
CHAPTER I

Introduction

On Philosophy as a Way of Life

1.1. Philosophy Ancient, Modern, and Contemporary

Philosophy is a subject of study. In this, it is just like physics, mathematics, French language and literature, anthropology, economics, and all the other established specialties in contemporary higher education. Undergraduate institutions everywhere have departments of philosophy offering degrees in the subject. These departments are staffed with lecturers and professors with advanced degrees certifying their preparation as teachers and as professional philosophers—as people who pursue research in the field and write articles and books of philosophy and on philosophy, just as physics lecturers do physics and write on physics, or anthropologists do and write on anthropology. In fact, this book is just such a book of philosophy, written by a professional philosopher and teacher of philosophy.

But, even as a subject of study, philosophy is different from all these others. One indication of this is the fact—often a cause of frustration, even irritation, in professional philosophers when confronted by it—that in the popular imagination, and even among many beginning students, a philosopher is often conceived simply as someone who has a wide and deep experience of human life and insight into its problems. On this view, a philosopher is supposed to be a wise person, full of good advice on what to value in life most and what is worth valuing less, on how to deal with adversity and how to develop and sustain a balanced and harmonious, properly human, outlook on life, one's own and others'. So professional philosophers are often vaguely thought of—until closer acquaintance dissipates this idea—as especially wise people, with deep knowledge of human life

and its problems. Moreover, the connection of philosophy to wisdom about human life is also reflected in the prevalence nowadays of the idea of a “philosophy of life,” and in the attribution of a “philosophy” to pretty much anyone who seems to have some consistent set of ideas about what to value and strive for in life, and can at least claim they are guiding their own choices and courses of action with them. But people speak of their own “philosophy of life” with no thought of professional philosophy, or of philosophy as a subject of study, as any sort of source or foundation for it. On the contrary, a “philosophy of life” is felt to be such a personal thing that its status as a philosophy might seem degraded if it were subject to validation by—let alone if it resulted from—rigorous study within an intellectual discipline having its own principles and its standards of evidence and argument. Your personal commitment and your resulting strength in leading your life are proof enough, or so people seem to feel.

Even so, there are ties linking these popular ideas about philosophy to the subject of study that is pursued and taught in philosophy departments by professional philosophers. Indeed, I believe that these ideas reflect something deeply ingrained in philosophy from early on in its origins (for us in the European intellectual tradition) in ancient Greece, even if this may not be prominent in contemporary philosophy today. In antiquity, beginning with Socrates, as I will argue in this book, philosophy was widely pursued as not just the best guide to life but as both the intellectual basis and the *motivating force* for the best human life: in the motto of the U.S. undergraduate honor society Phi Beta Kappa (even if ΦΒΚ never understood it in quite the ways the ancient philosophers did), for these philosophers, philosophy is itself the best steersman or pilot of a life (βίου κυβερνήτης). Over most of the one thousand years of philosophy in ancient Greece and Rome, philosophy was assiduously studied in every generation by many ancient philosophers and their students as the best way to become good people and to live good human lives. That history has left its mark in these popular ideas.

Indeed, one aspect of ancient philosophy as a way of life has survived intact in philosophy nowadays: the prominence among philosophy’s varied subfields of ethics or moral philosophy. When Socrates introduced this ancient ambition for philosophy, he notoriously did so by shifting his focus away from the study of the world of nature in general to specifically that of human nature and human life. He established ethics or moral philosophy as one part of the subject (for him, in fact, his sole interest). As it has been practiced since the Renaissance—and things were not so very different for philosophy in ancient Greece and Rome—

philosophy is traditionally conceived as composed of three branches, namely, metaphysical philosophy, natural philosophy, and moral philosophy.¹ It is true that these traditional terms, especially “natural philosophy,” are somewhat out of fashion nowadays. Philosophers today speak of philosophy of science instead.² In fact, it is not uncommon to hear a different threesome mentioned, namely, metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Other established specialties not easily brought under any of these principal headings are recognized, too (logic, philosophy of language, philosophy of art, and so on). In ancient philosophy, from the time of the Stoics and Epicureans, the standard threesome *διαλεκτική*, *φυσική*, *ἠθική* prevailed—that is, dialectic (which included logic, philosophy of language, and epistemology), philosophy of nature (“physics”), and ethics. What stands out in all these divisions of the subject—the ancient, as well as the traditional modern and the contemporary ones—is the enduring presence of ethics, or moral philosophy as it is also called, as one of the three principal components of philosophy.

In the ancient scheme “ethics” or *ἠθική* meant the philosophical study of human moral character, good and bad, and of the determinative function in structuring a person’s life that their character was assumed to have—character being their particular, psychologically fixed and effective, outlook on human life, and on the differing weight and worth in a life of the enormously varied sorts of valuable things that the natural and the human worlds make available to us. In fact, the alternative term “moral philosophy” itself has its origin in Cicero’s decision (in the first century BCE) to render the Greek *ἠθική* with his own coinage, *moralis*, meaning in Latin essentially the same thing: the philosophical study of moral character.³ Contemporary moral philosophy or ethics is different, as a result of the long development of human cultures since antiquity, and correspondingly of changed bases for philosophical reflections upon our human circumstances, and as a result of changed conceptions internal to philosophy itself as to what philosophy can, and cannot, reasonably hope to accomplish. The ancient philosophers all agreed in assuming, as I have implied, the centrality of moral character (good or bad) to the conduct of individual human lives; ancient literature (history, drama, poetry) and many cultural practices, both in Greece and

¹ See *Random House Dictionary*, s.v. “philosophy.”

² In early modern philosophy “natural philosophy” denoted natural science (including astronomy and physics); the field of philosophy of science is a recent creation.

³ See Cicero, *On Fate* I 1. As Cicero says there, the customary translation into Latin of the Greek word for character, *ἦθος*, was (in the plural) *mores*; all he had to do was form an adjective from this noun, in parallel to the corresponding well-established Greek adjective.

later in Rome, supported them in this. People of outstandingly good character were held up as models, both in literature and in life, or, more commonly, those of bad or flawed character were the focus of fascinated attention, in both daily life and high-cultural contexts.

