

REVIEW

John M. Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), ISBN: 978-0-691-13860-2

“Philosophy is no doubt a delightful thing,” Callicles says to Socrates in Plato’s *Gorgias*, “as long as one is exposed to it in moderation at the appropriate time of life. But if one spends more time with it than he should, it’s a man’s undoing.”¹ John M. Cooper’s *Pursuits of Wisdom* sets out, much as Socrates did in reply to Callicles, to show his readers “how wonderfully good and, above all, interesting the philosophies of antiquity are,” and his intricate and lucid reconstructions of the philosophies of Socrates, Aristotle, the Stoics, the Epicureans, the Skeptics, and the Platonists provide a useful account of why philosophy is such a “delightful thing.” Yet, while offering perspicuous readings of these philosophers’ arguments, Cooper’s book also misses an opportunity to convince the likes of Callicles today. Reading *Pursuits of Wisdom* does make one marvel at the variety and intellectual riches of ancient philosophy, but it leaves unexamined what living these philosophies in the ancient world actually consisted of—not to mention how these philosophies might constitute a way of life in the twenty-first century.

According to Cooper, philosophy as a way of life describes the idea that we can “live our lives from some set of argued through, rationally worked out, rationally grasped, and rationally defended, reasoned ideas about the world and one’s own place within it.”² In ancient philosophy, this idea consists of three interlocking claims. *First*, reason is taken to have the power to inquire into and recognize the truth as such. Philosophy as a way of life thus rules out religious revelation or romantic insight as modes of acquiring the truth. *Second*, reason can be perfected. Pursuing wisdom entails not just relying on one’s reason, but improving that reason through inquiry. *Third*, knowledge is psychologically decisive. Reason motivates action by obtaining decisive knowledge; usually only one set of views adds up to truth. These three interconnected assumptions no longer appear on the intellectual landscape of philosophy today, Cooper notes, but they once constituted the essential structure of a formidable tradition of philosophical reflections in antiquity.

Cooper begins his study with Socrates, who models the pursuit of wisdom followed by many in the subsequent tradition. According to Cooper, Socrates argues that the good condi-

¹ Here I use the translation of Alexander Nehamas in John M. Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 484c.

² John M. Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 17. All further citations to this text will appear in the text.

tion of the soul (and thus virtue) is wisdom. While human beings can never fully attain wisdom, which makes human goodness precarious and unsteady, Socrates nonetheless endorses its pursuit. The lack of any permanent condition in human affairs does not preclude recognizing the unity of virtue as well as the necessity of acting virtuously for happiness. Socrates emphasizes that while we may never reach certain knowledge about how one should live, philosophy requires a commitment to one's reason and following the results it bears.

While Socrates introduces philosophy as a way of life, Aristotle begins to complicate it. Socrates had pursued wisdom only in the realm of moral philosophy; his questions thus concerned ethical concepts such as justice, virtue, and happiness. Aristotle, however, separates the "essentially practical" (73) ethical and political knowledge pursued by Socrates from the theoretical knowledge pursued by the true philosopher. Aristotle thus offers two different happy lives: the happy life achieved through practical virtues where morality pervades one's life; and the happy life achieved through theoretical or intellectual virtues. The latter turns out, on Cooper's reading, to supersede the former in importance: true moral virtue requires significant theoretical knowledge whereas practical virtue, by implication, depends more on the communal enterprise of the political community.

For the Stoics, "all philosophy is practical." (218) Philosophy as a way of life begins for the Stoics from the theory of *eudaimonism*, the idea that happiness can function as the single constant goal or end for a well-lived life. (150) Yet this theory, as Cooper shows, depended in turn on complex metaphysical commitments and claims about the physical world. First, one must live in agreement with what the Stoics call the world spirit, a metaphysical embodiment of what we might call "the way of the world." Living in agreement with the world spirit means thinking the same thoughts it does, which entails discerning its thoughts in the first place. Second, one must live in accordance with nature, which means aligning oneself with natural outcomes. On these theories, human virtue requires an active practice of concordance: making sure one acts in harmony with the order of the world, while also resisting attachments to the ephemeral objects that populate it; reason provides the best guide to distinguishing what is good from what is merely of value and aligning oneself accordingly. Happiness comes from achieving this concordance: living in agreement with the world's mind, being in harmony with the rational order. Philosophy is practical, because it allows one to discern the best path of concordance, to discover the essential structure of the cosmos according to which the best life is possible.

