

REVIEW

John Sellars, *The Art of Living: the Stoics on the Nature and Function of Philosophy*, Second Edition (London: Duckworth/Bristol Classical Paperbacks, 2009), ISBN: 978-1853997242

The publication in the prestigious “Bristol Classical Paperbacks Series” of John Sellars’ wonderfully written and well-researched *The Art of Living* is a very encouraging sign of what appears to be a new trend in ancient philosophy scholarship. It seems, indeed, that after years of skepticism Pierre Hadot’s thesis (to which Sellars acknowledges his debt) that in Antiquity philosophy was regarded as a way of life is being taken more seriously. In this respect, Sellars’ *The Art of Living* can be considered a very important contribution to ancient philosophy scholarship – a text that will probably be regarded as a classic in years to come. *The Art of Living* offers new and profound insights into the interpretation of ancient philosophy developed by Hadot and Foucault. Contrary to what professor Inwood holds in his review,¹ I think that *The Art of Living* does not miss its chance to make a serious impact on ancient philosophy scholarship.

The main thesis of *The Art of Living* is that in antiquity, and more specifically among the Stoics, philosophy was “primarily” regarded as a way of life. Sellars supports his thesis convincingly by showing that, at least for the Stoics, philosophy was considered an “art” in the ancient sense of a craft such as shoemaking, building, etc. In chapter one Sellars offers an insightful and entertaining example that suggests that in Antiquity philosophy was seen as something primarily expressed in one’s life rather than in one’s theories. Sellars’ example is that of the philosophers’ beard. According to Sellars’ reconstruction, in Antiquity the beard was seen as a defining character of a philosopher. Sellars uses the example of the beard to reach the more general conclusion that the fact that in Antiquity anecdotal and biographical materials were regarded as philosophically relevant suggests that philosophy was perceived primarily as a way of life. Sellars presents his interpretation persuasively but his reading does raise some questions. The first is that throughout Antiquity the portrayal of the defining features of a philosopher was much more controversial than what Sellars indicates. For example, among the Aristotelians the philosopher was regarded as somebody who primarily devotes his life to *theoria*; in Rome, at the beginning of the Imperial Era, it was not uncommon to see the model of the philosopher in Cato the Younger, who devoted his life to politics while remaining

¹ B. Inwood, “Review of J. Sellars, *The Art of Living: the Stoics on the Nature and Function of Philosophy*,” 2004.04.04, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (<http://ndpr.nd.edu/>).

committed to his philosophical ideals. Sellars' inference from the fact that in Antiquity people took an interest in anecdotes of philosophers' lives that they regarded philosophy primarily as a way of life is also quite controversial. The belief that anecdotes of a person's life offer insights into his character and ideas was, indeed, a common feature of many ancient biographies of political figures and it appears to be an indication more of the way they proceeded to grasp a person's character than of their view of philosophy. The attention that the Greeks and Romans paid to the lives of philosophers seems to tell us more about a limitation of contemporary scholarship than of their mind-set. Contemporary scholarship (especially in the Anglo-Saxon world) does not seem to fully appreciate how useful it can be to familiarize ourselves with the life of a thinker in order to appreciate what motivated him to reach some particular views.

In the second chapter Sellars develops a very original and penetrative analysis of the Socratic notion of art by studying texts often wrongly neglected, such as Plato's *Alcibiades*. Sellars' thesis is that, according to Socrates, philosophy is not a science (in the Aristotelian sense of a discipline that relies on first principles) but an art and, just as any other art, philosophy is better expressed in the way it is performed rather than in its theory. Sellars' view raises exegetical as well as theoretical issues. From the exegetical point of view, Sellars, as some reviewers noted,² appears to downplay the so-called intellectualist dimension of Socrates' thought. In contrast to other reviewers, I find Sellars' reading of Socrates not only persuasive but also very insightful in that it helps to better understand the rise, after Socrates' death, of thinkers such as the Cynics, who saw themselves as followers of Socrates' enterprise. It is from a theoretical point of view that Sellars' interpretation appears problematic. Sellars suggests that Socrates' understanding of philosophy as an art rather than as a science makes philosophy an activity that is primarily practical. This is because in an art, e.g., shoemaking, it is more important to be able to perform the art (repairing a shoe) than to know the theory behind it. Sellars' view of art as a primarily practical activity does, however, present a difficulty. Normally, we tend to regard as an expert in an art someone who is not just able to practice such art but also possesses theoretical knowledge. Sellars' characterization of art works well only with some examples of art such as shoemaking, which involve very little theory but not with other arts in which theory plays a more prominent role. For example, in the case of an art such as building, the knowledge of how to build a house is normally regarded as equally, if not more, important as the ability to build the house. When seeking advice on how to build a house, we typically give more credit to the opinion of an architect than to that of a construction worker.

