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Discussion

Philosophers in Search of Life...

David A. White^{*}

If, after reading the above title, someone has ventured this far—the opening sentence—then he or she has doubtless conquered any urge to dismiss the contents of this piece (and do something else...) because the title is so blatantly silly. Only a philosopher would be so sadly quixotic as to feel a need to become involved in a “search” for life. Dwelling in the realm of the living is where we humans spend all our waking hours. Furthermore, all of us settle into sleep for a greater or lesser amount of time and once in that state (discounting the differentiating factor of dreams), we exhibit the practical necessity of rest and a general quieting of the demands of consciousness—remaining alive throughout. Life is everywhere. What point would be served by identifying it as an object of philosophical interest and concern?

A recent article by Robert Zaretsky in the *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (6 December 2015) poses this question. Zaretsky relates an experience he had with Pierre Hadot’s book, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (Harvard, 2002). Hadot’s thesis is that ancient philosophers, from the pre-Socratics through to the Hellenistic period, were not primarily interested in constructing grand theoretical accounts of reality and how we know it;

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rather, they aimed at affecting how their contemporaries—and, presumably, posterity—led their lives. Here is an elegant summary taken from the Hadot’s concluding chapter, “Questions and Perspectives”:

We must discern the philosopher’s underlying intention, which was not to develop a discourse which had its end in itself but to act upon souls. In fact, each assertion must be understood from the perspective of the effect it was intended to produce in the soul of the auditor or reader. Whether the goal was to convert, to console, to cure, or to exhort the audience, the point was always and above all not to communicate to them some ready-made knowledge but to *form* them. In other words, the goal was to learn a type of know-how; to develop a *habitus*, or new capacity to judge and to criticize; and to *transform*—that is, to change people’s way of living and of seeing the world. (Hadot, 274—all italics in text)

Zaretsky’s *Chronicle* account is a vivid report, based on various personal experiences and inquiries, testifying to the conclusion that if Hadot was right and ancient philosophy intended “to change people’s way of living and of seeing the world,” this goal does not strike much of a chord in the prose efforts of current academic philosophers or, more generally, in their range of professional interests. But it does sound a great deal like commonly pursued goals for what is dubbed “self-help” literature.

I: LET’S HELP OURSELVES TO A LITTLE WISDOM

Gretchen Rubin may not be a familiar name in contemporary philosophical circles but she is well-known in the self-help arena. She has written two best-selling books on happiness—*The Happiness Project* (2009) and *Happier at Home* (2012). Her most recent publication, and the work which will occupy us here, is *Better Than Before: What I Learned about Making and Breaking Habits...*(2015). Before she began to write, Rubin earned degrees from Yale and then clerked for Justice Sandra Day O’Connor; for those who want additional credentials of an academic cast, the motto which heads the Introduction to Rubin’s book on habits is a quotation from Whitehead’s *An Introduction to Mathematics*. This book has been out for less than a year (as of this writing) and has received over 400 reviews on Amazon. We may safely assume that what Gretchen Rubin says and how she says it represent vanguard literary expressions in the self-help

genre.

Better Than Before and its author were featured in the 22 March 2015 issue of *Parade*, a popular weekly supplement which appeared for many years in American newspapers; the quotations given below are taken from this account. Here is a thought which, for Rubin, encapsulates her basic goal in *Better Than Before*: “Think about the habit that you want to form and then think, *What’s everything I could do to set myself up for success?*” Readers immersed in the dense thickets of academic philosophy may initially shrug at the above—after all, what does this sentiment and the other, often syrupy thoughts common to self-help books have to do with any of their mountain-top, rigorously developed concerns? Even if Rubin knows a smidgen of Whitehead, what reason is there to pay serious attention to whatever she says about habits?

II: ARISTOTLE AGREES....

