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MORAL SERIOUSNESS

SOCRATIC VIRTUE AS A WAY OF LIFE

D. SEIPLE

Abstract: "Philosophy as a way of life" has its roots in ancient ethics and has attracted renewed interest in recent decades. The aim in this paper is to construct a contemporized image of Socrates, consistent with the textual evidence. The account defers concern over analytical/theoretical inquiry into virtue, in favor of a neo-existentialist process of self-examination informed by the virtue of what is called "moral seriousness." This process is modeled on Frankfurt's hierarchical account of self-identification, and the paper suggests an expansion of Frankfurt's concept of a person to include "full" personhood, in which the apprehended "meaning" of one's "whole life" is taken as a necessary condition for eudaimonia (meaning of life) and is characterized by phenomenological transcendence. In addition, the importance of the informed scrutiny of a community of philosophers to the self-examination process is discussed.

Keywords: community, eudaimonia, flourishing, Frankfurt, freedom of the will, meaning of life, moral seriousness, person, self-knowledge, Socrates, virtue, transcendence.

> Such is the lesson of ancient philosophy: an invitation to each human being to transform himself. Philosophy is a conversion, a transformation of one's way of being and living, and a quest for wisdom.
> —Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, p. 274

My general topic here is "philosophy as a way of life"—a theme of growing interest ever since Pierre Hadot began writing on it in the 1960s (see Hadot 1995).[1] Even so, I suspect fresh readers attracted by the concept might be intrigued by its vagueness as well. Is this really anything more than an invitation to historical reminiscence? A great many philosophers think about philosophy less as a way of life than as a way of employment; and those who bemoan this are likely to polish their specialty in history of

[1] *Metaphilosophy* recently devoted an entire double issue to this topic (vol. 51, nos. 2–3).

philosophy, perhaps to engage a few eager liberal arts majors still in the dark about what professionalized philosophy really is. Or some might imagine an ethnological agenda pinpointing communities living out philosophically prescribed forms of life (the way of the Cross, the way of the Tao), like ancient Epicureans or Dominican monks, but updated, like our contemporary followers of Stoicism (see, e.g., Irvine 2008, Pugliucci 2017, and Robertson 2013). One could even imagine a well-tutored retiree spending her twilight years as an adult learner, attending seminars, perusing the classics, and pondering the Big Questions arrayed in her mind like sublime sunsets across the Grand Tetons.

None of this is quite what I intend for this discussion (though that last option does have its attractions). Instead I have two aims here. To begin with, I attempt to contemporize Socrates, whose reputation sets forth a model for a philosopher's life. And though I'm not aiming to solve "the Socratic Problem" by finally rescuing the historical Socrates from the hands of his commentators, I make some educated guesses about him, to illustrate the larger point I want to make about Socratic virtue.

Now this is complicated by the fact that the Socratic ideal embodies distinct and not entirely complementary aspirations—to analyze and to self-examine—and this tension accounts, at least in part, for the irksome vagueness of the concept I am addressing. So my second aim is to explore, in rather general terms, one way of addressing that tension, and in doing so, I want to imagine how this skeptical-seeming sage, reconstructed from the early dialogues, foreshadows "what some of us are still doing today" (Nehamas 1998, 2)—not in solitude but within a community of philosophers. At the end of this discussion I have more to say about such a community and its importance for the practice of Socratic virtue.

1. Two Puzzles

1.1. A First Puzzle

Let's begin, then, with Plato's Socrates, and let's notice first some consistency in the literary setting for the early, more purely "Socratic" dialogues. The typical scene is a practical issue: Should Euthyphro be prosecuting his father? How should Laches and Nicias train their soldiers for battle? How can Charmides get rid of his headache? Can Protagoras really teach his students how to be "better"? In other words, once the participants are drawn into serious discussion, the scene gets directed toward how some individual person might learn to evaluate his own everyday decisions. With one major caveat I'll discuss later, it's not so much about "human

life" in general—about Being, or social policy.[2] Plato and Aristotle would make that move later on.[3]

So at first it seems as if maybe we do know something about Socrates, more than just our own ignorance. We know that the Socratic "way of life" *seems* intended to be an *action-guiding* enterprise, one where virtue (*arete*), once clearly identified, guides our deliberations toward the good life (*eudaimonia*). Indeed, beginning with the Greeks and stretching well into the modern era, much of the work of ethical inquiry, modeled initially on the Socratic elenchus, has aimed at identifying the life-guiding virtues.[4] As Plato makes Socrates say later on, virtue is knowledge (*phronesis*) (*Meno* 89a).

Yet in at least six of the early dialogues, Socrates is reported to be ignorant of what arete even is.[5] Why is this? One obvious explanation might be that Socrates already had a hidden agenda, to cleverly push for his own settled intuitions through his mastery of irony. (Like any good "Socratic" teacher, he wants his students to discover this themselves.) Maybe Plato, our main source, was in on all this, and maybe Socrates already communicated his views esoterically to his star pupil, as close to the master as a gnostic disciple to Jesus, imbibing the secrets he would later reveal to the world (see Williams 2008). Or maybe Socrates' best student finally did just figure it out for himself (although, given the doctrinal variety over Plato's long literary output, maybe not). And so forth. Any of these details would be consistent with a pedagogical aim of guiding a student toward right conduct by coaxing out the logical characterization of action-guiding virtue.