Among the other changes that modernity has wrought in our ways of thinking, the focus in moral philosophy or ethics has shifted—away from good and bad character and toward morally right and wrong action. Current ethical theories do indeed include something called “virtue ethics,” indebted to the ancient writings in the central role assigned within it to moral character. But more prominent, indeed dominant, in the field are other familiar theories, in particular those of two types. First, there is utilitarianism, or in general what are called consequentialist theories of ethics, in which moral requirements are related to and justified in terms of their supposedly good consequences for self and others. Second, we find theories indebted to Kant’s ideas about a supposed “categorical” imperative as establishing the priority of “moral reasons” (ones deriving from other people’s needs and interests, together with one’s own, and others’, human powers and status as rational agents) over concerns (otherwise legitimate, of course) for one’s own pleasure or material advantage, or simply over one’s particular desires—likes and dislikes—or special relationships one may stand in of love or family, and the like.

Again, some theories give special prominence to individuals’ “intuitions” about what is the right thing to do in given specific sets of circumstances, or more generally in recurrent ones. And, indeed, some current work by psychologists on the psychological basis of human morality, and its grounding in evolution, starts from the assumption that morality is nothing but a specific, widely shared, set of such intuitions about right and wrong.⁴ And some philosophers, too, in what they call experimental philosophy do surveys of ordinary people to see how they report their intuitions about various “scenarios,” drawing conclusions from the often surprising results about the contents and structural features of the “ordinary morality” of perceived right and wrong actions.⁵ And there are many other types of theory too: “divine command” theories, and one based on so-called natural law, for example. One striking common point, though, for all these theo-

⁴See, e.g., Hauser, *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong*, also published in paperback under the title *Moral Minds: The Nature of Right and Wrong*.

⁵Joshua Knobe, Shaun Nichols, Jesse Prinz, and John Doris have done prominent work of this sort. On the severe limitations on experimental philosophy’s contribution to ethical theory, see Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics*.

ries is their principal focus on the question of right versus wrong action (not, as for the ancients, good versus bad character). Contemporary theories concern, and offer different proposals about, which actions in given circumstances are right, and which wrong, and what the ultimate basis is for deciding that question. In general, then, one can say that contemporary ethical theory (i.e., what is called “normative” ethics)⁶ concerns centrally and primarily right versus wrong actions, and how to explain and, perhaps, justify assigning this or that action to one or the other of those classifications. Ancient moral philosophy, by contrast, as I have said, starts from and focuses on goodness and badness of character: rightness and wrongness of action comes into ancient ethical theories, to the extent it does at all, as the expression, respectively, of good and bad character.

Nonetheless, as noted above, despite these differences between modern and ancient philosophy, and leaving aside the vast array of differing approaches to ethical questions in contemporary moral theory, as just summarized, ethics is and has always been one principal component of philosophy. That fact establishes the difference that I claimed above between philosophy as a subject of study and any of the other specializations offered in universities as undergraduate majors and for graduate training. Whether one is trying to arrive at a satisfactory result concerning the bases for deciding right and wrong, or thinking and learning about good human character, as grounded in judgments concerning what is valuable in life, moral philosophy deals with questions about how one (how anyone) ought to live. Since everyone has a life to live, this subject professes to concern everyone, and not in some incidental way, or in some way that can be left to others (to experts) to see to. Other subjects may and indeed do have much to teach that can have practical value, beyond whatever may be intrinsically interesting about the questions they take up and the ways in which they pursue them. But moral theory takes as its subject something that concerns everyone directly. (At least, it does so if it can return the investment of time and energy required.)⁷ Moral philosophy, and so philosophy taken altogether, does propose itself as having a different intellectual standing, in this respect, from other subjects of study. It is inherently a practical subject, at least in part, one

⁶I set aside here “meta-ethics,” concerned with the analysis of moral language and the sociology and psychology of ethics, and other studies of ethics from the outside.

⁷This does not mean that everyone, if rational, must or even ought to study moral philosophy: one might reject the idea that philosophy can achieve what it sets out to achieve, or not think it sufficiently worthwhile to spend time thinking about how to live, instead of just proceeding with doing it, in light of where one already stands in life at a time when the issue of how to live might arise. After all, life is short, while art—especially this art of living—is long.

that engages directly with universally applicable questions of how to live and what to do—whereas, it seems, none of the others has such a status of mandatory universal personal concern.⁸

Only in antiquity, however, did philosophy realize to the fullest extent all that moral philosophy's combination of theory and practice might involve. Nowadays, normative ethical theories, or normative political theories, attempt to tell us what we should do or not do, personally or politically, where questions of what we owe to one another simply by living in the world together arise (i.e., questions of moral right and wrong)—but only there. So contemporary philosophical argument, analysis, and theory, of a highly intellectual and to some extent abstract kind, offers itself as guiding us to correct practical decisions and actions, telling us about certain actions or policies as right or wrong, and on that basis as to be done or enacted, or not.

But beginning with Socrates, as I mentioned above, ancient philosophers made philosophy the, and the only authoritative, foundation and guide for the whole of human life, not just as to questions of right and wrong action—a limited part of anyone's life.⁹ For these thinkers, only reason, and what reason could discover and establish as the truth, could be an ultimately acceptable basis on which to live a life—and for them philosophy is nothing more, but also nothing less, than the art or discipline that develops and perfects the human capacity of reason. No one can lead their life in a finally satisfactory way without philosophy and the understanding that ideally, anyhow—when finally successful and “complete”—only philosophy can provide.¹⁰ And, to speak positively, when one does possess a completely grounded philosophical understanding of the full truth about how to live, by living one's life through that understanding one achieves the finally and fully satisfactory life for a human being. In this way, for these ancient Greek philosophers, philosophy itself became a way of life. Socrates himself, in setting the pattern for all later thinkers in this tradition, made the activities of philosophizing (philosophical discussion and argument) central ones of that best life: so in this tradition philosophy was indeed a subject of study, with basic principles, and theories and arguments and analyses, and refutations of tempting but erroneous views, and so on. But the whole body of knowledge that, when finally worked out fully, would constitute the finished result of such philo-

⁸On “literature as a way of life,” see endnote 1.

⁹For Socrates, and my reasons for regarding him as the philosopher who initiated the ambition to make philosophy a way of life, see chapter 2.