One reply which might help deflect this dismissive attitude appears in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. At the end of chapter I of book II (1103^b23ff), we read (Rackham’s translation):

In a word, our moral dispositions are formed as a result of the corresponding activities. Hence it is incumbent on us to control the character of our activities, since on the quality of these depends the quality of our dispositions. It is therefore not of small moment whether we are trained from childhood in one set of habits or another; on the contrary it is of very great, or rather of supreme, importance.

Indeed, as Aristotle comments by way of preamble at the beginning of chapter I, moral virtue is the product of “habit” which in Greek—ἔθος—transliterates into “ethics” itself. Aristotle’s testimony thus underlines the seminal importance of habits. Although the passage cited concentrates on pointing out the need to establish right habits from childhood through one’s adulthood, it is easy to reason that if one wanted to *change* a habit ingrained from youth for purposes of improving one’s hold on avenues to happiness, Aristotle would fully support such personal modification.

In fact, Aristotle’s affinity to the very core of a self-help agenda emerges in his immediate thought after emphasizing (in the above passage) the importance of having the right habits. The opening lines of chapter II assert (1103^b26ff):

As then our present study, unlike the other branches of philosophy, has a

practical aim (for we are not investigating the nature of virtue for the sake of knowing what it is, but in order that we may become good, without which result our investigation would be of no use), we have consequently to carry our enquiry into the region of conduct, and to ask how we are to act rightly....

Hadot does not mention this passage in his discussion of Aristotle's approaches to dimensions of human life as lived philosophically but the vigor with which Aristotle states the foundational value of practicality—that everything laid out theoretically in the account of “the nature of virtue” in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is directly intended so that “we may become good” since otherwise our investigation “would be of no use”—is remarkable in its undeniable embrace of “self-help” motivation. If therefore Rubin and Aristotle intersect at some juncture in their analysis of habits and considerations pertaining to them (indeed, Rubin cites “reading Aristotle” in the subtitle of the first of her two books on happiness), we seem fully justified in applying Aristotelian modes of thought within a self-help context if his reflections enhance and deepen Rubin's descriptions and recommendations.

III: HABITS ARE HARD TO FORM—I NEED A BREAK....

Rubin's approach to habits and their formation blends speculative generalization and practical advice, the descriptive and the prescriptive. For Rubin, “[t]he more [things] you can make into a habit, then the less you have to drain yourself using your willpower.” If, however, “...you are constantly pushing out and nothing is coming in, then you're not going to be able to stick to these habits when they're a little challenging.” But there is a practical solution to the threat of falling short with regard to establishing a new habit: “Treats are a way to give yourself that energy that you need to keep going.”

This interjection is eminently practical and makes good discretionary sense. A treat is a certain kind of pleasure. But it is an incremental pleasure both by itself as well as when juxtaposed with the intended goal, i.e., the implementation of a habit. Now Aristotle observes that the moral agent does not want to pursue a life of virtue by abstaining from pleasure entirely, to the point of becoming “insensible” (1104^a24). For Aristotle, pleasure is an integral feature of human life; the challenge is to experience pleasures but to do so in the right way. Are treats a legitimate strategy as far as developing a desirable habit is concerned? Yes. In fact, if we read this section of Aristotle from the standpoint of the

connection between treats and habits, we see Aristotle developing a position which reinforces the prudential value of this advice, a sort of Moral Morphology of Treats.

IV: JUST ONE CAN'T HURT....

In book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle characterizes moral virtue as “continuous and divisible” (1106^b26). Now if the various types of virtue are concerned with actions and every action is accompanied by some measure of pleasure and pain, then “for this reason also virtue will be concerned with pleasure and pain” (1104^b13ff). Therefore, if moral virtue is continuous and if the spectrum of pleasure and pain always be present in the exercise of moral virtue, then we may conclude that as integral elements in moral virtue, pleasure and pain are themselves continuous. Finally, an assertion which is classic in the Aristotelian account of virtue and the experience of pleasure and pain as necessary components in the exercise of virtue; this is also one of the passages which has grounded the oft-quoted adages “everything in moderation” and “nothing in excess”:

...in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, toward the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue. (1106^b18–24)

