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WAYS OF LIFE AS MODES OF PRESENTATION

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Abstract: Books and journal articles have become the dominant modes of presentation in contemporary philosophy. This historically contingent paradigm prioritises textual expression and assumes a distinction between philosophical practice and its presented product. Using Socrates and Diogenes as exemplars, we challenge the presumed supremacy of the text and defend the importance of ways of life as modes of *practiced presentation*. We argue that text cannot capture the embodied activity of philosophy without remainder, and is therefore limited and incomplete. In particular, we contend that (1) a static text is essentially alienated from our practices of philosophising, (2) words cannot unambiguously represent lives, and (3) practiced presentation enriches our understanding beyond words alone. After discussing some pedagogical implications, we conclude with a plea for a pluralistic approach that recognises lives as legitimate and valuable modes of philosophical presentation.

Keywords: philosophical presentation; philosophy as a way of life; practiced presentation; ancient philosophy; Socrates; Diogenes; metaphilosophy; teaching philosophy.

Introduction

> "It sometimes seems to me that writing prevents one from living, and that one can express oneself better by acts than by words." (Andre Gide, *The Counterfeiters*)

A cursory historical survey reveals that philosophical presentation has taken a bewildering variety of forms; discussion, dramatic dialogue, theatre, novels, satire, letters, aphorisms, poetry, private notebooks, prayer, sermon, meditation, and much else besides. Compared with this rich history, today's paradigm is strikingly narrow. While tolerating a limited range of penumbral cases, contemporary academic philosophy has settled on books and journal articles as the dominant modes of presentation. Formal and apparently rigorous, these modes of philosophical expression typically prize clarity, present arguments in a structured, systematic manner, and aim for objectivity removed from the individual's life.[1] This article is an example of such work, and we predict that most contributions to the current issue will conform to these standards. Still, the approach is limited and limiting in certain ways. In particular, we shall argue that the standard model neglects philosophy as a way of life, which

[1] See further Trakakis (2012) and Sharpe (2016).

is a valuable mode of presentation that cannot be fully and adequately expressed in the form of an academic book or article.

The standard academic model

Two notable features of the contemporary approach set it apart from much historical precedent: (1) it assumes a clear distinction between the *activity* of philosophy and its *presented product*, and (2) it prioritises a local and historically contingent textual form of presentation. According to the standard academic model, philosophy involves a two-step process: we first engage in the multifaceted process of *doing* philosophy and formulating our arguments, and then we *present* our ideas as rigorously as possible in formal writing. Philosophical practice and philosophical presentation are thus viewed as separate and discrete categories. Within the university, the latter category, which is near-exclusively identified with the textual product (and more specifically, the book or journal article), is typically privileged as the most important part of philosophy. Let us call this approach *textual supremacism.* The activity of philosophising, on this view, has far less prestige. Instrumentalised as a mere means to the end of producing writings, practice languishes in the shadows, institutionally underappreciated and frequently unrecognised as a legitimate mode of philosophical expression. The professional philosopher's merit and success (as reflected by appointments, promotions, grants, and so on …) is mainly determined by publications. Indeed, according to a certain mindset, an absence of publications entails an absence of philosophy *tout court*. After setting out an alternative in the next two sections, we shall go on to offer several arguments against this curiously narrow vision.

Philosophy as a way of life

Despite the familiar and entrenched nature of the contemporary model, philosophical presentation has not always been understood in this way. Historically, embodied activity has been a legitimate and even crucial mode of presentation. In particular, many ancient Greeks and Romans conceived of philosophy as a *way of life*. Philosophers including Socrates, Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics, and Cynics, viewed philosophy not as purely theoretical discourse expressed by the written word. Rather, as Hadot (1995) puts it, philosophy was "a mode of existing-in-the-world, which had to be practiced at each instant, and the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual's life" (p. 265). The same is true of Eastern traditions such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Moreover, this mode of philosophising had the ultimate therapeutic purpose of aiding the individual to live well – its aim was to alter not only beliefs, but also action, feeling, and the self, permeating and shaping one's entire existence (see Nussbaum, 2009). Philosophy was therefore, at its core, something *done* by an embodied human.

