THE ART OF LIFE

AN ANCIENT IDEA AND ITS SURVIVAL

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Introduction

*A*mong the many clubs and foundations that advertise themselves on Bruin Lane on the campus of the University of California at Los Angeles one is called 'The Art of Living'. The Buddha-like figure on its poster suggests that its members look East for the origins of this idea. But clearly it is part of Western culture. The 'art of life' (German 'Lebenskunst') most often refers to the ability to conduct one's social life in an appropriate and satisfactory manner. As such, it is connected with etiquette, i. e. a set of rules regulating social behaviour. A related idea is encapsulated in the French expression *savoir vivre*, which however is often used to indicate the ability to derive sensual pleasure from life.

What most people do not know is that the idea of an art of life goes back to the Greek philosopher Socrates (469–369 B. C.). If we take a closer look at how he and his ancient successors understood this, it becomes apparent that a few elements of the modern notion were already in place in ancient times, viz. the following of particular rules and happiness as the goal towards which this leads. There is also an important difference. For the ancients it is a *philosophical* concept, not etiquette in the sense of a collection of traditional, undemonstrated rules. But what then does 'art of life' mean as a philosophical concept? This is not a merely historical issue. In present-day philosophy the concept has been resuscitated–and those redefining it today are fully aware of their ancient precursors. In what follows I will trace its development from its origin until the present day.

The Birth of an Idea

Halfway through the Platonic dialogue *Alcibiades I* Socrates and Alcibiades consider how a person could achieve moral progress and even perfection. In this context Socrates introduces the notion of *technê*: 'expertise', 'art', 'skill'. Which *technê* will enable us to attain this ideal and, in this sense, care for ourselves? Trying to answer this question Alcibiades runs into various self-contradictions. He looses all confidence

and admits to being perplexed. Socrates encourages him to persevere and answer another series of questions (127d-e). Making a fresh start Socrates explains that as there is an art that takes care of what belongs to the foot (the shoemaker's art), so too there is an art that takes care of the foot itself (gymnastics). Socrates concludes:

> Socr.: So the art (*technê*) through which we care for each thing in itself is not the same as that through which we care for what belongs to that thing?
> Alc.: Apparently not.
> Socr.: Taking care of your own things, then, is not the same as taking care of yourself.
> Alc.: Certainly not (128d).

From here Socrates proceeds to a precise definition of the self.[1] It cannot be the body, which is the instrument used by the self. The self is the soul (*psychê*). One should therefore get to know [2] and care for one's soul. This is achieved through cultivating the soul's most precious and divine potential, viz. that for wisdom.

Thus Socrates expounds his philosophical ideal of caring for one's soul or self. That we have an inside self or character worth caring for was not an entirely novel idea. Pythagoras and Heraclitus had made the first steps towards a philosophical reflection on personality, from which they drew inferences for a responsible way of life, that is to say, for an ethics. Socrates was enormously influential in further developing this idea of the care of the self, in particular by introducing the notion of 'art' (*technê*). But exactly what was its function?

Anyone who starts reading Plato's dialogues soon becomes familiar with the recurrent situation where Socrates' critical examination (*elenchos*) of the views of his interlocutors ends with their being exposed as pseudo-experts. They laid claim to knowledge but deluded themselves and others on this score. Typically the knowledge concerned is that of a particular moral or social subject: justice, piety, courage, political excellence etc. Socrates' interlocutors prove unable to present an adequate account (*logon didonai*) of their beliefs. Often this is how it ends: the dialogue ends with an impasse, a perplexing difficulty (*aporia*). In consequence, Socrates has earned himself a reputation for having usefully seen through and exposed all kinds of specious wisdom – without however replacing it with a systematic doctrine of his own. For this his dialogic method of *elenchus* is taken to have been too limited and insuffient.[3] Still, this impression is too one-sided. The *technê* analogy introduced in the *Alcibiades I* seems designed to develop, alongside the *elenchus*, a procedure that makes it possible to 'give an account'. Having a *technê* means having a rational and explicable method, a coherent set of rules. This is why an art can be learned and

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[1] On this part of the discussion cf. Gill (2006) 344–59.

[2] 129a. This refers to the 'wise Delphic inscription' (132c) 'Know thyself'. Cf. also Plato, *Prot.* 343a and for more material Diels-Kranz, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (18. Aufl. 1989), part I, nr. 10, 2.