Pleasure is continuous; this means that if an experience is felt throughout a segment of time as pleasant (e.g., savoring one’s favorite food while in the act of eating), then the experience of pleasure can be divided into smaller segments without affecting the distinctive pleasurable quality of that experience. A treat, if understood as a small pleasure, is therefore inherently pleasant for the simple reason that it is an instance of a type of experience providing pleasure for the individual. A treat characterized as a “lesser pleasure” is no less a pleasure than a “greater pleasure”: it may differ in terms of intensity or duration or quality but these differences do not affect its “hedonic” nature (and, as should go without saying, it would be a fundamental error in rhetorical technique to use a word like “hedonic” in a proposed literary rendition of lived philosophy and practicality if aimed at benefitting a general audience! We will say more on such rhetorical choices in Section VI below).

Rubin contends that if establishing a habit is becoming a slog, treats will give the individual seeking to form a habit the “energy” to keep going. In general, to form a

habit is either to do something one has not done before (e.g., address chores and tasks immediately, without procrastination) or not to do something one had done before (e.g., consume too much of a favorite food). Understanding how a treat punctuates the latter type of habit will afford an intriguing exercise in applied Aristotle and will show how this notion of energy becomes interestingly and relevantly complex.

A treat is not pleasant just because the individual has decided to allow herself to enjoy something which, given the decision to instill a habit which controls a pleasurable intake, should not have occurred. This approach effectively reduces a treat to a type of “guilty pleasure.” Experienced in this way, it is not evident that the pleasure produced by the treat has overridden the guilt arising from the realization that the process of gaining a habit has been disrupted, perhaps to the point of nullifying all previous efforts to achieve that end.

As we have seen, however, even if the pleasure derived from a treat is somehow reduced in intensity and duration, it remains a pleasure. This follows from Aristotle’s position regarding pleasure as a continuum. Thus even if the experience of pleasure from the treat is inflected with a thin veil of guilt—“I really shouldn’t have this little bit of (insert favorite treat here), but I deserve a treat for doing so well forming this habit”—the overall experience is and remains pleasant. Indeed, a moment’s reflection should eliminate any residual “guilt” associated with the enjoyment in question, i.e., as a momentary lapse from observance of the habit’s natural parameters. But even if the power of reflection does not dissolve this negative feeling, the continuousness inherent in sensed pleasure allows the experience of a treat to be combined with a number of other feelings and remain distinctively pleasant throughout.

Treats also evoke another dimension of experience relevant to habits. Having a treat does not just happen; there is a *decision* to have a treat. As a result, there is a temporal field underlying this event, connecting it with what precedes and follows the actual (and typically brief) enjoyment of the treat. Thus a treat is not just the enjoyment of a pleasure by itself but a subtle actualization and realization of self-knowledge surrounding the temporality of the experience of this pleasure. In fact, the quality of the experience will be affected if the pleasure is connected to the time frame covering the period before and after the enjoyment of the treat.

According to the account in *Parade*, Rubin’s preferred treat is her favorite perfume. Presumably then she would treat herself to a rationed amount of this substance as a reward for any habit she was attempting to incorporate into her way of life. But what if the

energy produced by the treat derives from an experience of precisely the kind of elements which the acquisition of the habit intends to curtail and control?

Consumption of food is an obvious example (e.g., having a favorite dessert if one is trying to reduce sweets and their attendant calories). In general, then, a treat could be either like (the food example) or unlike (the perfume example) the elements of the conduct defining the sought-after habit. But even if the treat is like the elements involved in the establishment of a habit, it can also be seen as a morally justified experience. Here again, self-knowledge becomes of fundamental importance. If, for example, the individual realizes that he or she is subject to “binging” on something pleasant if deprived of any of that kind of pleasure, then a treat will combine (a) the experience of a pleasure with (b) the awareness that this experience, even if felt as only momentarily pleasant, will address the connection between this kind of action (e.g., eating) and the need for restraint when in the presence of food.