On this model, philosophy involved what Hadot (2002) calls "spiritual exercises" and Foucault (1982) terms "technologies of the self".[2] Recognising that discourse alone was

[2] While the categories of *exercices spirituelles* and *techniques du soi* are relevantly similar for present purposes, there are also deep metaphysical differences. See further Flynn (2005) and Sellars (2020).

often insufficient, these exercises went beyond our purely rational and cognitive faculties to engage the emotional and bodily for the purpose of self-transformation. Activities included meditation, visualisation, memorisation, intersubjective dialogue, counselling, exhortation, ascetic living, and physical endurance. The Epicureans, for instance, trained with incantatory recitation of mantras, such as the *tetrapharmakos,* with the purpose of internalising philosophical theory and benefiting from its full therapeutic force (DL, 10.35-6). Marcus Aurelius partook in regular meditations and exercises of mental detachment to gain mastery over his passions. And Diogenes purportedly rolled around in blistering hot sand in summer and embraced icy statues in winter to accustom his body and mind to hardship (DL, 6.23). These exercises were not merely peripheral or auxiliary, but partly constitutive of doing philosophy.[3]

Given the current primacy of the text, it is striking (and perhaps faintly embarrassing) that arguably the most influential philosopher in the Western canon did not write anything at all, but rather presented philosophy through practice. As Shusterman (1997) notes, with Socrates, "philosophy began not with a paradigm text, but with an exemplary life, a dramatic model of living – and of dying" (p. 17). One crucial component of the Socratic way of life was continuous philosophical discussion. The self-professed "gadfly of Athens" dedicated his existence to relentless engagement in conversation, inviting passers-by to reason with him about how to live. He identified the "care of the soul" or self-cultivation as among philosophy's primary tasks (*Apology* 30a-b), and held that personal transformation was attained through philosophical *activity* in the form of dialogue. Through this interactive, critical (and often playfully ironic) question and answer process, Socrates and his interlocutors challenged their assumptions, discarded unjustified beliefs, and made philosophical progress together. Frank and fearless public speech was also an important mode of presentation for Cynics whose way of life involved "going from town to town in the philosopher's garb, stopping people, holding discourses, conducting diatribes, teaching, [and] shaking the philosophical inertia of the public" (Foucault 1982, p. 139). A staunch advocate of free speech (*parrhesia*) as "the most beautiful thing in the world" (DL 6.69), Diogenes was known for provocations such as ordering Alexander the Great to stand out of his sunlight (DL 6.38).[4] In this context, saying was a form of doing.

Beyond words alone

For Socrates and the Cynics, it was imperative that philosophy went beyond mere words. As Cooper stresses, the Socratic pursuit of wisdom entailed "the constant practice of just, and temperate, and courageous, and pious, and all other virtuous actions in all the varied circumstances of daily life" (2012, p. 57). Embodying his beliefs in concrete action, Socrates purportedly prided himself on his frugal lifestyle and wandered the city in bare feet (DL 2.27). He not only lived, but also famously died, according to his philosophical

[3] Grimm and Cohoe (2020, pp. 238–244) persuasively make this case in some detail. But see also Cooper's (2012) more intellectualist vision of philosophy as a way of life.

[4] See Flynn (1989) and Shea (2010, pp. 169–192) for more on the Foucauldian view of Diogenes as parrhesiast.

commitments, accepting his death sentence for "corrupting the youth of Athens" in the belief that doing so complied with the demands of justice. Diogenes, too, was notoriously dedicated to expressing his ideas in behaviour.[5] Rejecting the value of material possessions, he resided in a barrel and dressed in rags. He performed "the works of Demeter and of Aphrodite alike" (DL 6.69) in the marketplace, shamelessly violating custom (*nomos*) to express natural bodily functions (*physis*). Through such theatrical acts, Diogenes "designated his entire life as a performance of philosophy" (McEvilley, 1983; cf. Tuncel, 2020).

It was their philosophical lives for which Socrates and Diogenes were admired as sages. By contrast, those who presented philosophy in word *alone* were often regarded as proper subjects of ridicule or suspicion. Cynics chided philosophers who were enchanted by the mist (*typhos*) of puffed-up theoretical discourse at the expense of the clear-eyed lucidity (*atyphia*) needed for a life well lived (see Navia, 1996, pp. 138–141), and Polemon, a head of the old Academy, similarly cautioned that "we must not be like those who can astonish their onlookers by their skill in syllogistic argumentation, but who, when it comes to their own lives, contradict their own teachings" (DL 4.18). Proclamation without action constituted a failing *qua* philosopher. Indeed, such individuals were often not considered as real philosophers at all. Plato, for instance, dismissed those whose actions did not reflect their words as merely sophists, rhetoricians, or grammarians – purveyors of empty *logos* who knew how to argue but lacked wisdom.

