

# Philosophy for Living: Exploring Diversity and Immersive Assignments in a PWOL Approach

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**Abstract:** In this article, we reflect on our experiences teaching a PWOL course called Philosophy for Living. The course uses modules focused on different historical philosophical ways of life (Epicureanism, Stoicism, Confucianism, Existentialism, etc.) to engage students in exploring how philosophy can be a way of life and how its methods, virtues, and ideas can improve their own lives. We describe and compare our experiences with two central aspects of our approach: engagement with diversity and the use of immersive experiences and assignments. In particular, we discuss how we recognize and center various forms of diversity in philosophy—cultural and gender diversity, but also diversity in how and in what forms philosophy can be done and what “philosophy as a way of life” can be. We also examine how the experimental and experiential aspects of immersive assignments promote deeper understanding and create possibilities for personal transformation.

## Introduction

Here we examine the Philosophy as a Way of Life [PWOL] course we teach as an introductory level, general humanities elective: Philosophy for Living. We begin by discussing how we each independently designed the course, focusing on why we were drawn to a PWOL approach and how our class sections reflect our distinct areas of research specialization. We have now been teaching Philosophy for Living in the PWOL approach for fourteen years (Benjamin Rider) and six years (Sharon Mason). This shared experience, along with our similar pedagogical approach, has become the basis for an ongoing collaboration. While our courses retain their unique emphases, they also have increasingly come to reflect a shared pedagogical perspective that has developed through years of conversations about course objectives, structure, content, assignment design, challenges, and more. In

particular, we focus on two shared features of our courses that we have come to believe are particularly distinctive and valuable components of a PWOL course.

First, we have a strong commitment to engagement with diverse philosophical traditions, questions, and modes of philosophical inquiry. Insofar as a PWOL course centers study of various conceptions of what it means to live well, restricting the study to answers that arise from within one philosophical tradition (Anglo-American philosophy) or from one social location within that tradition (white, economically secure males) seems indefensibly arbitrary. Thus, we explore some of the ways in which we engage with diverse philosophical traditions in selecting content for the course. Moreover, we discuss how we also engage more familiar philosophical traditions in more expansive ways, particularly in terms of the questions and areas of emphasis that are highlighted. Finally, we discuss how the PWOL course provides opportunities for exploring multiple modes of philosophical inquiry, including philosophical letters, loosely organized collections of sayings, dialogues between multiple characters, and poetry. These different approaches can inform a richer exploration of what it means to practice philosophy as a way of life.

Second, as is the case in many PWOL courses, we both use an immersive assignment as an experiential capstone project. Students are tasked with adopting a philosophical theory for several days, implementing its view of the world through living it out in their own context and developing a critical reflection as a result of their experience. In particular, we both view the assignment as experimental and experiential, which raises interesting questions such as: What is the value of trying to live a rich, comprehensive life philosophy in a few days? What kinds of scaffolding, activities, or guidance can make this experience as meaningful and informative as it can be? In what sense can an immersive assignment be an experiment, and what is being tested? How does the experiential aspect of the project align with the other pedagogical aims of the course, especially insofar as it focuses on philosophy and life? We conclude by reflecting on various ideas of what it means to teach philosophy as a way of life.

### Philosophy for Living

Since the 1970s, our university's introduction to philosophy course has been called "Philosophy for Living"—a name that was chosen to make the course stand out from the usual "Introduction to X" courses that first-year students choose from. In the current university curriculum, it is one of the options that's available for first- and second-year students to fulfill their general education humanities requirement. Although in its history the course has often been taught with a standard introduction to philosophy structure, both of us took the title as an inspiration for creating something different: a study of philosophies of life, exploring

what the various comprehensive philosophical perspectives and traditions could offer us today as we seek to live well.

We made independent decisions to develop a PWOL curriculum for this class. Benjamin Rider, a specialist in Greek and Roman philosophy, focuses especially on Plato and Epicureanism. His initial design for Philosophy for Living was inspired by the way that ancient Greek philosophical “schools,” especially in the Hellenistic period, saw themselves as articulating and promoting—even evangelizing—their philosophy as a way of life. These philosophies not only offered a comprehensive picture of the world and how we ought to live in it, but they also shaped their proponents’ identities, and the adherents aimed to convert people to their schools. You didn’t study Stoicism—you *were* a Stoic, and that identity fundamentally informed how you saw yourself and your life.

Consequently, for Rider, the goal has been to provide for students an immersive experience of the way proponents of each philosophy thought about the world, human society, and human life. His course particularly aims to highlight modes of thought and arguments that could be valuable to students in their own lives today, ideas of enduring and perennial value, such as Epicurean arguments about fear of death; the Stoic analysis of and response to disturbing emotions; or Confucian ideas about community and leadership.<sup>1</sup> The question that organizes the whole course is: What makes for a good human life? And thus, what do each of these philosophies have to offer to help us to think about how we live *our* lives and what our goals and priorities should be?

