ibid.* 993b21-3.

<sup>21</sup> See Plato, *Theaetetus* 174a (DK 11A9) and Aristotle, *Pol.* 1259a5-18 (DK 11A10) respectively.

<sup>22</sup> Aristotle's division of knowledge into the practical, productive, and theoretical at *Metaph.* 1025b25 does not appear to prioritize one form of knowledge over any other. However, under the heading of “theoretical knowledge” (*theôrêtikê*) falls first philosophy or theology, which is accorded a priority over all other branches of enquiry because it deals with that which is unchanging. Knowledge of this sort forms the paradigm for Aristotle's conception of philosophy:

There seems to be a clear metaphilosophical contrast, then, between these two images of philosophy. Socrates and Aristotle are doing two quite different things, it seems. Hadot did his best to subsume Aristotle under the banner of Philosophy as a Way of Life by reminding us that the Aristotelian ideal of *theôria* is an activity that itself becomes a lived practice and so something that effectively becomes a way of life.<sup>23</sup> However Hadot does not deny that for Aristotle the highest form of theoretical knowledge is something that is chosen for itself.<sup>24</sup> It is true that the pursuit of theoretical knowledge might itself form a way of life, indeed the best way of life to which a human might aspire. However, the claim that this form of life is the *motivating* force for Aristotle seems less convincing. What matters to Aristotle most of all is understanding the way the world works; given that, naturally he will prefer a life devoted to the pursuit of that kind of understanding over a life devoted to the pursuit of anything else. That does not mean, though, that the question of how best to live was uppermost in his mind, in the way that it clearly was for Socrates.

One might think that if we want to understand what Aristotle thought about the best way to live we ought to be looking at the *Nicomachean Ethics* rather than

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he says further on that the theoretical sciences are superior to the other sciences, and that “first philosophy” (*prôtê philosophia*) is superior to the other theoretical sciences (*Metaph.* 1026a22-3).

<sup>23</sup> See Pierre Hadot, *Études de philosophie ancienne* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1998), 225. Note also *Pol.* 1325b16-21, cited by Hadot, where Aristotle presents contemplation as a practice, but also (significantly) describes it as an end in itself. Matthew Kapstein, in his book *Reason's Traces: Identity and Interpretation in Indian & Tibetan Buddhist Thought* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001), 9, notes the “apparently diminished place of Aristotle” in Hadot’s account of ancient philosophy but also suggests that, for Hadot, Aristotle’s *theôria* is very much a lived practice. I thank my anonymous reviewer for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>24</sup> See e.g. Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 77, a translation of *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).

the *Metaphysics*. In the opening book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle famously says that all human beings identify *eudaimonia* with living well.<sup>25</sup> However, later on when he prioritizes the ideal of the contemplative life over other forms of life he does so not based on its propensity to generate *eudaimonia* but rather on the superiority of its objects of knowledge, namely unchanging universals rather than changeable particulars.<sup>26</sup> The contemplative life is best not because it is identified with living well but because it devotes itself to the highest form of knowledge there is.

It seems, then, that we have a clear metaphilosophical division between Socrates and Aristotle. Both are committed to the pursuit of knowledge and both offer an image of an ideal life involving the pursuit of knowledge, but nevertheless there is a clear difference when we turn to their ultimate motivations. Socrates pursues knowledge *in order* to live a philosophical life, while Aristotle lives a philosophical life *in order* to pursue knowledge. This is a subtle but, I think, important difference. It is also the difference between what I earlier called the scientific and humanistic conceptions of philosophy. Aristotle's scientific image of philosophy is a disinterested pursuit of knowledge for its own sake; Socrates' humanistic image of philosophy is concerned with what it means to be human and how to live a good human life. The subsequent history of Western philosophy has seen both of these conceptions of philosophy

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<sup>25</sup> See Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* 1.4, 1095a17-22.

