

# Taking Philosophy Seriously



# Taking Philosophy Seriously

By

Lydia Amir

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To my beloved Cedric who nobly suffered for my career.

To my friends, who fed him, and nourished me with their love  
and support wherever I was.



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# INTRODUCTION

Philosophy, along with science, was founded in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC by the mathematician and astronomer Thales of Miletus.<sup>1</sup> Renowned for his wisdom during his lifetime, Thales was primarily remembered in Western civilization as an absent-minded fellow. While examining the sky he fell into a well; and, at least according to Plato's version of the story, this incident provoked the laughter of his servant.<sup>2</sup> Since this memorable beginning of science and philosophy alike, the list of philosophers ridiculed for confining themselves to theory at the expense of practice has been long.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Following Aristotle's account in *Metaphysics* (bk. 1, 983b6.3).

<sup>2</sup> (*Theaetetus*, 174 b-e). The anecdote stubbornly remained from Aesop to Martin Heidegger, albeit with some variations. Diogenes Laertius, Tatian (recorded by Stobaeus), Cicero, Ovid, Philo, Eusebius, St. Augustine, Tertullian, Pierre Damien, Michel de Montaigne, Francis Bacon, Pierre Bayle, Jean de La Fontaine, Voltaire, Immanuel Kant (who told it on Tycho Brahe), Ludwig Feuerbach, Eduard Gans, and Heidegger, all referred to it. For a longer list, see Blumenberg (2000).

<sup>3</sup> Plato himself generalizes the incident: "The same jest applies to all who pass their lives in philosophy," he adds (*Theaetetus*, 174 b). The tradition of the ridiculous philosopher views philosophy first as laughable in the eyes of society, and later, as laughable in the eyes of theologians and philosophers who prioritize practice over theory. The habit of ridiculing academic philosophers begins with Heraclitus, who laughs at his predecessors, followed by the Cynic Diogenes who scorns Plato. The Hellenistic philosophers Epicurus and Timon the Sceptic ridicule other philosophers, and Lucian mocks them all for their abstractions. In the Middle Ages, theologians follow in the footsteps of those critical philosophers: they ridicule philosophy's emphasis on reason in order to prioritize faith in God and the salvation it grants. In the controversy over the nature of philosophy, Renaissance philosophers such as Desiderius Erasmus and Montaigne laugh at medieval philosophers and theologians who are entangled in abstractions instead of prioritizing life as the true philosophic and theological concern. In modern times, the third Earl of Shaftesbury ridicules theoretical thought and academic philosophy. He is followed by Friedrich Nietzsche and George Santayana and, more recently, by Gilles Deleuze. In the spirit of Erasmus and Ludwig Feuerbach, Søren Kierkegaard ridicules Georg W. F. Hegel's abstractions and Hegelian theologians who are forgetful of the individual's genuine life of faith (see Amir 2013; Blumenberg 2000).

The charge of restricting oneself to theory would not be appropriate unless philosophy ought to be relevant to life. Indeed, its dissociation from everyday concerns has been widely considered a deviation from its original purpose.<sup>4</sup> While Plato put the blame for the uselessness of philosophers on society's ignorance of their potential (*Republic* 489b), sociologist Georg Simmel accused philosophers of refusing "to do their job properly," by which he means, "something for which there is still no better description than the somewhat old-fashioned expression, wisdom about life" (Simmel [1921] 1971, 235).

"Taking philosophy seriously," the title of this book, points to doing philosophy's job properly. *Contra* Simmel, however, what this requires is not at all clear. For philosophy has been variously defined over the millennia of its existence, and its very definition is deemed a philosophical problem.<sup>5</sup> Even by focusing on contemporary views of philosophy in order to narrow down the possibilities, we cannot easily answer the question of what "philosophy" includes. One of the reasons for this confusion is that philosophy is, nowadays, a divided discipline.<sup>6</sup> Even more divided is the recent movement of Philosophical Practice, whose theory and practice seek to make philosophy practical again.<sup>7</sup> Thus, not only is the practice of

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<sup>4</sup> To take an example, in *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains*, Paul Oskar Kristeller comments on the importance of humanist treatises of the Renaissance. He writes, "They derive added importance from the fact that *some of the genuine and more concrete problems of moral philosophy were apparently neglected by professional philosophers of the time*, and thus the humanists prepared the ground for a more systematic treatment of the same problems by later philosophers. *This seems to be the function of poets, writers, and amateur thinkers at any time when the professional philosophers are absorbed in technicalities and refuse to discuss certain basic problems*" (Kristeller 1961, 18; italics added).