Sharon Mason first became interested in developing a PWOL approach in response to growing dissatisfaction with the survey-centered introductory approach.<sup>2</sup> She wanted to slow the course down and go deeper into philosophical ideas, arguments, and primary texts. Moreover, she was also thinking a lot about the question, “Why is philosophy important for *everyone*?” Given the current structure of our educational system, undergraduate introductory classes in philosophy are often a student’s first introduction to philosophy. For many students who are taking the class to fulfill general education requirements, this course is the only class they will ever take in philosophy. If a student has only one semester to explore philosophy, what would be most useful for them to study, learn how to do, and come to care about?

The answer to these questions became goals of the course. *What it is important to know*: to gain a depth of understanding of a variety of philosophical ideas, historical and present, from global traditions; to expand one’s conceptual repertoire for identifying and expressing ideas and arguments; to recognize ways in which philosophical ideas are already embedded in the way that one thinks about the world and in one’s own experiences. *What it is important to do*: to develop tools that enable the process of rational inquiry (e.g., careful reading of texts, recognizing and evaluating analogies, using and critiquing thought experiments,

etc.); to practice sympathetic and critical examinations of philosophical ideas; to increase the scope of one's effective agency in the world as a result of the ability to understand and critique ideas. *What it is important to care about*: to value accurately describing a philosophical view and engaging with a philosophical position in its strongest version; to adopt one's own intellectual projects and develop interest in philosophical problems; to have experiences of curiosity, puzzlement, frustration, surprise, delight, etc. that ground motivation for lifelong learning.

While the courses were developed independently, we have benefited a great deal from ongoing collaboration, which has included discussing course organization and objectives, sharing ideas for course modules and readings, and reviewing assignments and assessment activities. The main question we both address is: what does it mean to live well? Exploring various answers to this question introduces students to a variety of philosophical ideas, past and present from global traditions; it introduces them to new ideas and concepts for describing and evaluating philosophical positions; and it provides many opportunities to explore how philosophical ideas are embedded in our own views of the world. The development of the tools of rational analysis occurs organically throughout the course, as we discuss methods of analysis when we encounter them in texts, and each philosophical view is explored in detail before it is critiqued. The courses emphasize putting various philosophical traditions into conversation with one another, as students are encouraged to think about how, for instance, a conversation might go between an Epicurean and a Stoic, or an Existentialist and a Confucian. Each course still reflects our different areas of expertise and philosophical styles, but there is also significant overlap in some of the decisions we have made about the course structure and assignments. For instance, we both structure the course as a series of modules on each of several different philosophical "schools" or systems of thought, where we spend roughly two weeks on each, and we both cover many of the same areas in-depth. The course is designed to introduce students to the experience of engaging in sustained, in depth, inquiry. Sometimes it is frustrating, but often a new insight is right around the corner. As their knowledge base increases, students learn to translate their own vague dissatisfaction into articulate critiques, going from a sort of puzzlement about how you would even go about studying the good life to having thoughtful, considered views.

### Engagement with Diverse Philosophical Traditions and Perspectives

A course structured in the PWOL approach has a built-in reason to include diverse philosophical traditions and ideas. Since a primary goal of the course is to examine various answers to the question of how to live well, the class is enriched by examining a diverse array of answers and ideas. Limiting these answers only to ideas that come from Western philosophical traditions artificially limits the

possibilities for considering ourselves and the world, especially the possibility of critically evaluating deep assumptions about the self and society that may differ across global philosophical traditions. It also limits the possibilities for identifying ideas that resonate across centuries and cultures. For instance, it can be an incredibly valuable experience for a student to discover that what was written in ancient Chinese texts can challenge and enrich their own view of the world today. Our main focus in this section, then, is on how our courses interact with diverse philosophical traditions, questions, and modes, and why we think that these specific areas of focus can be valuable for students.

But first, note that there are several important dimensions of diversity that are worth considering here. The most obvious, of course, is cultural diversity. We bring in philosophers and texts from China, India, and other traditions not usually included in philosophy courses in the United States. Gender diversity is also important. Women's voices have not often been heard in these important human conversations. But we also want to talk about some other ways we have found that engagement with a diverse philosophical curriculum can be valuable. For example, we can think of diversity in terms of exposing students to a wider variety of ways that philosophy can be done. Philosophy can be and has been done in dialogues, letters, aphorisms, and poetry. Studying these different forms of philosophy can expand our conception of what it means to think and live philosophically. Moreover, all of these kinds of diversity can help us to imagine different sorts of questions that are worth considering.

