

**What It Takes to Live Philosophically:
Or, How to Progress in the Art of Living**
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Abstract:

We present an account of what it takes to live a philosophical way of life: practitioners must be committed to a worldview, structure their lives around it, and engage in truth-directed practices. Contra John Cooper, it does not require that one's life be solely guided by reason. A philosophical way of life does involve reflection and the use of reason, but it does not require perfection or solitary achievement. Religious or tradition-based ways of life can count as truth-directed as long as their practices are reasons-responsive and would be truth-directed if the claims made by their way of life are correct. We argue that our three conditions can be met by progressors as well as sages. Making progress in how one acts in the world and improving one's understanding and direction through being part of a community *is* living a philosophical way of life. Our view acknowledges more ways to develop the art of living and enables a broader range of people to count as living philosophically.

Keywords: Art of Living; Progress; Reason; Reasons; Religion; Sagehood; Spiritual Exercises; Tradition; Truth; Way of Life; Wisdom; Worldviews.

1. Introduction: What is a Way of Life?

What does it take to practice a way of life in general, and a philosophical way of life in particular? Is it as simple as regularly engaging in characteristically philosophical activities?¹

We show that there are good reasons to think that living philosophically must be an achievement – something one can try to do, yet fail to pull off. When a philosophical way of life is treated as an achievement, however, it is usually presented as a superlative achievement that only the wisest and best can hope to fulfill. In this paper, we argue for a more moderate view: those who are making progress in their actions and understanding are already living philosophically, even if both their grasp of truth and their actions are imperfect.

You might think that living a way of life is relatively easy. We speak of the American way of life or the Chinese way of life, suggesting that living a specific way of life might only require being formed around a certain set of values (often those generally accepted in your social environment) and then using these to orient your life. Perhaps my way of life is just a description of the overall pattern of my life and the activities and practices it includes. If this is true, though, living a way of life would not really be an accomplishment. Just as Molière's Monsieur Jourdain was delighted to discover that he

¹ Hadot 1995 and Cooper 2012 give contrasting accounts, as we will discuss.

Popular books around this subject include Puett and Gross-Loh 2017 and Wright 2017; contemporary Stoic approaches are collected at www.modernstoicism.com.

had already been speaking prose all his life (*Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, 1670), so we might be delighted to find that we have been living a way of life all along. In both cases, however, these supposed accomplishments turn out to be not as impressive as the language describing them might suggest.

There are several reasons to think that living a way of life is not that straightforward. To begin with, many characteristic ways of life, whether cultural or based in a philosophical school, are quite demanding. This comes out most clearly in cultures with well-defined and strictly enforced rankings of goods. The Spartan dictum “With your shield or on it” encapsulates the relative value of honor in comparison to injury or death, a value ordering that the warrior is enjoined to live out. Growing up in Sparta does not automatically guarantee that one will not flee battle, even if it makes it a less attractive option than it would be for someone from a less honor-focused culture. There is some sense in which everyone has a way of life, insofar as our actions and patterns of behavior (both individually and socially) embody certain value judgments. But these may be incoherent or in tension. For example, consider the mixed messages in American culture on whether Thanksgiving and Christmas are really about family and giving, as many discussions of the “real meaning” of these celebrations suggest, or about getting presents and enjoying oneself, as advertisements and some evidence from actual practice suggest.

This leads to a larger issue: many of us have conflicts between the life we want to be living and the life we are currently living. Most of those advocating for living a way of life present it as a normative goal, not simply a description of existing patterns that we

may or may not value or might even regret. There is also the question of consistency. Many of us recognize tensions between our beliefs and our actions. For example, we do not always treat others as we think we ought. We also sometimes recognize tensions within our values: we can be drawn to sacrifice so that our children will have more opportunities while also recognizing a pull to act primarily for the benefit of our wider society and not just for the good of those close to us. Achieving a consistent way of life requires resolving these tensions. The goal is a harmony between our view of the world and the way we are actually living in the world.

2. Complete Achievement Conceptions of the Philosophical Way of Life

What, then, does it take to strive for and attain a philosophical way of life? Some hold that this is a supreme achievement, available only to the great and the wise. Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, insists that: "The philosopher's product is his *life* (first, before his *works*). It is his work of art [*Kunstwerk*]." (KGA III.4, 29 [205]; 1995, 184) On this view, you show yourself to be a philosopher from the entirety of your actions, not just from a few lectures or discussions. Your whole life should embody your excellence.