¹⁰On the special status of ancient skeptics within the Greek philosophical tradition, see endnote 2.

sophical study, was also not only the best guide to living (by telling you how to live, and what to do or not do, in all aspects of life), but one's full grasp of that knowledge was to be the very basis on which the best life would then be led. Philosophy was not merely to guide one's life. One was to become a good person and live a good human life not as a mere result of philosophical study and by following its precepts; rather, precisely in and through one's philosophical reasoning and understanding of the world, of what is valuable in life, and of what is not so valuable, one was supposed to structure one's life continuously, as one led it, and to keep oneself motivated to live it. One was to live one's life from, not just, as one could put it, in accordance with, one's philosophy. Your philosophy did not just guide your life, it steered your life directly, from its implanted position in your mind and character. Philosophy would be the steersman of one's whole life. My aim in this book is to explain and explore this ancient tradition of philosophy as a way of life, as it was founded by Socrates and as later thinkers, adopting Socrates's ambitions for philosophy, successively applied and elaborated his conception in their own individual ways. This tradition lasted unbroken from Plato through to the eclipse of ancient pagan philosophizing and its ultimate replacement as a way of life in the Greek and Roman world by the Christian religion.

Philosophy conceived as a way of life encompassed, if not for Socrates (for reasons special to him that I will explain in the next chapter), then for his successors, the whole subject, not only philosophy's moral part. All the major thinkers in this tradition regarded the subject of philosophy in all its parts, and gave good reasons for so doing, as a completely integrated, mutually connected and supporting, single body of knowledge. The "moral" part was not something separable and could not be fully comprehended except along with the philosophy of nature (including the theory of the divine), logic, the theory of knowledge, philosophy of language, and, above all, metaphysics. So in our exploration in this book of the ancient Greek tradition of philosophy as a way of life, we will be occupied not only with ethical theories of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Epicurus, the ancient Pyrrhonian skeptics, and the Platonists of the imperial period, but also with their metaphysical theories and philosophy of nature, and, though less centrally so, with their logic, epistemology, and philosophy of language, as well. We will need to grasp in each case the whole worldview proposed by each of these philosophies, as the context necessary to understand and fully ground what they propose about the best way of leading a human life. Each of the ancient ethical theories simply expresses a particular moral outlook, on the basis of an all-

encompassing, particular philosophical worldview—different for each of them, in important regards. Each ethical theory presents a certain conception of the place and role in human life of the whole vast array of different sorts of goods and bads, or more generally of things of positive and negative value, that our nature as human beings makes available to us. Despite various points in common, the Platonist worldview differs from the Aristotelian, and both differ from the Stoic, from the Epicurean, and from the Skeptic. And in each case the moral outlook expressed in the respective ethical theories derives in crucial ways from that worldview—and so, those differ correspondingly, too. For that reason, it is entirely appropriate to speak, as Socrates and others in this tradition did, of philosophy, as they conceive of it, and not instead only moral philosophy or ethics, as proposing and constituting a way of life.

It is not my intention to offer an account of the ways that later philosophy—medieval, early modern, nineteenth century, twentieth century, and contemporary—differs from ancient philosophy in this regard, much less to attempt to explain such differences in historical or in substantive philosophical terms. That would require much knowledge that I do not possess. But it may help to set the ancient philosophical tradition in sharper focus if, before turning to further preliminary remarks about it, I offer some brief, admittedly speculative comments on philosophy in these different other philosophical worlds.

The late Pierre Hadot, distinguished French scholar of Plotinus and late ancient Platonism, has given a persuasive account of the transformation of philosophy from a way of life into what it is today: no more than a subject of theoretical study. Hadot argued that this transformation actually began in a decisive way not within pagan philosophy itself, but rather with transformations during late ancient times within Christianity—a major opponent of pagan philosophy at that time.¹¹ For Hadot, the transformation in philosophy was completed, and the new, purely theoretical conception of philosophy firmly established, in the inclusion of philosophy in the medieval universities' curriculum as just such a study. In his influential books published in English with the titles *Philosophy as a Way of Life* and *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, and in the French articles and books from which these derive,¹² Hadot explains how the new religion of the followers of Jesus Christ, as it expanded to encompass Greeks and Romans of all

¹¹ For further discussion of Hadot's account see below, pp. 20–22.

¹² Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* presents a rearranged and expanded translation of *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, and in Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* Chase translates, with some corrections by Hadot himself, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?*

classes, itself claimed also to be a philosophy—that is, a way of life grounded in a philosophical, but also religious, worldview. Indeed, Christianity claimed to be the one true and valid philosophy—all the pagan philosophies were rejected as inadequate and false.¹³ Of course, the doctrinal content of this religion-cum-philosophy, corresponding to the philosophical tenets of a straight or pure philosophy (such as Plato's or Aristotle's), had its ultimate basis not, as with the pagan philosophies, in rational insight and reasoned argument, but in the Christians' holy scriptures. It did not derive, ultimately and completely, from philosophy, allegedly giving the results of philosophical reason's own judgments. Nonetheless, if the new religion was to succeed in recruiting Greeks and Romans of the educated classes, it had to equip itself, in claiming the title of a philosophy—the true one—with philosophical elaboration of its basic claims.

Increasingly in Roman imperial times the revived Platonism of Plutarch, Numenius, Plotinus, and Plotinus's successors, came simply to be Greek philosophy: Aristotelianism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, Skepticism simply ceased, or (with Stoicism and Aristotle's philosophy) were absorbed into and reshaped as components of a comprehensive Platonism. And Platonist metaphysics, with its focus on a triple set of immaterial and intelligible world-creating divinities (the One, Intellect, and Soul), was readily co-optable by Christian thinkers for this purpose (even though the second and third gods were derived from and not co-equal, even in what came to be the Christian way, with the first).¹⁴ So, as Hadot shows, pagan philosophy did have a large, even in many ways decisive, role to play in the elaboration of Christian theological doctrine in the early centuries of the new Church, as well as later when Aristotle became the main intellectual authority in the Western Church. But this role was a strictly subordinate one. Philosophy was recruited so as to aid in the explanation and working out of doctrines of the faith whose acceptance as true rested on their claim to have been authoritatively asserted in those scriptures as true. The Christian way of life of later antiquity and medieval times was thus grounded in the scriptures, or anyhow in the authoritative interpretations and elaborations of them recognized officially by the hierarchical Church. Thus, however much Christianity in the early centuries claimed also to be a philosophy, the Christian way of life was one of religious devotion and faithfulness in all aspects of one's life to Christ's mes-

¹³See *Way of Life*, esp. chaps. 4 and 11, and *Ancient Philosophy?*, chaps. 10–11 (where Hadot amends some of his former views: see p. 254, n. 3).