That being said, it is also important to acknowledge that bringing new material into a course is challenging, and it requires a lot of careful work to do well. If, like us, one's education has focused on the Western historical canon or contemporary European and American philosophy, one may not initially be in a position to lead an in-depth study of philosophy from other traditions. When teaching something we do not know, it is easy to fall into shallow caricatures or to distort unfamiliar material through the lens of what we already know. But if the new material is to be meaningful, it must be respected for its own integral and distinctive viewpoint, and it needs to be taught in a way that is true to that perspective. So, if we are to teach this new material responsibly, those of us who are not specialists in these areas need to invest significant study and thought to prepare. One strategy that has worked for us has been to proceed incrementally, adding new sections a bit at a time, expanding slowly from one semester to the next. The diversification in the course occurs parallel to our own study of global philosophies, as an example of learning with students.

Preliminaries aside, let's discuss in more detail the specific ways we have found that it can be valuable for students to engage with a diverse range of philosophical perspectives.

### Putting Philosophies in Conversation

One clear reason to include a range of diverse perspectives in a course is that it provides many opportunities to put those philosophies in conversation with each other, highlighting interesting congruences as well as disagreements. This exercise emphasizes the ongoing conversation of philosophy and its continuing importance. The issues debated by Mencius, Seneca, or the Buddha still matter to us today, and students are invited, in their own way, to join the discussion. It also provides excellent opportunities to highlight key aspects of each philosophy, through contrast. Some of the philosophical work we encourage students to do in class is to identify the points of disagreement between various positions and to be able to understand why those tensions exist in relation to the theory as a whole.

For example, Mason begins her version of Philosophy for Living with the study of Hedonism, Stoicism, and Existentialism, since many of the philosophical ideas in these three modules carry a certain cultural plausibility, and starting here also allows students to gain practice in articulating philosophical ideas, identifying reasons, and considering objections. When the class begins discussing Stoicism, the Stoic rejection of hedonism is more keenly felt, and, in turn, Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist claim of existence before essence is more easily understood when it can be compared with the two previous theories that begin with an account of human nature and develop an account of a good life from there. Interacting with diverse global philosophical traditions becomes a natural extension of this critical conversation. Existentialism is followed by Confucianism, as there are many points of disagreement between Existentialism and Confucianism that can be the starting point for interesting critiques and productive discussions. Sartre's critique of bad faith can be juxtaposed with the Confucian idea of the rectification of names, and the idea of the relational self can be put into conversation with Existentialist ideas of authenticity and radical freedom, along with other Confucian ideas about ritual propriety (禮, "li") and the importance of ritual in moral self-cultivation.

We also follow certain themes across various philosophical traditions, giving students the chance to repeatedly return to an idea and consider how it fits within a larger philosophical theory. Often there is contrast. One particularly productive theme Mason follows focuses on questions about what it means to be a human self and how the self is related to society and to the natural world. The contrast between Existentialism and Confucian ideas of the self is a good place to start, but the rejection of individualism has a different emphasis in Confucianism than it does in, say, Viola Cordova's writings.<sup>3</sup> Her work on what it is to be human is an accessible and poetic analysis of concepts of self and Other in the Jicarilla Apache tradition. She recasts the concept of the Other as a foundation for tolerance and situates human selves within distinctive tribal identities that she views as expansive accounts of what it means to be a person.

A major theme in Rider's version of the course is the relative importance of reason and emotions in human development, excellence, and flourishing. A key learning moment occurs when the course transitions (in his version) from Stoicism to Confucianism. The Stoics argue that many common emotions are irrational diseases of the mind, and ought to be eliminated in favor of a purely rational approach to life. The Confucians, by contrast, center the development of moral emotions (仁, "ren/jen") in their humanism. The *Dao De Jing* goes further, casting doubt on whether the tools we usually classify as "rational"—creating concepts, making distinctions, trying to work out the causal structure of reality—can really help us to live well at all, instead of pushing us further away from immediate experience of and engagement with the world.

As we've mentioned, exploring global philosophical traditions can help students get outside of their pre-existing set of cultural assumptions. At the same time, it is often surprising and interesting to see the extent to which philosophies that developed in very different places and times can converge. For example, Aristotle and Confucius develop similar ideas about virtue and its cultivation. Both of them argue that, to be virtuous, one must avoid extremes, seeking the appropriate midpoint (*mesotēs* in Greek, 中 *zhong* in Chinese). Also, despite their differences, the Stoics and Daoists both emphasize the need to cultivate harmony with the world around us and to avoid attempts to control. It is striking how often Stoic and Daoist recommendations about how to live life and deal with problems align. Ifeyani Menkiti's "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought" engages in comparative philosophy between Existentialism and African ways of thinking about the self.<sup>4</sup> There, Menkiti argues that although Existentialism views self-development as individualistic and some African philosophical traditions view self-development as social, they both view the development of the self as a process; selves are not a given but are instead created.