<sup>26</sup> In *Eth. Nic.* 6 Aristotle says there are different types of reasoning and that excellence in intellectual reasoning is to be preferred over excellence in practical reasoning, in part because it deals with unchanging universals rather than changeable particulars. That kind of knowledge is thought to be more valuable because of its wider applicability. This is effectively the argument behind the claim made later in *Eth. Nic.* 10 for the priority of *sophia* over *phronêsis*. However, as Matthew Sharpe has reminded me, in *Eth. Nic.* 10 (esp. 1177a22-5) Aristotle does say that one reason to prioritize a life devoted to contemplation is that it is the pleasantest of virtuous activities.



flourish at different times, sometimes in combination, and sometimes apart. We see the contrast very clearly in the Renaissance, for example, when Petrarch attacks the scholastic Aristotelians of his day because, unlike Socrates and Cicero, he thinks that they teach him nothing about how to live.<sup>27</sup>

Although I have not said it explicitly yet, it should be clear that I am provisionally identifying this Socratic, humanistic conception of philosophy with Philosophy as a Way of Life. By extension I am contrasting it with the Aristotelian, scientific conception of philosophy. Yet, as we shall see, such a distinction may turn out to be too simplistic.

### III. Philosophy as a Way of Life and Continental Philosophy

When faced with a contrast between a practical, engaged, existential image of philosophy on the one hand and a disinterested scientific one on the other, it is tempting to try to map this division onto the distinction between ‘continental’ and ‘analytic’ philosophy.<sup>28</sup> Whether we think of the contrast between continental Existentialism and Oxford linguistic philosophy in the 1950s and 60s or engaged Marxism and Quinean naturalism a little later on, it seems not unreasonable to suggest that continental philosophers are the heirs of Socrates while analytic philosophers are heirs to Aristotle. Indeed, some commentators on the so-called analytic-continental divide have presented the difference

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<sup>27</sup> See Petrarch, *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia* §§ 107-8 (text and translation in Francesco Petrarca, *Invectives*, ed and trans. David Marsh (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 314-15).

<sup>28</sup> I hesitate before using either of these labels. As Simon Glendenning (*The Idea of Continental Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006)) and Hans-Johann Glock (*What is Analytic Philosophy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)) have shown, neither term refers to a unified, coherent tradition.

between the two traditions in terms of their motivation: while analytic philosophers pursue knowledge (*epistêmê*), continental philosophers aspire to wisdom (*phronêsis*).<sup>29</sup>

There are certainly many examples of what I am calling Philosophy as a Way of Life among philosophers that usually get labelled ‘continental’. We might think of Nietzsche’s remarks in *Schopenhauer as Educator* that we saw earlier or the later work of Michel Foucault on care of the self. Hadot was an important influence on Foucault’s later interests in ancient philosophy and in his own work Hadot aligns a range of European thinkers with Philosophy as a Way of Life, including Goethe, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Merleau-Ponty.<sup>30</sup> Of course for Hadot, writing in Paris, none of these were ‘continental’ philosophers; they were just modern exponents of an ancient way of approaching philosophy.

#### IV. Philosophy as a Way of Life as a Third Way

Although there have been many continental philosophers who appear to embrace something akin to Philosophy as a Way of Life, there are no doubt others who do not. Of course it is difficult to make generalizations here given that the label ‘continental philosophy’ does not really refer to anything at all beyond those bits of recent Western philosophy that analytic philosophers tend to reject as not how they think philosophy ought to be done.<sup>31</sup> But even so, there

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<sup>29</sup> See e.g. Simon Critchley, *Continental Philosophy, A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1-11, who also acknowledges the limitations of putting it in these terms.

<sup>30</sup> See Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, *passim*.

<sup>31</sup> See Glendenning, *The Idea of Continental Philosophy*, esp. 12-13.

are many philosophers in the ‘continental tradition’ who seem to be engaged in something akin to Philosophy as a Way of Life, which should come as no surprise given that, as I have tried to show, the idea is expressed in texts that are foundational for the subject as a whole, namely Plato’s *Apology* and the early Socratic dialogues.