The factor of self-knowledge combined with a habit-seeker experiencing a treat will illuminate the relevance of the conditions Aristotle imposes on a morally virtuous act. For Aristotle, moral virtue requires experiences which are the mean between extremes. Now a treat is optional; we may or may not choose to enjoy a treat while we work to acquire a habit. But the conditions Aristotle identifies as elements in moral virtue can readily be applied to the moral quality of a treat. Aristotle’s position emphasizes the “rightness” of this energetic interlude based on the fact that it should happen (1) at the right time—thus a treat should not be enjoyed one day after having gone on a diet; this is too soon; (2) in the right way, i.e., not gloating about one’s success but appreciative of one’s efforts—so far. Attaining good habits is hard work; whereas a treat looks backward in time at past success, this achievement is only provisional and is no guarantee that the enjoyment of a treat will energize one toward gaining the habit in one’s future actions and choices. And finally (3) for the right motive; although enjoying the treat is indeed the “right” thing to do and is “characteristic of virtue,” the individual experiencing the treat must be motivated in terms of self-awareness to appreciate that this break in a sequence of actions ordered in a regularly defined way should be understood in relation both to what preceded it (all the actions devoted to instilling the habit) as well as what will follow it (the resumption of these actions).

If, therefore, the achievement of the habit is successful—with arguably a reduction in stress throughout this phase of the process—then treats become not a stopgap

measure to forestall failure in the implementation of a habit but rather an integral step in the process of achieving a desired end. Thus, it could be argued that treats should be “built into” the regimen of establishing a habit not only to maintain one’s natural receptivity to pleasure but also, and more importantly in this context, to provide a basic counterbalance to the rigors involved in controlling one’s behavior, and one’s choices so that, in due course, the desired habit has been formed. Should the treats continue *after* the habit has been inculcated? The answer is yes and for at least two reasons: to help maintain this habit and also to generate confidence that the present and ongoing success in such maintenance will serve as a foundation, present in living memory (and reinforced by the occasional treat!) for parallel success if and when the individual decides to pursue another change in habit, regardless of the extent to which the type of behavior defining the proposed new habit is similar to that of the habit already established.

V: “LIVING” PHILOSOPHY—SETTING THE SCENE

It may surely be assumed that any conclusion established in the name of moral theory would, if realized in practical circumstances, produce salutary effects for those who act according to its lights—e.g., Aristotle on moral virtue, Kant on duty, Mill on the greatest good for the greatest number (the reader may add his or her favorite moral philosopher to this list). For if this assumption once duly generalized were without such warrant, then any philosophical theory (in ethics or other areas of philosophical inquiry) may be proffered with no concern whatsoever whether its implementation would affect the practical matters that define the lives of human beings—even, be it noted, philosophers themselves insofar as they exemplify common humanity. Such a putative eventuality generates a fundamental gap—“chasm” is perhaps more accurate—between the initial attractiveness a moral stance might exhibit when asserted as pure theory and the typically “down and dirty” business of making one’s moral way in the world.

Philosophers write, or at least they tend to do so. Socrates did not indulge himself this way but he had literarily-minded contemporaries (some more friendly to him than others). Of course, writing about how to lead one’s life remains...writing. Leading one’s life is something else again. Hadot’s book aims to revivify what he claims is a lost sense of living a certain kind of life, one which—based on ancient authors as models—can justifiably be called “philosophical.” If contemporary readers are persuaded by Hadot’s thesis, they remain *only* readers about how to lead a philosophical life—until, that is, they actually

attempt to implement this approach within the concrete dimensions of their own lived reality. During such periods, however, they cease reading about how to lead this kind of life and actually live it. Furthermore, the individuals who will access and dwell within the boundaries of this approach to human affairs are those aware of its existence and feasibility. Who are these individuals? Only those with a philosophical bent, a decidedly small segment of society and within that segment, only those who know about Hadot's approach, search out the relevant written sources, then make the effort to read and absorb their contents.

