

JOHN M. COOPER



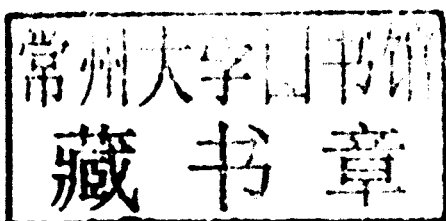
PURSUITS *of* WISDOM

Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy
from Socrates to Plotinus

Pursuits of Wisdom

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PURSUIITS OF WISDOM

For G.E.L. Owen and Michael Frede
In Memoriam

PREFACE

My first idea for a book on ethical theory in ancient philosophy came in the 1970s: at that point it was to encompass Plato, Aristotle, and Hellenistic philosophy. My friend Jerry Schneewind, then a colleague at the University of Pittsburgh, proposed a joint project of a three-volume “history of ethics”: ancient ethics by me, post-Renaissance ethics by him, and someone (to be discovered) to deal with the intervening late ancient, medieval and Renaissance periods. Jerry eventually published his remarkable and ground-breaking *The Invention of Autonomy* (1997)—not exactly the envisaged general history of “modern” ethics, but quite close enough. Later, other friends, notably Myles Burnyeat and Michael Frede, insisted that the expanding field of ancient philosophy really needed a comprehensive study of ancient moral and ethical theory, and urged me to fill this gap. I agreed with them about the need (this was in the early 1990s, before Julia Annas had published *The Morality of Happiness*). But what theme could one use to weave a truly comprehensive, philosophically live history of the ancient tradition, which by this time had to include late ancient Platonism? I didn’t have the stomach for a traditional critical report on what current scholarship in the field says about Socrates’ ideas about virtues, Plato’s accounts in the *Republic* of virtue and happiness, and about pleasure in the *Philebus*, Aristotle’s ethical theory, the controversies surrounding Stoic and Epicurean ethics, and Plotinus’ spiritualist and Platonist conceptions of the human person and the human good. So, while I continued to write scholarly articles on topics in ancient ethics, moral psychology, political philosophy and related matters that struck me as interesting and needing attention, the book languished inchoate.

I found my theme about ten years ago through reading English translations of the late Pierre Hadot's remarkable and highly stimulating work on ancient Greek philosophy as a way of life: *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1995) and *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* (2002). Fascinating and even inspiring though I found Hadot's ideas, his understanding of ancient philosophy, and of in what way it *could* be a full and complete way of life for its adherents, seemed to me to omit virtually altogether the central and indispensable place in philosophy (in Greece and ever since) of rigorous analysis and reasoned argumentation. As the first fruit of my liberating encounter with Hadot's work I published an essay in 2007, in Dominic Scott's festschrift for Myles Burnyeat, on "Socrates and Philosophy as a Way of Life," in which I explained my dissatisfaction with Hadot's conception of philosophy, and marked out my own new path toward conceiving, not ancient philosophy itself as a way of life (as if ancient philosophy were a unique and special genre of philosophizing), but specific ancient philosophies—in fact the six to which this book is devoted—as *ways* of life.

In writing this book, my ambition has been to discuss, both as a unified tradition and as a set of widely diverging individual philosophies, the main ideas and theories of pagan Greek moral philosophy as a whole—in a continuous tradition from Socrates, the originator of full-blown ethical theory in our Western tradition, down to the Platonists of late antiquity. I hope to show my readers both how wonderfully good and, above all, *interesting* the philosophies of antiquity are, both individually and in the full sweep of this tradition's history, when considered as offering ways of life. I want to show first, how good and strong these philosophies are in strictly philosophical terms—as carefully, coherently and plausibly reasoned sets of all-inclusive proposals for understanding human nature, human values, and the best way of living a human life—but also, second, how clear, and even compelling, these philosophies are as potential guides to living, for anyone who has any inclination to live their life on the basis of reasons they can understand and approve, after critical reflection of their own concerning what reason itself tells us about how we should live. It is true, of course, that our own cultures and historical circumstances differ in many ways from those of antiquity, and we see in ancient philosophy some basic assumptions that we cannot easily accept in the climate of twenty-first century philosophy. But we can set those aside, and consider the ancient theories, nonetheless, in the light of them. My own experience, which I hope my readers will share, is that these theories open up illuminating and clarifying perspectives that can both enrich our contemporary philosophical thought, and open the prospect of new self-

understandings that might allow us to embrace philosophy as a way of life, in the ancient manner—to some extent, at any rate—even in our very changed modern circumstances.