### Asking New Questions

It can also be fruitful to reflect on how we teach western philosophical theories, particularly in terms of what we take to be the key questions and perspectives within those traditions. We have found that there are opportunities to explore social justice and diverse perspectives that arise from thinking about familiar traditions in new ways. For instance, consider a broadly Epicurean approach to living well, where Epicurus advises pursuing a simple, analyzed life, rejecting false beliefs that give rise to vain and empty desires. For him, political involvement is generally more trouble than it is worth, and it is best to seek out like-minded friends and enjoy eating, drinking, and being together. Epicurus famously claims that a pleasant life is not so difficult to acquire, after all. As a free male citizen of Athens, he had access to sufficient means to establish the Garden outside Athens where his ideas could be practiced and taught, as well as a good bit of leisure that

enabled him to spend his time as he wished. It is interesting to think about what Epicurus might have to say about social activism and social justice movements, particularly the extent to which a person should be involved in these sorts of causes, which can be difficult, disruptive, and exhausting. Is it better to opt out so that one can enjoy life? Furthermore, to what extent do one's prospects for succeeding at living an Epicurean life, or a hedonistic life in general, depend on having the good luck to be born free in a society where others are enslaved, a cis-gendered male in a society where that is taken to be normative, and/or with sufficient resources to acquire pleasant experiences?

As a second example, consider a standard presentation of Existentialism, which takes Sartre's "Existentialism is a Humanism" as a key text and supplements, perhaps, with a discussion of bad-faith and/or additional readings from Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus, and Søren Kierkegaard.<sup>5</sup> One might emphasize Sartre's claim that "existence comes before essence," work through his example of the young soldier who is faced with a choice between going off to war and staying at home to care for his mother, and emphasize the inescapable tension between ourselves as object and subject, the simultaneous anxiety and possibility that results from our condition as limited physical beings who are radically free. But suppose also that a PWOL approach encourages students to reflect on how these ideas may be put into practice, to analyze the ways in which they might be living in bad faith, failing to recognize their freedom to create their own values that become the standards by which their lives are measured. We both assign Simone de Beauvoir's introduction to *The Second Sex* in the module on Existentialism, as it raises important questions about the possibility of radical freedom and authenticity when one is a member of a socially-marginalized group, and where societal norms limit self-determination in ways that seem invisible to Sartre.<sup>6</sup>

### Expanding the Picture of What Philosophy Can Look Like

As philosophy teachers, many of us have probably have been asked: What you do? When we tell them, they say, "Oh yeah, I had a philosophy class when I was in college. It was awful!" Some students have a similar expectation before they enter our classes. They expect that studying philosophy is going to require reading dense, boring books and essays, filled with impenetrable technical terminology. They cannot imagine how it connects with or grows from their everyday concerns, nor how it could be an organic part of their life.

Therefore, it is also important to notice that, as we are looking at this wide range of philosophies, we are comparing not only different sets of philosophical ideas, but also different conceptions of what philosophy can be and what a philosopher or philosophical text can look like. In Rider's course, students encounter and think about Platonic dialogues; Epicurus' Letters, in which he explains his philosophical principles to his friends; Epictetus' Stoic *Discourses*, recounting the Stoic teacher's



interactions with his students; the *Analects* of Confucius, with their pithy sayings and sharp dialogues; and poetry as philosophy in the *Dao De Jing*. All of these texts, we would insist, present us with philosophy, but their ways of doing philosophy, and the demands they make upon their readers and interpreters, are very different. Certainly, it is useful to de-center the idea that philosophy occurs only in dense books and articles with lots of confusing technical terminology. Philosophical investigation and insight can be found in many forms.

Not surprisingly, not every style appeals to every student. Some students love deciphering Laozi's poems, while others find them confusing and frustrating. Similarly, some are charmed by Plato's Socrates and his questions, while others find him infuriating. Almost everyone, however, finds something that appeals to them, a form of philosophy that they can embrace. That certainly does not happen when all of the readings look the same and present the same model of philosophy.

The Menkiti reading mentioned previously is also a good example of how a discussion of ethnophilosophy can fit well within a PWOL approach. Familiar forms of philosophy from cultures such as Ancient Greece/Rome and Ancient China arose where written traditions flourished and many philosophical texts were preserved. In cultures that do not have extensive historical written texts, ethnophilosophers analyze traditional cultural practices in order to see what may be revealed about the philosophical assumptions that underlie the practice. Ethnophilosophy specifically arose out of efforts to identify indigenous African philosophical ideas, and it challenges the view that there is little evidence of philosophical inquiry in some indigenous traditions by adopting a combined anthropological/philosophical approach. A discussion of ethnophilosophy can inspire epistemological reflection on how we know a good bit about what ancient Epicureans, Stoics, and Confucians thought, and why in comparison we know so little about, for instance, Bantu or Akan thought. There is an interesting sense in which ethnophilosophy is the inverse process of what we ask student to do in their immersive assignments by applying philosophical ideas to lived experience (see next section), and the resonances between ethnophilosophy and approaching philosophy as a way of life continue to be underexplored.