[3] Cf. the end of book I of the *Republic* where Socrates having refuted the sophist Thrasymachus is challenged by his companions to set out an alternative theory of justice. When the transition from the dialogic first book to the far more monologic books II-X is made, the *elenchus*, i.e. the method of the historical Socrates, is in fact abandoned by Plato.

taught. The subject-matter of the art envisaged by Socrates is our inner self. The use of the *technê* analogy in connection with the call for the care for the soul is found in several passages throughout Plato's work. We may assume that these related ideas derive from the historical Socrates.[4]

The *Technê* Analogy Contested and Rehabilitated

Socrates had introduced his *technê* analogy to present the moral principles he defended as mutually coherent. But he was still far from constructing a complete system of morality. The precise way in which we could achieve moral perfection (or virtue, *aretê*) and happiness had remained largely unimplemented. Moreover, there was Socrates' controversial intellectualism, i. e. his view of moral excellence as a form of knowledge, encapsulated in his dictum 'nobody errs wittingly'. The criminal acts out of ignorance: he wrongly believes that he pursues what is good, i. e. what is conducive to his happiness. This theory of action leaves no room for acting against one's better judgement: to know the good is to act on it. Socrates, then, denied the reality of weakness of the will (*akrasia*), the conflict between (right) reason and the desires whereby the desires prevail but we simultaneously believe that the resulting action is wrong.

Socrates' intellectualism was abandoned by his pupil Plato in book IV of the *Republic* on empirical [5] and logical grounds. Aristotle followed suit in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (I, 12) and *On the Soul* (III, 9–10). They postulate two (Plato) or one (Aristotle) psychic powers alongside, and irreducible to, reason. These other power or powers explain emotions such as desire and anger. The conflict between emotion and reason, then, is what constitutes weakness of the will. For our present purposes it is important to note that this rejection of Socratic intellectualism also involves the rejection of the *technê* analogy, i. e. the view of moral perfection as a form of technical knowledge, an expertise.[6] According to Plato and Aristotle, becoming good is not only a matter of knowing certain things but of influencing our emotions through a variety of means that are not confined to reasoning. For Aristotle the constant interplay between emotion and practical wisdom shapes a particular pattern of behaviour that becomes habitual, i. e. that shapes our character, including, as the case might be, a perfect character.

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[4] For a good discussion of Socrates' *technê* analogy on the basis of the relevant Platonic passages see Irwin (1977) 71–101.

[5] This term should not be taken to refer to systematic-empirical or experimental research, which has become typical and requisite in modern, i.e. post 19th century, psychology. Plato and other philosophers of the Greco-Roman world appealed to general human experience, that is to say, the behaviours they observed in others and in themselves. Thus Plato operates with examples such as that of the Athenian Leontios who takes a look at the corpses of executed criminals in spite of the fact that the voice of reason tells him not to.

[6] Cf. Aristotle's criticism of this use of *technê* at *EN* VI, 6; cf. also *Met.* I, 1.

Plato and Aristotle delivered a well-argued critique of Socrates, a critique that de-rived support from the general intuition that reason and emotion are two separate factors in our mental functioning. It is therefore striking that the Socratic model made a powerful comeback. This was due to the emergence of Stoicism, one of the most influential philosophical schools from the beginning of the Hellenistic period until well into the Imperial period. The Stoics espoused the Socratic insight that our mental life including emotions such as desire is cognitive, that is, consciousness, in a way that differentiates (adult) humans from animals in a fundamental sense. In other words, emotions too are ways of (erroneous) thinking and in this, non-normative sense rational. Thus the great Stoic Chrysippus defined desire as 'reason (*logos*) commanding man to act'.[7] In Stoic philosophy the dominant model is that of the inner dialogue: thinking is having a talk with oneself. This model replaces that of the relations – and conflict – between reason and the irrational emotions accord-ing to the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition.

