

PRACTICING
PHILOSOPHY

Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life

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Introduction

THE PHILOSOPHICAL LIFE

A Renewed Poetics of Philosophy

I

Why undertake the practice of philosophy? Even readers already deeply engaged in this practice are not spared the question: the critical, self-reflective nature of philosophy demands it. Teachers seeking to convince their students of philosophy's value must repeatedly examine it themselves. Students deciding to devote their lives to philosophy should explore what exactly it offers and amounts to, particularly given its uncertainty as an academic career.

“There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live.” These words from Thoreau's *Walden* pose as much a question as a reproach.¹ What does it mean to be a philosopher? Is it not enough to study, write, and teach this subject in some academic institution, or does being a philosopher require something else, perhaps a special way of living? Defining the philosopher as one who practices philosophy only returns us to the questions of what that practice entails and what is its value. This book is an exploration of these questions, though it can illuminate only a small fraction of their immense scope.

Philosophy resists conclusive definition not only because of its historical diversity and open future, but because its precise nature, limits, and best exemplars are continuously debated. While some claim philosophy as science and others as poetry, it has also been identified with ideology,

therapy, and even autobiography (as the systematic articulation of one's own experience and/or wishes of the world). Most of the best philosophy seems to have most of these elements.

Since the productive richness of its complex, contested nature more than compensates for its definitional frustrations, it seems wrong to force philosophy into a single form or function. Two is not much better. So without claiming they exhaust the field, let me distinguish two basic philosophical forms that seem salient in philosophy's tradition and can introduce the argument of this book. One practice, call it "theory," concerns the formulation or criticism of general, systematic views about the world—including human nature, knowledge, and the institutions of human society. Anyone who treats the standard topics of academic philosophy (e.g. theories of meaning, being, truth, knowledge, value, justice, art, and the like) is practicing philosophy in this theoretical sense—no matter whether the vision formulated is scientific, poetic, or ideological, or whether it expresses autobiographical or therapeutic interests.

Thoreau's complaint evokes, in contrast, another way of practicing philosophy: as an art of living. His experiment of living at Walden Pond can best be appreciated in such terms. More than an eccentric flight of romantic primitivism, it is a radical effort to recover the ancient idea of practicing philosophy as a concrete way of life that is as rewarding as it is demanding. His reproachful contrast of false academic philosophy to the true practice of *living* philosophy builds on a long tradition that was extremely powerful before modernity's academic professionalization of philosophy, and it still echoes in moderns like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

In this tradition, philosophers like Cicero, Epictetus, Seneca, and Montaigne disparage pure theorists as mere "grammarians" and "mathematicians" who, devoting more "care and attention to their speech ... than to their lives," "teach us how to argue instead of how to live." Philosophy, in this tradition, derives her value and "authority over other arts" because she is "the mistress of the art of life itself." Consequently, "this most valuable of all arts, the art of living well," is tested more in the quality of one's concrete life than in that of one's theoretical writings. "Philosophy," says Seneca, "takes as her aim the state of happiness" not of book learning, whose zealous pursuit can be not merely useless but harmful. Some eminent philosophers, Diogenes Laertius reports, "wrote nothing at all," and, like Socrates, conveyed their teaching primarily

through the conduct of their exemplary lives rather than by formulated doctrines. As Montaigne writes: "To compose our character is our duty, not to compose books ... Our great and glorious masterpiece is to live appropriately."²

Since Thoreau's time, this alternative tradition of philosophy as an art of living has become even further eclipsed, suppressed by the institutions of professional philosophy. The idea of philosophy as a deliberative life-practice that brings lives of beauty and happiness to its practitioners is as foreign to professional philosophy today as astrology is to astrophysics.³ This is not good for professional philosophy, increasingly marginalized in our pragmatic society by its apparent irrelevance to our lives and by growing doubts about its scientific value. Nor is it good for the millions of intelligent people who must look to far less thoughtful sources than philosophy in trying to develop what the vernacular terms "a philosophy of life." The idea of philosophy as "self-help" in the art of living may bring a scornful smirk from most professional philosophers.⁴ But self-help was once philosophy's prime goal, and it remains a worthy one, whose attraction and utility go far beyond the narrow circle who hope to earn their living in the academy. In reviving this idea of philosophy's art of living, this book hopes to broaden the meaning and appeal of practicing philosophy.

Though one may usefully distinguish between philosophy as theory and as artful living—between books and life—one must not erect this into a false dichotomy. First, writing is not only a mode of living, but, already by the Hellenistic age, an important tool for artfully working on oneself—both as a medium of self-knowledge and of self-transformation.⁵ Hence the very advocates of philosophy as an art of living made writing (in such diverse forms as letters, diaries, confessions, essays, treatises, handbooks, poems) a central part of that art. Moreover, writing provides a means of recording, communicating, and thus preserving the philosopher's model of life far beyond the immediate circle of his living presence. What would Socrates be for us without the writings of Plato and Xenophon?

Secondly, philosophical theories of the world typically serve as logical grounds or guiding orientations through which philosophical arts of living are developed and defended. Epicureanism is a case in point. Holding that philosophy's prime aim was to achieve a life of happiness (conceived