I attach importance to a philosopher only to the extent that he is capable of setting an example...it must be presented in the way the philosophers of Greece taught, through facial expressions, demeanor, clothing, food, and custom more than through what they said, let alone what they wrote. (KGA III.1, Section 3, 346; 1995, 183-4)

Philosophers emerge here as exemplars who consistently and impressively display their mastery of life, not only in their discourse but in their entire way of being. For Nietzsche,

most academic philosophers are not even close to attaining such a way of life: “As long as philosophers do not muster the courage to advocate a lifestyle [*Lebensordnung*] structured in an entirely different way and demonstrate it by their own example, they will come to nothing.” (KGA III.4, 31 [10]; 1995, 311) A philosophical way of life is something that only the impressive few can achieve.

We see a similar idea in Michel Foucault, who also stressed the importance of making your life into a work of art.

What strikes me is the fact that, in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals or to life... Why should the lamp or the house be an art object but not our life? (Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 1997, 261)

Fashioning your life into art requires sustained application and skill. Just as not all lamps or houses are works of art, in the societal sense of high art that Foucault is using, so not all lives are works of art. It would take impressive exercises of philosophical, aesthetic, and artistic abilities to achieve this.

This idea of the philosophical way of life as a distinguishing achievement, separating the sage from the masses (and the imitating pupils) also has ancient precedent. John Sellars notes that, in the late ancient context, it was “standard practice to preface the study of any philosophical text with a biographical account of its author.” (2003, 29; cf. Mansfield 1994, 30, 97-98, 108-110) On Sellars’ reading, the biography of the authors would contain telling anecdotes illustrating “the sort of transformation of attitude that might follow from a thorough understanding of [the author’s] philosophy” (ibid.). For

example, Porphyry, the pupil of Plotinus and his literary executor, tells us of how Plotinus refused to sit for a sculptor. Plotinus did not want to make an image of an image or suggest that such a work would be worth looking at, showing how his philosophy had transformed his view of his own body. (Porphyry 2017, *Life*, section 1)

The various philosophical schools thought their leaders had lived great lives as well as thought great thoughts. Biography played a key role in ancient introductions to and summaries of the philosophical schools, as we see in Diogenes Laertius. He prepares us to consider the philosophies of the various schools by first establishing the credentials of their founders, based on stories about their lives and practices (Diogenes Laertius 2018). This insistence that the deeds of one's life should demonstrate one's philosophy and its transformational impact sets a high bar for living a philosophical life. It may seem that only the sort of saintly exemplars who have the credentials to start their own schools of philosophy count as living philosophically.

There is another way in which living a philosophical way of life might turn out to be extremely demanding. This comes from the thought that only the wise count as living a philosophical way of life. On this view, living philosophically requires successfully understanding things for yourself, so that every action you take displays your excellent comprehension of the cosmos and your place within it. John Cooper argues for a set of stringent requirements on the philosophical way of life based around the importance of comprehensive understanding. In his *Pursuits of Wisdom*, he maintains that a philosophical way of life consists only in activities of rational understanding and actions taken on the basis of that understanding. He insists that "philosophy itself, both in

antiquity and, in fact, in its whole history, is an exercise of reason.” (2012b, 40-41) Cooper claims that “increased rational understanding” is the only way to live a more philosophical life (41), and on his view, practices and therapeutic exercises have no real role to play in the philosophical life (For a discussion of the role we think they should play see Cohoe and Grimm 2019). Further, anyone who lacks a full rational understanding of the world and our place in it is not leading a philosophical way of life. You need personally to have achieved a comprehensive rational grasp of the cosmos, one that perfectly informs your life.

3. The Appeal of a Moderate Approach

Cooper is right to think that some philosophers – notably the Stoics, late Platonists, and Aristotle – have very demanding conceptions of what it means to live philosophically. Nevertheless, we believe there are strong reasons, both historical and philosophical, not to endorse a strongly restrictive conception of a philosophical way of life. The philosophical way of life should include progressors whose lives are not yet artistic masterpieces and it should be open to those who have not yet achieved comprehensive understanding.

We note first that Cooper’s view makes a philosophical way of life inaccessible to all but the most educated elites, who have the leisure necessary to cultivate such a comprehensive understanding of reality. Although elitism really is present in a number of ancient philosophers, we think this exclusivist approach is not an apt model for living a philosophical way of life in the contemporary world. While Cooper maintains that the life of reason is open to all, his narrow and demanding conception of what it requires

involves a combination of intellectual, moral, and psychological attributes that is exceedingly difficult for most humans to acquire. Even if it is open to all in principle, its requirements—including a long course of study and extensive leisure—make it actually accessible to only a few.

We object to Cooper's model not only because of its narrowness, but also because there are good reasons to include imperfect practitioners within the way of life. A philosophical way of life need not be perfectly achieved or completely successful, just as someone can be living a musician's way of life while occasionally missing beats or playing wrong notes. We should allow people to count as living a philosophical way of life even if their lives are not yet artistic masterpieces and they are lacking in great deeds or sayings. While it is important to connect life and action to one's vision of the world (as we discuss below), requiring a perfect embodiment of one's philosophy is too high a bar for living philosophically. We also should not build into the notion of philosophy as a way of life the idea that it must consist in perfect rational activity, even if this is the substantive position that some philosophical schools ultimately take.