<sup>5</sup> See John Passmore's essay, "Philosophy, Historiography," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1967). The controversies over philosophy's nature have recently attracted some attention, e.g. Cohen and Dascal (1991), O' Hear (2009), Ragland and Heidt (2001), Plant (2017). Plant's references point to valuable further bibliography (2017).

<sup>6</sup> Between the Analytic (even in its post-Analytic phase) and Continental traditions. On this topic, see Bernard Williams' "What Philosophy Might Become?" the last essay in *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (2009).

<sup>7</sup> In Amir (2018), I differentiate between the following practical activities or theories about practice. First, public philosophy or philosophers commenting publicly on social and political issues. Second, lawyers for philosophy or philosophers who articulate ideas for silenced part of the population and fight for them. Academic philosophers who specialize in ethical, social, legal, and political issues without the ambition nor the interest of seeing them implemented. Finally,

philosophy divided by theoretical concerns about philosophy's nature; it is furthermore divided by questions about the purpose and the means of practical philosophy as well as the relations it should maintain with the academe.

*Taking Philosophy Seriously* addresses these issues with the aim of outlining a framework in which all factions of philosophical practice can participate without dismissing the significant differences between them. It addresses academic philosophy as well, as it conceives the practice of philosophy as if on a continuum, which begins with the successful appropriation of philosophical theories that effective teaching requires and ends in sharing them with various audiences according to their needs and capacities. It distinguishes accordingly between perfectionism as radical philosophy for the few and meliorism as democratized philosophy for the many, and suggests that the latter should attract our attention both within the academe and outside of it.

This book presents meliorism as philosophy's contemporary challenge. Counterintuitively, meliorism is especially significant in liberal states, where adult education is unattended in many areas that seem necessary for taking effective advantage of one's opportunities. The tools for activating these liberties are not luxuries to be used in an ethical project of self-perfection. Rather, they are necessary for the survival of democracy. This is so because they involve moral and intellectual virtues without which individual autonomy is meaningless, and liberty without the capacity to realize it is an empty notion.

To be fruitful, philosophic education requires individual attention. Philosophical practice can play a vital role within contemporary societies, as the service that philosophical practice offers is both necessary and rare. Since no other discipline can fulfill the needs it addresses, philosophers are subject to a responsibility to their communities on which I have elaborated in *Rethinking Philosophers' Responsibility* (Amir 2017a).

The current volume proposes a melioristic program that enhances democratized philosophy, and thus offers tangible solutions to many problems the new field of philosophical practice encounters. It introduces a detailed educational vision needed both in the academe and outside it, whose feasibility I have witnessed in many years of practice.<sup>8</sup> It challenges

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philosophers involved in practical practice whose aim is to bring philosophy to the many, not by merely writing books about philosophic subjects that may be palatable to most, but engaging philosophically with anyone, to enlighten his philosophical interests, needs, and problems.

<sup>8</sup> For nearly 40 years, I have taught philosophy in Universities and Colleges in various continents (Asia, Europe, South and North America), lectured to and

the divide between theory and practice by revealing its artificiality in philosophy. It aims to engage practical and academic philosophers alike in a meta-philosophical discussion that is required to answer the crisis philosophy faces, both internally and externally.<sup>9</sup>

The first chapter, “Taking Philosophy Seriously,” outlines the main themes that the remaining of the book develops. This chapter further identifies philosophic goals and means that cut through the alleged divide

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conducted workshops with various audiences worldwide. Along my academic career, I have worked since 1992 as a philosophical practitioner with organizations, groups, families, couples and individuals.

<sup>9</sup> Although philosophy is considered part of the humanities, its fate should be dissociated from the contemporary crisis the former undergo. The reason does not lie in philosophy’s alleged closeness to science, in contradistinction to the rest of the disciplines that are currently listed as humanities. Rather, I believe that philosophy’s usefulness is more easily noticeable, its lessons more immediately applicable to contemporary concerns, and its objective of much more significance than the rest of the disciplines deemed humanistic, although they all contribute to its goal. This is not to diminish the respect I have for foreign languages, literature, history, drama and musicology (in short, the rhetorical tradition, as well as the Arts). Thus, to appreciate my argument, it may help to realize how encompassing the term “humanities” is. The Stanford Humanities Center refers to the humanities thus: “The humanities can be described as the study of how people process and document the human experience. Since humans have been able, we have used philosophy, literature, religion, art, music, history and language to understand and record our world. These modes of expression have become some of the subjects that traditionally fall under the humanities umbrella. Knowledge of these records of human experience gives us the opportunity to feel a sense of connection to those who have come before us, as well as to our contemporaries” (<http://shc.stanford.edu/what-are-the-humanities>). In the National Endowment for the Humanities homepage, we can find the following formulation. It says: “According to this definition, which was used by the U.S. Congress when the National Endowment for the Humanities was established in 1964, the humanities include, but are not limited to, history; literature; philosophy and ethics; foreign languages and cultures; linguistics; jurisprudence or philosophy of law; archaeology; comparative religion; the history, theory, and criticism of the arts; and those aspects of the social sciences (anthropology, sociology, psychology, political science, government, and economics) that use historical and interpretive rather than quantitative methods” (<https://www.neh.gov/about>). Bertrand Russell argued that the study of history and anthropology should supplement philosophy’s abstract knowledge (1956). More recently, Martha C. Nussbaum’s insistence on the usefulness of literature is understandable, given the interest she has in developing the emotions. However, she requires that the study of literature involve moral philosophy, which points to the centrality of philosophy to any liberal education (2010). She defends this centrality in (1997).