What motivated the Stoics to fall back on the older, Socratic model? For one, this move is in line with their general reverence for Socrates as the thinker who had lived his philosophy right until the end. There were also conceptual problems with the faculty approach of the soul, problems that had already worried Aristotle.[8] But an-other factor deserves special emphasis, namely the radical counter-cultural side of Stoicism – a feature that it shares with other Hellenistic schools such as Epicurean-ism and Cynicism.[9]

Aristotle's ethics had taken its starting point from an existing morality, viz. in particular that found among the aristocracies in the Greek city-states. The Stoics do not start from man as already shaped by his culture but rather from human, i. e. ra-tional, nature as uninformed by a particular cultural setting. This radicalism ex-presses itself in the assumption that on this empirical and natural basis man can shape his own life regardless of (unfavourable) social and cultural circumstances. Philosophy points the way – a way which for the Stoics as for Aristotle leads towards, and is motivated by, *eudaimonia*, the happy or successful life. But the Stoics went beyond Aristotle in elaborating a normative account of this moral development to-wards perfection, viz. their theory of *oikeiôsis* ('familiarization'), the process whereby individuals become attached to ever widening circles of fellow-human beings – a process based on the recognition of our common rationality and ideally culminat-ing in a sense of unity with all humankind and indeed the divine Reason ruling the cosmos. Other new themes are the doctrine of 'appropriate actions' (*kathêkonta*) and roles (*prosôpa*, Latin *personae*).

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[7] Cited by Plutarch, *On the Self-Contradictions of the Stoics* 1037F (=SVF 3.175).

[8] Cf. Aristotle, *On the Soul* III, 9–10: the problem of how to justify a particular number of different faculties and the related one of how to account for their interaction; cf. Tieleman (2003) 275–77.

[9] According to the connoisseur of Hellenistic philosophy, A. A. Long, this radicalism goes some way towards explaining why ideas such as 'Stoic' and 'Epicurean' still live on in cultural memory as indicating a particular attitude towards life: see Long (2006) 27.

Stoic philosophy is the instrument by means of which happiness can be pursued and, ideally, attained. It does not only involve theoretical study but practice and exercise (*askêsis*, *epitêdeusis*). Here the Stoics look back at Socrates and restore the latter's *technê* analogy to the central role it has lost under the influence of Plato and Aristotle. The Stoics define philosophy as an 'art (*technê*) with respect to life aimed at a useful goal'.[10] This definition brings out the nature of philosophy as a rational but not purely theoretical activity: it refers to a goal useful for life, a goal that is pursued by learning and consistently using philosophical concepts. The Stoic define *technê* as a 'system of concepts' so that their definition of philosophy includes the notion of systematicity, an ideal the Stoics were the first to thematize. Logic, ethics and physics constitute an organically coherent whole, the basis of a consistent life.

This is an art which effects no less than a transformation of one's life, as is made clear by the later Stoic Epictetus (c. 50–130 A. D.):

> Philosophy does not profess to give man any of the external goods. Otherwise it would admit of something that lies outside its proper subject-matter (*hylê*). For just as wood is the material of the carpenter and bronze that of the bronze-caster, so too is each person's life the material (*hylê*) of the art with respect to life (*tês peri bion technês*).[11]

The techniques of argument and mental exercise that make up this philosophical art of living are found throughout Epictetus' discourses, but also in the work of other Stoics of the same period such as Seneca (1–65) and Marcus Aurelius (121–180).[12]

Modern Revival

In his essay *Schopenhauer as Educator* Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) states:

> I attach importance to a philosopher only insofar he is able to set an example […]. The philosopher must provide this example through his visible life and not through his books only; that is to say, this [life] must be shown in manner taught by the philosophers of Greece: through facial expressions, demeanour, dress, nutriment and habit rather than through what they said, let alone what they wrote.[13]

Nietzsche no doubt exaggerates when he presents the written and spoken word as of subordinate significance in Greek philosophy. But we may have to make allowance for the fact that he is trying to correct a by his time deep-rooted and widespread conception of philosophy as an abstract, theoretical activity far removed from everyday life.

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[10] *SVF* vol. 1 (Zeno) 73; 3 (Chrysippus) 111, 526. Latin authors refer to philosophy as an *ars vitae*: see Cicero, *On Moral Ends* (*De finibus*) 3.4; Seneca, *Moral Epistles* 95.7, 117.2, fr. 17.

[11] Epictetus, *Dissertations* 1.15.2 (my translation).