In fact, the views of the schools of ancient philosophy suggest a more moderate approach than Cooper's. Even those with the highest standards for a rational life, such as Aristotle, the Stoics, and late Platonists such as Plotinus, recognize the idea of making progress. They acknowledge that one can start to live a philosophical way of life even if one has not fully achieved the virtue of practical wisdom. Many discussions of philosophy as a way of life, including Cooper's, focus on the ideal cases, on what the rational life of the sage or wise person would be like. But Aristotle recognized that true

virtue would be rare, while the Stoics famously questioned whether, in fact, there are any sages. (*EN* X 9, 1179b10-1178a6; for the Stoics on sages see Arius Didymus 2.7.5-12; Cicero, *Tusc. Disp.* 3.10-21; Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. Math.* 11.181) This pushed them to allow for sorts of advancement that do not require complete rational understanding. They recognized a number of ways that we can begin to live a philosophical life, even while falling short of the ideal.

The Stoics, for example, although stringent on what true virtue and philosophy requires—a complete understanding of the cosmos—explicitly made room for improvement. Thus Epictetus asks:

So where is progress [*prokopē*] to be found? If any of you turns away from external things to concentrate his efforts on his own power of choice, to cultivate it and perfect it, so as to bring it into harmony with nature...if, when he get us in the morning, he holds in mind what he has learned and keeps true to it, if he bathes as a trustworthy person, and eats as a self-respecting person, putting his guiding principles into action in relation to anything that he has to deal with, just as a runner does in the practice of running, or a voice trainer in the training of voices—this, then, is the person who is truly making progress. (*Discourses*, I 4. 18, 20-21, trans. Hard)

Epictetus thinks there will be both internal and external evidence for whether his pupils are subjecting their choices to Stoic standards. The Stoic principles of progressors should be evident in the way they live their lives: as they eat, drink, and socialize. Nevertheless, this leaves room for failure and inconsistent application. The question is whether

progressors are trying and whether they keep referring their actions back to their principles, as the runner and singer in training do. For Epictetus, progress should be evident, but it takes time and may be imperfect.

4. What It Means to Take Philosophy as an Art of Living

To better understand what it takes to live a philosophical way of life, we can look to the way that ancient thinkers thought of *phronēsis*, practical wisdom or the excellence that allows one to live well, as a sort of *technē*, an art or craft. This idea of practical wisdom as a general art of living is prominent in Socrates's questioning of his fellow Athenians, and is later picked up by the Platonist, Aristotelian, and Stoic conceptions of the good life (cf. Sellars 2003, chapters 2-3). Epictetus, for instance, famously frames it as an art whose matter is our own lives:

Philosophy does not promise to secure anything external for the human being, otherwise it would be admitting something that lies beyond its proper subject matter [*hulēs*]. For just as wood is the material [*hulē*] of the carpenter, bronze that of the statue maker, so each individual's own life [*ho bios autou ekastou*] is the material [*hulē*] of the art of living [*tēs peri bion technēs*] (*Discourses*, I 15.2, trans. Sellars)

We can use this analogy to help understand the difference between merely living and practicing an art of living.

Human lives characteristically involve elements such as eating, wearing clothes, and engaging in social relations. But not all of us are practicing an art of eating, an art of fashion, or the social graces. What differentiates those with the art from the rest of us is

the way their performance of these activities manifests the principles they have internalized in a consistent, well-thought out, and beautiful way. Most human lives involve talking to others, but this does not mean that most of us possess the art of conversation. Actually practicing the art requires much more than simply performing some tokens of the general action type; it involves being able to bring the best out of our friends and acquaintances through our questions and replies.

Similarly, while we all enact certain patterns of behavior that reflect certain values, really living a way of life is an achievement. On the *technē* model, craftspeople possess an understanding of the relevant domain that allows them consistently to act in accordance with their understanding of the craft. Their works always manifest that art in the ways open to them given the circumstances. The expert shoemaker makes the best footwear – for the whole range of human feet and from the whole range of suitable materials – because the shoemaker’s *technē* reveals how best to manifest that art in the full variety of circumstances. Those who lack the art or are novices lack the relevant understanding. We can produce pretty good chocolate chip cookies in favorable circumstances but, lacking the *technē* of baking, our productive ability is modally fragile. When we don’t have the exact ingredients, when we are baking at altitude, when we are baking in really dry conditions etc., we do not understand how to best adjust the recipe and so we often produce a very disappointing batch.

To develop the notion of showing one’s skill whatever the circumstance, Epictetus compares Socrates to the skilled ball player.