Even so, some have rejected the idea of any connection between the two. In particular, Michael Chase, who has translated the bulk of Hadot’s works into English, has recently presented Philosophy as a Way of Life as a third way of doing philosophy that is distinct from both analytic and continental approaches.<sup>32</sup> He offers an autobiographical account of his own first experiences with philosophy and describes his own undergraduate education in analytic philosophy. He was, he says, “introduced to reading some of the most boring material I have ever encountered,”<sup>33</sup> which unsurprisingly left him feeling dissatisfied. For Chase, who was interested in the big questions that had occupied much of the history of philosophy, his analytic professors seemed bent on dispensing with such questions altogether, to the point of advocating “the elimination of philosophy itself.”<sup>34</sup> No wonder that many of them seemed embarrassed to be philosophers at all and spent much of their professional lives wishing they were scientists.

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<sup>32</sup> See Michael Chase, “Observations on Pierre Hadot’s Conception of Philosophy as a Way of Life,” in Michael Chase, Stephen R. L. Clark, and Michael McGhee, eds, *Philosophy as a Way of Life, Ancients and Moderns: Essays in Honor of Pierre Hadot* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 262-86.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 269.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 272.

Like many philosophy students before and since who have found themselves uninspired by possible worlds or out-of-control trolleys, Chase decided to move to a different university for his graduate studies where he would be able to study continental philosophy, which he had been told was “the only other game in town.”<sup>35</sup> Although more congenial in many ways, Chase found continental philosophy’s own brand of jargon as off putting as the logical symbols he had just fled, especially in the secondary literature where “this jargon seemed to become an end in itself.”<sup>36</sup> Summing up his experiences of both analytic and continental philosophy, Chase writes:

I had had a taste of both Analytic and Continental philosophy, the two mutually exclusive branches of the discipline, and neither had satisfied me. Neither seemed able to speak to my thirst for the honest, jargon-free discussions of philosophical issues that genuinely mattered to my life.<sup>37</sup>

What he wanted was a third way and, to cut the story short, he found that in the work of Pierre Hadot, which he encountered after shifting direction to study Greek and Latin in order to work on Plato and Aristotle. Summing up, Chase says:

Hadot’s conception of Philosophy as a Way of Life, which does not fit neatly into the usual two-pronged division of philosophy into

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 273.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 274.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 275

Analytic and Continental, may provide indications of a third way as an alternative to them both.<sup>38</sup>

This is because i) it does not shun the traditional big philosophical questions; ii) it deals with issues relevant to people's lives; iii) it does not model itself on the natural sciences; and iv) it avoids being ironic or relativistic.<sup>39</sup> It is a way of thinking about philosophy today that is accessible to non-experts and connects with the wider history of philosophy stretching back to antiquity. It also, especially in the hands of Hadot, has a rigorous intellectual foundation in the philological study of Greek and Latin texts. As such, it is also quite different from most popular philosophical writing that aims to offer people guidance in their daily lives.

Whether Chases's images of analytic and continental philosophy are entirely fair is a question I shall put to one side. I do not doubt for a moment that both accounts accurately present his own experiences as a student. No doubt both traditions are far richer than the particular instances that Chase encountered at university. The important point in the present context is that Chase is proposing *three* distinct traditions of philosophy rather than just two. It is also worth noting that Chase's account does not neatly map onto the twofold division that I outlined earlier, even though there are some connections. Rather than draw a contrast between scientific and humanistic metaphilosophy, Chase's distinction is between two kinds of equally arid and irrelevant academic discourse (analytic

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 280.

<sup>39</sup> See *ibid.*

and continental) versus a venerable ancient tradition of life-changing wisdom (Philosophy as a Way of Life).