But here's the first puzzle. If being a self-avowed teacher of virtue assumes knowing how to define one's own terms, it's at least strange that, according to Gregory Vlastos (1985, 6–7), in only one single passage in the early texts does Socrates claim to know even one moral truth (*Apology* 27b 6–7). Even this seems too weak to support anything but a mere conventional opinion on Socrates' part—something like: Whatever justice turns out to be, I know injustice when I see it and I must not do it (Nehamas 1999, 47).

[2] The caveat is "the unexamined life is not worth living" (*Apology* 38a5–6).

[3] Even when the Socratic discussion addresses the well-being of the community, we have to remember that politics in Athens was conducted by individuals who knew each other personally, on an everyday basis; and the Socratic aim was to inquire, of those individuals, how the Socratic elenchus might impact their decision making. On this, see also Nehamas 1999, 43.

[4] Broadly speaking, the Socratic elenchus is the question-and-answer process of interrogation that Plato's Socrates uses. Vlastos 1982 distinguishes an "indirect" elenchus, which was intended to undercut an opponent's views, from "standard elenchus," intended to provide rational support for Socrates' own moral views. But against such a standard view, see the collection of articles in Scott 2002.

[5] For an extensive list of these passages, see Nehamas 1999, 54 n. 37.

So when Socrates announces that he really doesn't know the answers to his own questions, maybe we ought to take his disavowal seriously. And that would solve the first puzzle. A teacher of virtue *would* be able to explain (with *logos*) the subject matter of his teaching. Socrates can't do that, and he knows it. So he couldn't have seen himself as a teacher of virtue. This is explicitly what he tells us (*Apology* 33b).[6] Moreover, if his disavowal was *not* sincere, then (from the evidence we have) he was pretty much a failure. The early accounts we have of most of his students—Plato being the most obvious exception—suggest that they failed to learn what he would have wanted to teach them. Like Euthyphro they remained unresponsive, or like Laches they were left hanging at the sudden end of discussion, or like Charmides they remained unprepared for the challenges that would await them later on. So it would seem like flimsy scholarship to rest our estimation of Socrates upon his general failure to perform a task he never intended to accomplish, imposing instead our own analytically based, historically anachronistic preoccupations as to what he *should* have intended to teach.[7]

Rather, what we see instead, in the early Socratic dialogues, is an unveiling of the participant's own ignorance, through what Vlastos (following

[6] There is a problem, however. My view does not match the morally informed discussion by Socrates in the *Crito*, where he refutes the advice to escape the hemlock with little hint of tentativeness. Melissa Lane (1988, 313) characterizes the *Crito* as unique among the dialogues for its depiction of Socrates engaging in Aristotelian-style practical deliberation. So the usual early dating of the *Crito* presents serious difficulties for my thesis, since it depicts Socrates engaging in a style of argument that I am suggesting is not authentically his; even Nehamas accepts the early authorship of the Crito (1998, 184), arguing that "though everything here is morally robust, it is dialectically light and tentative," lacking in definitive certainty on Socrates' part (1999, 65). But the better case would be if the *Crito* could be shown to be later than usually thought, and indeed Anastasia Zolotukhina (2010) has recently provided solid reasons for regarding the dialogue as late in composition and probably written by a member of the Academy rather than Plato himself. Her view fits well with my own suspicions on this.

[7] There are problems with such an approach beyond questions about its connection to the historical Socrates. For example: any moral principles that an analytically successful elenchic dialectic might produce should be action guiding; yet, to be action guiding they need to be motivationally efficacious. But according to the favored account from Hume, desires are motivating but impervious to reason, and reasons are logically compelling but motivationally inert. So it is not at all implausible that someone might admit that, morally, she should give to charity but still wonder what real reason she has for doing so (Smith 1994, 6). On the other hand, perhaps she already has a desire to exercise her generosity, in which case her moral judgments are simply expressions of her inclination, and the moral principle does no psychological work. Admittedly, this is not the way many people view moral norms, but this very fact might simply be a cultural phenomenon, as Elizabeth Anscombe suggested (1958, 4): with the demise of religion, the forensic notion of moral obligation that derived from Christian culture has lost much of its force, but popular culture is still left with "obligation" as a linguistic relic. These considerations famously led Anscombe herself to the view that something like the eudaimonistic ethic of the ancients needs to replace modern moral philosophy.

Richard Robinson) termed "indirect elenchus" (1982, 711), that is, *reductio* arguments designed to convince the interlocutor of his own error, to strip aside his epistemic pretensions. This replicates Socrates' own lesson from the oracle—the maxim "Know thyself" was inscribed on the temple at Delphi—and the simplest account of his self-understood mission would be that Socrates intended to make others understand, by personal experience, what the oracle must have meant.

1.2. A Second Puzzle

Now obviously even if Socrates did not see himself as a teacher of virtue, this would not mean that others might not see him that way. Plato would certainly portray him that way in his more mature work, and his enemies viewed him that way as well (*Apology* 27c). If I'm right so far, this would just be evidence of their misunderstanding.