[No experienced ball player] is concerned about whether the ball is good or bad, but solely about how to throw and catch it. It is there accordingly that the player's agility, and skill, and speed, and good judgment are demonstrated...an expert will catch it whenever I make a throw...Now Socrates certainly knew how to play ball...and there in court, what ball was in play? Life, imprisonment, exile, a draught of poison, the loss of his wife, and having to leave his children behind as orphans. That was what was involved, that was what he was playing with, but play he did nonetheless and threw the ball with dexterity. That is how we too should act, with the close attention of the cleverest of ball players, while showing the same indifference to what we are playing with, as being no more than a ball.

(Discourses II 5.15-20, trans. Hard)

For Epictetus, athletes show their skill in difficult circumstances. It is the consistency of their actions and their excellent judgment that distinguish a great basketball player from someone who can dunk impressively but passes poorly and fails to use their athletic potential well. Likewise with philosophy. Socrates is a strong candidate for possessing the art of living precisely because his life and choices consistently reflect his value commitments across a wide range of circumstances. They show what it looks like to value virtue over externals even in the face of dishonor, ridicule, and death. Socrates displays this on the battlefield, in the marketplace, and in front of a jury. By contrast, many of us either fail to properly apply our beliefs to our lives or cannot figure out how to apply the art we are trying to practice. Just as, when stressed, the person seeking moderation may wolf food down or, when placed in a foreign setting, struggle to eat gracefully, so we,

under pressure, do not have an understanding of how to live well that manifests itself in demanding situations.

Does this mean, though, that living the philosophical way of life requires being a paragon of virtue and wisdom? Do our struggles to be consistent and live out our values show that we lack any real art of living? In fact, the notion of an art allows room for degrees of progress in attaining the art. By being able to consistently and accurately follow a recipe, you might be further down the road to the art of baking than your children, even if you have not yet attained the art itself. As Epictetus suggested in discussing progress, the aspiring singer will take lessons, practice repertoire, work on technique, and listen to great singers. All these are signs of progress. In many cases, we can also trace stages on one's development towards a goal. Consider those pursuing fitness through (in part) achieving mastery of the pushup. A pushup has a certain definite form and clear success conditions, based on the combination of muscles the movement is meant to engage and the use of bodily force that it unlocks, as well as many failures of form (sometimes dangerous) that the person performing it must avoid. Initially, most people will need to be corrected along multiple dimensions. Even when they lift themselves up, their positioning, the muscles that are used, the way force is generated etc. will be off on many attempts. More advanced beginners will be able to do a pushup with fairly good form. They will be engaging the right groups of muscles and getting close enough to the correct form, but they may have small errors or deficiencies. They may fail to extend all the way up or they may not be evenly lifting their chest and legs. They may also struggle with consistency. Intermediates become more consistent and

deviate less from correct form. They will have good form during most pushups but may struggle to keep that form after other taxing movements or at the end of a long series. These people are often doing pushups well, but they do not fully have the craft, because they do not consistently move as well as their body allows. Now, who is practicing the art? It is reasonable to think that we should count advanced beginners and intermediate athletes as well as the truly expert. Similarly, it is reasonable to think that the equivalent of advanced beginners and intermediates are practicing the philosophical life.

There is, however, a complication with the analogy between philosophy and art. Aristotle notes a key difference between arts and virtuous actions: “the things that come to be by the arts have their goodness in themselves” (*EN* II 4, 1105b27-28, our translation) whereas in the case of excellence or of acting well, it matters not just *what* is done, but *how* it is done. This is relevant for living philosophically as well as living virtuously. The intention with which we do things and the manner in which we do them make a great difference for whether an action embodies a philosophical way of life. This gives flexibility in both directions. A progressor might have good intentions but be only moderately successful at putting them into practice. Alternatively, some people might be doing the actions required by a certain way of life, but if their intentions and the way in which they perform the actions are contrary to those called for by that philosophical way of life, they will not count as practicing it. Epicureans and Platonists may both eat moderately and eschew luxurious foods, but if Epicureans do so in order to maximize pleasure and avoid pain, then they are not living a Platonist way of life, even if some of

their eating practices resemble those that the Platonists would recommend for separating yourself from your bodily desires.

A theoretical understanding of a philosophical way of life is also not sufficient to count as a progressing practitioner. In this sense, we agree with Epictetus (and, to an extent, with Nietzsche and Foucault). Many academics are quite competent teachers of what the Epicureans or Stoics thought without that affecting their choices and lives in any ultimately significant way. Such academics do not count as progressors in the Stoic or Epicurean life. While they may have relatively high levels of understanding, they lack commitment. They are not trying to develop and exercise the art. They show no interest in supporting practices and are not making an effort to become more Stoic or Epicurean. While having some relevant knowledge, they do not base their actions on these philosophies.