We have found, as a result, that presenting a wide range of philosophical perspectives benefits students in at least two significant ways: First, it provides students with a lot of ways of life that they can think about and select from. But also, they can see and experience a lot of different ways of doing philosophy. They get many ideas about what philosophy (and a philosopher) can be. This ties back into the idea of philosophy as a way of life. We are showing how philosophy can (and has been) done by all sorts of people, in different ways, and how it arises from the real, everyday circumstances of people's lives. If you believe (as we do) that philosophy is and should be a deep part of how we pursue a rich and excellent

human life, we need to acknowledge the many ways this can be done, and how open-ended is the range of questions it can and should consider.

### Immersive Assignments

In the previous section, we considered how our PWOL courses interact with diverse traditions, questions, and forms of philosophical inquiry. In this section, we explore how assignments can be designed that reflect the goals we take to be central in our approach to studying philosophy as a way of life. As already noted, many of the philosophers we study in the class took themselves to be offering a comprehensive picture of the world and how we ought to live in it, including claims about fundamental reality, value, identity, and relationality. The question, “What makes for a good human life?” arises out of a deeply personal inquiry: What does it mean *for me* to live a good human life? What is important for me to believe, yes, but also to care about and to do? In teaching philosophy as a way of life, we invite students to study philosophical theories in order to consider what difference that theory makes in practice. Here we describe the immersive assignments we use in our classes, and we discuss how they may be tailored to emphasize group collaboration, as well as how smaller immersive assignments can be used to prepare students for a capstone immersive experience. We also discuss the pedagogical value of immersive assignments as a way to promote in-depth understanding, and we reflect on how they center experimental and experiential aspects of a PWOL approach.

#### What are Immersive Assignments?

By immersive assignments we are referring specifically to assignments that ask students to temporarily adopt a philosophical theory and to consider how the theory might make a difference to their lives. To a certain extent, the process is similar to provisionally accepting a set of assumptions in order to see what follows. However, in an immersive assignment, the assumption one takes on is a comprehensive way of viewing the world. We both include an immersive assignment as a capstone project for the course. While we have tinkered with various details over the years, the stable core of the assignments directs students to choose one of the philosophical theories we studied in class and live it out for a few days (usually three to five). The assignment also includes some way in which students report back on their experiences. Presentations at the end of the semester provide an overview of the course that replaces a final exam. During the finals period, individual or groups of students present their findings to the whole class, describing the philosophies and ideas they tried out, and discussing their experiences. We have found the final presentations to be a highlight of the course, as well as being a great way to review a good deal of the material that we’ve studied throughout the semester.

The details of the assignment design can be modified to fit with a variety of pedagogical goals. For instance, Rider designed the project broadly as a group project, with substantial individual components. Rider conceived of the project initially to fulfill a requirement that First Year Seminar courses needed to have a substantive collaborative assignment, so it was built from the ground up as a long-term group project. Students select groups based on their expressed preferences. Informed by the readings and class discussions, their first activity together is to make a list of ideas about how one might live the philosophy. For instance, they are prompted to consider what things that the philosophy might ask or recommend that one do. Then, each student (individually) tries out the philosophy (putting it to the test) for several days, keeping a journal of their experiences. Finally, in the last week of the semester, the groups who were working on each philosophy convene to compare experiences, and put together a collaborative presentation in which they explain their findings to the rest of the class. They reflect together on what experiences they shared, what aspects of the experience were most helpful or gave them the greatest insights, and what parts they found the most challenging to implement (and why). Mason's assignment design includes a significant individual writing component, as the primary report is a portfolio that is submitted to the instructor, followed by brief presentations to the class. They work in groups during a peer review process, but the portfolio is primarily individual work, and it requires students to write an in-depth summary of their theory, develop a detailed project plan, keep track of their observations through reflective journaling, and write a critical analysis of the theory that is informed by their experience, as well as a reflection on their own learning.

Since many freshmen take this course, it has been helpful to provide some scaffolding to help students prepare for the project through a series of smaller experiential writing assignments they work on in each module. These smaller writing assignments focus on only one or two aspects of a theory and specify the sorts of activities that the students should do and provide reflection questions. For example, when students in Mason's class study Stoicism, the writing assignment is to consider a way in which they are inviting misery into their lives by trying to control things that are not in their control or failing to control what is in their control. Students are then asked to identify any impressions related to that situation that they can reconsider, and to think about whether they should revise the judgments they are making about that situation.<sup>7</sup> Similar assignments are used in each module (Hedonism, Existentialism, Confucianism, etc.), and they provide short immersive experiences alongside the study of each theory, giving students a chance to practice the process of applying a theory and then writing about it.

