THE PHILOSOPHICAL LIFE

TWELVE GREAT THINKERS AND
THE SEARCH FOR WISDOM:
FROM Socrates TO
NIETZSCHE

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Of all those who start out on philosophy—not those who take it up for the sake of getting educated when they are young and then drop it, but those who linger in it for a longer time—most become quite queer, not to say completely vicious; while the ones who seem perfectly decent . . . become useless.

—PLATO, Republic (487c–d)
Once upon a time, philosophers were figures of wonder. They were sometimes objects of derision and the butt of jokes, but they were more often a source of shared inspiration, offering, through words and deeds, models of wisdom, patterns of conduct and, for those who took them seriously, examples to be emulated. Stories about the great philosophers long played a formative role in the culture of the West. For Roman writers such as Cicero, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius, one way to measure spiritual progress was to compare one’s conduct with that of Socrates, whom they all considered a paragon of perfect virtue. Sixteen hundred years later, John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) similarly learned classical Greek at a tender age in order to read the Lives of the Eminent Philosophers, as retold by Diogenes Laertius, a Greek follower of Epicurus who is thought to have lived in the third century A.D.

Today, by contrast, most highly educated people, even professional philosophers, know nothing about either Diogenes Laertius or the vast majority of the ancient philosophers whose lives he recounted. In many schools in many countries, the classical curriculum has been largely abandoned. Modern textbooks generally scant the lives of philosophers, reinforcing the contemporary perception that philosophy is best understood as a purely technical discipline, revolving around specialized issues in semantics and logic.
The typical modern philosopher—the Kant of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), say, or the John Rawls of *A Theory of Justice* (1971)—is largely identified with his books. It is generally assumed that “philosophy” refers to “the study of the most general and abstract features of the world and the categories with which we think: mind, matter, reason, proof, truth etc.,” to quote the definition offered by the outstanding recent *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*. In the modern university, where both Kant and Rawls practiced their calling, aspiring philosophers are routinely taught, among other things, that the value of a theory should be evaluated independently of anything we may know about the person holding that theory.

Such a principled disregard of any evidence about philosophers’ lives is a characteristically modern prejudice. For most Greek and Roman thinkers from Plato to Augustine, theorizing was but one way of living life philosophically. To Socrates and the countless classical philosophers who tried to follow in his footsteps, the primary point was not to prove a certain set of statements (even when the ability to define terms and analyze arguments was a constitutive component of a school’s teaching), but rather to explore “the kind of person, the sort of self” that one could become as a result of taking the quest for wisdom seriously.

Or, as Socrates puts it in the pages of Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*, “If I don’t reveal my views in a formal account, I do so by my conduct. Don’t you think that actions are more reliable evidence than words?”

In ancient Greece and Rome, it was widely assumed that the life of a philosopher would exemplify a specific code of conduct and form of life. As a result, biographical details were routinely cited in appraisals of a philosophy’s value. That Socrates faced death with dignity, for example, was widely regarded as an argument in favor of his declared views on the conduct of life.

The transition from ancient to modern modes of living life philosophically was neither sudden nor abrupt. Writing a generation after Montaigne, Descartes (1596–1650) could still imagine commissioning a kind of mythic biography of himself, whereas, fewer than two hundred years later, Rousseau (1712–1778) can only imagine composing an autobiography that is abjectly honest as well as verifiably true in its most damning particulars. It should come as no surprise, then, that so many modern philosophers, though still inspired by an older ideal of philosophy as a way of life, have sought refuge,
like Kant, in impersonal modes of theorizing and teaching.

This sort of academic philosophizing notoriously left Friedrich Nietzsche cold. “I for one prefer reading Diogenes Laertius,” he wrote in 1874. “The only critique of a philosophy that is possible and that proves something, namely trying to see whether one can live in accordance with it, has never been taught at universities; all that has ever been taught is a critique of words by means of other words.”

A century later, Michel Foucault (1926–1984) expressed a similar view. In the winter of 1984, several months before his death, Foucault devoted his last series of lectures at the Collège de France to the topic of parrhesia, or frank speech, in classical antiquity. Contemplating, as Nietzsche had a century before, possible antecedents for his own peculiar approach to truthfulness, Foucault examined the life of Socrates and, using evidence gathered by Diogenes Laertius, the far odder life of Diogenes of Sinope (d. c. 320 B.C.), the archetypal Cynic, who was storied in antiquity for living in a tub, carrying a lit lamp in broad daylight, and telling anybody who asked that “I am looking for a man.”

Foucault of course knew that the lore surrounding a philosopher like Diogenes was no longer taken seriously. But he, like Nietzsche, decried what he called our modern “negligence” of what he called the “problem” of the philosophical life. This problem, he speculated, had become eclipsed for two reasons: first, because religious institutions, above all Christian monasticism, had absorbed, or (in his words) “confiscated” the “theme of the practice of the true life.” And, second, “because the relationship to truth can now be made valid and manifest only in the form of scientific knowledge.”