## V. Undercutting the Divisions

In a recent essay entitled “The Complications of Philosophy” Tom Stern also notes the contrast between modern impersonal academic philosophy and the ancient image of philosophy as a therapeutic practice that teaches people how to live.<sup>40</sup> However, he insists that this ought not to be an either/or choice. How can we be inspired by, say, Nietzsche (his example), if we have not yet worked out precisely what Nietzsche was saying? No doubt Chase would agree, who, like his mentor Hadot, has devoted much of his own academic career to careful and patient scholarly work on ancient philosophical texts.<sup>41</sup>

Stern recounts some of his experiences trying to bring philosophy to a wider public, running philosophy sessions for a mental health charity. The context of the sessions is broadly therapeutic but Stern is all too conscious that, for them to be serious *philosophy* sessions, a concern with trying to find the truth must trump any simplistic attempt to make the participants feel better. If they become simply therapy, can they at the same time be philosophy? Philosophy attempts to uncover truths, and some of those truths might not be particularly consoling at all: what if it turned out that life is meaningless, nothing possesses any inherent value, and there are no good reasons to keep living?

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<sup>40</sup> See Tom Stern, “The Complications of Philosophy,” *The Point* 10 (2015), online at <<https://thepointmag.com/2015/examined-life/complications-of-philosophy>>.

<sup>41</sup> Among Chase’s many scholarly works, I note his annotated translation of Simplicius, *On Aristotle Categories 1-4* (London: Duckworth, 2003).

At the same time Stern is all too conscious that the vast bulk of academic philosophical writing has very little impact in the real world. Most of it, if it is read at all, is read only by a handful of other academic philosophers. If it all disappeared overnight tomorrow, he comments, few people in the wider world would even notice. At the same time, however, there is a real public appetite for philosophy, and that appetite is satisfied by an industry of popular, therapeutic, self-help books that have little or no connection with academic philosophy, and which academic philosophers tend to dismiss out of hand as not proper philosophy at all. While Stern is sympathetic to the idea of bringing philosophy to a wider public in a way that might impact on their lives, he knows that in practice this can often become simply an exercise in trying to make people feel better in which “a messy argument about what’s true and what’s false can just get in the way.”<sup>42</sup> Stern’s greatest concern with that kind of popular philosophy is not its lack of academic or intellectual rigour but the way it papers over the fact that the truth might not make people feel better at all: perhaps on closer inspection it will turn out that you are indeed a failure, with no discernable talents, whom nobody loves. Reflect philosophically about your own life and you too can come to know that these things are in fact true. It may turn out that philosophy is no consolation at all.

Stern’s final conclusion in his reflections about philosophy and its practical relevance is that “wherever we find philosophy we find, on the one hand, the pursuit of truth and, on the other, some promise to make a difference or to

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<sup>42</sup> Stern, “The Complications of Philosophy.”

guide us towards a better or a more fulfilled life.”<sup>43</sup> If ever someone champions one side, the other side never quite goes away. Perhaps the best option, then, “is to keep moving from one to the next, back and forth, dissatisfied with each.”<sup>44</sup>

At first glance, this contrast between these two sides of philosophy sounds similar to the contrast I drew earlier between Socratic, humanistic philosophy, motivated by a desire to transform one’s life, versus Aristotelian, scientific philosophy, concerned with truth. Yet Stern’s point is different. His point is that this tension is not *between two competing* conceptions of philosophy but is *internal to any* plausible account of philosophy. All philosophers worthy of the name are engaged in this constant back and forth between what we might call the Socratic and Aristotelian poles of philosophy. As I suggested earlier, both Socrates and Aristotle were concerned with the pursuit of knowledge *and* following a philosophical life, with the difference between them simply coming down to which of these was the ultimate motivating impulse. For Stern, both aspects are intrinsic to philosophy itself and any activity that tries to champion one at the expense of the other runs the risk of no longer being philosophy at all.

Stern’s account has a lot to recommend it. All really good philosophy worthy of the name takes seriously the central idea of Philosophy as a Way of Life, but never at the expense of the desire to understand the world as it is. This means that it cannot be merely a project aimed at making us feel good, because truths can sometimes be uncomfortable. This deals with one of the concerns philosophers might legitimately have about the idea of Philosophy as a Way of

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.