In whatever form they take, an immersive assignment asks students to consider: What is it like to live as X? In answering this question, students are required to develop an in-depth understanding of the theory or theories they are

studying. In fact, we have found that students seem to learn more by experiencing the philosophy than they would by just studying it as a set of doctrines. When the focus is on preparing to take a test or write an essay, too often students are primarily concerned with accurately describing a set of doctrines, without really grasping what they would really mean for their lives. But when you actually have to *do* something, it has a greater impact. Students must be able to articulate *what* X says, as well as understand *how* to apply those ideas within their own context. Applying a philosophical theory is difficult, if not impossible, to do without substantial comprehension of a theory, and going through an immersive assignment can quickly reveal any gaps in a student's understanding that they need to address as they work through the project.

In one sense, these observations are not surprising, as developing any skill requires practice. To learn to bake, it is not sufficient to watch others make cakes; one must get in the kitchen and try it out for oneself. In a course that centers questions about what it means to live well, it is not sufficient to learn what others have said about what makes life worth living, what is of fundamental value, etc. Immersive assignments specifically focus on the ability to consider the relation between theory and action, insofar as a recurring question in the class is: What difference do these ideas make for how we decide to live? They also focus on practicing skills required for stepping outside one's own presuppositions in order to consider what follows from a potentially quite different way of looking at the world. There is something experimental and experiential about the exploration of philosophy that we are encouraging students to undertake.

### Philosophical Experiments

The notion of philosophical experiment is central to the immersive assignment, as evidenced by various iterations of the assignment name: "Living Philosophically," "Putting Philosophy to the Test," and "Lived Philosophy Experiment." However, the idea of a philosophical experiment raises questions about the sense in which an immersive assignment is, in fact, *experimental* and what the goals of the experiment might be. In particular, why think that living three days as, say, an Epicurean, is a good way to evaluate it as a comprehensive way of life that has been developed over centuries? What data is produced through a brief immersive experience, and what is it useful for?

In thinking about immersive assignments as philosophical experiments, it is important to note that we are not suggesting that philosophical theories should be viewed as hypotheses that can be somehow tested in a three-day lived experiment. The sense in which we are thinking of immersive assignments as experimental has only a loose connection with formalized experiments with specific methods and aims. Rather, the relevant sense in which the assignment is an *experiment* is much closer to what someone might say if they were going to try out a new

cooking technique or ingredient. For example, one might decide to experiment with sourdough. This probably doesn't indicate that they are testing a particular hypothesis or using some formal methods of evidence gathering and evaluation. What it does mean is that they are planning on engaging in a process of discovery about sourdough—e.g., to learn how to feed a sourdough starter, to practice baking sourdough bread, to explore what flavors it enables one to produce, what challenges arise in the process, and what new possibilities it opens up for what one is able to create. To experiment in this sense is to approach a domain as a potential practitioner whose goals include developing some degree of familiarity with what one is interested in learning, but whose goals are also somewhat open-ended. One might not yet know exactly what they will learn, but they are embarking on a process of practical discovery.

For comparison, consider the way that John Stuart Mill uses the concept of “experiments of living” in Book III of *On Liberty*. Mill writes

As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, so is it that there should be different experiments of living; that free scope be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others; and that the worth of different modes of life should be proved practically.<sup>8</sup>

By this, he doesn't mean that we should do a controlled experiment with results carefully recorded and replicated for confirmation. He is suggesting that people ought to be encouraged to try out different ways of living, to expand the scope of human possibility and enrich human experience. The “proof” of a way of living is in the experiences that those participating in it have, and the example they can provide for others. Our experiments in philosophical ways of life and the activities through which the students share their experiences with each other enacts a small-scale version of this idea.

We have already noted that immersive assignments promote depth of understanding as students think through how philosophical ideas apply to their own particular contexts. Understanding is itself a goal of these philosophical experiments, but there is also an important sense in which the immersive assignment develops lived experiences that can serve as starting points for an analysis of a philosophical theory. In addition to putting forward a broader notion of experiment, we also think that these experiments broaden the range of critical analysis that students are able to do by expanding the set of questions one can ask, and, crucially, by expanding their reflective experience which can serve as a basis for evaluation. In an immersive assignment, relevant questions include more traditional areas of focus such as the question, What does this theory get right or wrong, and why? Immersive assignments better position students to answer these questions from within a deeper understanding of the theory, but they also broaden the questions one is in a position to explore—not just hypothetically, but as a result of the lived experience. Thus, philosophical experiments help put students in a

position to productively engage questions such as: How does this theory compare to your usual ways of viewing the world? What would be different if you adopted some of these ideas? What would be different if society adopted some of these ideas? What are the challenges? What ideas might one need more time to implement or internalize? Is there anything you view differently as a result of this experiment? What is it, and why did you change your mind about it?

### Experiencing Philosophy

Both the experimental aspect of immersive assignments and the depth of understanding they promote arise from the fact that immersive assignments are experiential. That is, the assignment is designed so that students experience what it is like to adopt a particular way of being in the world. To put it one way, the experiment is the experience, as the lived experience becomes the basis for an evaluation of the theory that is informed by the attempt to put a theory into practice. But there are two additional observations we think are significant when reflecting on the value of experiencing philosophy in an immersive assignment. First, the experience can be instrumental in creating space for development of curiosity, intellectual humility, open-mindedness, and other intellectual virtues. Second, the experience can, in some cases, be transformative.