In contrast to the Stoics' cosmic view of reason, the Epicureans advance an empirical account, arguing that reason names a naturally arising power of human beings grounded in and limited by human powers of sensation and feeling. Not metaphysical inquiry but reflection on experience teaches us that pleasure is the only thing with value in itself; the human good therefore consists in maximizing *katastemic* pleasure, the pleasures of waking awareness undistracted by other desires and inclinations, with appropriate *kinetic* pleasures, the pleasures produced by special circumstances, admixed. While virtue is important, it ultimately has only an instrumental value: wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice all serve as a means toward pleasure. Similarly, while the Epicureans recognize the pleasures only attainable through friendship, they nonetheless prescribe, "living unnoticed" as a way to avoid disturb-

ance. Continuous philosophical activity has no pride of place, as these convictions need only rest on habituation.

“Living without believing anything,” Skeptics return a pared-down philosophical inquiry à la Socrates to the center of living a good life. Yet, while continuing the Socratic legacy, the Skeptics constitute a major exception to the other philosophies contained in Cooper’s account. Whereas Socrates, Aristotle, the Stoics, and the Epicureans took reason (and its self-development) as fundamental to developing knowledge about how to live, with Aristotle, the Stoics, and the Epicureans going so far as to present comprehensive theories of human nature, the world, and the cosmos in order to support their accounts of philosophy as a way of life, Skeptics doubt the very possibility of such theories—and thus the basic foundations of philosophy as Cooper describes it. Because we can never satisfy the basic requirements of what it would mean to know something, Skepticism denies the possibility of positive doctrine; at most one can avoid disturbances that might come from an attachment to appearances, although even in this instance one cannot claim to know anything undergirding such a pursuit. Still, Skepticism allows for better and worse ways of dealing with appearances, giving some place for the kind of philosophical activity, which would make it worthy of inclusion as a “philosophy as a way of life.” Sextus Empiricus, Cooper’s primary source for Skepticism, lists fourfold “everyday observances” that skeptics following appearances can use to structure their life: direction by nature, necessitation by passive affection, handing down of laws and customs, and teaching of professional occupations. (295) Skeptics “question nothing that is authoritatively accepted in their community,” (296) yet they are also not simply “dumb and lazy people” (298) merely following convention. Instead, skeptics maintain a positive commitment to philosophy as a way of life even while they reject the idea that philosophy could yield the answers it promises. Skeptics are richer for their “love affair with philosophy,” as Cooper puts it, but it remains a disappointing one. (299)

While Plato shadows many of Cooper’s accounts of philosophy as a way of life, he remains in the background: Plato’s texts provide the basis for Cooper’s notional Socrates and Plato’s theories serve as spring-boards for the later thought of Aristotle, the Stoics, and Epicurus, as Cooper notes (68); however, Cooper explicitly declines to discuss Plato’s philosophy as a separate, passable way of life. When Plato does appear, he comes in the guise of the later school that would bear his name: Platonism. Platonism introduces a major contrast with other schools: rather than striving to enrich and deepen our existence as beings living on earth, Platonism seeks to disengage us, to take us away from animal life. Instead, Platonists maintain that life consists in activities of pure intellectual thinking; being alive means keeping ourselves alive in this intellectual way. Platonism thus advances a series of radical theories about human nature and the human person. Human persons are just one part of their souls, namely their reason or intellect; personhood thus depends upon developing this reason and intellect, which is accomplished through philosophy. Philosophy begins when one wonders what the nature of something is (or even, more generally, about what a nature could possibly be). Following Plato’s usage, Platonists call these natures Forms. To be the nature of something, that is to be a Form, something must itself be that nature in a complete and perfect way. Contemplation of the Forms, therefore, allows human beings to perfect themselves by considering this true perfection; however, this self-perfection comes through distancing from the illusory mate-

rial world distant from the Forms themselves. Thus, while Platonism does not discourage care for bodies and the world, it regards both as separate from what human beings actually are.

The extreme degree to which the Platonists distance philosophy from the actuality of lived human experience means that the arc of *Pursuits of Wisdom* from Socrates to the Platonists covers a journey from a practice of philosophy deeply involved in the ethical and political questions of its day—so deeply involved that Socrates would be put to death by his native Athens—to a practice of philosophy that considers the whole of what we take as real as an illusion, instead devoting itself to formal intellectual activity purified of the body and embodied existence. Seen through Aristotle’s division between practical and theoretical approaches to philosophy as a way of life, in this study Cooper remains, at least implicitly, on the theoretical side. *Pursuits of Wisdom* focuses almost exclusively on the theories of these philosophers with very little discussion of how their theories translate to a practical way of life. Indeed, Cooper explicitly limits himself to “examining these philosophies as philosophies, that is, as systems of thought.” (22) Yet such an approach leaves open two questions: how were these philosophies instantiated—how were they *lived*—as actual ways of life? And, perhaps more importantly, how are *we* to live our lives according to these philosophies? What would this look like?