¹⁴The Platonist system was in formation already in the first century CE; it reached its (more or less) authoritative form with Plotinus (third century); on Plotinus see chapter 6.

sage of love. It was not a philosophical way of life, in the sense that the ways of life of the ancient Greek philosophies were—it was not a way of life grounded in philosophy, or rather, in reason (philosophical, argumentative, analytical, deductive reason) itself.

What then about philosophy, once Christianity at last eclipsed its rival pagan system of thought and way of life, the late Platonist one? What could remain of philosophy—this pagan invention—within the Christian community? Philosophy had claimed to be reason's authoritative cultivator and spokesman, but in the religion-dominated world of late antiquity it was deprived now of the pagan Greek philosophers' further claim that reason is authoritative for all aspects of human life. Philosophy did survive, for example, as I mentioned, in the medieval universities, but only as a handmaiden of theology in the task of explicating and supporting scripture-grounded items of belief, and the corresponding way of life. As such, it could be only a body of argument, and in general a form of discourse, that could be studied for its theoretical and clarifying interest—and needed to be, if reason were to be given its due. But philosophy could have no direct practical value for life, but only this indirect one, in supporting the theology and religiously sustained doctrine that gave life its direction. The Christian way of life was anchored elsewhere than in philosophy, directly in the scriptures, accepted as divinely inspired.

Hadot's account, just summarized, does not claim to do justice to the many currents of philosophical thought between the end of paganism and the origins of modern philosophy in the Renaissance.¹⁵ Nonetheless, there seems no doubt that in its principal embodiments philosophy after antiquity, and ever since, is no longer widely conceived as a way of life. And Hadot's account surely does properly highlight one central component in the explanation for this state of affairs. Once, with the help of Platonist philosophy, Christianity had refashioned itself from a popular movement of the lower classes and became a formidable intellectual force that could appeal to educated people, and once philosophy became, in the Middle Ages, a purely theoretical study subordinated to religion, philosophy was surely unlikely to regain the status of an independent way of life so long as the Christian religion was dominant, as it remained for several centuries after medieval times. An enormous expansion of philosophical work began as philosophy regained a tenuous autonomy in the Renaissance, and

¹⁵Hadot acknowledges and sketches some countermovements, and counterconceptions, both in medieval philosophy and in later times, in *Ancient Philosophy?*, chap. 11.

continued as philosophy ceased to be located exclusively within universities during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Given the many currents of thought this expansion generated, such large-scale cultural generalizations as I have been indulging in become too hazardous even to embark upon, and of doubtful explanatory value in seeking further light on the fate of philosophy as a way of life during the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. If one looks within philosophy itself, however, that is, into the internal and substantive development of philosophical ideas over this time, one might be able to cast some useful light. To be sure, the very great complexity and the play of strongly contrasting, even contradictory, ideas on fundamental principles that characterize modern philosophy throughout its history leave room for important exceptions to any generalization one might hazard. Still, there are three closely connected points I wish to make here.

First, the major ancient philosophers from Socrates onward, without exception, share one fundamental assumption that post-Renaissance philosophy, continuing to the current day, came to reject. At any rate, even if some philosophers accept a version of this assumption, in modern and contemporary philosophy it does not figure as any sort of basic principle for ethical analysis, as it did for the ancients. Socrates's philosophical quest, the essential forerunner in this regard of all later Greek philosophy, was founded on the assumption about human reason—the power of inquiring into and recognizing truth as such—that it is also, psychologically speaking, a power of motivation for action.¹⁶ Those beings that possess this power are moved simply by it (or by themselves through that power) to seek to know, and to try to discover truths. Moreover, where these truths concern what is good, or in general of value, for themselves, those who possess this power are moved by it to obtain and make value-directed use of things that they recognize in their own thinking, for reasons that they give to themselves implicitly or explicitly, to be good for them. They may make mistakes in their reasoning and come to hold something to be good for them that is not good in fact. But whatever the quality of their reasoning may be, reason, by its very nature, is, for all the Greek philosophers, such a motivating force in any human being's life. As

¹⁶The "British moralists" Samuel Clarke (d. 1729) and Richard Price (d. 1791) in England, as well as Kant in Germany (d. 1804) and Thomas Reid in Scotland (d. 1796), are among the modern philosophers who also assign motivational force to the deliverances of reason. So far as I am aware, however, none of them see Socrates, or the ancients in general, as their forerunners in this, nor do they, in the manner of the ancients as detailed below, connect this part of their theories of human motivation with both theories about the sole authority of philosophical reason for the establishment of truth in practical matters, and a conception of the overriding motivational power of philosophically grounded knowledge.

we will see in subsequent chapters, some of these philosophers, unlike Socrates, adopt analyses of human psychology that recognize other internal sources of motivation in the same sense—additional powers within the human psyche with which we can move ourselves toward action, independently from reason and even in opposition to the impulses generated by our own reasoned judgments of value. And all these philosophers are clear in recognizing that sometimes what one may hold, for reasons one takes as valid (rightly or wrongly), to be the best thing to do, is not what one actually does: various psychological mechanisms, depending on further details of their theories about the human psyche, are invoked to show how this possibility can be realized in a human life, and is depressingly often realized in fact. We will explore these details of theory at many points in this book. For the moment we can leave such differences to one side, since they do not affect the general point, relating to this whole philosophical tradition, which I want to emphasize now: that for the whole tradition of Greek ethical philosophy the capacity for reasoning does have an inherent power of moving us to action.