The twelve biographical sketches of selected philosophers from Socrates to Nietzsche that follow are meant to explore these issues by writing, as Foucault suggested, a “history starting from the problem of the philosophical life.” Instead of recounting one life in detail, I recount a number of lives in brief. Anecdotes and human incident flesh out the philosopher under discussion. Distinctive theories and doctrines are summarized concisely, even though their nuances and complexities often puzzle philosophers to this day. And following the example of such ancient biographers as Plutarch in his Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans, I am highly selective, in an effort to sum up the crux of a character. My aim throughout is to convey the arc of a life rather than a collection of doctrines.
and moral maxims.

Modern standards of evidence are acknowledged—I am a historian by training, and facts matter to me. But for the ancient philosophers especially, the myths must be acknowledged, too, for such legends long formed a constitutive part of the Western philosophical tradition. That the lives of many ancient philosophers have beggared belief is a cultural fact in its own right: It helps to explain the enduring fascination—and sometimes the resentment—aroused by spiritual athletes whose feats (like those of the early Christian saints) have so often seemed beyond credibility.

This history begins with Socrates and Plato, for it was Plato in his Socratic dialogues who first gave currency to the word philosophy. In the century after the death of Socrates, a distinct, identifiable group of “philosophers” flourished for the first time. Monuments to their memory—busts, statues—were erected in Athens and elsewhere in the Greek-speaking world. For the purposes of this study, I generally picked figures who sought to follow in Socrates’ footsteps by struggling to measure up to his declared ambition “to live the life of a philosopher, to examine myself and others.”

For Socrates, as for many (though not all) of those who tried to measure up to his example, this ambition has in some way revolved around an effort to answer to the gnomic injunction, Know thyself. (Aristotle, for one, assumed that this injunction was a key motive for Socrates’ lifework.)

Of course, what, precisely, the Delphic injunction means—and what it prescribes—is hardly self-evident, as we learn in Plato: “I am still unable,” confides Socrates in the Phaedrus, “to know myself; and it really seems to me ridiculous to look into other things before I have understood that.”

Moreover, self-examination, even in antiquity, is only one strand in the story of philosophy. From the start—in Plato, and again in Augustine—the problem of the philosophical life evolves in a complicated relationship between what we today would call “science” and “religion”—between mathematical logic and mystical revelation in the case of Plato, between an open-ended quest for wisdom and the transmission of a small number of fixed dogmas in the case of Augustine.

The series of biographies that follows is not comprehensive. It omits Epicurus and Zeno, Spinoza and Hume, and such twentieth-century philosophers as Witt-
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genstein, Heidegger, Sartre, and Foucault. But I believe the twelve ancients and moderns I selected are broadly representative.

While I include some figures rarely taken seriously by most contemporary philosophers—Diogenes, Montaigne, and Emerson, for example—I also include several canonic figures, notably Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant, whose life’s work helped lead philosophy away from its classical emphasis on exemplary conduct toward a stress on rigorous inquiry, and whose biographies therefore raise larger questions about the relation of philosophy as a way of life to the mainstream discipline of philosophy as it currently exists in academic institutions around the world.

Taken as a whole, these twelve sketches raise many more questions than they can possibly answer:

- If, like Plato, we define philosophy as a quest for wisdom that may prove unending, then what is the search for wisdom really good for?

- What is the relation of reason to faith, of philosophy to religion, and how does the search for wisdom relate to the most exacting forms of rigorous inquiry and “science”?

- Is philosophy best pursued in private or in public? What are its implications, if any, for statecraft, for diplomacy, for the conduct of a citizen in a democratic society?

- Above all, what is the “self” that so many of these philosophers have sought to know, and how has our conception of the self changed in the course of history, in part as a result of how successive philosophers have embarked on their quests? Indeed, is self-knowledge even feasible—and, if so, to what degree? Despite years of painful self-examination, Nietzsche famously declared that “we are necessarily strangers to ourselves, we have to misunderstand ourselves.”
• If we seek, shall we find?

Here, then, are brief lives of a handful of philosophers, ancient and modern: Socrates and Plato, Diogenes and Aristotle, Seneca and Augustine, Montaigne and Descartes, Rousseau and Kant, Emerson and Nietzsche. They are all men, because philosophy before the twentieth century was overwhelmingly a vocation reserved for men: a large fact, which has limited the kinds of lives—stubbornly independent, often unattached, sometimes solitary and sexless—that philosophers have tended to lead. Within these common limits, however, there has been considerable variation. Some philosophers were influential figures in their day, while others were marginal; some were revered, while others provoked scandal and public outrage.

Despite such differences, each of these men prized the pursuit of wisdom. Each one struggled to live his life according to a deliberately chosen set of precepts and beliefs, discerned in part through a practice of self-examination, and expressed in both word and deed. The life of each one can therefore teach us something about the quest for self-knowledge and its limits. And as a whole, they can tell us a great deal about how the nature of philosophy—and the nature of philosophy as a way of life—has changed over time.