between theory and practice and among various factions of philosophical practice. To that purpose, I first emphasize the significance of abstract thought within the practice of philosophy: the disengagement it occasions is a valuable tool, provided it is provisional. Second, I highlight the importance of epistemology and identifies an agent-based epistemology of intellectual virtues as suitable to the practice of philosophy. Third, because of the close association of moral and intellectual virtues, I advance the view that philosophical practice has a significant moral role to fulfill within democratic and liberal societies. Among various ideas this book advances, let me mention here two: In sharing the tools needed for self-integration, philosophical practice enhances integrity. And, in making autonomy, an epistemological and moral virtue, accessible to as many persons as possible, the practice of philosophy contributes to reducing the gap liberal societies leave unattended between their members.

Following the introductory first chapter, the book is further divided into six parts. They address the main issues philosophy taken seriously and the new field of philosophical practice may encounter. I begin by tackling the understudied philosophic mentors-apprentices relationship: I point to the main problems it often creates and evaluate the means philosophers have used to reduce or avoid them (Part I). I follow with a detailed analysis of the challenges brought by the emulation of past philosophers, who have considered the practice of philosophy a necessary feature of the discipline (Part II). I further examine some unduly neglected topics in philosophy and its practice (Part III). I contribute to the latter by reconsidering the means available to philosophical practice (Part IV), by rethinking the tools it uses (Part V), and by indicating the problematic assumptions of this field as well as the unique benefits it brings to the very discipline of philosophy (Part VI). Let me briefly elaborate on each part.

Part I, “Philosophers as Mentors and Apprentices,” addresses the philosopher’s education. It analyses the relationships between philosophers-teachers (or mentors) and proto-philosophers (or apprentices), their mutual yet no necessarily compatible needs and the problems these relationships may create. Rarely addressed, this subject is of relevance both to academic philosophy and to the renewed emphasis on philosophy’s practice. Through an historical analysis that yields insights into contemporary concerns, I highlight both the need for a teacher (Chapter 2) and the necessity of self-education (Chapter 3). As the tension between these two requirements is obvious, I introduce various methods philosophers have used to prevent or attenuate it.

Part II (“Practical Philosophers—Some Antecedents”) considers landmarks in philosophy’s past that can be especially useful or dangerous

for philosophers to emulate today. It addresses the Hellenistic philosophies—Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Pyrrhonism, as well as Cynicism (Chapter 4)—the modern Socratic philosopher of the British Enlightenment, the third Earl of Shaftesbury (Chapter 5), and the Danish 19<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher, precursor of existentialism and critic of Georg W. F. Hegel, Søren Kierkegaard. Let me explain these choices.

Since the Sophists and Socrates, philosophy has been at least partly considered a practical discipline whose aim is moral and political. This view of philosophy is exemplified not only in Plato's dialogues but also in his Academy and in the often-perilous travels he undertook to Syracuse with the hope of implementing his views. While the aim of Aristotle's Lyceum was no less moral and political than his teacher's, the theoretical part of Plato and Aristotle's metaphysical philosophies, as well as the Aristotelian view that the pursuit of theoretical knowledge has value in itself, came immediately under attack. The Cynics ridiculed these views, and the Hellenistic schools of Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Pyrrhonism replaced them with practical philosophies, often modified in Roman times to be even more palatable.

The Hellenistic schools' impressive appeal to wide audiences position them at first sight as ideal antecedents to the renewed endeavor of making philosophy practical—the movement known as philosophical practice. In Chapter 4, I engage in a thorough analysis of these philosophies, including Cynicism, in order to probe the plausibility of this claim as well as the difficulties it may create. Instead of reviving distant and somewhat problematic Alexandrian roots, I propose the Enlightenment as the genuine origin of contemporary philosophical practice.<sup>10</sup>

Chapter 5 follows on this proposal by identifying the third Earl of Shaftesbury as largely responsible for the revival of interest in philosophy's benefits. His role within the British Enlightenment indicates that, by making virtue the content of happiness and good breeding the goal of philosophy, this Modern Socratic made philosophy necessary for the new class of citizens his politics purported to create. Implementing his views today would single out philosophical practice from psychology and self-help books alike, yet at a price, which philosophical practitioners would not easily pay.