Life, namely that it reduces philosophy to a form of therapy, becoming simply something that is supposed to make us feel better. When the Greek concept of *eudaimonia* is translated as 'happiness' and then packaged for popular consumption, the danger is that philosophy gets reduced to being part of what has been called the 'happiness industry.' The real concern here is that the motivation becomes simply to make people feel better, potentially at the expense of everything else: it does not matter what people believe so long as it has the desired effect. That is certainly not what Socrates had in mind; his motivation to live a philosophical life, grounded on secure knowledge of what is and is not good, was, as we all know, one fraught with difficulties. And Aristotle's ideas about *eudaimonia*, as anyone who has dipped into the *Nicomachean Ethics* knows, do not straightforwardly correspond to what people now think of as 'happiness.' In short, if we want to think of philosophy as something engaged, practical, and life changing, we need to be careful not to reduce it to something we do just to make us feel better. Thus, Philosophy as a Way of Life ought not to be conceived merely as a form of therapy. The same applies if we avoid talk of happiness and instead focus on self-formation or self-cultivation. The danger with Michel Foucault's account of "technologies of the self" for instance, as Martha Nussbaum pointed out some time ago, is that it might be taken to be a purely aesthetic process of self-transformation that loses sight of what is distinctive about philosophy, namely a commitment to the truth based on sound arguments.<sup>45</sup>

In the light of what we have discussed so far, we might now point to three distinct views about Philosophy as a Way of Life. These are:

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<sup>45</sup> See Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 5.

1. The claim that Philosophy as a Way of Life is a distinct tradition within Western philosophy, different in form and motivation from both analytic and continental philosophy, dominant in antiquity and present ever since, albeit marginalized in recent times.
2. The claim that Philosophy as a Way of Life is a humanistic approach to philosophy, to be contrasted with a scientific approach and, as such, perhaps sharing more in common with the work of some continental philosophers than it does with most analytic philosophy.
3. The claim that Philosophy as a Way of Life is one pole inherent to all philosophy, sometimes marginalized but always present to a greater or lesser extent.

My own response to this would be to return to the question of motivation: does one do philosophy in order to transform one's life, or in order to comprehend the world? I am sympathetic to Stern's view that all really good philosophy does both. Do we have to choose? Perhaps we do not, but I think the notion of Philosophy as a Way of Life involves the claim that the ultimate motivation is the Socratic one to transform one's life, with the caveat, as Stern points out, that for this to be philosophy at all that motivation cannot be at the expense of a commitment to the truth, for that is part of what makes it philosophy.<sup>46</sup> There have been numerous thinkers throughout the history of philosophy who have

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<sup>46</sup> It is worth noting that in the *Apology*, 29d-e, Socrates berates his fellow Athenians for focusing their attention on money and reputation rather than "truth (*alêtheia*) and understanding (*phronêsis*) and the perfection of soul."

held this view, some of whom might now be labelled ‘continental’ philosophers, and perhaps some more recently who fall into the increasingly amorphous analytic tradition.<sup>47</sup> In that sense, I would be inclined to say that Philosophy as a Way of Life cuts across that divide rather than standing as a distinct third tradition.<sup>48</sup>

## VI. Learning from Lucretius

I would like to conclude by saying a little more about the relationship between what we might simplistically call ‘therapy’ and ‘truth’. To do this I want to look more closely at one particular philosopher, one who embraces both the practical, therapeutic role of philosophy and its commitment to the truth. The philosopher I have in mind is Lucretius.<sup>49</sup>

Lucretius’s poem *On the Nature of Things* is divided into six books.<sup>50</sup> Its form – a lengthy didactic poem about Nature – was probably inspired by the work of Empedocles while its contents follow closely Epicurus’s magnum opus *On Nature*, which was for a long time lost but fragments of which have been

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<sup>47</sup> On the amorphousness of analytic philosophy see Glock, *What is Analytic Philosophy?* and on theoretical and practical motivations see esp. 200-1.

<sup>48</sup> It is worth noting that Hadot not only had interests in a number of philosophers sometimes labelled ‘continental’, he also wrote on Wittgenstein and was one of his first champions in France. See now Pierre Hadot, *Wittgenstein et les limites du langage* (Paris: Vrin, 2014).

<sup>49</sup> Hadot was certainly familiar with the work of Lucretius, to which he refers throughout *Philosophy as a Way of Life*.