Nowadays, we caution students against the *ad hominem* fallacy of conflating people with their arguments.[6] There is an assumption that theory is detachable from theorist, and can be fully analysed on its own. Contemporary philosophy, especially in the analytic tradition, strives for "products of a bodiless or fleshless mind" (Trakakis, 2012, p. 931), which impart ideas without the distortions of personal histories, feelings, and experiences. Perhaps, however, this is just a local, regulative ideal. If philosophy is presented not only through words, but through action too, then ideas cannot be neatly separated from a person's life, written up and scrutinised. This link between doctrine and deed in the ancient world explains the importance of biography as philosophical presentation, as, for example, in Diogenes Laertius' or Plutarch's *Lives*. It once seemed obvious that Socrates' and Diogenes' lives were inextricable parts of their philosophical "arguments".

Today, the university has largely abandoned this tradition of philosophy as a way of life, at least as part of its official, professional practice.[7] In Shusterman's (1997) words: "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" (p. 3). But reflection on philosophy as a way of life exposes the dominant contemporary approach as comparatively narrow. It also poses a definite challenge to the two assumptions mentioned above: (1) the distinction between philosophical practice and its presentation, and (2) the superiority of the written word. When philosophy is understood as a mode of living—as embodied self-transformation, expressed in thought, word, feeling and action—

[5] See Schutijser (2017) for further discussion of Cynicism as a way of life.

[6] See, however, Leibowitz (2016) for a recent, highly qualified defence of *ad hominem* arguments.

[7] This remains true despite a recent uptick in interest. See Grimm and Cohoe (2020, p. 249, fn. 2) for some institutional examples.

the presupposed supremacy of textual presentation is undermined. Indeed, for philosophers like Socrates and Diogenes, the assumed division between philosophy *qua* activity and philosophy *qua* presented product evaporates. In such cases, activity *is* philosophy's presented product – the philosopher's life becomes a mode of *practiced presentation* as theory is expressed through action. As Nietzsche (1995) aptly declares, "the product of the philosopher is his life (first, before his works). That is his work of art" (p. 311).

The value of philosophical practice and limitations of text

We have set out a model of philosophy as practiced presentation and mentioned some of its attractions. The standard academic model, by contrast, seems to presuppose that philosophical practice is a mere precursor to the real thing, i.e., the published paper. On this view, whichever aspects of practice have distinctively philosophical value can be written up and presented objectively. Everything else can be discarded without loss. In this section, we argue to the contrary that the objective, depersonalised text fails to capture the activity of philosophy without remainder, and is therefore limited and incomplete. In particular, we shall stress the importance of practiced presentation by contending that (1) a static text is essentially alienated from our practices of philosophising, (2) words cannot unambiguously represent lives, and (3) practiced presentation enriches our understanding beyond words alone. These arguments give us reason to reject textual supremacism, i.e., the exclusive value and priority of written modes of presentation. We shall unpack each in turn.

First, let us note the familiar fact that much of the best and most interesting philosophising involves not only writing and reading, but also impassioned practice and interaction with the world. We engage with philosophy through enthused conversations in the classroom and the coffeeshop, grappling with pressing existential questions, developing our character, and living out our philosophical commitments. As we re-orientate our beliefs, behaviour, and feelings, our axiological and metaphysical understanding finds concrete realisation in the structure of our lives. At its best, this embodied process is characterised by distinctive forms of passion: joy, excitement, and wonder as ideas ricochet back and forth within one's own mind or in collaboration with others. This is the incandescent experience which Solomon (1999) considers "a kind of magic – dazzling and disturbing insights and visions, ideas that make our heads spin" (p. 4). We are reminded that philosophy is etymologically and practically bound to the *love of wisdom*, both practical and theoretical, its significance fully realised in thought, feeling, and action. This embodied, deeply (inter-) personal process captures the hearts and minds of academics and laypeople alike, drawing many into the profession and even more into philosophical lives which flourish entirely outside the boundaries of academia. And rightly so – philosophy, we insist, would be impoverished without it.