Thus, I move on in Chapter 6 to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, whose existential interests constitute a *prima facie*

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<sup>10</sup> The Renaissance occasioned a revival of Hellenistic and Classic philosophies, yet I skip here the significant role of Michel de Montaigne as a practitioner of philosophy. For an elaboration of this view of Montaigne, see Chapter 1 of Amir, *Laughter and the Good Life: Montaigne, Nietzsche, Santayana* (work under contract for State University of New York Press).

antecedent for philosophical practice. While voicing concerns about Kierkegaard's religious aims, this chapter outlines the many ways in which his philosophy is of service to philosophical practice, and proposes his dialectical movement between the concrete and the general and back as a model for practicing philosophy.

Part III ("Unduly Neglected Topics") addresses four uncommon practical topics that are significant yet usually neglected both in philosophy and in its practice.

Chapter 7 addresses the reasons for the contemporary neglect of Benedict Spinoza's ethics, whose key epistemological and moral virtue of understanding I introduce in the opening chapter of the book as particularly interesting for the practice of philosophy. I find the possible reasons for eschewing Spinoza unconvincing, and list good reasons for embracing his ethics, as it answers contemporary concerns and sensibilities better than many other theories.

Chapter 8 tackles the human condition and questions the capacity of humor, even when considered a survival tool, to ameliorate the human predicament. The negative note on which this chapter ends has been the spur of further research. The thesis of *Homo risibilis*, first introduced in Amir (2014) and elaborated on below (Chapter 15), reveals that some form of the comical is uniquely adaptable to the human condition. The significance of humor for all Hellenistic schools as well as for Shaftesbury and Kierkegaard that part II highlighted points to its role in exoteric philosophy. I further elaborate on the interiorization of humor, which enables the enculturated philosopher to approach himself as an exoteric audience with the aim of enhancing self-knowledge and self-change (Chapters 9, 12 and 15).

Chapter 9 brings us to the boundaries of Western philosophy by addressing the neglected topic of educating one's will, its role in self-integrity, and its contribution to philosophy as alternative spirituality. A sufficient understanding of what it takes to educate the will as well as a practice of willing well may mark the difference between philosophy's power and impotence. As willing well is living well, the education of the will is particularly relevant to philosophical practitioners, who may have to face the charge that philosophy is impotent in bringing about personal change. In this chapter, I draw on the program advanced by the famous philosopher of religion, Robert C. Neville (1978) for the education of one's will to attain self-integrity through self-image, action, consciousness, and commitment. Following my critical engagement with his program, I further propose a philosophic tool that makes self-integrity more palatable to persons who are not fully committed to ideals, or well versed in Eastern

practices, or interested in the use of psychoanalysis.

Chapter 10 puts sexuality on the agenda of practical philosophers.<sup>11</sup> Since sexuality is intrinsically amoral, the responsibility of devising our own sexual ethics is up to us. As an ethical field, party to the good life, sexuality is the business of philosophers and especially of practical philosophers. A powerful and puzzling force to contend with in everyday life, sexuality's opacity, senselessness, and inherent incapacity of successfully completing the confused project it aims at, no less than its transgressive nature, have been amply discussed in the philosophic and psychoanalytic literature. However, its successful incorporation within a good life is no small feat, an ambitious goal this chapter aims at. This is all the more important since the various narratives of liberation are entangled in social and political agendas that, counter-intuitively, may obscure the individual's duty to himself. Were we to embrace Montaigne's view, that "it is an absolute perfection and virtually divine to know how to enjoy our being rightfully" (Montaigne 1967 III, chap. 13, 857), we would realize that this "know how" is not only a philosophic adventure of self- and other-knowledge, but also an initiation to wisdom. As such defined, sexuality pertains to philosophers' interest, if not responsibility.

Part IV reconsiders the means for practicing philosophy. Since Socrates, the notions of self-knowledge and dialogue loom large in reflections about the practice of philosophy. Thus, the three chapters comprising this part critically assess the possibility of self-knowledge, given the predominance of the unconscious both in philosophy and in psychology, and of dialogue, both the intra-personal and inter-personal varieties. In Chapter 11, Sigmund Freud's view of the role of the unconscious, Jean-Paul Sartre's criticism of it, and the shortcomings of the latter's alternative are thoroughly examined. My proposal to further self-knowledge through an innovative form of intra-personal dialogue follows (Chapter 12). I further examine in Chapter 13, finally, the conditions for a fruitful inter-personal dialogue rather than a polite exchange of two monologues.