Whether or not intellectual virtues are a part of the curriculum, as they are in Mason's course, many instructors view the development of various intellectual virtues as worthy pedagogical aims. While a detailed exploration of the role experience in the formation of intellectual virtues would take us too far outside the scope of the current discussion, we take the development of intellectual virtues to be, at minimum, aided by the experience of cognitive emotions, insofar as "they have their basis in and are a response to the cognitive functions of the mind."<sup>9</sup> The immersive assignment can create an experiential foundation for the development of intellectual virtues insofar as it is an occasion for the experience of cognitive emotions that motivate the development of intellectual virtues. For example, the task of implementing a rich and nuanced philosophical system, such as Confucianism, in three days can be daunting. However, the experience of being somewhat overwhelmed (without being paralyzed) can be incredibly valuable, insofar as it opens up an occasion for critical examination of why one feels overwhelmed. In many cases, the experience of being overwhelmed can be identified not as an obstacle to be overcome, but as an appropriate reaction to what one is being asked to do. What should one reasonably expect from spending three days as a Confucian, against the backdrop of one's own cultural presuppositions? What does it mean to deeply understand Confucianism, and how can one avoid superficial, misguided critiques? Can something be worth doing, even if one has reason to expect that it cannot be done completely (consider again the notion of experiment that is relevant here)? A student's experience, including not just what

they did but how they felt about it, can become a basis for the development of the virtue of intellectual humility—recognizing one’s own limitations and becoming comfortable with the fact that there is a great deal that one doesn’t know. Sometimes a key takeaway from the immersive assignment is that Confucianism cannot be mastered in a few days, but that the process of Confucian moral self-cultivation requires a long-term, sustained commitment (which is, of course, consistent with Confucian accounts of how to live well).

Sometimes students choose to work on a theory because they are eager to critique a view that initially strikes them as problematic. Critical analysis is better when it arises from open-mindedness, a virtue which includes cultivating the ability to genuinely consider a point of view that is not one’s own and to interact with the strongest version of a theory, rather than with caricatures and strawman arguments. On one particularly memorable occasion, a student who, throughout the semester, had shown a pattern of hastily jumping to conclusions without first developing a thorough understanding of the relevant ideas, chose to work on Stoicism because he was eager to critique it. His immersive experience was transformative. In his reflection, he noted that as he worked through how to live as a Stoic, he realized that he had some misconceptions about the theory. He described his process of beginning to appreciate some Stoic insights and noted that he found some of their methods to be useful. While his final assessment of Stoicism was that he still found the theory problematic, his analysis was far more nuanced and charitable as a result of his experience.

As this example suggests, the experience of an immersive assignment can lead to self-transformation when a student steps outside their ordinary ways of being in the world and immerses themselves in a different philosophy of life. Trying on different ways of looking at the world can challenge preconceptions at an experiential level, opening up possibilities for significant transformation. In one example, a few years ago a student who was working on Stoicism was practicing the Stoic advice to think about the fact that the people she loves are mortal, as advised by Epictetus in *The Enchiridion* (Chapters 3 and 14). She reported that she found this very disturbing; she cried, and she called her parents to talk to them and tell them she loved them. But after she’d had time to process it, she realized how valuable the experience had been in keeping her from taking her loved ones for granted. For another activity, a student who was working on Epicureanism used one of her journal entries to analyze her friendships. Epicurus thinks friendships are the most important tool we have for living happily, but he also emphasizes that they must be the right kinds of friends, ones who build us up and remove our stress rather than the opposite. She said she’d realized that one of her “friends” was actually toxic, and she needed to cut ties with them. It was painful, she reported, but her reflection helped her to realize that it needed to be done.

Undertaking the experience of living out a particular philosophy requires stepping outside one's ordinary habits, adopting an intentional and reflective way of living for the duration of the experience. We both set the tone for the class with an initial discussion of Socrates' claim that "the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being."<sup>10</sup> So even though Socrates' way of life is put forward as one philosophy of life among many, in a way his philosophical attitude of continual questioning sits in the background throughout, and the experience of adopting any of the philosophical theories is an experience of practicing living an examined life. The immersive assignments are thus another way to engage students in experiencing what it might be like to live an examined life.

### Conclusion: Philosophy as a Way of Life

We conclude by considering a final question: How do we, in our Philosophy for Living courses, think about *philosophy as a way of life*? This is an important question to address, because as the two of us have talked about and worked on this project, we've agreed that neither of us wants to endorse any particular conception of what philosophy is, nor to see ourselves as trying to sell our students on adopting any particular way of life. So, in what sense are we studying philosophy as a way of life?