Chapter three analyzes how the Stoics endorsed the view that philosophy is an art primarily expressed in one's life. The main merit of this chapter is that it offers the textual evidence that makes it clear that we need to seriously reconsider the traditional interpretation according to which the Stoics regarded philosophy as a predominantly intellectual activity. In developing

² cf., Inwood; A.A. Long, "Review of J. Sellars, *The Art of Living: the Stoics on the Nature and Function of Philosophy*, *Classical Review*," 56 (2006): 81-82.

his thesis Sellar seems, however, to overstress the difference between Aristotle, who is portrayed as regarding philosophy as a predominantly theoretical activity, and the Stoics, who are presented as considering philosophy as a primarily practical activity. Sellars' way of portraying Aristotle is useful in clarifying the Stoics' notion of philosophy, but it is not completely accurate. Aristotle does not think that to be a philosopher is simply to engage in an intellectual exercise that has no bearing on the way we conduct our life. Aristotle speaks not simply of an intellectual activity but, rather, of a *bios theoretikos*. That is a very specific way of living which makes our life meaningful by engaging in the activity that, more than any others, makes us human: theoretical knowledge. The so-called "theoretical man" is a man who shapes his life in a way that allows him not to attain practical benefits (ethical, economic, etc.), but rather to engage in what he perceives to be the highest activity: knowledge for the sake of knowledge. However, from Aristotle's point of view, in order to understand the value of such activity a person should develop a particular character. In *Metaphysics* I. 1-2 and the *Protrepticus* Aristotle indicates that the "theoretical man" is not an individual who disregards the importance of practical activities (including ethics), but someone who considers them as a means to an end, i.e., to possess the detachment and tranquility required to engage in the theoretical sciences.

Sellars' thesis that the Stoics regarded philosophy as an activity that is primarily expressed in a person's actions presents a further problem. His reading is based on the assumption that the Stoics considered *logos* and *askêsis* as two contrasting and competitive realms. This interpretation seems to project on the Stoics an understanding of the relation between *logos* and *askêsis* that is distinctive to our culture. In contrast to the ancient, medieval, and renaissance mentalities in our society it is quite common to consider the knowledge and skills that philosophy (or, more generally, the humanities) offers as ultimately unhelpful in practical matters. For example, today the classical idea that a solid humanistic culture is necessary to be a politician is mostly disregarded. The skepticism that ordinary people tend to have towards the possible practical benefits of philosophy is mirrored by the attitude that most philosophers have towards their own activity. As in Hermann Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game*, today many philosophers tend to see their activity as a sophisticated and cerebral game that has nothing to do with the way they conduct and consider their lives. On the contrary, in the case of the Stoics (and of most ancient thinkers) the focus appears to be not so much on contrasting "thinking" with "doing," but, rather, on developing a specific way of "being" in which the two realms, so to speak, "merge." The Stoics appear to propose an understanding of philosophy as a way of life according to which life is not simply the enacting of certain theories, but rather the acquisition of a certain "inner" (i.e., intellectual, emotional, and spiritual) state in which one's philosophical views are naturally reflected by the way one thinks, act, and feels. The fact that the Stoics are aware of the difficulties of translating their philosophical views into action does not mean that they regard *logos* and *askêsis* as two realms that are in tension. On the contrary, they believed that to "know" a theory is not just to have intellectual familiarity with it, but to internalize it to such an extent that it becomes "second nature." In this respect, the study of a theory, its constant revision and reconsideration via teaching and writing, and the enacting of such a theory are intertwined processes that all make such theory "seep into our

soul.” Given their understanding of philosophy as a way of life, the Stoics would probably have great trouble understanding the contemporary mindset according to which a person can spend his entire life studying Stoic philosophy without ever taking into account its theories when evaluating his own life or making ethical choices.