Part V reevaluates, in two chapters, the tools available to philosophical practice. Chapter 14 proposes a method for the practice of philosophy that enables us to take philosophy seriously. It provides philosophic goals and means to implement them, and recommends using philosophy rather than relying on other kinds of counseling for which philosophers do not have the required training.

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<sup>11</sup> I first did so in Amir (2017b), in *New Frontiers of Philosophical Practice* (2017c), among various new directions and topics for philosophical practice this anthology advances.

Chapter 15 addresses the thorny problem of the possibility of self-change or even full-fledged transformation, through philosophical tools, and offers the means for all to pursue such goal in view of attaining the good life. To that purpose, I engage in a critical revision of several themes that are inherent to a philosophical good life. These topics involve the relation between the tragic and the comic, the conditions of self-knowledge, the ability to acknowledge one's ambivalence and the capacity of better deliberation. Additionally, I address the relation between reason and emotions, between joy and suffering, and the conditions for endowing one's life with meaning and for grounding compassion in it. Finally, I clarify the possibility of living with unsolvable conflict and of eventually resolving the conflict that characterizes the human condition. I further advance humor as a potent tool for living well and introduce a new vision of the good life, *Homo risibilis*, as well as detailed exercises for implementing it. The views this chapter introduces answer the requirement that the practice of philosophy may have to enable moderate self-change or full-fledged self-transformation for those who seek it. Moreover, because we are not fully rational, the tool proposed there affords a more efficient implementation of philosophic ideals, including those that are not endorsed in this chapter.

Part VI ("Problems and Benefits") addresses the hurdles philosophical practice encounters by uncovering three questionable assumptions at its core (Chapter 16), but also highlights the unique benefits this field provides to the very discipline of philosophy (Chapter 17). This last chapter calls for a meta-philosophical discussion that reconsiders the divide between theory and practice. In addition, as most students of philosophy do not become professional philosophers, academic philosophers could use philosophical practitioners' experience in sharing philosophy with various audiences. I further propose a criterion of relevance to assess the curriculum and the manner in which one teaches philosophic theories. These devices could facilitate imparting philosophy in ways that enable the audience to appropriate its lessons and would make sure that philosophy, through its revised past theories and its future contribution to contemporary needs, stays firmly in the academe and thrives outside of it as well.

Several concluding remarks, based on two written interviews, sum up my views as shaped by experience in the practice of philosophy, both inside and outside the academe. They disclose my personal path whilst recalling this volume's ideas as well as those advanced in *Rethinking Philosophers' Responsibility* (2017a).

Most of the chapters comprising this book are considerably revised and updated essays and articles published separately over the last fifteen years. Whilst their content aims at academic accuracy, I have rewritten them in an accessible style to engage not only academic and practical philosophers, either students or accomplished scholars, but also professionals in other disciplines, such as in education and the helping professions, as well as the general public.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## TAKING PHILOSOPHY SERIOUSLY

There are various ways to practice philosophy. This variety may account for the tension between academic and practical philosophers, and among philosophical practitioners. In this chapter, as well as in the remaining of this book, I attempt to reconcile the factions by proposing a view of philosophy and its practice that can tolerate divergences. I explain what taking philosophy seriously means and I distinguish between radical philosophy (perfectionism) and democratized philosophy (meliorism). In the remainder of the chapter, I explicate what meliorism entails by focusing on three topics. First, I assess the significance of abstract thought within the practice of philosophy. Second, I propose an agent-based epistemology of intellectual virtues as an epistemological model suitable for the practice of philosophy. Given the inter-connectedness of intellectual and moral virtues, finally, I advance the view that philosophical practice has a significant moral role to play in democratic and liberal societies.

### **1. Taking Philosophy Seriously**

Taking philosophy seriously means recognizing its potency whilst remaining faithful to its objectives. Two main approaches to philosophy seem not to take it seriously enough. The philosophy professor, who holds that philosophical theory is irrelevant to life, exemplifies one approach. The philosophical practitioner, who believes that philosophical theory is not significant for its practice, exemplifies the other approach.

The philosophy professor, who believes that his discipline is not relevant to life, may not be taking his profession seriously enough. Were he to take seriously his profession as a teacher of philosophy, he would thereby participate in one form of philosophical practice, for good teaching implies appropriating the matter at hand and the ability to communicate the essential in a way that answers the audience's capacities and interests. Imparting philosophical theories without a Socratic emptying of previously held conceptions is hardly possible. In addition, mere theoretical understanding of philosophical theory is no understanding, I argue, not necessarily because of the so-called existential features of philosophy, but



because a theory has to be exercised or essayed, as Michel de Montaigne would say (1967), in order to effectively comprehend what it could be.