With these ambitions, I have attempted to make the ancient philosophies that I discuss accessible to philosophers, and students of philosophy, with little or no familiarity with specialist scholarship within the now burgeoning philosophical sub-field of ancient philosophy. But I have hoped to make the book equally accessible to readers interested in philosophy, and in the idea of philosophy as a guide to life, with little formal background in the academic field. I have avoided unexplained specialist terminology, untranslated Greek words, and technical or quasi-technical terms of philosophy, in favor of as direct and plain contemporary English as I was able to manage. Even though many of the ancient philosophers' ideas are unfamiliar and even surprising to a twenty-first century reader, and their arguments are often complex and difficult, I hope to have made good and clear sense, even for less philosophically adept readers, both of what these ideas actually amount to, and the philosophical reasons that the philosophers in question rested their theories on.

With the interests of non-specialist readers in mind, I have excluded from my main text discussion of scholarly details and scholarly disputes (including interpretations alternative to my own), as well as all specific references to texts of ancient authors that I rely on in my presentations and critical discussions. Such textual references are liberally provided in the footnotes, where I also inform the reader (sparingly) about alternative interpretations and approaches from my own, and cite the work of other scholars and philosophers. I also provide in footnotes what seemed essential background information concerning ancient authors and texts, including English translations where available; this is followed up in the lists of Readings for each chapter that are assembled at the back of the book. Longer discussions, particularly those of special or exclusive interest to ancient philosophy experts, are relegated to Endnotes. I hope this somewhat unusual division of labor—footnotes for the most essential information readers should take into account as they proceed through the book, plus endnotes for more extended discussion of particular points that arise—will prove easily manageable and convenient.

I am grateful to many institutions for financial support during the long gestation of this book. Princeton University supported my research and writing during five paid leaves beginning in 1992–93, with additional support coming from

the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences and the A.W. Mellon Foundation of New York, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Princeton University Council of the Humanities, in which I was an Old Dominion Professor in academic year 2010–11. During the spring of that year I delivered the John Locke Lectures in the Philosophy Faculty of Oxford University on the topic of ancient philosophies as ways of life, as a Visiting Fellow of All Souls College. I am grateful to the Faculty for inviting me to give these lectures at such an opportune moment—just as I was putting the book chapters into final form—and to All Souls for its hospitality and the comfortable housing and first-rate facilities that a visiting fellowship there entails. Discussions with many Oxford philosophers and philosophy students, at the lectures and seminars of the series and informally, helped me greatly to clarify and sharpen my arguments. Over these years I also gave papers and lectures at a number of universities using material that eventually made its way into the book (becoming, in many cases, free-standing articles as well). I thank those from whom I learned in discussions, too many to recall here, on those occasions: at the Universities of Athens, California at Davis, Canterbury, Chicago, Kentucky, Maryland College Park, Memphis, Oslo, Oxford, Paris-Nanterre, Paris-Sorbonne, Pittsburgh, São Paulo, Toronto, and Virginia; Australian National, Boston, Bowling Green State, Columbia, Cornell, Florida State, Fordham, Georgia State, Hamburg, McGill, New York, Northwestern, Ohio State, Otago, St. Joseph's, Stanford and Uppsala Universities; Franklin and Marshall, Haverford, and Middlebury Colleges, and the City University of New York Graduate Center.

Jerry Schneewind's encouragement from early on in my work on the book, and his comments chapter by chapter as I completed penultimate versions of my text over the last twelve months, were invaluable to me. My Princeton colleagues Hendrik Lorenz, Benjamin Morison, Alexander Nehamas and Christian Wildberg each read and commented extremely helpfully on different chapters of the book at the same late stage of preparation (Nehamas had, as always, read drafts and discussed with me my ideas as they took shape at earlier stages); their generous sharing of their expertise, especially when it came to Hellenistic and late Platonist philosophy, saved me from errors and helped me greatly to sharpen and clarify my ideas. As the book was already in press, Lorenz and I gave a joint graduate seminar, attended also by Morison and Wildberg, on the topic of ancient philosophies as ways of life, in which we read and discussed relevant ancient texts in the light of the book chapters. Lorenz's acute and deep exploration in the seminar of central points in the moral philosophies of Socrates, Aris-

totle, Epicurus, Chrysippus, Sextus Empiricus, and Plotinus, and in the detailed examination of related texts, helped me to make many final corrections and improvements to the book, as I revised copy-edited texts and at the page-proof stage. I got efficient and intelligent assistance from Corinne Gartner and Samuel Baker in preparing the lists of Readings appended to the individual chapters, and very helpful comments from Arudra Burra on penultimate versions of the first chapters of the book. I am extremely grateful to all these friends for their generous help and support. Finally, I would like to thank my Princeton University Press editor, Rob Tempio, for his patience in waiting for the book to be finished, and for his good judgment and advice concerning issues in both the preparation and the production of the book. I also thank Bruce Tindall for his expert and thoughtful preparation of the book's Index.