The philosophical community, comprised almost exclusively of academicians, may or may not be impressed with Hadot's position to the point of attempting to realize it. Note in this regard that to support his conjecture that the model of the living philosopher can be resurrected in the contemporary world, Hadot cites (321–2fn8) five sources written since 1985—all appearing in journals (and one book) aimed at academic philosophers. Who will read this material? The high probability is only other academics. What will they do upon reading it? Either try to refute it, roundly dismiss it, perhaps find it “interesting” then do something else (moral or otherwise), or—the ideal for Hadot—take it to heart and try to live its message, both in terms of their own lives and also, importantly, how they treat others in light of this instilled “lived” wisdom. But even if *every* academic philosopher were in fact to embrace this kind of life, a logically possible but existentially implausible state of affairs, what about all those individuals outside the academy, some of whom, indeed perhaps many, are thoughtful human beings leading their lives several worlds apart from academic philosophy? Is it possible to convey Hadot's renewed vision of the philosophical life as lived—lived philosophy—to a broader, more inclusive audience?

VI: WELL, THERE'S WRITING AND THERE'S WRITING....

If Hadot's sincere and engaging style begets only more writing of the same sort (inflected perhaps with minor variations), then the audience for this moral message remains pitifully small. What philosophers must do who not only admire Hadot's work but also resolve to advance its message into the actual business of living is “spread the word,” but not by writing more words which only other academic philosophers will read (and react to in variously fitting but limited professional modes). It seems incumbent as a methodological prerequisite to instill in those who spend time writing academic philosophy the desire—the habit, if you will—to develop their professional “love of wisdom” in ways which will reach

non-academic audiences. Bluntly stated, the goal should be to write technical philosophy *à la* self-help formats, to smooth out the original terminology of suitable moral masters and to make its messages ingratiating to an audience actively seeking assistance in basic areas of human concern.

Consider in this regard the feasibility of the “Axiom of Clarification”—i.e., regardless of the conceptual complexity which any philosophical position displays when initially articulated, this position can be restated, clarified and stylistically broadened without substantial loss of either basic meaning or theoretical rigor. If this axiom is taken to heart, then the challenge is to address the range of topics established by dominant self-help literature—such as Rubin on habits—and to write about those topics in ways which are accessible to a “non-philosophical” audience lacking rehearsed analytic experience with technical philosophical terminology and the rhythms of its reasoning, and also by executing this writing with considerations illuminating those topics according to notions and implications derived from the tradition’s philosophical “sages” (Hadot’s word).

The point is not that academic philosophers should in all their professional efforts bow to the intricately blended (and occasionally mangled) complex demands of lived practicality. This would never happen, of course, nor is it something that should happen. Philosophers will continue to write primarily if not exclusively for other philosophers, following the protocols for respectability and rigor that obtain within the many diverse, pluralistic strains that currently characterize the discipline’s output of source material. But if some philosophers pay attention to the fact that everyone has roughly the same range of experiences—what Hume called “common life”—and if indeed philosophy is the “love of wisdom” as the etymology of its name indicates, then the following conclusions seem credible: At least some protagonists of philosophy should feel empathy for the masses of mortals who consult the printed word for help in dealing with the knottier elements of life. This shared humanity will then inspire philosophers to present their professional labor in a form which will speak to people in ways derived from the seminal sources of philosophical thought and which will also inspire and direct their actions.

Assume that these conclusions are realized within the philosophical community—here is a simplified schematic sketching one way to proceed:

1. Select an appropriate philosophical guide as a model and mentor for the many—we assume that any of the great philosophers defining the tradition of moral philosophy have thought and written with sufficient

humanity and breadth to serve in this capacity.