<sup>50</sup> There are numerous editions of Lucretius; I have tended to rely on Cyril Bailey, *Titi Lucreti Cari De Rerum Natura Libri Sex*, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), from whom I take the Latin text. For translations I quote from Ronald Latham’s slightly more expansive version, *On the Nature of the Universe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951), occasionally modified.

recovered from among the papyri found at Herculaneum.<sup>51</sup> Each book opens with a reflection on the nature and purpose of philosophy, which function as repeated reminders as to the purpose of the work as a whole.

At the opening of Book 1 Lucretius is explicit that the task at hand is to transform one's life for the better and that the only way to do this is by gaining a correct understanding of Nature. The great enemy throughout the poem is superstition (*religio*) – a false and confused set of beliefs that cause people to behave badly. It is superstition above all else that must be overcome and there is only one way to do this. He writes:

This dread and darkness of the mind cannot be dispelled by the sunbeams, the shining shafts of day, but only by an understanding of the outward form and inner workings of nature.<sup>52</sup>

That these three lines are key to understanding Lucretius's purpose is underscored by the fact that he repeats them verbatim in the openings of Books 2, 3, and 6 as well.<sup>53</sup> What is striking about them in their first instance in Book 1 is that they immediately precede his account of the Parmenidean metaphysical foundations of atomism – the very next lines say “in tackling this theme, our starting-point will be this principle: nothing can ever be created by divine power

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<sup>51</sup> On its Empedoclean form and Epicurean content see David Sedley, *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>52</sup> Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 1.146-8: *Hunc igitur terrorem animi tenebrasque necessesit / non radii solis neque lucida tela diei / discutiant, sed naturae species ratioque.*

<sup>53</sup> Thus *De rerum natura* 1.146-8 = 2.59-61 = 3.91-3 = 6.39-41.

out of nothing.”<sup>54</sup> The section that follows is probably the most abstract and philosophically technical part of the entire work and so the part that may seem to be of least practical relevance to anything, let alone overcoming the “terror of the mind” (*terrorem animi*). Yet Lucretius reminds us at the outset that his plan for therapy of the soul *requires* abstract metaphysics and that these metaphysical reflections will have a transformative effect on our lives. Metaphysics is both a necessary and ultimately sufficient condition for self-transformation.

At the opening of Book 2 he insists that it is reason (*ratio*) that can cure us of the fears and anxieties that keep us awake at night.<sup>55</sup> Only philosophy can save us. And again at the beginning of Book 3 he says that the terrors of the mind (*animi terrores*) will only take flight when reason (*ratio*) uncovers the true nature of things (*naturam rerum*).<sup>56</sup> That Lucretius sees the task at hand as a therapeutic one is also underscored at the opening of Book 4 where he compares his own use of poetry to present natural philosophy with the doctor who sugar coats his medicine.<sup>57</sup> The poetry is designed to lure readers in but Lucretius is explicit that the goal is twofold: to understand Nature and to grasp the benefits of doing so.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> *De rerum natura* 1.149-50: *principium cuius hinc nobis exordia sumet, / nullam rem e nihilo gigni divinitus umquam.*

<sup>55</sup> *De rerum natura* 2.53-4: *quid dubitas quin omni' sit haec rationi' potestas? / omnis cum in tenebris praesertim vita laboret.*

<sup>56</sup> *De rerum natura* 3.14-16: *nam simul ac ratio tua coepit vociferari / naturam rerum, divina mente coorta, / diffugiunt animi terrores ...*

<sup>57</sup> See *De rerum natura* 4.10-25. This section is a repetition of 1.926-50 with some minor variations.