This leads, however, to the second puzzle. It is hard to see how Socrates could attract pupils the way many a typical sophist would (claiming to be in possession of answers they lacked) if he made no such claim. But he did attract followers. The obvious question is how? Granted, many were just there for the show ("they enjoyed hearing people interrogated," *Apology* 23c), but there were others—Xenophon, Aesthines, Crito, Cebes, Simmias. How could they hope to benefit from someone who, apparently, had little to tell them? (See esp. Nehamas 1999, chaps. 2 and 3.) Even today we're left wondering. "What is the good of philosophy, after all, if it does not tell people what to do?"[8] Millennia later we're still stuck with that question, and with the assumption behind it, that the way to conduct ethical inquiry is to begin to construct an ethical theory providing analytically driven answers to questions about defeasible principles or probabilistic procedures.

Does this mean that we (and those who knew Socrates in the flesh) are left with nothing but our own ignorance? I don't think so. There are other ways of doing ethics apart from the quest for settled knowledge about the essential nature of the virtues. And this, if I am correct, is the way Socrates proceeded.

2. Exemplary Moral Seriousness

The Socrates I've been reconstructing here is the one who always leaves his listeners perplexed—and I think we ought not to imagine him enacting any ironically crafted pedagogical curriculum. What, then, was he doing? Consider again the boastful Euthyphro, who first gets confused and finally scurries away—out of fretful embarrassment perhaps? We're not sure. But

[8] This is a comment from Robert Solomon, wryly quoted by Alexander Nehamas (1998, 103).

anybody who made it through Philosophy 101 might remember him as a flagrant shallow head who lacks something or other essential to any full-fledged moral being, and as the dialogue makes obvious, he certainly lacks "knowledge." But then so does Socrates. So what is specially lacking in Euthyphro?[9]

Perhaps it's this. It's been said that the writing of Rebecca West was infused with a "steady moral seriousness" (Fremantle 1977). I don't know if this is true, but steady moral seriousness, whatever it is, seems to hint at one telling feature of moral character to which Euthyphro could make no claim. Exactly here, I suggest, is what Socrates' followers discovered in Socrates: a living exemplar of steady moral seriousness—a person who can be recognized as embodying (rather than logically explaining) a conception of virtue. In other words, moral seriousness is not first of all about what we should do but about who we are and what relationship we have to ourselves. What Socrates communicated directly, in real-life personal encounters, must have been a way of living that left some of his audience feeling deeply unsettled but others feeling "transformed" (Hadot 1995, 274). "Taking ourselves seriously means that we are not prepared to accept ourselves just as we come," that is, through run-of-the-mill socialization (Frankfurt 2006, 2).

Plato himself was one of these "transformed" sorts, and we still feel the impact from this in his own idiosyncratic writings.[10] Plato's Alcibiades testifies to Socrates' ability to make him feel ashamed of himself (*Symposium* 216b). The Greek word here is *aischunesthsai*, and I'm not sure it entirely fits into our familiar distinction between "shame" and "guilt" (Benedict 1989)—where guilt is only about one's deeds, while shame is directed toward one's "self." But we can perhaps detect hints of this in the Platonic anecdote where Alcibiades—entirely devoid of conscience—is nonetheless befuddled by the dreaded Socratic rebuke for having neglected his soul for the sirens of celebrity. Alcibiades was taken by the power of Socrates' presence—which strikes him as an interior beauty (*kalon*)—making him yearn to better himself as a person. Unfortunately, even more than Euthyphro, Alcibiades is a "story of waste and loss, of the failure of practical reason to shape his life" (though one that Plato transposed into a cautionary lesson in erotics [Nussbaum 1986, 166, 195–98]).

So there has to be something right about exemplarist virtue ethics (Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018, 2.2), which focuses on the pretheoretical identification of paradigms, and a view like Linda Zagzebski's (2004, 41, 52ff., and 2017, passim) turns out to be relevant not only for those well developed in practical reason—which Alcibiades certainly was not—but for the many, whose primal emotional responses could prompt even

[9] For a rather more staid picture of the *Euthyphro*, however, see Geach 1972, 31–44.

[10] Plato's work may not seem idiosyncratic to us now, because Plato happened to become the most famous of Socrates' direct line of followers.

an Alcibiades to recognize Socrates as a master of virtue. Exemplification is the motive behind the sketch of the Socrates I am providing here. No way of life gets embraced without a model to emulate.[11]

If this is right, then (*pace* Plato), perhaps the virtue of steady moral seriousness cannot (in the strict sense) be "taught," despite all one's best hints, cajolings, and formulas. As Socrates showed, charisma helps. But perhaps the most an instructor can finally do is provide a student with at least one tradition that conveys what it's like to engage in the Socratic quest, along with an environment that gives that student a safe and undistracted chance to explore it—all of which universities these days are even less prepared to offer than they were decades ago (Deresiewicz 2014).[12] In the end, the rest is mostly up to the student to discover for herself.

So, yes, it seems that Socrates could attract followers after all, without actually teaching them or even intending to teach them any "knowledge." And in Plato's earliest writings we have a distant vision of just that—followers attracted not so much by the process of elenchic success as by an intuitive sense of a person seen as "a unique whole" (Nussbaum 1986, 191). This is what Xenophon saw: "Not that he ever professed to be an instructor," but "by showing that he was himself such a character, he made those in his society hope that, by imitating him, they would become such as he was" (*Memorabilia* 1.2.3).

