

John M. Cooper

Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus.

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Pursuits of Wisdom is an original, clearly written, and brilliantly argued reinterpretation of six ways of life offered by ancient Greek philosophers: Socrates/Plato, Aristotle, Stoicism, Epicureanism, Skepticism, and the Platonism of Plotinus. Cooper writes vividly, with an unfaltering clarity of purpose, and he manages to balance accessibility and rigor. The book is the culmination of years of rigorous study in ancient philosophy and an invitation for a wide audience to engage seriously with these ancient ways of life. I think this invitation is worth accepting.

Cooper presents these six ways of life in relation to their metaphysics, epistemology, and moral psychology; in relation to one another; and, quite often, in contrast to modern and contemporary assumptions. The book is full of passages that explore the similarities and differences between these traditions: it provides the reader with a thorough and clear understanding of the topic.

In the preface, Cooper points out that he wants to discuss pagan Greek moral philosophy as a unified tradition with ‘diverging individual philosophies’ (x). Moreover, his two main ambitions in the book are to show the strength of these philosophies in philosophical terms and to demonstrate how compelling they can be as 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’. While he largely accomplishes this, I would have liked to see Cooper discuss in some more detail how these lives may be relevant to us today.

Given the size of the book and the detailed discussions contained in it, I can only briefly highlight some of the main points of its chapters in what follows. Chapter 1 serves as the introduction to the book: Cooper posits that it is clear that ethics has had an enduring presence in the philosophical tradition since the time of Socrates. In addition, Cooper explains the central place of reason and philosophy in the ancient Greek tradition and why this is important in terms of the rest of the book. Ancient philosophers thought that reason is essential to living a full life and that philosophy as a way of life could develop and perfect reason. Thus, philosophy was not simply a guide to life but a way of life that steered one’s life directly. This is the approach Cooper takes in discussing the six traditions in the rest of the book.

In the first chapter, Cooper also presents what he takes to be the three main assumptions of these six traditions and of ancient Greek philosophy that set it apart from later philosophy. The first is that the ancients thought that reason is a motivating power for action (11). They thought that reason moves us to seek to know and to pursue what we think is good. The second assumption is that philosophy, as the pursuit of wisdom and ultimate truth, makes reason perfect

and thus aids – or even is synonymous with – living the good life. Finally, they thought that possessing the truth through knowledge gives us the power to live the good life consistently and confidently. Cooper claims, correctly in my view, that in the modern and contemporary philosophical traditions philosophy cannot be a way of life since these traditions do not share these assumptions (14–15). One of the most interesting and fresh parts of the chapter is Cooper’s argument that studying ancient philosophy may substantially change one’s life precisely because these three assumptions may be true even though contemporary philosophy does not accept them.

Chapter 2 discusses the Socratic way of life and how this influences the rest of the tradition espousing the idea of philosophy as a way of life. Cooper claims that Socrates was the philosopher who originated the idea of philosophy as a way of life (30). He also points out that his discussion will be of Socrates as he is presented by his contemporaries, especially Plato.

In this chapter, Cooper explains very clearly how in the Socratic view, the good of the soul is inseparable from knowledge and wisdom, how knowledge can allow us to discover and rank goods, and how all this fits together with Socrates’s theory of human motivation. Socrates’s frequent practice of the *elenchus* and his refusal to reveal his own views reveals that Socrates held these views ‘in a spirit of open inquiry’ and that he was never fully satisfied with the current level of his understanding (44). Socrates thought that uncertainty is part of the human condition and so he proposed the life of philosophy, the life of pursuing wisdom through philosophical discussion and thought, not the life of possessing wisdom, as the best life for humans. Cooper claims that this open-endedness marks off the Socratic way of life from all its successors (61). In contrast to this, Plato seems to propose a different way of life as the best, namely, the life of possession, not constant pursuit, of wisdom. While Cooper sets up this very interesting contrast between the Socratic and the Platonic way of life, he says little about the Platonic way of life. Given Plato’s importance, it would have been fruitful had Cooper provided a lengthier discussion of this before moving on to discuss Aristotle’s view.

Chapter 3 contains a thorough discussion of Aristotle’s view of happiness both in his ethical and his political philosophy. Cooper explains vividly how Aristotle thought that there are two levels of happiness, that of the theoretical activity and that of practical activity where one’s life is directed by practical wisdom. While both of these make one happy, the life of theoretical wisdom and contemplation is superior to that of practical activity. Cooper does a masterful job showing how Aristotle tried both to surpass and to continue the Socratic project, which had placed philosophy at the center of a the good human life. Of Aristotle’s philosophy, Cooper writes that not ‘only is its subject matter different... but in addition, Socrates’s dialectical, critical probing way of proceeding as a philosopher has now been replaced by a constructive, quasi-deductive, tracing back of various phenomena to dependence, first, on certain first principles relevant to the specific area of reality being examined’ (141).

Cooper discusses the Stoic way of life in chapter 4. He grounds his discussion in Stoic metaphysics, physics, their view of the soul, and moral psychology. In explaining the Stoic view, Cooper additionally contrasts it with the Socratic and Aristotelian ways of life and their respective moral psychologies, which is very helpful, especially when explaining the Stoic view on emotions, reason, and virtue. In this chapter one can see very clearly why the Stoics thought

that our highest aim ought to be to live in agreement with nature; why reason was considered by them to be capable of eradicating the power of emotions; why the Stoics rejected the idea that emotional states were something to be trained; why they thought that the only virtues are those of the mind; and why they thought that theory or philosophy ought to be in the service of practical life (contra Aristotle).

Chapter 5 entails a thorough exposition of the Epicurean and the Skeptic ways of life. Cooper explains that unlike the other traditions, the Epicureans and Skeptics did not think that reason had ‘divine affiliations that give it some unique power and value’ (227). Epicureans famously held that pleasure was the only thing valuable in itself and that the good life consisted primarily of pleasure. Cooper explains that this view becomes more plausible once we realize that the Epicureans thought that there were two special circumstances which gave rise to pleasure: kinetic, which gave rise to pleasure due to movements in the flesh, and katastematic, which gave rise to pleasure without any movement in the flesh and in the absence of any pain. Katastematic pleasure occurs when, for example, we are awake and aware of the smooth, healthy functioning of our body, and without any excitations which are a result of movements in the flesh. Moreover, katastematic pleasure is the highest and purest kind we can experience since it is unmixed either with stressful and intense desire or with pain, the way kinetic pleasure is (237). Cooper also manages to make this position plausible by showing how the Epicureans could respond to the criticism that their position is one of extreme egoism.

In the remainder of chapter 5, Cooper discusses the Pyrrhonian skepticism of Sextus Empiricus. He argues convincingly that despite common criticisms of this view, skepticism may be a plausible way of life. While aiming at *ataraxia* (tranquility achieved through a sustained suspension on all matters of assertion of knowledge), skepticism does not give up on reason’s power to know, and it is a view that provides several practical guidelines for the good life.

The Platonism of Plotinus is the subject matter of chapter 6. Cooper successfully navigates the reader through the relevant parts of the *Enneads*. He does this by avoiding the highly technical terminology of Neo-Platonism while not sacrificing a rigorous analysis of Plotinus’ views. Cooper also traces Plotinus’s views back to Plato’s dialogues (especially the *Phaedo*) and his metaphysics, but he wisely cautions the reader that Plotinus seems to find more in Plato’s texts than is there.

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