<sup>58</sup> *De rerum natura* 4.24-5: *... dum percipis omnem / naturam rerum ac persentis utilitatem.*

Philosophy is presented as the rule of life at the beginning of Book 5, as that which rescues a person's life from chaos and darkness, and leads it to the Epicurean goal of tranquillity.<sup>59</sup> In what must be the most audacious defence of the utility of philosophy ever written, Lucretius compares the usefulness of philosophy to other human creations, including farming, the invention of which must surely be the single most significant event in human history. Lucretius argues that philosophy is *more important* than farming because it is still possible to be happy without such an innovation but it is impossible to live well without philosophy. There are no happy and content noble savages according to Lucretius, and the unexamined life is indeed not worth living. A good life is impossible without a mind purged by reason, which only philosophy can deliver.<sup>60</sup>

The final book of the poem opens with a eulogy to Epicurus.<sup>61</sup> For Lucretius Epicureanism is a therapeutic philosophy and the reason why it works where others fail is precisely because it was Epicurus who uncovered the truth about the way the universe works. It was, Lucretius says, "with words of truth" that Epicurus "purged the heart."<sup>62</sup> He then repeats those three lines we saw earlier in Book 1, reminding us once more that it is only by understanding Nature that one can overcome the terrors of the mind.

What comes through very clearly, then, is that there is no choice between conceiving philosophy as therapeutic, on the one hand, and its commitment to

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<sup>59</sup> See *De rerum natura* 5.1-21.

<sup>60</sup> *De rerum natura* 5.18: *at bene non poterat sine puro pectore vivi.*

<sup>61</sup> See *De rerum natura* 6.1-42.

<sup>62</sup> *De rerum natura* 6.24: *veridicis igitur purgavit pectora dictis.*

truth, on the other. The *only* way to overcome our fears and anxieties, Lucretius insists, is by uncovering the truth about the way the world works. The Stoics took a similar line, and so did Spinoza, who in his *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* argued that the only way for him to overcome the mental disturbances that stopped him attaining the happiness he desired was via a proper understanding of Nature.<sup>63</sup> All these philosophers share an outlook quite different from the one outlined by Stern, in which facing reality can all too often breed despair. It is also worth noting that the Lucretian point regarding the relationship between therapy and truth goes in both directions, namely that the only philosophical therapy that will ever work is one grounded in truth *and* that the pursuit of truth, insofar as it frees us from confusion, error, and superstition, is itself therapeutic.

Lucretius gives us a vivid example of what Philosophy as a Way of Life might look like in action. He explicitly sees his philosophy as a guide to life. The division I proposed earlier between scientific and humanistic conceptions of philosophy more or less collapses here, although, as we have seen, Lucretius is much closer to Socrates than Aristotle when it comes to his ultimate motivation. His motivation is indeed therapeutic, but a therapy based on, rather than at the expense of, the truth.

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<sup>63</sup> Benedictus de Spinoza, *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* § 14 (*Spinoza Opera*, ed. Carl Gebhardt (Heidelberg: Carl Winters, 1925), 2: 8; *The Collected Works of Spinoza I*, trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 11).

## VII. Conclusions

Philosophy as a Way of Life is a model of philosophy that emphasizes its practical, life-changing aspects. It cuts across the division between analytic and continental philosophy, neither aligned with nor opposed to either tradition. It can be a useful way to think about philosophy if the wider philosophical culture tends to downplay its practical side. Yet, as we have seen, there is a good case for the claim that all philosophy worthy of the name acknowledges this aspect of philosophy, which has been there since the beginning. If the idea is to refer to anything distinctive, we might reserve it for those conceptions of philosophy that explicitly identify their motivation as the transformation of one's way of life. This would certainly apply to Lucretius. But, as Lucretius himself has shown us, perhaps it does not matter so much whether we start out in the pursuit of truth or with a desire for a transformed life, for if we do our philosophy well we shall always end up with both.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> An earlier version of this paper was read at the Australasian Society for Continental Philosophy conference at Deakin University, Melbourne, in December 2016. I must thank both Matthew Sharpe and Sean Bowden for inviting me to speak at the conference and then to contribute to this issue of *Parrhesia*. A second version was read at a workshop at Monash University's Prato Centre, Italy, 'Reinventing Philosophy as a Way of Life', held in July 2017 and organized by Michael Ure, to whom further thanks. I would also like to thank the audiences in both Melbourne and Prato for their comments on the paper, and an anonymous reviewer for *Parrhesia* for some helpful corrections and comments.