It is by adopting this assumption that the ancient philosophers are able to make plausible, and to work out, in their different theoretical constructions, their conceptions of philosophy as a way of life. For they all share a second fundamental view. They think that philosophy, in being the pursuit of wisdom and ultimate truth, is the intellectual accomplishment (in ancient terms the “art” or the form of knowledge)—the only one—whereby reason is made perfect.¹⁷ As such, it is the final and sole authority as to what really is true. Accordingly, given the motivational force belonging to reason, once those who pursue philosophy have perfected their power of reason by coming to possess a reasoned, articulated philosophical understanding of, among other things, everything of value in a human life, they will be moved, simply by that knowledge, toward living in such a way as to realize in their life that correct scheme of values. But merely being motivated to live in a certain way, and being motivated for that by one’s philosophical knowledge of values, is not sufficient to make one’s philosophy one’s

¹⁷As often, it is the Stoics who officially formulate this idea, basic to the whole Socratic tradition of ancient philosophy during the classical and later periods. Clement of Alexandria, a second to third century CE Christian opponent of pagan philosophy, quotes the following Stoic definitional account of philosophy: it is “the devoted practice of correctness in reasoning” (ἐπιτήδευσις λόγου ὀρθότητος) (see J. von Arnim, *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, vol. 3, fragment 293). The same definition occurs again in a text preserved on a papyrus from Herculaneum that von Arnim argued (“Über Einen Stoischen Papyrus”) might be due to Chrysippus himself (vol. 2.131, p. 41, lines 27–29). (Hereafter I cite the von Arnim collection with the abbreviation *SVF*.)

actual way of life. It must not merely provide an authoritative guide for it that might nonetheless not always be followed. If one's philosophy is to be lived, it must function, as I put it above, as precisely that from, as well as on, which one lives. By this I mean that one's philosophical thought or understanding must on its own, and directly, provide the motivation (or an essential and indispensable part of it) on which one actually lives one's life in just the way that one does. Hence, if one's philosophy is to be one's way of life, those who possess the full knowledge that philosophy promises must be moved simply by having that knowledge and through its power (or rather, through the power of their reason so equipped) to live consistently on its basis. Thereby, the ancients think, they will achieve the human good.¹⁸ This achievement is due to philosophy itself, and, indeed, for the ancients, it is unachievable without philosophy.¹⁹

We are thus led to recognize a third basic principle that I believe the Greek philosophers shared—and one to which, again, as I will suggest below, modern and contemporary philosophers do not subscribe. The character Socrates in Plato's dialogue *Protagoras* asserts this principle when he speaks of the psychologically decisive power of knowledge. In his extended debate with Protagoras over the possibility of acting against one's better judgment, Socrates lays out his own position on one crucial aspect of this issue: "[K]nowledge," he says, "is a fine thing, capable of ruling a person, and if someone were to know what is good and bad, then he would not be forced by anything to act otherwise than knowledge dictates."²⁰ A little later in the dialogue Socrates says of this knowledge that "by

¹⁸As Chrysippus, the greatest theorist among the Stoics, said, the "goal of philosophy is living in agreement with nature" (ὁμολογουμένως τῇ φύσει ζῆν), which is to say "happily," since this phrase expresses the Stoic principle that the human highest good or happiness consists in living consistently throughout one's adult life in just that way (*SVF* 3.5). (We will examine below, in chapter 4, how this formulation is to be understood.) The consequence is that for the Stoics, and indeed for the whole of this tradition, philosophy itself has as its inherent and definitory aim to achieve for us the highest human good, or happiness.

¹⁹It is this strong commitment of the ancient philosophers to the claim that philosophy itself is not only necessary for the full possession of the human virtues, and through that for happiness, but also sufficient for virtue and happiness, that most sharply marks ancient philosophy off from modern and contemporary philosophy. Perhaps as inheritors of the Christian idea that all human beings are equally children of God, the canonical philosophers of our modern tradition all hold that the knowledge necessary for a morally good life (one in which, as for Kant, one is at least deserving of happiness) is available to all of us, without any elitist philosophical study being at all necessary. And, as for sufficiency for happiness, as just indicated, not only Kant but the basic thrust of the whole modern tradition are strongly against any such idea. These commitments survive in the contemporary context, though for the most part without any close tie to ideas derived from Christianity.

²⁰*Protagoras* 352c. (Strictly speaking, Socrates does not assert, but rather asks Protagoras whether he accepts, this view—but he goes on to confirm explicitly the impression he gives here that this is his own view, too.)

showing us the truth, it would give us peace of mind firmly rooted in the truth and would save our life.”²¹ So we can give this Socratic principle of the power of knowledge the alternative and equivalent title of the power of truth—that is, the power that possessing the truth through knowledge gives a person, with the effect that he or she is completely safe from ever doing any wrong thing, and therefore inevitably lives a completely secure, consistently and thoroughly good life. Now, in Socrates’s case, this principle is accompanied by a number of specific further philosophical views, some of them peculiar to him within ancient philosophy and in any event by no means shared by all his successors. Yet, as we will see in subsequent chapters of this book, all these successors show themselves, upon examination of their philosophies, to adhere to some version or other of this principle of the power of truth and knowledge, one framed in terms of their own detailed, overall philosophy.

It follows from Socrates’s commitment to the power of truth that he thinks there is only one set of philosophical views that, constituting knowledge, will save our lives. Other views of other philosophers definitely will not save anyone, he must think; any other philosophy will not possess this power, since power belongs not to views or opinions as such about what is good and bad, but only to knowledge and truth. It may even be that Socrates, and his successors, might hold that if one’s philosophical views do not constitute, or are not fully grounded in, the truth, then there is no guarantee at all that one will live fully in accord with them, or, as I have put it, from them. The weakness of one’s views, in terms of falsehood or philosophical inadequacy, might render them such that no one could stick to them, no one could fail to waver in their commitment, and to harbor doubts that might rise up on occasion to prevent them from living fully and consistently from that philosophy. On the other hand, each of our philosophers, and all the full adherents of their philosophies, hold that their philosophical views do rest upon and do express the truth. Even if they may be mistaken (and at least some of them must be, since these philosophies are in conflict at many points), they are fully entitled to adopt and put forward their philosophies, in light of the fully articulated and defended analyses and arguments on which they rest them, as being fully grounded in reason. So they can hold that by living from the Stoic, or the Epicurean, or the Platonist or Aristotelian philosophy, they are living the life of perfected reason—and so are living happy and completely and unassailably good lives.

²¹ *Protagoras* 356e. On these Socratic ideas, see further section 2.2.