On this question, note that there are many different ways to think about philosophy as a way of life. First, "philosophy as a way of life" can be a practice that works to examine the individual beliefs and values and social dogmas (e.g., about human nature, society, the self, and relationality) that underlie the way we act and respond to the world. Philosophical reflection can itself be thought of as an approach to living that students are taught in the class, both through learning the skills that are required for such examination, as well as through considering various claims and arguments others have made about where philosophical examination leads. In this sense, a PWOL approach invites students to reflect on how *doing* philosophy might change their lives. How does our (unexamined) worldview shape our actions? Why do we believe as we do, and do those beliefs hold up to scrutiny? What other possibilities are there, and how might thinking differently change things for us? This approach sees philosophy as a key element in building individual agency and taking control of the direction of your life. Rather than unquestioningly accepting your inherited presuppositions or, in many cases, being unable to even see those presuppositions and recognize them as contingent, a person who understands the beliefs and values that shape their life can take a more active role in determining what they believe and who they wish to become.

One might also see philosophy as a way of life as a resource for acquiring tools a person can use to think about common problems and challenges we humans face in our collective and individual lives. We all face set-backs, vulnerability, and death. We all have to think about who we are, what we value, what our priorities



will be. We have to manage relationships and social roles to think about questions like: What is friendship? What makes a good leader? What are the proper aims of education? What are the consequences of being able to choose, within limits, what I want to do and become? The philosophers that we study in this course provide students with a diverse range of ideas they can consider and even adopt in their own lives. One might even think of certain philosophical analyses as conceptual technologies, enabling us to give attention to aspects of our experience that may have been previously opaque to us, thus enabling us to understand and explore possibilities that may otherwise never have been noticed. For instance, studying Epicurus, Émilie du Châtelet, and J.S. Mill introduces students to different ways of working out broadly hedonistic theories, providing them with a structure for thinking about the various types and sources of pleasure in their own lives, strategies for how one could make one's own life more pleasant, and the pros and cons of a life organized around different conceptions of how to achieve a pleasant life. The philosophical theories we study can also be resources for specific methods and techniques that address specific problems. For example, the Stoic technique of negative visualization can be a way of addressing anxiety; someone wanting to increase and express their respect and concern for others (*ren*) might consider what rituals they could adopt; and Laozi's discussion of how names, labels, or categories (名 *ming*) shape and limit our perspective on things can enable students to reflect on how their own prejudices and expectations may distort how they see themselves and others. It is not necessary to consider philosophical theories as monolithic systems for wholesale adoption or rejection. Rather, one can adopt a more fine-grained analysis of the specific tools offered by each. Students can also be encouraged to consider what aspects of a philosophical system are central and which may be open for revision, while preserving core insights of the whole.

Finally, a third possibility gives special attention to the relation between philosophical inquiry and certain broad "philosophical" attitudes and habits we hope to inculcate in our students through the course activities. It is widely recognized that studying philosophy is an excellent way to develop skills in analytical reasoning and effective communication. However, our PWOL courses also focus on contextualizing specific skills within a broader motivational structure—e.g., being able to analyze an argument becomes situated within a context in which a student is also encouraged to be curious (curiosity), to watch out for mistakes (carefulness), and to be aware of their own limitations (humility). Explicit instruction about intellectual virtues or adoption of a robust intellectual virtues framework is optional, but we both give attention to philosophical inquiry within a broader view of living well. This, along with the emphasis on experiential aspects of the course, brings to the fore an emphasis on how studying philosophy can be a catalyst for personal transformation. It is, in short, a study of philosophy

that offers a substantive picture of what it means to flourish as a thinker and a knower, as central aspects of human experience.

There are, of course, significant overlaps between these three conceptions of a PWOL approach, and we want to emphasize that we do not see them as in opposition. On the contrary, they overlap and intersect in interesting ways, in many cases complementing and mutually supporting one another. Thus, the sense of pluralism that characterizes our approach to the study of particular philosophical theories also extends to our view that there can be many valuable ways to approach philosophy as a way of life.

### Notes

1. Cf. Epicurus, “Letter;” Epictetus, *The Enchiridion*; Epictetus, *Discourses*; and Confucius, *Analects*.
2. This idea came from an informal conversation at the 2015 Central Division APA with someone who had developed a course with a PWOL approach, and told me about it in broad outline. I returned from that conference and began building a new course. I wish I could remember who it was, as I would like to thank them.
3. Cordova and Hogan, *How It Is*.
4. Menkiti, “Person and Community.”
5. Sartre, *Existentialism*.
6. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.
7. The idea, format, and even some of the details of these assignments came from Phil Woodward, who generously shared his Practicums with me in our discussions about his own PWOL course.
8. Mill, *On Liberty*, 54.
9. Ritchhart, *Intellectual Character*, 166.
10. Plato, *Apology*, 38a.

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