3. Second Thoughts

Even so, let's pause here for a moment. Can what we've said here so far be entirely right? For what is the point of fashioning a contemporized image of Socrates if we have nothing to learn from it? So let's reconsider this.

Socrates certainly did not win his companions' devotion like some handsome rock star seducing a gaggle of groupies. His devotees do seem to have been captivated by his very presence, but because he was engaging and accessible as a celebrity might not be, he somehow inspired at least a few of them to change their lives. Thus Plato remained a playwright (of sorts) but with a transformed life mission—which was to explain "how one could learn from Socrates even if Socrates had nothing to teach" (Nehamas 1999, 49). I imagine that Plato must have puzzled hard over this thought: Socrates ended his life not as a blinded Oedipus but as one whose death came through the most clear-sighted choice.

[11] There are, however, major objections to taking exemplarist virtue as the primary model for virtue ethics, and my use of it here is just as a starting point. See Merritt 2000, 370ff.

[12] Steven Pinker's curt retort to William Dereciewicz is worth including here: "Perhaps I am emblematic of everything that is wrong with elite American education, but I have no idea how to get my students to build a self or become a soul" (Pinker 2014). If my suggestions here are correct, Pinker has a point, though he may be missing the larger point of what higher education should and should not include.

So maybe Plato realized that he did learn *something* from Socrates after all, but he spent his transformed life trying to understand what (and how) this could be. And if we learn something from someone who is dedicated to a task and invites others to join in, then that person is certainly a kind of teacher. But here the teaching proceeds first of all by example: the life of Socrates was a living example of a single-minded life task of steady moral seriousness. ("I spent my whole life going about persuading you all to give your first and greatest care to the improvement of your soul," *Apology* 30a–b).

An unexamined life may not be worth living, but apparently an examined life makes even dying worthwhile.

So, it seems, we would have to say that Socrates did indeed "teach" at least one virtue—the virtue of unremitting self-examination—and to exemplify that, he did not need to present any logical demonstration of its advisability. He did not need to offer lessons in that concept's essential properties. He needed only to continue doing what he was doing—in public. (And we shall see shortly the importance of this public engagement.)

4. The Examined Life and the Care of the Soul

What, then, is to be said about this process of self-examination, which embodies this virtue of steady moral seriousness?

The first thing to note—and this assumes we are "followers" of the Socrates I am imagining here—is that *self-examination is an existential urgency*. After the incident at Delphi, Socrates says he felt "compelled to put my religious duty first," to interpret the oracle's message despite his internal "distress and alarm" at his burgeoning unpopularity (*Apology* 21e). Life, he insists, is meaningless ("not worth living") apart from this mission (37e), which he pursues with relentless seriousness and single-mindedness—to regard the care of the soul above all other concerns (30a–b).

Admittedly, this may strike some as just an obsolescent sensibility. I am aware that linking the terms "existential" and "serious" may conjure up more than I intend. Simon Blackburn (1995, 37ff.) reports that Philippa Foot fought an inward battle in her earlier career against the "existentialist" spirit of those decades, and I am not proposing a wholesale reversal of that victory. But no exemplar is perfect, and I do want to evoke here a contemporized alternative to the light value Socrates seems to place on life itself, as he even denies being "so desperately in love" with it (*Apology* 37e). What I want to maintain is a vivid sense for the unique preciousness of living and an appreciation for its fading efflorescence—lest we find ourselves on Ivan Iliych's deathbed, wondering how it all went so wrong (Tolstoy 2009, 88). Moral seriousness, one might say, is sensitivity to "the sting of the real," and the "real" here includes the ineluctability of mortality, cast against the changing backdrop of our historical situation.

Foot (1978, 13) has observed that there may be no general virtue of self-love just because we are attached enough to our own good already. But perhaps "moral seriousness" is the better way to describe that virtue, because if Socrates is right, then remaining personally attached to the values that people typically consider their own good (minus self-examination!) is surely no path to wisdom.

A second important point is that *self-examination is self-interpretation*. And here I mean not just that self-examination *requires* self-interpretation. I mean that serious self-examination *is* a kind of self-interpretation—serious reflection upon how we have lived our lives, who we have become, and what we may realistically hope or—and that without such a narrative there can be no caring for the soul. And that's because who we are as persons is, quite precisely, the result of our self-interpretation.

This raises the question of what we mean by "soul." The metaphysical and religious connotations of the term are obvious, and this itself might be a distraction, especially for the secular minded, since it turns out that the care for the soul (self) could even involve "spiritual" practices.[13] Similarly, there are a host of interesting analytical problems around personal identity, but these should not distract us either. We no more need a solid theory of personal identity to examine our souls than we need a perfect theory of optimal health to know we're sick.

Let's just say that "soul" is simply the centerpiece of the narrative that one's self-examination reveals. Suppose that "I" am the guy who remembers growing up an only child of aging parents, gay and troubled in lonely Central Ohio, whose recuperation from all this extended his time in graduate school far too long, who couldn't stomach any more academic work at the end of it, and who returned to academics late in life as a semi-employed adjunct. Maybe as a result I've developed a pesky anxiety disorder, maybe I've been harboring unacknowledged resentments, or perhaps I just have a general tendency toward depression. I wouldn't need to have a good answer to Joseph Butler's objection to John Locke's theory of personal identity (see Butler 1867, 265ff.) in order to devote myself to the care of my soul.[14]

[13] Hadot thinks the term "spiritual" is necessary here because "these exercises are the result, not merely of thought, but of the individual's entire psychism." For more discussion on this, see the context of this quote in Hadot 1995, 81–82.