I suggest that modern philosophy and contemporary philosophy lack the ancient conception of philosophy as a way of life because these three large-scale, interconnected assumptions of the ancients have not been part of the accepted intellectual landscape for philosophical inquiry at any time since the Renaissance (nor, for that matter, in medieval philosophy). The ancients assume a seamless connection between philosophical views, or in general philosophical convictions, about what is good and bad for a human being, and the actions—as well as the life made up of those actions—of anyone who holds those views. The classical philosophers of the modern tradition, and also contemporary philosophy, have developed theories of human motivation that greatly complicate any connection there might be between one's philosophical views on life and how it is best led, or on what is right and wrong to do, and one's actual way of living and one's actions. The result is that even if moral philosophy in modern and contemporary terms could be taken to present itself as a guide to a good life and to right action, by working out theories about these matters and presenting them as true, and therefore to be followed, there remains a psychological gap to be bridged. The question remains how to link these philosophical views to whatever it is in one's psyche from which actual felt preferences and actual decision making derive. Philosophy alone—reasoned understanding of practical truths—does not suffice, in the modern and contemporary philosophical climate, as it did in the ancient one.

To this one could add that philosophers in antiquity, after Socrates, as I have emphasized, were able to conceive and present the whole of their philosophies, and not merely some separate ethical part, as not only guides to life but ideas from which a life might be led, by contributing in some important way to what motivatingly steers it. As I have said, the ancient philosophies insisted on the complete unification and interlocking, mutually self-supporting, character of ethics, physics, and dialectic (or however else one might divide up the totality of philosophical discourse). That, too, is a feature of ancient philosophy that is lacking, certainly, in contemporary philosophy, and arguably in most of post-Renaissance philosophy through the nineteenth century as well.²² Nowadays

²²Here too there are exceptions: certainly both Spinoza and Kant have a strongly unified set of views linking their moral philosophies very closely to their theories of metaphysics and epistemology, and politics too. Descartes, as well, and even John Stuart Mill, not to mention Hegel, are strongly systematic thinkers whose views across the whole spectrum of philosophical topics form a unity. Others could be mentioned, also. Nonetheless, with the sole exception of Spinoza, it seems that for all these thinkers their moral philosophies were meant to stand on their own, in the sense that you could fully comprehend their first principles as well as the conclusions drawn from them without venturing into metaphysical or other

people work on logic or metaphysics or epistemology or philosophy of language, taking up the questions that interest them in isolation, or at any rate with no concern to integrate their answers to them with answers to a full range of other contemporarily pressing philosophical issues. One can hold interesting and engaging views on the metaphysics of personal identity or the metaphysical analysis of physical objects, or adopt a fallibilist epistemological analysis and, again, a Humean theory of motivation, without seeing any necessary connections among any of these, or any significant consequences for normative ethics. Or so it appears to me, from where I sit and work as a philosopher concerned to understand the history of ancient philosophy. Hence, even if moral philosophy nowadays might be approached and presented as offering guidance for life, one cannot think of philosophy as a whole as having even that function. Most of philosophy today is truly an exclusively theoretical discourse, with no direct connections to the conduct of one's life.²³

What then is someone to do who comes to academic, seriously argumentative philosophy with the idea that it is a uniquely vital subject, one that, if one succeeds in it, will alter one's life directly for the better? There seems to be no viable alternative except to study ancient philosophy—or rather, the ancient philosophies, in the plural—in the spirit in which they were written, that is, with a view to one's own self-improvement. As for those governing philosophical assumptions that, as I have suggested, made ancient philosophy conceived as a way of life possible, maybe they are actually true, even though they are not made part of contemporary approaches to ethics. Many considerations favor them, all emphasized by philosophers in the ancient tradition, and these may still have some force with us, if we consider the matter carefully. At any rate, they may be plausible enough to encourage someone brought up in our modern intellectual milieu to follow out, and weigh for the constitution of one's own life, the varied philosophical theories, in all areas of philosophy, that the ancient philosophers constructed on the basis of them. As I turn now to make some further preliminary remarks about how we should understand ancient philosophies as ways of life, and in subsequent chapters, that is what I invite the reader to do.

areas of their thought. For the ancients, as I argue below, the connection from moral theory to metaphysics and physical theory, as well as logic and epistemology, was such that one cannot fully grasp either its first principles or conclusions in separation from these other subjects.

²³I should emphasize that I am speaking here of recent and contemporary philosophy. In the tradition of modern philosophy one could see Spinoza as a philosopher who like the ancients presented his work as something to be lived as well as grasped intellectually, or lived when and because it was understood intellectually; it was not something purely theoretical.

1.2. What It Means to Live a Philosophy

In speaking of ancient philosophy I have been assuming that for the ancients with whom I am concerned, exactly as with us, the essential core of philosophy is a certain, specifically and recognizably philosophical, style of logical, reasoned argument and analysis. Anyone who has read any philosophy at all is familiar with this style, whether it takes the form we find in the question-and-answer dialectic of the character Socrates in Plato's Socratic dialogues, or in the medieval disputation, or in Hegel's elaborations of his system of Absolute Idealism, or, again, in the writings of a contemporary analytic philosopher. The idea of philosophy as constituted essentially by devotion to rigorous, sensitively logical and disciplined thought, in pursuit of a philosophically grounded, ultimate truth about the world and our place in it, goes back, in fact, to Plato.²⁴ And Plato, in his dramatic presentations of Socratic thought, holds Socrates up as its devoted exemplar. This is not to say that there were no philosophers, in this Platonic sense, before Socrates (one may think of Parmenides, or Heraclitus, or Anaxagoras and Empedocles as instances). But, if we follow Aristotle, who characterizes all the "early" philosophers as "lispering" in their thinking, we can think of these predecessors of Socrates as saying things without paying serious enough attention to what the things they say mean, to the philosophical implications and bearings of what they seem to announce as philosophical theses of theirs, so as even to make coherent sense—as Aristotle thinks philosophers beginning with Socrates and Plato all tried to do quite self-consciously.²⁵

In considering the ancient view of philosophy as a way of life, we must bear constantly in mind what this thing, philosophy, on which one is to hang one's life, is supposed to be. One must take with utmost seriousness that what the ancient philosophers, following Socrates's innovative lead, are proposing is that we 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. They propose that we live from these ideas precisely on the basis of just that reasoned understanding. A philosophical way of life is therefore in fundamental ways quite a different thing from any religious way of life. This is so whether we take as our paradigm of religion contemporary Christianity and other contemporary religions, or the ancient civic religion of classical Greece,

²⁴ On Plato as origin of this restricted conception of "philosophy" (φιλοσοφία), see endnote 3.