If this is true, there is no discontinuity between academic philosophy and philosophical counseling.<sup>13</sup> The practice of philosophy can be pictured

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<sup>13</sup> The criticism of academic philosophy did not begin in this century, nor did it begin with the philosophical practice movement. In a way, Socrates initiated it with his criticism of the Sophists; Arthur Schopenhauer rekindled it with his attack on Georg Wilhelm F. Hegel. Michel de Montaigne, Søren Kierkegaard, and Friedrich Nietzsche took part in it, as well as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. In the twentieth century, we may add John Dewey, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Michel Foucault, the existentialist philosophers, as well as the Spanish-born American philosopher, George Santayana, to the long list of philosophers who were critical of the way philosophy was approached in the academe. Let me elaborate on Santayana, as his views on the matter may be less known. The very discipline of academic philosophy rubbed Santayana the wrong way. "That philosophers should be professors is an accident," he wrote, "and almost an anomaly. Free reflection about everything is a habit to be imitated, but not a subject to expound; and an original system, if the philosopher has one, is something dark, perilous, untested, and not ripe to be taught, nor is there much danger anyone will learn it." Looking back on his Harvard days in *Character and Opinion in the United States* (1921), he spoke of the new breed of philosophy professor who was "very professional in tone and conscious of his *Fach*," "open-minded, whole-hearted, appreciative," but also "toasted only on one side." In "On Philosophers and Philosophy," he notes, "there is a sense in which [William] James was not a philosopher at all. He once said to me: 'What a curse philosophy would be if we couldn't forget all about it!' In other words, philosophy was to him what it has been to so many, a consolation and a sanctuary in a life, which would have been unsatisfying without it. It would be incongruous, therefore, to expect of him that he should build a philosophy like an edifice to go and live in for good" (Santayana 1921, 56-57). More recently, Michel Foucault has rekindled the views of the Greeks, Benedict Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard by saying: "More important, however, than scrutinizing the lives of others, each philosopher must direct critical attention and creative imagination to her own concrete deeds and life-experiences as well as to her own ideas . . . . At every moment, step by step, one must confront what one is thinking and saying with what one is doing, with what one is" (Foucault 1984, 374). Richard Shusterman sums up the views shared by Dewey, Wittgenstein and Foucault by noting that "the disrespect for mere academic philosophizing" stems from the view that "philosophy had a much more crucial, existential task: to help us lead better lives by bettering ourselves through self-knowledge, self-criticism, and self-mastery. Philosophy is more than thought; it is a life-practice where theory derives its real meaning and value only in terms of the life in which it functions, in the concrete pursuit of better living" (1997, chap. 1). The idea of philosophy as "self-help" in the art of living was once philosophy's prime goal, and it remains a worthy one. Yet it may bring a scornful smirk from

as if on a continuum, which begins with the successful appropriation of philosophical theories that understanding requires and ends in sharing them with various audiences according to their needs and capacities. Thus, these requirements, which make of philosophy a practical discipline, merely define effective teaching and learning, which naturally assumes the teacher's prior understanding of the material at hand.

The philosophical counselor who believes that philosophical theory is not important is not so different from the professor who does not take philosophy seriously enough. For this counselor does not trust his own discipline, philosophy, to bear fruitfully on life's problems and interests. Thus, he emulates forms of counseling taken from other disciplines, such as psychology, New Age theories, and so on. Not to take philosophy seriously is not to trust its potency, not to take advantage of the wealth of wisdom it contains, but rather to sell it short.

Reflecting adequately is the seal that differentiates philosophy from psychology and New Ages theories. The difference between philosophy and psychology lies in the emphasis on reflection: philosophical reflection is general or abstract yet its power derives from this characteristic feature. The difference between philosophy and New Age thought lies in the emphasis on adequacy: adequacy stems from rigor of thought, from arguments that establish the reliability of conclusions. This locates epistemology and logic at the heart of philosophical practice, although papers and articles on practical philosophy hardly address these topics.

Thus, to take philosophy seriously is to be loyal to its objectives. Forms of communication may differ among the consultancy, groups outside the academe, and the classes within the academe, but the objectives have to be the same. Otherwise it is no longer philosophy.

I have found three interrelated objectives of philosophy that we could agree on. First, philosophy aims at truth, at least by *via negativa*, through the eradication of our errors (Popper 1962). This means that the philosopher aims at truth rather than happiness, choosing the former over the latter if he has to.<sup>14</sup> Second, philosophy aims at liberation, even partial,

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most professional philosophers. As one of them writes, "The idea of philosophy as a deliberate life-practice that brings lives of beauty and happiness to its practitioners is as foreign to professional philosophy today as astrophysics is to astrophysics" (Shusterman 1997, 3). Yet another contemporary philosopher warns us: "Philosophy is a wonderful subject but it does not make a human life . . . Too much of it is not good for a person" (McGinn 1989, vi).