[14] The process of identifying one's own self-narrative actually presupposes the numerical identity that much analytic discussion addresses (DeGrazia, 2005, 114). For it should be obvious that requiring a logical "definition" of personal identity prior to attending to narrative self-definition is wrong-headed. Broadly speaking, to "define" is to give form to something, and giving necessary and sufficient conditions for X is not to give it real-life form. It is to engage in what the Stoics dismissively called only "discourse *about* philosophy." For them, philosophy *was* a way of life, a way of giving definition not to one's theories but to one's living (Hadot 1995, 265–67).

So here we depart from the Platonic Socrates: we are not now especially concerned with disembodied souls (*Phaedo* 105e).[15] Self-examination prioritizes not our heavenly expectations, not just a collection of biographical attributes, even less just a chronicle of events, but rather the meanings we construct from our own autobiographical narration. And within our reconstituted narrative of the events themselves, we may perhaps expect to discover some "barely noticeable impulses" that we, like Ivan Iliych (Tolstoy 2009, 88), may have till now ignored, which should remind us of the existential urgency of our hermeneutical task.

A third thing to emphasize is that once we have availed ourselves of the requisite moral seriousness and a phenomenologically sensitive narratology, we shall also have noticed that *self-examination is inwardly dialogical*. At the simplest level, there is a relationship between my life as narrated (its past, present, and possible future) and my own attitudes toward that story. Both of these are mental representations, but in self-reflection the first is the "object" of the second: I may be pleased or disappointed, engaged or indifferent toward something I remember doing or undergoing. And I shall almost certainly have conflicting attitudes that take on the character of reciprocal inner conversation.

So far there is little here that's unfamiliar, but it gets more complex when we add in the features of desire and will that Harry Frankfurt (1988, 12) has called "second-order" attitudes, which generate and essentially inform that inner conversation. This brings us to the structure of personhood itself. If, say, my difficult childhood has left me with resentments I would rather not have, then taking care of my soul might involve addressing these resentments, and of course I must be aware of them to do this. This might well be an intricate matter. I may sense instead that my pique is entirely justified, I may (in an especially Romantic mood) regard my depression as the key to creative breakthrough on my projects. And then I may later find that these same traits interface badly with the other aspects of my life (perhaps these idiosyncrasies have just caused a relationship to go bad), and I might begin to embark on the Socratic task after all.

Frankfurt's point is this. If I enter into dialogue with myself, with the aim of setting things in my life right—deciding perhaps to get myself to a therapist (if I decide I do not want to be this way), or even to become a productive but solitary hermit instead (I'd rather stay the way I am)—then that is a sign that I am a "person." In Frankfurt's vocabulary, I have identified with one or another of my second-order attitudes regarding the tensions in my life. Here is a specialized use of the concept of "a person" that means more than simply having a body and a mind (Frankfurt 1988, 11). It means more than being the object of legal standing, as one who is

[15] What I say here, however, is not logically incompatible with an afterlife either.

guaranteed freedom of speech or due process of the law. (And much, much more than simply being a fetus in embryo!)[16]

But now—let's imagine that we feel some of this Socratic urgency, and that we might be sympathetic toward the inward dialogical process of self-formation. But to what purpose? Is there an endgame here? Indeed there is.

A fourth point to stress is that *Socrates' call to self-examination is directed toward attaining "eudaimonia."* This is a positive future state of the soul, thinly elaborated, left to Socrates' successors (beginning with Aristotle) to fill out.[17] In ancient ethics this came to suggest a picture of a certain form of life: one that sees various deliberations leading not only toward various ends (pleasure, wealth, or whatever) but also toward a life culminating in a unity of ends (*telos*). This unity itself becomes the end in itself.[18]

Let me explain.

It may not be easy for moderns to appreciate this eudaimonistic aspect of ancient ethics, just as it has seemed increasingly difficult for us late moderns to find "meaning" in life itself. These two concepts are related, and this I find crucial. Neither is bestowed externally, like a gold watch at life's retirement party. Both eudaimonia and life's meaning are imagined to be intrinsic values (good in themselves, and not for the sake of anything else). But neither of these is reducible to mere pleasant experience alone, since otherwise a lifelong stint in a virtual-reality machine would be all we would need. Beyond this, much of Hellenistic ethics is the story of filling in content for this elusive term "eudaimonia," and modern philosophy has not fared much better at arriving at a consensus on "the meaning of life." It seems to me that these two concepts share more than just their vagueness, and insofar as we are attempting to contemporize Socratic ethics, I suggest we take them as overlapping terms.

For recent commentators, "human flourishing" is about the closest term we have to "eudaimonia," with only partial consensus as to its

[16] Though Frankfurt's theory on persons has attracted much comment related to moral responsibility, Frankfurt insists that this is not his primary interest (1988, 2), which is really the metaphysical status and psychology of personhood itself, and which I think relates more closely to virtue ethics than is generally assumed.