In chapter four Sellars offers a very informative and crisp analysis of how Sextus Empiricus endorses the view that philosophy is ultimately concerned with the transformations of one’s life, despite producing many objections to the idea of philosophy as a way of life. In chapter five Sellars follows the lead of Pierre Hadot, who shows that Stoics gave great importance to various types of practices (meditating on the nature of death, writing philosophical works, following a particular dietary regime, etc.) that Hadot calls “spiritual exercises.” Sellars’ investigation of why and how spiritual exercises allow men to embrace the philosophical life is lucid and effective. Sellars shows how, according to the Stoics, the goal of spiritual exercises is to bridge the gap between *logos* and *askêsis*. According to this reading, spiritual exercises are what allow philosophers to translate their theories into practice. Sellars’ emphasis on the difference between *logos* and *askêsis*, however, seems to skew his understanding of Stoics’ spiritual exercises. In contrast to what Sellars suggests, it appears that the goal of such exercises is not simply to translate abstract theories into a way of life, but, rather, to help a person to acquire and maintain a particular “inner state.” For example, activities such as teaching, engaging in philosophical discussions, or writing philosophical texts are forms of spiritual exercise because they put us in a particular state of being. When we engage in these scholarly activities we detach ourselves from the everyday world and develop new ways of looking at it.

In chapters six and seven Sellars shows how Epictetus’s *Handbook* and Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations* can be interpreted as examples of spiritual exercises. The main merit of Sellars’ outstanding analysis of these two influential works is to show convincingly that Epictetus’s *Handbook* and Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations* should be taken seriously as philosophical texts alongside more theoretical works such as Aristotle’s treatises. Sellars interprets Epictetus’s *Handbook* as an attempt to show the need to engage in certain spiritual exercises in order to learn how to employ theoretical knowledge in order to shape one’s character. According to this reading, the study of philosophical theories is only an initial step in the process of becoming a philosopher, a process that needs to be completed by developing the ability to enact such theories. Sellars’ interpretation, although very persuasive, appears to be too schematic in that it considers *logos* and *askêsis* as two different steps that should come one after the other. This picture fails to appreciate the dynamic nature of philosophical knowledge. As opposed to other types of knowledge, knowledge in philosophy is not just a matter of “learning” a theory, but of “understanding” it. It is because philosophical knowledge has the peculiar feature of allowing several levels of understanding that *logos* and *askêsis* are intrinsically related in such a way that one informs the other and vice-versa. Philosophical knowledge can, indeed, be deepened by difficulties human beings encounter when trying to enact some philosophical theories because such difficulties may lead them to reconsider their theories. Similarly, a purely abstract analysis of the problems of a given theory may lead philosophers to embrace different life-styles – in this respect the practical effects that theoretical dis-

agreements had among members of the ancient philosophical schools is quite telling. This suggests that philosophical theories cannot be learnt once and for all since life experiences as well as further thinking always create the need for further considerations. On this reading, it seems that the goal of texts such as Epictetus's is to show how philosophy is the interplay between *logos* and *askêsis*, rather than an analysis of how to transform *logos* into *askêsis*.

In the last chapter Sellars offers a very penetrative analysis of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*. He sees the *Meditations* as the work of an "advance apprentice" in philosophy who, having learned philosophical theories, has to "digest" them in order to be able to act according to them. This suggestion, though fascinating, seems to rely on the view that philosophical theories are something static that we first learn and then apply. If this were true the *Meditations* would be nothing more than Marcus Aurelius's attempt to gain further familiarity with Stoic theories. On the contrary, the *Meditations* is a more profound text in which Marcus Aurelius reconsiders and revisits Stoic theories in the light of his own experiences as well as his own intellection investigations. On this reading, it seems that Sellars' distinction between "theoretical treatises" (such as Aristotle's works and Alexander of Aphrodisias's commentaries) and texts written for a practical purpose (such as Epictetus's *Handbook* and Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*) is not very persuasive. Aristotle never intended to write abstract treatises and Alexander of Aphrodisias's commentaries are not meant to be intellectual exercises comparable to contemporary commentaries on Aristotle's works. Both Aristotle and Alexander of Aphrodisias saw their works as occasions to reflect on particular philosophical problems or on other philosophers' views and, more generally, to engage in the activity that made their life worth living, i.e., theoretical thinking. In this respect, the works of Aristotle, Alexander of Aphrodisias, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius are similar in that they all regard the activity of writing philosophical texts as a way of making philosophy a way of life.

The many issues that *The Art of Living* raises are not a sign of its limitations but, rather, of its richness. It is because *The Art of Living* investigates so precisely and rigorously the Stoic notion of philosophy as a way of life that it is possible to consider the various problems that the discussion of such a topic raises. *The Art of Living* is a stimulating work that offers scholars interested in the ancient idea of philosophy as a way of life a rich source for further thought and investigation.

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