Despite its familiarity, very little of the above is revealed by the typical monograph or journal article which remains "fixed on the intellectual plane, cut off from other, equally significant aspects of life, thus creating a style of philosophising that is one dimensional" (Trakakis, 2012, p. 932). And, indeed, it is difficult to see how the book or article *could* fully represent our lived philosophy. As an inanimate *object* separate from us, the textual product is essentially alienated from those aspects of philosophy which can only be realised

by an embodied *subject*. There is an apparently unbridgeable gap between static (and all-too-often sterile) words, and the dynamic practice sketched above. In Sartrean terms, this might be described in terms of the difference between the facticity of being-in-itself and the transcendence of being-for-itself. Text can present a theory, or even a description of a philosophical life, but it cannot think, feel, act, or live in the world. Plato stresses this limitation (and even the metaphysical inferiority) of textual discourse in the *Phaedrus*, arguing that writing is by nature a lifeless shadow or "image" of our active philosophising, removed from "the living and breathing word of him who knows" (276a). Our thoughts, passions, and practices – as vital aspects unique to our lived philosophising – are therefore lost in translation, or at best remain only as pale reflections.

Another reason to think that text cannot fully capture ways of life, and is therefore limited as a mode of philosophical presentation, is the many-many relation between word and action. A particular description is consistent with many actions, and a particular action can be correctly understood as falling under innumerable descriptions. Anscombe (2000) makes this point during her well-known discussion of the nature of intentional action as she denies that there is "any description which is *the* description of an intentional action" (p. 37). Take, for instance, Socrates' final act of drinking hemlock – he is acting in line with his philosophical beliefs, complying with the law, making a political statement, committing suicide, ingesting poison, moving the muscles in his body a certain way, disturbing the dust particles surrounding him, and much else. No particular description is either uniquely privileged or exhaustive. Equally, it is doubtful whether any action is *the* action described or prescribed by a principle. Consider, for example, the notorious difficulty involved in applying the categorical imperative to the case of the murderer at the door. Despite Kant's own infamous verdict, scholars have come to a variety of (mutually contradictory) conclusions (see, e.g., Korsgaard, 1986). Because of the many-many relation between action and description, there is no uniquely privileged description of a philosophical life that can replace it without loss or ambiguity.

The more general problem, as Beauvoir (2004) explains, is that "reality goes beyond any description that can be attempted of it" (p. 210). If this is right, discursive descriptions or principles cannot uniquely specify action, no matter how precisely they are stated. We can neither read a life off from a text, nor a theory from a life. This is obviously true in the case of Hellenistic approaches that make no pretence of providing an algorithmic guide to action. The Socratic injunction to care for oneself, the Cynic exhortation to live in accordance with nature (*kata physin*), the Epicurean directive to seek mental tranquility (*ataraxia*), and the Stoic imperative to act according to reason, are consistent with many ways of living depending on the particulars of situation and individual character. One might think, for instance, of the contrast between Crates "to whom all doors fly open" in welcome (DL, 6.86) and the abrasive character of Diogenes as rival exemplars of Cynic principles played out in practice. Abstract principles are neither fully determinate nor can they be adequately understood except in their concrete instantiation. It is by presenting philosophy through *living* that individuals create and establish themselves as concrete manifestations of doctrine, giving it solidity and determinacy in the world.

So far, we have argued that a dynamic, embodied way of life cannot be fully represented by a static text, and that there is no uniquely privileged description of a practice such that the former can represent the latter without loss. A third consideration in favour of lives as modes

of presentation is the *epistemic* advantage of living out one's philosophy. The strongest form of this argument, with which we have some sympathy, is that certain forms of knowledge are necessarily embodied and cannot be fully expressed in propositional form. More modestly, it is clear that we improve our knowledge and understanding of practical principles as we try to live them out, or witness others attempting to do so. What *exactly* does it take to live out a philosophy, for *this* person, in *these* circumstances, given *these* choices, in concrete detail, in practice? We deepen our understanding of the implications of philosophical ways of life as we observe the challenges, successes, and failures of individuals acting in situations that cannot be fully anticipated in advance. We learn more still, perhaps, when we are the actor and not merely the observer. For finite, fallible beings such as ourselves, embodied examples of philosophical ways of life are independent sources of understanding.

Teaching and assessment

Within universities, the standard pedagogical model tends to reflect a preference for text and the assumed divorce between philosophical activity and presentation. The prestige of the journal article has an obvious analogue with the priority of essays and exams in determining students' grades and influencing their future prospects. Although most students will not become professional philosophers, teachers focus much of their pedagogical effort on the art of producing what might be harshly described as pseudo-articles. Moreover, the standard lecture format tends to reinforce the notion that philosophy's product is words alone, as much of the broader activity of philosophising occurs behind the scenes and "content" is then presented in person or online. It is entirely predictable, then, that many students understand the process of learning philosophy in instrumental terms – content is to be learnt and repeated for the purpose of producing scholarly prose and passing courses.