Once we take philosophy as an art of living, we see that it involves much more than the pure use of reason advocated by Cooper. Again, an analogy to the arts that promote health is helpful. Understanding health is important to achieving it, but there is much more to it than that. Part of aiming at health is just to avoid certain unhealthy practices (e.g. not eating too much of certain foods) and committing to healthy practices (e.g. making it a priority to eat fruits and vegetables, committing to regular exercise). We also need certain mental habits to support this. For example, when we are apprehensive about exercising, we can think about how we'll feel afterwards or think of what an exemplar of healthy living would do. These strategies can help us realize our goals. Thus both external commitments to certain actions (eating some foods and not eating others)

and internal reflection on how and why our practices are improving our health and life play an important role. They play this role and help us become healthier even when our understanding of exercise science and nutrition science is quite incomplete.

Similarly, a philosophical way of life will involve both some degree of reflection and understanding along with various practices, external and internal. On the more external side, we restrict ourselves from performing certain actions that we take to either lack value, have negative value, or distract from achieving things of positive value. For example, we may decide to use social media for no more than 15 minutes a day. We might commit to doing certain actions that we take to be valuable, even when we find doing them challenging. There are a wide variety of demanding things various worldviews recommend: eating moderately, consistently showing compassion to others, sharing your resources for the greater good, committing to daily prayer, meditation, or study of sacred writings etc.

On the internal side, a philosophical way of life involves reflecting on the attitudes we have when acting and the intentions with which we act to improve how we are acting. For example, there is a significant difference between lovingly reaching out to a friend and doing so only in a pro forma way. As we noted, intentions matter more to promoting the good life than they do in the case of promoting health. Even when it comes to improving intentions, however, self-reflection and psychological awareness often help more than a better grasp of ethical theory. We also internally reflect on our goals and motivations so as to more effectively act. Considering how we will feel after helping a friend can help guide and motivate us. Thinking about moral exemplars can also increase

our desire to be like them and value what they value. (This may be fairly global or may instead be focused on certain values; see Zagzebski 2017)

The analogy to health also brings out the possibility of learning from others and relying on their understanding. We can become healthy through making good use of the expertise of fitness coaches and nutritionists, even if we lack their understanding. Similarly, it is plausible that the role of defending and articulating a philosophical way of life can be partly offloaded to other members of one's community. We should be responsive to reasons, but we do not have to figure out and defend every aspect of a view of the cosmos ourselves. Those living philosophically will be intellectually humble, owning their limitations, just as Socrates did (Whitcomb, Battaly, et al. 2017). Other community members play vital roles in helping us discern the correct actions in our circumstances, motivating us to carry them out, and correcting and refining our mistakes.

This communal dimension is missing from Cooper's picture of ancient philosophy. His language suggests that ancient philosophy operated via atomistic individuals deciding which schools to endorse on the basis of abstract arguments, which neglects the social aspects of philosophical formation. In fact, one of the most striking things about philosophers who led their own schools, such as Plotinus and Epictetus, is the close relationships and back and forth exchanges they had with their pupils. Even if the perfect sage would have a full understanding of reality and would avoid relying on the opinions and admiration of others, the vast majority of us are progressors. Since we do not have a complete wisdom to judge things by, we can and should make use of the understanding of others, as Socrates himself tried to do (cf. the *Symposium's* appeal to the wisdom of

Diotima). Often the best way to do this is to enter into a community that seems to share your view of the good life. Through participating in such communities we can improve our vision and understanding and also come closer to practicing such a way of life (cf. Zagzebski 2012, chapters 7-9). Most of us need to continue to use a variety of exercises, intellectual and practical, to constantly correct and reorient our views. Doing this, however, is already to begin the philosophical way of life.

5. Conditions for a Philosophical Way of Life

a. Condition 1

What, then, are the key factors for living philosophically? We think there are three conditions practitioners should meet. They are committed to a worldview, are structuring their lives around it, and they engage in truth-directed practices. These conditions are jointly necessary, but progressors can meet these conditions as well as sages. On our view, you need not perfectly satisfy each condition to be living philosophically. Instead, you need to pass the threshold that marks you as committed to and progressing in the philosophical way of life you have chosen. The philosophical way of life involves developing and exercising intellectual and character virtues, but it does not require the perfect use of pure reason.

Our first condition is that progressors need to be committed to the truth and value of a worldview's claims. Truth-claim making is included to imply that philosophical ways of life need to be making truth-evaluable claims. For example, it may be therapeutic for you to think of your thoughts as putting positive energy out into the universe, but if

someone presses you on what this means and you say it is merely a figure of speech, then you are not seriously affirming it.