<sup>14</sup> Truth is the philosopher's happiness. Among other classical formulations of this idea, recall Descartes' view (1991, vol. 3: Letter to Princess Elizabeth, 6 October 1645), and more recently, André Comte-Sponville's. The latter states that the

from illusions, preconceptions, and self-centered perception. Third, philosophy aims at wisdom, even if negative, in the sense of realizing that I do not know, yet also of actively finding out what I do not want to know, which results in a better understanding of the human condition. The relation that holds among these objectives seems to be the following: liberation from untruth is the path to wisdom.

To further elucidate these notions, it propose to distinguish between two traditions within philosophy: one tradition may be called perfectionism, or radical philosophy, the other, meliorism, or democratized philosophy. While we may be more familiar with the former, both traditions live on in academic philosophy, and are practiced in the variety of philosophical practices. Both are valid and significant forms of philosophy; however, unawareness of the differences between them results in tension among counselors as well as between practitioners and academics.

Those who are familiar with Eastern philosophy may recognize in this distinction the Western analogue to the main schools of Buddhist thought: on the one hand, the Hinayana school, or small vehicle, which leads to personal liberation, and, on the other, the Mahayana school, or large vehicle, whose goal is to help others achieve liberation. Other ways of describing these alternative approaches could be “radical” *versus* “piecemeal” philosophy, “elitist” *versus* “democratic” approaches, or philosophy that is more oriented towards liberty *versus* philosophy that is more oriented towards equality. Let me elaborate on each of these approaches to philosophy.

## 2. Radical Philosophy: Perfectionism

*Unless one is a genius, philosophy is a mug's game.*

Iris Murdoch, *The Philosopher's Pupil*

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choice between happiness and truth is indicative of philosophers: because we made this choice, we are philosophers, and not the other way around. As human beings, we require happiness, and as philosophers, we are committed to the truth, in the same way that scientists are. However, truth predominates, if we have to choose, otherwise we are no philosophers: “Le philosophe, on s'en doute, fait un autre choix, qu'à vrai dire il ne choisit pas. Ce n'est pas en effet parcequ'il est philosophe qu'il fait ce choix; c'est parce qu'il fait ce choix qu'il est philosophe. Il est l'effet, plutôt que le sujet de ce choix qui le définit . . . Toujours est-il qu'il a 'choisi', lui, doublement la vérité et le bonheur. Comme le savant, il a souci du vrai; et comme nous tous, cette exigence d'être heureux. Mais le vrai prime: s'il faut choisir entre une vérité et un bonheur, il choisit la vérité. Il ne serait pas philosophe autrement” (Comte-Sponville 1993, 199).

Any teacher of the history of philosophy cannot avoid noticing the radical enterprise that philosophy is. If the lecturer does not notice it, his students will not fail to do so. Philosophy is revolutionary, time and again, and for various reasons. It presents itself as an alternative to established religion, and to all other establishments. It is highly critical of society's values: it dismisses the common-sense, non-critical views of regular persons, urging them to examine their lives and not take appearances at face value; it presents itself as an alternative to the common societal views of happiness—riches, pleasure, and power or fame. It requires a conversion to forms of thought and allegiances foreign to most persons. It assumes that radical change is possible through the transformative power of thought, through sole understanding and practice. It is comprehensive, keeping touch with other disciplines but in a supervisory and critical stance, perfectionist and ambitious in answering all worthy needs, including spiritual ones. It prescribes the highest ideals, in morality and ethics: it aims at nothing less than liberty, happiness or peace of mind, and even at philosophic redemption. It is for the few. Rare are those who live according to its requirements and even fewer dare claim that they do.

Consider, for example, Arthur Schopenhauer's description of the requirements of "mere" philosophizing:

The two main requirements for philosophizing are: firstly, to have the courage not to keep any question back; and secondly, to attain a clear consciousness of anything that *goes without saying* so as to comprehend it as a problem. Finally, the mind must, if it is really to philosophize, also to be truly disengaged: it must prosecute no particular goal or aim, and thus be free from the enticement of will, but devote itself undividedly to the instruction which the perceptible world and its own consciousness impart to it. (Schopenhauer, 1970, *Essays and Aphorisms*, "On Philosophy and the Intellect," section 3)

The perfectionist tradition within philosophy is immensely rich, and as perennial philosophy it redefines itself time and again, being the sole enterprise whose definition and role are subject solely to internal criticism (meta-philosophy is part of philosophy, while meta-psychology, for example, is part of philosophy of science). It was repeatedly dying or declared dead, losing its best minds to the established religions or the sciences, which it helped create, but like the phoenix, it has always been reborn out of its ashes.