2. Identify areas of concern by reviewing popular self-help literature. The number of sources is legion and the philosopher could readily select a theme or slate of issues which he or she found interesting, important, and worth sustained professional attention—quite apart from the “lived” dimensions which these issues occupy for self-help readers (and which the philosopher intends to affect in positive ways).
3. Articulate the relevant coordinate position from the chosen philosophical guide. The brief account of seminal areas from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (section IV above) may stand as a working illustration of what a philosopher could develop as a point of theoretical departure.
4. Apply the results of Step 3 to the identifications made in Step 2. This kind of writing will be challenging in at least two distinct but related directions—(a) “translating” the selected philosophical positions into accurately paraphrased prose and at the same time, (b) making it accessible to a wide audience. The goal is to present this “popularized” position within narrative or expository formats such that non-academic readers will not only grasp the import of the original position but also be sufficiently moved by its feasibility and attractiveness to incorporate its recommendations into the fabric of their lives. During this phase of the process, one might look for ways to reinforce analytical phases in the formulation of the self-help agenda so that readers will be informed of underlying theoretical points which could be readily transformed into relevant practical action.
5. Philosophers are naturally disputatious. Self-help literature will seemingly present a variety of soft (if not attractively spongy) argumentative targets. However, the point is not to dismember conceptual weaknesses in self-help texts with the cavalier thrusts so many academic philosophers relish when skewering and severing the arguments of their peers, but to evaluate the descriptions of the settings and advice delivered to the reader in a way which combines sympathy and critical direction.

In addition, a practicing philosopher can look beyond the

parameters of the immediate issues into regions of concern addressed and illuminated by the original position. Such investigation may be heuristically significant in revealing additional areas of moral relevance not directly handled by the letter of the self-help account. For example, in her book on habits, Rubin deploys human personality into four types: Upholder, Questioner, Obliger, Rebel—based on tendencies exhibited by those “in search of habit change.” An expansion of Rubin’s treatment of habits might gather these types of personality as assumptions, so to speak, and then investigate the more concerted reflections on happiness in her two previous books. The four types are clearly intended as paradigmatic in some respects; would it be possible to confront, e.g., aspects of Aristotle’s rich speculations on human nature with one, some or all four of Rubin’s types and offer additional perspectives on her inferences regarding each type as it theoretically grounds the quest for habits?

6. Producing such accounts will require a nice blend of layered philosophical understanding and congenial rhetoric. But in a way, this is the easy part of the philosopher’s mission. The tricky part is having results see the light of day. The obvious publication strategy given the intended audience will involve seeking outlets in the popular press, e.g., op-ed articles. And of course the blogosphere has generated enormous possibilities for informing a computer-literate (but philosophically unversed) audience of what a life inflected with philosophically derived thoughts and practices has to offer. Technology beckons to any thinker resident in the academy willing to heed its call.

POSTSCRIPT: HUME AND THE ANCIENTS ON “LIVED” PHILOSOPHIZING

It may happen that contemporary analytic philosophers, typically imbued with the desirability for technical precision and rigor in their work, will be less receptive than their stylistically more relaxed continental brethren to this plea for broadening the scope of the philosophical enterprise. But stringent adherence to such rigidified methodology to the exclusion of other possible approaches (and potential audiences) will cast them into a realm where their work is divorced from ready accessibility. This professionalized

isolation comes with consequences. In “Of the Different Species of Philosophy,” the first section of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, hard-headed empiricist (and spiritual father of analytic philosophy) David Hume writes:

The mere philosopher is a character, which is commonly but little acceptable in the world, as being supposed to contribute nothing either to the advantage or pleasure of society; while he lives remote from communication with mankind, and is wrapped up in principles and notions equally remote from their comprehension.

The eighteenth century Hume is much closer to our own time than the historically dim figures read and discussed by Hadot, but if the description of the philosopher as “wrapped up in principles and notions” to the point of living “remote from communication with mankind” and contributing “nothing” to the advantage of society stings at least a bit to contemporary sensibilities, then perhaps a reexamination of the public goals of professional philosophy might be worth serious and sustained consideration, regardless of ideological preferences and practices. In the end, it is a possibility the implementation of which is worth pondering for all concerned with the practice and dissemination of philosophy.