[17] "A future state of the soul" should not be taken to refer necessarily to an afterlife, though Aquinas glossed Aristotle to make it seem so. The key point here is more a point about one's responsibility to the Socratic injunction of care for the soul through sustained self-examination, rather than just meandering ahead with the self we may have already thoughtlessly acquired.

[18] Such a life is obviously not a matter of random chance, though chance events of course play a part, and one might have to reassess events retrospectively to see how unexpected intrusions conform to an overall scenario (as when a bad turn becomes a "challenge" and a "lesson"). On the other hand, I doubt that such a life is well described (at least for us) as the fulfillment of a "life plan." To the extent that the ancients did advocate for such an agenda (as suggested by Larmore 1999, 100–102, and Annas 1993, 38), this aspect of ancient ethics may seem either untenable or undesirable for us. Either our carefully laid plans fail due to the complexity of modern life or else our energy is consumed by the psychic narrowness it takes to secure them. So this is still fertile territory for philosophical work.

meaning.[19] Here, I would add one feature in particular that may not have received sufficient attention in this particular context—what I'll call "phenomenological transcendence."[20] The idea, borrowed from the ancients, would be that "each of us has a final good" in that "when we stand back a bit from our ongoing projects and ask why we are doing what we are doing, we do not find a satisfactory halt until we get to the final end which makes sense of our life as a whole" (Annas 1993, 43). This is a view of our own urgently constructed narrative where self-examination comes to a pause (at least for the moment) once self-formative dialogue no longer seems urgent; where the deep tensions within our personality structure feel integrated into a unity; where the eudaimonistic telos feels less like a future goal to achieve than like a present activity of living, now contemplated from the realized satisfaction of a life already well lived.

For the religiously minded, this "transcendence" might seem disappointingly pedestrian, but it seems to me that others who have experienced it might not be so dismissive.

5. Two Hard Cases

In this discussion so far, I have suggested that for those who take on the project of "philosophy as a way of life," any theory of virtue needs to begin with a steady and serious reflection on the life one has been living. Caring for the self means attentively reconstituting one's personhood from the narrative fragments of one's present self-awareness. Here the example of Socrates reminds us that if we keep too far a theoretical distance, then we have probably chosen philosophy not as a way of life but only as a profession or a hobby. Philosophy as a way of life aims at eudaimonia, which is the opportunity for self-transcendence, to "see life as a whole" (Annas 1993), and there's no accomplishing this in theoretical isolation from our own scrutinized lived experience.

There is, however, yet another complication. For not every human being will easily fit into the Socratic form of life. In particular, two personality

[19] "Human flourishing," "human well-being," "the good life," and (occasionally) "happiness" tend to be treated virtually as synonyms in contemporary philosophical discussion. Anne Baril has provided a thorough survey. Briefly: there are minimalist notions of eudaimonia, more like Aristotle's famous definition (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1095a18–20); these leave unspecified just what Aristotle's "living well and doing well" might entail for us, except perhaps for formal constraints like "self-sufficiency" (sometimes mislabeled "autonomy") or intrinsic value ("completeness"). Other theories are "thicker" in terms of laying out the specific content of the virtues, perhaps updating Aristotle's list, which notoriously excludes, for example, charity to the poor (Broadie 2002, 8).

[20] "Phenomenological transcendence" relates to what Hadot's translator calls "cosmic consciousness," where one develops a felt awareness of "the place of one's individual existence" within "the perspective of the whole" (Hadot 1995, 273). My use of this term neither requires nor excludes metaphysical significance for this kind of mental event.

types stand out as obviously difficult cases, and Harry Frankfurt describes them both.

5.1. A First Hard Case

From the angle of eudaimonistic ethics, Frankfurt's theory of persons reads rather like a bare-bones account of how to begin caring for the soul. It is explicitly thin on narrative interpretation, but Frankfurt does recognize that human persons are naturally pervaded by an "anxious concern" that our thoughts, choices, and actions "make sense" (Frankfurt 2006, 2). This felt tension, I take it, is the goad for the inward dialogue of self-examination.[21] But not for all humans. A "wanton"—a human who lacks second-order volitions (Frankfurt 1988, 16–17)—"is not concerned with the desirability of his desires themselves," so no deeply inward dialogue is likely to take place.[22] This might be someone who lives a life of willful dissipation—a privileged college student, for example, constantly out on the town and consumed with the pleasures of the clubs (and not coming to class). A wanton does not need to be irrational, however: he may be able to reflect upon the proper course of action to take, given his (lightly examined) subjective preferences. He can even be an expert decision-theoretician dealing in bit coins, for whom probability is the guide to life (see Carnap 1947 and Kyburg 2001). Nevertheless, he remains a wanton and not a person, because he has not thought deeply about what his preferences mean for a wider view of his life.

This distinction between "person" and "wanton" is not hard and fast: there are degrees of wantonness. This must mean that there are degrees of personhood as well. And the process of being transformed into fuller personhood is, for Frankfurt, exactly this matter of "endorsing" or "identifying with" one or another of one's second-order attitudes, because a pattern of endorsing one's desires and volitions is a way of constituting one's own character—of "taking responsibility" for who one is as a person (Frankfurt 1988, 171). It would not be too wide of the mark perhaps to suggest that one way of filling out the notion of eudaimonia would be to say that it requires a high degree of personhood. With that, Frankfurt wants to say, comes "freedom of the will," grounded in a distinction between free action (the Humean condition of absence of external coercion) and freedom of the will (the ability to will what one wants to, that is, the absence of internal coercion).[23]

[21] This goes beyond Frankfurt's explicit theory.