²⁵ See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I, 985a2–10 and 993a15–25. On early philosophy's "lispering" see Cooper, "Metaphysics A 10: Conclusion—and Retrospect," pp. 15–18.

whether we think of it as enriched with mystery cults or not. The key here is the idea of reason—an idea, if not quite introduced, then purified by philosophical inquiry beginning in pre-Socratic times, and crystallized in the work of Socrates and Plato. To live a life of philosophy is to live committed to following philosophical reason wherever it may lead. The promise is that by doing so—but only by doing so—one will achieve the best possible human life. But, given what reason—philosophical reason—is, this promise can be made good only through one’s own deep and complete understanding of the reasons why the way one is living is best.²⁶ In leading such a life you cannot, as in leading their lives from religious conviction people can and do, accept what any text that you regard as authoritative tells you about how to live, just because you regard it as sacred. That is so even if you think you have excellent reasons for assigning authority to that text, or to that tradition if tradition takes the place for you of a text. If you follow a text at all it is because of your independent rational assessment of the truth of what it recommends. You must understand everything for yourself. A mere feeling of conviction that some way of living is the right one, induced for example through prayer or through a sense of having a personal relationship with a higher than human power, will not do. These characteristics of a religious way of life—living on the basis of a sacred text or tradition, validation through an intense personal feeling—distinguish that way of life from the philosophical one.

To be a philosopher in this ancient tradition, then, is to be fundamentally committed to the use of one’s own capacity for reasoning in living one’s life: the philosophical life is essentially simply a life led on that basis. This is the basic commitment that every true and full philosopher made in adopting philosophy—in choosing to be a philosopher—whatever ancient school they belonged to. Pierre Hadot, whose writings on ancient philosophy as a way of life are fundamental reading on this subject, speaks of an “existential option” as needed when anyone becomes personally aligned with the doctrines of any specific school.²⁷ But that is incorrect. Any specific philosophical views and orientations

²⁶I speak here of the views of the “mainline” philosophies (of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and Plotinus and his successor late Platonists): Epicurus and the Pyrrhonian skeptics (see chapter 5), in their different ways, do not require so extensive a grasp of the reasons why the Epicurean or skeptic way of life is the best. Nonetheless Epicureans and skeptics lead their life on what they present to themselves as a *rational* worked out grasp of the truth about human nature and human values, or, in the skeptic’s case, on an appropriately qualified commitment to such reasoning.

²⁷On “existential choices” or “options” see Hadot, *Ancient Philosophy?*, pp. 102, 103, 129, 132, 176, etc. Hadot begins to use this terminology only with his chapter on “The Hellenistic Schools,” but he makes it clear from the first occasion (p. 102) that he thinks that Socratic philosophizing, and Plato’s and Aristotle’s schools too, were characterized by such a fundamental option or choice. However, there is no reason

that might characterize an ancient philosopher (as a Platonist or Aristotelian, or Stoic or Epicurean or Pyrrhonian skeptic) do not result from anything “existential.” They result simply from coming to accept different ideas, all of them supported by philosophical reasoning in pursuit of the truth, that these philosophical schools might put forward about what, if one does use one’s powers of reasoning fully and correctly, one must hold about values and actions. One’s “option” for any one of these philosophies in particular, far-reaching as the consequences might be for one’s way of life, does not deserve to be called an “existential” one. The only existential option involved is the basic commitment to being a philosopher, to living on the basis of philosophical reason. The choice to be an Epicurean, or a Stoic, for example, depends—certainly, by the standards of these philosophical movements themselves, it ought to depend—on rational arguments in favor of the fundamental principles of the philosophical school in question. It is crucial for a correct understanding of what ancient philosophy is, or was, that one sees the central force of the fundamental commitment to living a life on the basis of philosophical reason. It is this that set philosophers off as a single group from the rest of the population.

Pagan Greek philosophy was continuously practiced for a very long time, of course—more than a thousand years. Philosophy itself, as well as the rest of ancient culture, underwent progressive changes over these centuries, many of them momentous in their proportions. We will see, however, in investigating the major ancient philosophies in subsequent chapters of this book, that the pagan philosophers remained committed to this central idea of philosophical reason, and to its power to generate and shape the best possible life for a human being. Only in late antiquity—long after the heyday of Greek philosophy, in classical and Hellenistic times (fifth to mid-first centuries BCE)—did the way of life of philosophy begin to share the features of a religious way of life that I have just drawn attention to. This is only one part of what Hadot has incisively and illuminatingly described as the progressive mutual contamination of pagan philosophy and the Christian religion, beginning roughly in the second century CE.²⁸ One aspect of this contamination is the presence in late ancient philosophy and reli-

to think any ancient philosopher made a choice first to be a Stoic and live a Stoic life, or any other specific philosophical life. For one thing, many of them studied at more than one of the Athenian schools, simultaneously or in sequence, before finally settling in one philosophical milieu or another. First came the decision to live a philosophical life (perhaps, of course, under the influence of the attractions of some particular version of it)—to live according to reason. Even if at the same time one decided to live as a Stoic or an Epicurean or a Platonist, that specific choice is logically subsequent.