A philosophical way of life includes views about humanity and our place in the cosmos: it should not just make a few claims about a very limited sphere of life, hence the idea of a worldview. We are not requiring that all those living a philosophical life be able to fully articulate and defend all aspects of these views. Nevertheless, to orient their lives and actions they need a basic sense of what a given worldview claims in order to live it out. Even if they are not scholars, Platonists need to know why they should value the soul and its activities over the body and Epicureans need to know why they should seek pleasure and why they should not fear death. To live philosophically, you need to have thought about your life as a whole and to have consciously adopted views on your place in reality. (cf. Midgley 2018, 73) Your life needs to involve seriously contemplating the cosmos, even if your practical circumstances limit how often and how systematically you can do this (cf. McPherson 2020, chapter 5) We are not, however, requiring that your worldview be articulated purely on the basis of reason. We will turn to our case for rejecting such a requirement after we have set out our three conditions.

Value-prescribing is included to get at the idea that the worldview behind the way of life has to be both action-guiding and comprehensive. So just accepting the truth claims of standard contemporary Western sciences and having this inform your actions (say in getting medical treatment or forming beliefs about the age of the earth) is not enough to count as living a philosophical way of life on its own, because that does not require thinking that the sciences prescribe values in a way that structures and guides your whole

life. You could think that science (or science plus reason) does, in fact, give a value ordering that should govern your whole life, but this would be a further controversial commitment requiring an account of how to get metaphysics from science, and value claims from this metaphysics. Value-prescribing also excludes lifestyles where you think there are some reasons for you to adopt certain practices given your particular circumstances but you do not think your choice has broader normative implications or is universalizable (e.g. you have arguments for why yoga or live-action roleplaying are worthwhile for you).

The notion of commitment is closely related to intention and picks up on Aristotle's insistence that how you perform an action is crucial to its excellence. Your commitment is measured by your resolution to think and act in the way called for by a worldview and the concrete actions you take in response to this resolution. In the case of fitness, this will involve things such as taking classes and doing exercises. For a philosophical way of life, it involves activities such as reading and reflecting on key texts, approaching significant choices in a way that is informed by your school, examining how your actions could better reflect your values, and undertaking whichever supporting exercises your school supports (e.g. meditations, examination of desires, dialogue with other community members etc.). Commitment does not require success. You can be committed to your program of exercise even if you are struggling to get the correct form on your pushups. You are not committed, however, if you claim to want to improve, but take no steps to do so. Similarly, as long as you continue to engage with a philosophy and keep attempting to act in the spirit of this philosophy, you count as committed.

This, then, is **Condition 1: Practitioners of a Philosophical Way of Life Are Committed to a Truth-Claim Making, Value-Prescribing Worldview.**

b. Condition 2

The next condition is about the application of the first condition to one's life. As we have seen, some real level of achievement needs to be reached for one to be living philosophically. There needs to be a transition from unreflectively going along with certain values, perhaps even contradictory ones, to actively living on the basis of a global value scheme. Thus our **Condition 2: Practitioners of a Philosophical Way of Life Have their Practices and Life Structured by the Worldview to which They Are Committed**

How successful does your life structuring have to be to satisfy **Condition 2**? On our view, your life does not have to be perfectly ordered. Instead, we should look at whether you have made progress in using your worldview to structure your life and practices. This involves examining the direction in which someone's practices are developing. In the case of fitness, an athletic person with a history of personal fitness may be more adept at pushups than someone who is taking up exercise after previously being sedentary. If, however, the athletic person has abandoned the pursuit of fitness and is no longer trying to exercise his or her muscles or improve than we may judge the beginner to be closer to living a fit way of life, even though the former athlete is still the one with the better current form on pushups. The direction and attitude of the person involved matter, especially at the initiation of a way of life.

For instance, in the philosophical case, those who are improving their eating choices and seeking to bring them in line with the value judgments of their philosophical

schools qualify as practitioners more than someone who happens to follow the recommended sort of diet, but for quite different reasons. Committed utilitarians who are slowly and painfully, but determinedly, cutting out meat from their diets in order to reduce pain to sentient beings are practicing a philosophical way of life more than those who were raised vegetarian but are uncommitted to such practices and are adding meat back in to their diets. This can be the case even if the progressing utilitarians currently eat more meat than the lapsing vegetarians.

We are not claiming, however, that those who have plateaued are no longer living a way of life. As long as they are committed to doing everything they can to maintain and improve their practice, they meet the directionality condition. Someone who is struggling to increase their maximum number of pushups, while doing all that she can with her conditioning and diet is clearly committed to fitness, even if she is not currently improving.

There does, however, have to be real progress. Going to one or two classes sincerely while still having horrible form is not yet enough. Actual movement towards fitness must have taken place. Perfect pushups are not required and modifications to the exercises may be appropriate, but if your exercises are not yet engaging the right muscle groups, they are not far enough along. Similarly, philosophical progressors must have made some advance in understanding and living out their school's thought before they can count as practicing it.