[22] Frankfurt's actual theory is more complicated than a wanton lacking second-order volitions, as Frankfurt distinguishes between second-order desires and second-order volitions but then declines to make much of the distinction. See Frankfurt 1988, 16 n. 5.

[23] Cf. Paul's Epistle to the Romans 7:15–17; though for a different view, see Stendahl 1976.

The strong elements of existentialist voluntarism in this account are mitigated somewhat by the fact that for Frankfurt the origin of the will is not an issue. For Frankfurt, freedom of the will is possible only for persons who can act consistent with who they authentically are, but this does not entail that the will originates from some Sartrean contra-causal space. Freedom of the will would be possible even in an entirely naturalistic universe (though this part of Frankfurt's theory does not seem to require strict determinism either).

5.2. A Second Hard Case

For the second problematic type of individual I have in mind, freedom of the will is not available either, though her situation may not be as morally hopeless.[24] Frankfurt exemplifies this as "the unwilling addict"—not because such an individual is not (like the wanton) a person but because she cannot act freely from who she is *as* a person. Here would be the alcoholic who cannot stop drinking and hates herself for it. She has identified with her desire to stop, but her first-order desire to drink overpowers her authentic desire. Here is a clear case of Aristotelian *akrasia* (weakness of will). But in Frankfurt's sense, here is still a person.

Weakness of will presents a major challenge to the Socratic injunction to examine one's life and care for one's soul. Alcibiades, once again, is the star exhibit. At times he wants to better himself but gets distracted by the adulation of the crowd. It's not even clear that he rises to the status of an unwilling adulation addict, however, because more often than not he seems to forget his better inclinations once he's out of Socrates' sight, and he constantly reidentifies with his more shameful nature. (Once again, there are levels of wantonness.)

In any case, I take the unwilling addict to be an instance of an even larger class, into which many of us probably fit—I mean those for whom the pure model of Socratic sage does not take account of the unresolved tensions we may have inherited from dysfunctional families, systematic marginalization, or economic hardship. On the continuum of personhood, which positions the wanton toward one extreme and the full person at the other, the lives of the rest of us are situated, perhaps in an oscillating location, somewhere in between.

As ethics developed in the Hellenistic era, it must have become clear early on that an appeal to Socratic self-examination is not enough, notwithstanding even the commanding exemplary presence of a sage. The problem was seen to be the unruly passions. Plato of course had known this (*Phaedrus*), and knew that education makes a difference (*Republic*). An Aristotelian might put it more precisely: the virtues are dispositions,

[24] Though conceivably freedom of the will might become available under the right therapeutic conditions.

dispositions are habits, and habits can be trained, and from that insight there arose schools of ethics instructors—Cynics, Epicureans, Peripatetics, Stoics. These offered any young man of the time a veritable smorgasbord of training regimens, not through analyzing concepts but through "spiritual exercises" in living better. Thus the Aristotelian formula of "living well and doing well" acquired a more specific content aimed at "a profound transformation of the individual's seeing and being" (Hadot, 1995, 83). The focus of these is generally self-control, through mental exercises aimed at educating the passions.

My interest here is not the details of these programs but an observation about their telos and the conditions necessary for attaining it. So it's useful to notice that these Hellenistic training regimes (whatever their specific applicability to us today may or may not be) were undertaken as a way life within a philosophical community. Which brings this discussion back to my original second aim, which is to explore what this might mean for those of us who think of ourselves in this way.

6. A Community of Philosophers

After the death of Socrates, the tradition he initiated made possible the formation of philosophical communities, as his successors began to devise narratives describing the rational interplay of ideas. Different philosophical schools had different narratives to tell. Plato told stories of why justice is better than egoism, how education could maintain an ideal community; Chrisippus the Stoic must have told stories of how ethics was founded in theology and cosmology (Striker 1991, 13); and other avowed disciples of Socrates had their own stories. This is one of the differences between the Socratics and the Sophists. Without such a history, the philosophical community I want to imagine for us here would be fractured into self-help cults of personality.

Philosophical communities are important for philosophers generally, but especially for those pursuing philosophy as a way of life. For akrasiacs and others who fall short of the Socratic ideal, the rather idyllic notion that we can simply argue with ourselves and generate some Frankfurtian personality integration risks regression to the motivational quagmire that bothered us earlier (see note 7 above). Moreover, "situationist" skeptics toward the virtues have raised empirically based objections about the very existence of stable character traits (Harman 2000; see Snow 2014 for an overview), taking context rather than character as the overriding explanation for human behavior. Of course, the most that almost any such empirical study can show is scarcity, not nonexistence, but there are rather persuasive reasons to suppose that given our natures as social beings, the Aristotelian/Stoic ideal of self-sufficiency is certainly not a realistic option for almost any of us, as Maria Merritt (2000) convincingly shows. Our

social context plays a major determining role in whatever sustainable character traits we can manage, and many of us, in various ways, still bear the marks of struggling to manage them.