Philosophical education in the ancient world was far broader, including not only discourse and study, but embodied practices. Cognitive, affective, and physical exercises existed as pedagogical strategies in all of the ancient schools. Crates required his student Zeno to carry a pot full of lentil soup through the streets of Athens as part of his philosophical education (DL, 7.3), and Diogenes similarly ordered a prospective student to transport some cheese through the marketplace as an exercise in acting according to reason rather than custom (DL, 6. 36-37). Recognising that practice can sometimes communicate more than words, philosophers taught not only through abstract theory, but concrete example. As Diogenes Laertius reports, Zeno "exhorting to virtue and temperance those of the youth who come to him to be taught… afford[ed] to all in his own conduct a pattern for imitation in perfect consistency with his teaching" (DL, 7.10-11). Socrates, by wandering the streets conversing with strangers, and Diogenes, by living in a barrel, presented themselves as the flesh-and-blood embodiments of a theory for students to emulate. The embodied process of *doing* philosophy was thus a method of both teaching and assessment.

In our view, the practice of philosophy needs room for interaction and dialogue, and for teachers and students to present philosophy through action as well as words.[8] The

[8] For examples of how this might be put into practice see the resources assembled by the Mellon Philosophy as a Way of Life Network, available online here: https://philife.nd.edu

current system typically does too little to emphasise the potential transformative power of philosophy. Rather, it stokes the lamentable yet commonplace impression of philosophy as a mere intellectual exercise to be discarded when one goes about the business of "real life", which in turn fosters cynicism about the value and relevance of philosophy. A student who regurgitates partially digested lecture content may receive a passing grade, but they are not thereby en route to becoming a philosopher, and they often suspect as much.[9] Hein emphasises the radical difference between a lecture *about* philosophy and the personal experience of *philosophising itself*. "Here", he proclaims, "the qualitative difference between knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance is about as great as that between a lecture on love and being in love" (1972, p. 181). A pedagogical vision singularly focused on the relatively passive repetition of content in essays and exams is similarly impoverished.

Conclusion

We do not doubt the scholarly merit of most published philosophy, and we recognise the importance of theoretical discourse. Indeed, reading, writing, speaking, and thinking are valuable means of self-transformation and crucial parts of living philosophically. According to many within the tradition we have been emphasising, the philosopher's way of life is one of embodied *logos*, firmly rooted in its regard for truth and justified by rational argument. So, while we reject the idea that philosophy is an exclusively theoretical discipline of study, we don't intend to imply that philosophy is essentially practice. As Nehamas (1998, p. 102) points out, to insist either is "really" philosophy at the exclusion of the other would be to confuse one of philosophy's contingent historical phases with its nature. Both are important and today's lopsided vision of philosophy as a discipline presented solely through formal text does not paint the full picture of our perennial love of wisdom. Forsaking the lived component of philosophical presentation comes at a considerable loss, both practical and theoretical.

Our conclusion, then, is relatively modest. Academic articles, like this one, have their place, but as part of a broader practice which is all too often downplayed in favour of a particular, historically local and contingent mode of presentation that is either mistaken for the totality of the practice or the part with the greatest value. Our contemporary prioritisation of formal text neglects a rich and diverse tradition. Canonical figures such as Socrates and Diogenes understood philosophy as a transformative practice essentially done, not merely studied, and expressed not only in writing, but also through action. We defend the continued importance of this mode of presentation and have argued that discourse alone (from articles and essays to formal lectures) cannot fully capture much that is paradigmatic philosophical practice. Among the products of philosophy, we should include not only texts, but also lives. Philosophical presentation confined to writing, divorced from everyday life and gathering dust and cobwebs in the recesses of digital journal archives, is limited and incomplete at best.

[9] Similar observations apply to the handers-out of passing grades. As Cohoe and Grimm observe: "Many academics are quite competent teachers of what the Epicureans or Stoics thought without that affecting their choices and lives in any ultimately significant way." (2020, p. 399). Indeed, Hadot (2005) laments that nowadays there are no philosophers at all, only professors of philosophy who fail to embody philosophy in their lives.

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