How far do you need to have gotten? On our view, the threshold is significantly lower than the maximum possible attainment. Where this threshold lies is influenced by

the worldview in question. So Buddhism, Stoicism, Taoism etc. typically have developed views on what it takes to count as practicing Buddhism, Stoicism, Taoism. They may distinguish true believers from the merely nominal adherents whose lives are not significantly formed by the school. At the same time, these schools allow for progressors to count as living the school's life even if they are not yet good or excellent practitioners. You can be living out a way of life even when one's application has many failures and defects. Just as advanced beginners and intermediates are doing pushups despite deficiencies in their craft, so various progressors are already living a philosophical life despite their struggles. Instead of thinking of living a way of life as all or nothing, we should instead take it to be a degreed notion. We can make comparisons between those above the threshold and see how successfully they are achieving their goal. The threshold view still allows us to distinguish intermediates from experts.

Another important part of this condition is having the right relation between the diagnosis and the treatment. If you hold a Buddhist worldview but are actively engaged in pursuing wealth and status, there probably isn't the right connection between your worldview and your practices (*ceteris paribus*). The structuring also needs to be relatively global and sustained. Say you place flowers on your grandmother's grave once a year, out of Confucian filial piety. Even if you do this every year, this probably isn't enough to count as practicing a Confucian way of life. This is because practicing a way of life requires implementing an overall view of the world and value. The broad scope of the **Condition One** sets the bar for fulfilling **Condition Two**. If the truth claims and value

prescriptions are global and sustained, then the structuring of practice which they imply will be as well.

On our reading, the cafeteria consumer of spiritual and philosophical wisdom won't meet the structuring features of **Condition Two**. Meditating for stress relief isn't living as a Buddhist, because even if the practice is based on and originates in Buddhism, it is no longer structured by Buddhism in the right way. Similarly, as discussed above, an abstemious Epicurean is not living a Platonist way of life because their goals in being careful with food and the way in which they do so are quite different.

There are also a variety of ways in which one's practices and life could end up structured by your worldview. There are some philosophical views which end up satisfying **Condition Two** only in a weak sense. If your philosophical commitments indicate that there is no best life or that the best life does not distinctively involve philosophy or rational activity, this will give a perspective on your actions and choices, but one that may mostly be negative. Being a nihilist will presumably inform your life, even if it does so by suggesting there are no good lives or positive values that you can achieve. You will certainly avoid value commitments that you might otherwise make.

We can distinguish approaches whose implications are primarily formal from approaches with both material and formal implications. In the former case, your philosophy primarily informs the spirit in which or the intentions with which you act. For example, Pyrrhonian skeptics always avoid dogmatism and strong commitment, no matter the topic, and existentialists always emphasize choice and freedom, no matter the content of the choice. However, the specific choices and actions made can vary

considerably. By contrast, specific, concrete practices follow from some worldviews (e.g. the specific commands of daily prayers and hajj within an Islamic way of life or the practices of keeping kosher and observing the 613 commandments within a Jewish way of life). Ways of life will typically have formal requirements on the way in which you perform these specific practices: few if any philosophies or religions think that performing certain actions in a purely rote way is sufficient for properly embodying that way of life.

c. Condition 3

These first two conditions, then, set out requirements for practicing an art of living, as opposed to just acting on socially or culturally implicit values. Our third condition captures the specific requirements that come from a *philosophical* way of life. A philosophical life should not just be guided by truth-claims that one commits to, it also *consists* in practices that are truth-directed. There are many ways of life that apply a worldview, but if what it takes to live that life successfully does not constitutively involve realizing the truth, the life itself does not count as philosophical.

This bar separates off practices and lives that may have philosophical justifications, but are not themselves concerned with truth. Preference-satisfaction maximizers who don't care about the content of your preferences may have philosophical arguments for their position, but living that out would not be sufficiently truth-involving. While such a preference-satisfaction life would involve some instrumental reasoning, that is true of almost any lived life, whether it employs a *technē* or not. Filling everyone's preferences for, say, watching lots of sports does not seem to be truth-directed in the

relevant way. Activities of preference maximizing are not themselves necessarily truth-directed, only certain deliberations about them. By contrast, worldviews on which the good life consists in contemplating the nature and order of reality are constitutively truth-directed. Thus we have **Condition 3: The Practices and Life of Practitioners of a Philosophical Way of Life are Constitutively Truth-Directed and are Responsive to Reasons.**