This is not, however, all to the bad. As Pedro Alexis Tabensky (2014) has memorably described, this might actually present us with an advantage over the more traditional eudaimonistic accounts because it turns our vulnerability into an asset: rather than just wandering through life in our own echo chamber, we benefit from our social dependency, which is the necessary condition for love and friendship and, ultimately, for the bonds of community. So much more needs to be said on this that I'll leave it to another discussion.

Here, then, is our final question. If philosophers need a community in order to do well in the Socratic task, so that the inner dialogue is not a hermetic exercise, who would these sojourners be? Philosophical dialogue obviously requires philosophical interlocutors, and leads us to ask: Who are the philosophers? I recall my time as a New York City cab driver during my graduate school days, when in the wee hours I'd meet chatty patrons who suspected I wasn't a full-time cabbie. And so they'd ask. I'd admit that I was a philosopher. And if that didn't evoke the usual dead-end silence for the duration, they'd likely volunteer something like: "Well, everybody's a philosopher, right?" And so I'd be left quizzically contemplating just why I was so needlessly hacking so hard to become one.

Humor aside, this anecdote has a serious point. Even though I don't think that philosophy has to be technical discourse about modal logic or supervenient properties, there is something obviously right about the idea that a philosopher's way is not for just anyone, and not just because some people don't know what a "premise" is. If philosophy is a *way of life,* then it's more than just an accessory to other activities. It takes a position of prominence, as a reflective practice, and requires some mastery of critical thinking skills.

Accordingly, this topic of philosophy as a way of life naturally attracts a rather selective audience, for the most part, simply because philosophers engaged by it need to listen and respond to each other according to the form of life particular to philosophers. Obviously this does not mean that philosophers should not discuss serious topics with others. It just means that the way philosophers approach these topics may not always resonate with others who have a different angle of interest, even on subjects that philosophy also covers.

Not just anything that sounds a bit like philosophy counts. We've all seen the clips of political theater on YouTube, where agenda-driven gladiators take turns slamming the opposition with their weaponized arguments. That, as they say, is just politics. (Even though he may use premises and confirmation and analogy, Steve Bannon is probably not the model of a philosopher that comes most readily to mind.) No, the heart of a philosophical community consists of those I'll shamelessly call "serious

philosophers." I also want to be very clear on one more point, however. This notion of "seriousness" does not imply that one has to be trained in anything like a graduate philosophy program. I am not in the least disparaging the well-known efforts to bring philosophical discussion to the general public.[25] Critical inquiry is crucial to democratic governance, and the more intelligent the discussion, the better. It may be that a great many among the general public have been restructuring their own forms of life and not simply sharpening a tool to expedite (and rationalize) the life they already have. They have doubts about what they think they already know, they feel an urgency to explore these topics, and doing so would be living "seriously."

So, then, here is the Socratic challenge: to subject one's actual life to one's own inward dialogue, but also to benefit from what I call "informed scrutiny," performed by one's philosophical friends, as members of a community who pay close attention to philosophy's past, because the past sometimes reveals the alternatives still open to us. This need for community is not always obvious, and it's not always the so-called serious thinkers who best understand the truth about philosophical virtue—that for most of us philosophy practiced seriously in extended isolation would likely leave us with little but an ungrounded "life of dreaming contemplation" (Huysmans 1959, 213). Philosophy as a way of life—as an *art* of living—relies on some broad parameters and novel suggestions to save us from the stylized anguish of Huysmans's misanthropic antihero, who is certainly as deficient in the virtues of living as almost any other figure in the literature.[26]

Socrates seems to have been acutely aware of how indispensable for his own internal elenchic practice a continuing source of real-life dialogue was. ("Landscapes and trees have nothing to teach me, only the people in the city can do that," *Phaedrus* 230d). In the end, Socrates was unwilling to suffer a life in exile, torn from the community that made a dialectical life possible. Even this Socrates, this Silenic figure, too must have yearned for the informed scrutiny of friends who shared a Socratic form of life.

Such a life at its best encompasses more than rational interrogation alone, because it is informed by more than just premises and judgments—even if we could somehow manage to specify *all* things considered. On the one hand, these premises and judgments are lodged within our own individual life concerns (how else would they involve a "way of life"?), and those concerns arise within the narrative structures that reflect our

[25] See, for example, the Society of Philosophers in America (SOPHIA at https://www.philosophersinamerica.com/), Socrates Cafe (https://www.philosopher.org/Socrates_Cafe.html), and New York City's Philosophy Forum LGBT (https://philosophyforumlgbt.org/).

[26] Des Esseintes's escapist life strategy can be summed up in this quote: "The main thing is to forget yourself sufficiently to bring about the desired hallucination and so substitute the vision of a reality for the reality itself" (Huysmans 1959, 36).

own lived personhood. But more than this as well: our personal stories are not the sole contributors here. All the communities we identify with have histories of their own that bear upon who we are, and for serious philosophers philosophy's history presents a living heritage whose themes are concepts and arguments that come embedded within implicit narratives about how past controversies turned out. This is the backdrop for the informed scrutiny of our peers, which carries the eye of history and remembers how things have already gone, so that we might go forward in life together, with the fragile wisdom available to those of us who are not Socrates.

City University of New York–BMCC
Department of Academic Literacy and Linguistics
199 Chambers St.
New York, NY 10007
USA
dseipleonline@gmail.com

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