²⁸ See “La fin du paganisme,” in his *Études de philosophie ancienne*, pp. 341–74, esp. pp. 369ff.

gion—indeed the very conception—of those “spiritual exercises” that loom so large and strikingly in Hadot’s own account of ancient philosophy as a way of life, and which he claims belonged to it from the beginning, in Parmenides and other philosophers before even the time of Socrates, and which allow him to assimilate it to Michel Foucault’s ideas about “the care of the self.” The earliest evidence Hadot can cite in ancient philosophy for the presence of such exercises—his name for them seems to derive from St. Ignatius Loyola’s sixteenth century handbook *Exercitia Spiritualia*, urging meditations on sin and on Christ’s life and passion for the sake of one’s spiritual improvement as a Christian—is in Seneca, in the first century CE.²⁹ In one passage of his *On Anger* Seneca cites the nightly practice of self-examination on one’s day’s behavior as something particular to a certain Sextius, a now-obscure Roman teacher of philosophy at Rome in the reign of Augustus. This citation is evidence of the novelty of such a practice at Seneca’s time. So even if Seneca does refer to the daily bedtime examination of conscience with approval, saying that he adopts it himself, the passage counts not in favor of, but against, Hadot’s idea that such practices (or any associated one of “spiritual strengthening”) were common or standard even in the Hellenistic schools, much less in ancient philosophy as a whole, from Socrates’s time or even earlier.³⁰

Moreover, one of the new features of life in late ancient times to which Hadot points, as making possible the contamination of which he speaks, is what he calls a “psychological phenomenon” increasingly widespread among intellectuals of all stripes from perhaps the second century onward, as Christianity spread from its original home among uneducated Jews to the upper classes everywhere both in the Greek-speaking East and in Rome and the Latin West. This is a new conception of one’s individual self-consciousness—the “I” at the center of one’s experiences that people began to worry about—as constituting in some way one’s very self, the *person* that one is, the subject of one’s actions. Long before this conception began to show itself, the earlier ancient philosophers had well-developed conceptions of individual persons, with “selves” as the object of their fundamental and regulatory practical concern. The way of life of philosophy for these earlier, as well as all later, ancient philosophies was a life for individuals, conceiving themselves as such, and seeking the best life possible for themselves individually, as embedded in a rich and full physical and social life. In fact, a self might, as for

²⁹For more on Hadot’s ideas about “spiritual exercises,” see endnote 4.

³⁰For a discussion of “spiritual exercises” versus philosophy as ways of self-transformation, see endnote 5.

the Stoics, be a mind and nothing but—but such a mind was conceived unproblematically as part of the natural world. In short, no philosopher until the late Platonists conceived of a person's bare *consciousness*—the “I” at its center—as such a self, as the object of fundamental concern, the thing whose life was in question when one sought to live the best life possible for oneself. And in conceiving of consciousness in this way these philosophers were integrating into the philosophical tradition to which they belonged—the pagan one, deriving from Plato—an idea about the self that lay at the base also of Christianity, as it became transformed from a local Jewish cult in the late first century CE into a world religion by the end of antiquity. (We will consider in chapter 6 the intricate maneuvers of interpretation by which Plotinus was able to find this conception already fully present in Plato's works, especially or most prominently, for Plotinus, in the *Phaedo*.)

Hadot acutely describes how this new understanding of the self carried with it a psychological crisis that characterized this whole epoch—a “spiritual tension, an anxiety,” even a “nervous depression.”³¹ What is the origin of this mysterious thing, this “I” of consciousness, itself no part of the natural world, the world we learn about in significant measure through the use of our senses? Where did it come from? What is its destiny? That is to say, what is one's own origin and destiny? Thus arose, for those who became Christians as well as for those who became Platonists, not only an anxious concern about our origin and ultimate destiny, but a deep-seated feeling of not belonging to the natural world, not being at home in it, of being an alien interloper. And this led to an intense need to find personal salvation—not the saving of our lives that Socrates speaks of in the passage of the *Protagoras* I have cited, which we achieve by ensuring that we live and act well, but the salvation of our very selves, first of all, from the intolerable anxiety caused in us by this way of conceiving who or what we are. Christianity offered one resolution, Platonism another. I will explore these issues further in chapter 6.

For now, it is enough to say that along with the rapprochement of these two spiritual rivals went a change in the way the life of philosophy itself came to be conceived. The sharp separation ceased between, on the one hand, the life of philosophy as grounded in an individual's personal grasp, through fully articulated reasoning and argument, of the true reasons why a certain way of life was best, and, on the other hand, a religious life grounded in sacred texts and vali-

³¹ See “Fin,” 346ff.

dated through intense feelings of conviction generated in prayer or in the sense of having a personal relationship to a higher power. Those nonrational practices that Hadot describes as “spiritual exercises”—meditation, self-exhortation, memorization, and recitation to oneself of bits of sacred text, causing in oneself devoted prayerful or prayer-like states of consciousness and mystical moments—had, and could have, at most a secondary and very derivative function in the philosophical life during the heyday of ancient philosophy. The promise of a happy, fully good life that philosophy held out required not only the achievement of that full personal understanding but the use of it as the ultimate basis from which all the actions of one’s life themselves directly derived. But once the late Platonist philosophers adopted this conception of a human consciousness as a self, an “I,” and conceived of that as what our life derives from, nothing was easier than to suppose that, in order to improve oneself and so one’s life, what one really needed to do—more than to improve one’s grasp on reasons for acting—was to turn inward, to focus on and attempt to purify, and thereby strengthen, that consciousness. So spiritual exercises came to occupy a more central place in the way of life of philosophy.

Accordingly, in the successive chapters of this book, as I discuss the Socratic, Aristotelian, Stoic, Epicurean, and Pyrrhonian skeptic ways of life, I will leave aside altogether any consideration of spiritual exercises as forming part of those lives. (It is in fact only in the Epicurean life that anything of that kind has a place, and that is for reasons deriving from specific philosophical views of Epicurus, primarily his empiricist account of what knowledge and understanding requires and is.)³² I limit myself to examining those philosophies as philosophies, that is, as systems of philosophical thought. Only when I come, in the last chapter, to the philosophy of Plotinus will I, in addition to examining it as such a system of thought, make room for any consideration of the spiritual exercises that are so emphasized in Hadot’s conception of ancient philosophy. Even with Plotinus it will be crucial to see that and how specific philosophical theories he adopts, explaining and arguing philosophically for them, make it possible for such exercises to become central or essential parts of the Platonist philosophical life. If his Platonist successors, of the fourth through sixth centuries (Iamblichus and Proclus and their successors), import into philosophy and into the philosophical life further aspects of late ancient Christian and pagan religion, that is further evidence of the contamination of philosophy by religion of which Hadot speaks. By their

³²See section 5.4.

time, the assimilation of philosophy to religion, and of the Christian religion to philosophy, is reaching its final point—the total extinction of philosophy as an independent force in the life of late antiquity. Once pagan philosophy has transformed itself in these ways into something not easily distinguishable from a religion, it no longer has a reason to exist as an alternative to Christianity.