We use the language of truth-directed because, as discussed, a philosophical way of life does not need to consist primarily in discursive reasoning or other exercises of our rational powers, contra Cooper. There are other ways of getting to the truth. Experiences of beauty sometimes give us insight and allow us to contemplate reality in a way that arguments on their own do not. They allow us to see the truth of things in a distinctive way. Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch both make the case that appreciative attention to beautiful and good things can help us both morally and intellectually, allowing us to see and act better (Weil 1951, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God;" Murdoch 1997, especially "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts," cf. McPherson 2020, chapter 5). Plotinus, whom even Cooper wants to include as living a philosophical way of life, thinks that the culmination of his way of life consists in a union with the One that cannot be achieved via any intellectual activity: this activity is reality-directed, but not a rational activity in the standard sense (*Enneads* V.3, 14.5-8 ; VI.9, 4.1-4, though, of course, for Plotinus, developing intellectual virtues and activating one's understanding is an important part of the preparatory process). Truth-directedness, as we conceive it, requires that the characteristic activities of your way of life be truth

conducive, conditional on your worldview being right. If, conditional on the truth of Buddhism, Buddhist meditation would help you appreciate emptiness, then it is a truth-directed practice.

Our view allows for a wide range of practices to contribute towards achieving truth. The most central sorts of practices are those that themselves give access to truth, whether through successful use of discursive reason or through a more direct aesthetic or intellectual experience. Other practices, however, can be truth-directed insofar as they prepare you to see what's true or orient you in the right direction. Practices can count as truth-directed in this sense just by making you more convinced of your worldview and more committed to living it out. Even practices that do not directly change your credences can still be truth-directed. For example, in the context of an Abrahamic religion praying to God might be a truth-directed practice because, if such a God exists, it is plausible that prayer is a way of connecting to God. This might hold even if, in some cases, praying does not increase one's credence or directly result in any positive experience. You might still be engaging in a truth-directed practice. Similarly, for Buddhists, engaging in meditation while also accepting the transitory character of the self could be truth-directed, even in cases when your meditation does not immediately succeed in affecting your view of the self. If Buddhism is right, the practice is conducive to truth even when it does not immediately get you to where you are trying to go.

Living philosophically, then, means leading a life characterized by truth-directed practices, including argument, cognitive self-reflection, and contemplative appreciation of the true and the good. There are also, however, requirements for how practitioners of

a philosophical way of life go about forming their beliefs and pursuing truth. On our view, those living a philosophical way of life must be reasons-responsive. Reason has an important role to play in why they hold the views they do. They are also sensitive to defeaters to their views. They do not merely hope that the practices they are following turn out to be truth-conducive. They are following them because they reasonably believe them and are open to being convinced otherwise. This does not, however, mean that living philosophically requires being able to individually address any question or objection about the way of life you are following. Practitioners are allowed to consult others and to admit they are not sure about an issue. They will both develop their own intellectual virtues and be open to learning from the excellences of others. The crucial thing is being responsive to reasons, in whichever direction they ultimately point, and not ignoring defeaters. To live philosophically you need to be developing intellectual virtues which make you responsive to reasons. You are willing to consider objections to your view and be open to the truth.

d. Summation

We have seen, then, that a philosophical way of life is a value-oriented and lived-out way of life that is responsive to reasons and directed at truth. You need to have a vision of the good and live on the basis of that vision in a way that is conducive to reaching truth. These conditions are demanding and meeting them is a significant achievement. They are, however, still attainable. Further, religious or tradition-based ways of life can count as truth-directed as long as their practices are reasons-responsive and would be truth-directed if the claims made by their way of life are correct.

We can now sum up our three conditions in the following table:

	<i>Paradigm of Philosophical Way of Life</i>	<i>Philosophically Informed Life</i>	<i>Not Living Philosophically</i>	
<i>Examples:</i>	Sage or adept	Progressor (Includes both Inarticulate Practitioners and Those Who are Articulate but Deficient in Practicing)	Cafeteria Consumer	Practitioner of a non-philosophical worldview
1. Committed to a Truth-Claim-Making, Value-Prescribing, Coherent Worldview	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
2. Practices and Life	Yes	Yes, but not perfectly	No, because they are not	Yes

<p>Structured By This Worldview</p>			<p>ultimately committed</p>	
<p>3. Practices and Life are Constitutively Truth-Directed</p>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>Yes, but not perfectly</p>	<p>Not as uncommitted consumer</p>	<p>No</p>

6. Conclusion

A philosophical way of life involves reflection and the use of reason but does not require perfection or solitary achievement. Making progress in how one acts in the world and improving one’s understanding and direction through being part of a community *is* living a philosophical way of life. Our view acknowledges the wide number of ways in which people can live philosophically. Even if we do not all have the leisure to fully articulate and defend a view of reality, each of us can reflect on what is beautiful and true in our experience of the world. We can also make use of the practices, techniques, and

ideas shared with us by others in our communities. This allows us to benefit from their work and move together toward our shared goal of living well.²

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