As I indicated above, in writing the book I have drawn upon material I have published already in scholarly articles, in all cases, however, thoroughly reworked for presentation in a book intended not primarily for co-practitioners in the specialist sub-field of ancient philosophy, but for a wide readership. In footnotes I frequently refer readers to these articles for detailed explanation and scholarly support of various points of interpretation. However, I repeat verbatim or in close paraphrase from three of these articles sufficiently so that I should acknowledge and thank their publishers: "Socrates and Philosophy as a Way of Life," in *Maieusis*, ed. Dominic Scott (Oxford University Press, 2007) (used in chapters 1 and 2); "Political Community and the Highest Good," in *Being, Nature, and Life in Aristotle*, ed. James Lennox and Robert Bolton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) (used in chapter 3); and "Stoic Autonomy," in my own *Knowledge, Nature, and the Good* (Princeton University Press, 2004) (used in chapter 4). I would also like to thank my sister-in-law Dora DeGeorge for taking the author's photo, showing me sitting before my olive tree, named Athena after the goddess of wisdom and donor to Attica of its marvelous and characteristic plant.

I dedicate the book to the memory of Gwil Owen, whose unheard of, brilliant, and amazing lecture course at Harvard in the spring term of 1960 on *The Logic of Physics and the Logic of Metaphysics in Aristotle* burst open for me the world of ancient philosophy, who sustained my enthrallment during my subsequent graduate studies at Oxford and Harvard, and who was my colleague at Harvard and intellectual model in all my subsequent work in the field; and Michael Frede, whom I first met in Owen's B. Phil class on Aristotle in Corpus Christi

College, Oxford in October, 1962, and who became my close friend, colleague at Princeton, and constant collaborator: in fact, he sometimes seemed a co-conspirator, as we pursued, and tried to promote, the study of the texts of ancient philosophy, and their interpretation, in the terms of ancient philosophy itself—without coming to them from contemporary philosophical problems so as to see what the ancients might have to say about those, but seeking to understand ancient philosophy “as it actually was”—and thereby to expand the contemporary philosophical imagination. Both of them are sorely missed.

Princeton, December 2011

CONTENTS

Preface *ix*

- 1 Introduction: On Philosophy as a Way of Life *1*
 1. Philosophy Ancient, Modern, and Contemporary *1*
 2. What It Means to Live a Philosophy *17*
- 2 The Socratic Way of Life *24*
 1. Ancient Philosophy as Intellectual Pursuit vs. as Way of Life *24*
 2. Socrates in Plato's *Apology* *32*
 3. Socratic Dialectic, Socratic Knowledge, and Human Wisdom *42*
 4. Socratic Philosophy as a Way of Life *48*
 5. Socrates and the Subsequent Tradition *60*
- 3 Aristotle: Philosophy as Two Ways of Life *70*
 1. Introduction *70*
 2. Practical vs. Theoretical Knowledge *74*
 3. The Highest Good, Happiness, and Virtue *79*
 4. Two Happy Lives, Two Happinesses: The Contemplative and the Practically Active Lives *91*
 5. Theoretical vs. Practical Virtue as Highest Good *96*
 6. The Practical Virtues: General Account *99*
 7. The Specific Practical Virtues *105*
 8. Practical Knowledge and Ethical "Theory" *117*
 9. Political Community and the Highest Good *123*
 10. Conclusion: Philosophy as Two Ways of Life *137*

4	Stoicism as a Way of Life	144
1.	Introduction: The Three Hellenistic Philosophies	144
2.	Stoicism: Tradition and Texts	147
3.	Stoic Eudaimonism	150
4.	Stoic Moral Psychology and the Human Virtues	158
5.	Virtue: Agreement with the World-Mind's Plans	166
6.	What Is Good vs. What Is Merely of Some Value	184
7.	Consequences of the Stoic Theory of Value	190
8.	Stoic vs. Aristotelian Conceptions of Emotions or Passions	203
9.	The Stoic Way of Life	214
5	The Epicurean and Skeptic Ways of Life	226
1.	Introduction	226
2.	Epicurus's Theory of the Human Good: "Kinetic" and "Katastematic" Pleasure	229
3.	The Epicurean Way of Life: Virtue, Irreligion, Friendship	246
4.	The Epicurean Life: Concluding Summary	271
5.	Ancient Skepticism: Living without Believing Anything	276
6.	The Pyrrhonian Skepticism of Sextus Empiricus	282
7.	The Skeptic Way of Life	291
6	Platonism as a Way of Life	305
1.	Introduction: Pythagoras, Plato, and Ancient Greek Wisdom	305
2.	Plotinus's Platonist Metaphysics	317
3.	Plotinus's Theory of the Human Person	326
4.	Three Levels of Human Virtues: "Civic," "Purifying," and "Intellectual"	341
5.	Virtue and Happiness	363
6.	Philosophy: The Sole Way Up to Life Itself	381
7.	Epilogue: The Demise of Pagan Philosophy, and of Philosophy as a Way of Life	383
	Further Readings	389
	Endnotes	401
	Bibliography	425
	Index	431

Introduction

On Philosophy as a Way of Life

I.1. Philosophy Ancient, Modern, and Contemporary

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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