You may believe that this philosophical spirit has been forgotten in the time elapsed since Antiquity, during which Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the Cynics, Stoics, Cyrenaics, Epicureans, and Pyrrhonists may have lost

much of their impact. You may change your mind by taking a second look at Benedict Spinoza, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard, George Santayana, the existentialists, and the movement called “philosophical practice.”

Those who offer perfectionist teaching have to be themselves on this path; otherwise, they do not understand the content of their teaching. Usually, they avoid presenting themselves as sages, and the path they are pointing at may be reached by shared search. Moreover, contrary to common opinion, they can be pluralists, for various philosophical schools give different definitions of liberty, happiness, peace of mind, and even philosophic redemption. In this tradition, truth is lived more than known, and the appropriate model is that of the sage (see Neville 1978, 47-70).

Perfectionism is for a minority, yet the majority of philosophical schools are of this type. (Even existentialism, which is seemingly a democratization of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, posits authenticity as an ideal, which, by embracing anxiety, contradicts common views of happiness, and is, therefore, a rare achievement.) Today, the academe’s interest in perfectionism is being revived.<sup>15</sup> When pointing below to philosophy’s limitations in effecting self-transformation, and, thus potentially frustrating its adherents,<sup>16</sup> I am referring to this tradition of philosophy.

### 3. Democratized Philosophy: Meliorism

I use the term “meliorism” to refer to less ambitious theories than perfectionist philosophies. These meliorist philosophies would better fit common sense as well as the psychological needs and social goals of regular persons, who may be skeptical about the feasibility of perfectionist ends and means. For example, Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* may qualify as meliorist, if we exclude its tenth chapter, which addresses the few (1941). Among the philosophers who provide melioristic philosophies, we can count Montaigne, David Hume, John Locke, Bertrand Russell, and Karl Popper.

This is the tradition that requires further development, both in the academe and outside of it. A melioristic philosophical practice should be faithful to philosophy’s objectives and methods to deserve the title “philosophic,” and thus differentiate itself from psychology and New Age theories and practices. This means that the objectives proposed above

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Hurka (1994) and Cavell (1994).

<sup>16</sup> See Amir (2004b). I will address this topic below (Chapter 16).

(truth, liberation, and wisdom) should be sought through adequate reflection, which, in turn, should be ensured through philosophic methods, such as abstract thought, logic, and epistemology, yet made accessible to what Aristotle calls “the many.”

In what follows, I explain what such a melioristic practice may entail. To that purpose, I first elaborate on the significance of abstract thought within the practice of philosophy. Second, I propose an epistemological model suitable to the practice of philosophy: rather than a belief-based epistemology, I offer an agent-based epistemology of intellectual virtues. Given the inter-connection of intellectual and moral virtues, I finally argue that philosophical practice has a significant moral role to play in democratic and liberal societies.

Before elaborating on these topics, let me briefly introduce them in order to show how they work together. First, because philosophy is an abstract discipline, its practice also calls for abstract thinking. In practicing philosophy, it is best done by moving from the concrete to the abstract and back. By appropriating the insights gained in the abstract, one is faithful to philosophy (abstract thought) as well as to the goals of practical philosophy (the concrete). Rather than being a hindrance, the abstract considered in this light seems to be philosophy’s specific therapeutic tool.

Second, epistemology is the core of philosophy. Its value lies in developing one’s autonomous thinking. By making use of an epistemology of virtues, philosophical practitioners could enhance intellectual virtues, which, to my mind, are what philosophy is about. This argument is closely related to the question-and-alternative-answers method I propose for the practice of philosophy.<sup>17</sup> Let me explain how. Knowledge, as “intelligent development,” is associated to the capacity of adopting additional or alternative points of view. This fits Jean Piaget’s account of the development of thought (1932) and the role that alternative points of view have played in the history of sciences (Holmes 1976). Adopting different points of view fosters epistemic virtues such as impartiality and openness to the ideas of others. Critically assessing different answers develops one’s intellectual sobriety, or the virtue of the careful inquirer who accepts only what evidence guaranties. Additionally, the entire process of a practice of philosophy that is faithful to philosophy furthers the development of the virtue of intellectual courage, which includes perseverance and determination.

Finally, an ethics whose focus is on developing moral virtues, an aretaic ethics, seems to be the moral theory that more easily appeals to

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<sup>17</sup> See Amir (2003). I introduce this method below (Chapter 14).