Given our ample repository of ancient testimonia about what these lives looked like, Cooper seems to have missed a rich opportunity. While Cooper does mention the general circumstances of each school, he does not describe how practitioners inhabited their particular historical contexts. James Miller’s recent *Examined Lives*,³ with its portraits of Socrates, Plato, Diogenes, Aristotle, and Seneca shows the potential for such an approach, which allows one to reckon both with how these philosophers “lived their creeds” as well as to appreciate the exemplarity of particular lives dedicated to philosophy. (I would love to read Cooper’s review of Miller or vice versa.) Moreover, Cooper’s examination of this philosophy only “as philosophy” (22) raises questions about what these philosophies looked like “as life.” What difference does it make to “philosophy as a way of life” if the philosopher roams the streets and households of Athens (Socrates) or creates his own institution of learning outside the city walls (Plato)? Mary Dietz has recently suggested that Aristotle’s *Politics* only makes sense when we understand Aristotle’s position in the midst of the decline of the city-state at the hands of Alexander the Great’s conquest, as “between polis and empire.”⁴ How then might this situation have changed the possible expressions of his philosophy as a way of life? More generally, how could the Skeptics actually live without believing anything (which was itself *the* question of ancient skepticism)? Can we call Platonism a “way of life” when their concept of life seems to deny so much of what one might consider living?

These historical questions have a complement in the present. Work such as the recently translated lectures of Michel Foucault as well as Judith Butler’s *Giving an Account of Oneself*,⁵ which draws on these lectures, has begun to translate philosophy as a way of life from antiqui-

³ James Miller, *Examined Lives: From Socrates to Nietzsche* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2011).

⁴ Mary G. Dietz, “Between Polis and Empire: Aristotle’s *Politics*,” *American Political Science Review*, vol. 106, no. 2 (May 2012), 275 - 293.

⁵ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

ty into the register of intersubjective practices of freedom today. Perhaps in a nod to studies inspired by ancient philosophy as a way of life, Cooper criticizes Pierre Hadot's discussion of "spiritual exercises" for being insufficiently attentive to the primary place of reason in philosophy as a way of life. (22) This seems fair: Hadot overemphasizes the ritualistic elements of certain ancient philosophies and underplays their commitments to rational inquiry. Yet Hadot and Foucault differed on the degree to which these spiritual practices could translate into the present on various grounds: Hadot asserts, contrary to Foucault, that the philosophies of antiquity require a metaphysical or religious background on which to operate; while today we need not believe in the Stoics' nature or universal reason, spiritual practices still must entail "see[ing] the universe with new eyes."⁶ By overlooking this crucial difference between the care of self according to Foucault and the care of the self according to Hadot, Cooper's study passes by a fundamental question for any attempt to reconstruct philosophy as a way of life for the present: how has the world—political, social, and cultural—changed in the millennia since these philosophers' lifetimes that may render their doctrines and practices untranslatable or at least in need of significant correction? Or, conversely, how would a commitment to these philosophies lead us to see the world "with new eyes"?

Alexander Nehamas implicitly raises these questions in his work on philosophy as a way of life;⁷ by examining Socrates' influence on and appearance in Plato, Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Foucault, Nehamas shows that while such translation can proceed, the meaning and function of Socrates' philosophy will change in the process. For Nehamas, philosophy as a way of life gives birth to a project of self-fashioning, one where reason can play a role but not necessarily the crucial one. This calls attention to another question that lingers on the heels of *Pursuits of Wisdom*: how has reason, the most foundational element of these ancient philosophies according to Cooper, changed? That is, can we assert, as Cooper does, that these theories "open up illuminating and clarifying perspectives" that will "enrich" our thought (xi) without coming to terms with the powerful critiques of reason from the past century, whether Nietzsche's or Foucault's or Habermas's? Admittedly, such an encounter stands outside of *Pursuits of Wisdom*, but it also haunts the assertions upon which the book stakes its claims to relevance. I fear a Calicles today would be left unsatisfied.⁸

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⁶ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, translated by M. Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 212. A more extensive treatment of Hadot and Foucault on these questions will appear in Joel Alden Schlosser and Brendan Boyle, "Foucault and the Classics," *Foucault Studies*, forthcoming.

⁷ Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

⁸ This version of the book review was published on Dec. 4, 2013. It includes a minor modification and replaces the first version published September 2013.