[12] The importance attached by the Stoics to this conception of philosophy, as well as their influence in this period, is illustrated by the extensive criticism at Sextus Empiricus (2nd cent. A. D.) *Against the Mathematicians* 11.168–215. On Seneca considered from this perspective see further e. g. I. Hadot (1969); for Marcus Aurelius see Hadot (2001).

[13] Fr. Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer als Erzieher* § 3 (KGW III, 1, 346); my translation.

This conception (which is due to German philosophy of the late 18th and early 19th century in particular) has all too often been projected back on to Greco-Roman philosophy. Nietzsche, the classicist who had worked on Diogenes Laertius' *Lives and Opinions of the Distinguished Philosophers*, saw the distortion involved here. He paved the way for an approach of ancient philosophy that has been developed in our own time by Pierre Hadot (1922) and others.[14] It was through his influence on Michel Foucault (1926–84) in particular that Hadot has caused many historians and others to rediscover the true nature of ancient philosophy (or at least large parts of it) as a philosophy of life, or in Hadot's own words 'philosophy as a way of life'. His work also provided stimuli that have led to the formulations – by Foucault, Schmid (1953), Onfray (1958) and others – of a philosophical art of life for our time.

The still very influential Foucault became interested in the ancient idea – and ideal – of the art of life during the research for his *History of Sexuality*, which has remained limited to three out of six planned volumes. He had embarked upon this project with the aim of tracing the roots of modern sexual repression in early Christianity and the Greco-Roman world in general. In the third volume, *The Care of the Self* (*Le souci de soi*–a clear Socratic echo) he makes a rather unexpected turn when he discerns from the Hellenistic period onward certain changes, in particular a more favourable appreciation of marriage:

> It is not the emergence of particular prohibitions that underlie these changes in sexual morality: it is the development of an art of life (*art de l'existence*), which revolves around the question of the 'I', its dependence and independence, its general manifestation and the relations it can and has to engage in with others, the method through which it controls itself and the way in which it can establish complete authority over itself (p. 273; my translation).

It is very striking (although certainly due to Hadot's influence) that Foucault is here sensitive to the ancient *self*-disciplining, thereby taking leave of his usual theme of institutional repression, the subjugation of the individual by a scientific and/or social discourse. Thus there will be room, within certain limitations, for an original self or 'I' that makes its own choices.

Foucault was clearly impressed by the ancient art of life with its self-imposed rules. This discovery led to his advocacy of a 'technology of the self' for us here and now:

> What strikes me is the fact that in our society art has become something that pertains to objects only, not to persons or to life [...] But why could not everyone's life become a work of art? Why should a lamp or a house be a work of art but not our life?[15]

We must note that Foucault introduces here an esthetic aspect that is unknown from our ancient sources. Once again Nietzsche, another of Foucault's sources of inspiration, casts his shadow. In his early work *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (*Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*, 1871) Nietzsche ascribes to the

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[14] For relevant publications by Hadot see the Bibliography. Also note the earlier studies by Rabbow (1954) and I. Hadot (1969).

[15] Foucault (1994b) 392; cf. 617; my translation.

Greeks of the pre-classical period (especially as represented in the Homeric epics) the ideal of life as a work of art – a completely unhistorical, Nietzschian projection but nonetheless an idea that stimulates the imagination and has become influential. In consequence, one often comes across such aesthetic conceptions of the art of living.

Epilogue

It is no exaggeration to say that the moral philosophy of the Greeks and Romans today, at the beginning of the 21st century, constitutes one the most influential heirlooms of classical civilization. Referring back to philosophers such Aristotle and other Greek thinkers contemporary philosophers such as Elizabeth Anscombe, Peter Geach, Philippa Foot and Alisdair MacIntyre have made classical virtue ethics relevant for our time, thus filling certain lacunas left by modern, post-Kantian ethics. This had become an abstract discipline with little appeal to most people except a relatively small circle of academic specialists. Ancient philosophers by contrast did address the practical questions of everyday life; they did address universal human needs and emotions in a very direct way. This makes their extant work an indispensable source of inspiration and ideas for all those who try to make philosophy again relevant for a wider public and the existential questions with which it grapples. In this revival of ancient virtue ethics a prominent part is played by the Socratic and Stoic ideal of the art of life.[16] It is typical of this philosophical art of living that it does not offer a superficial lifestyle or shortcut to happiness; it remains philosophical in that it constitutes a discipline that requires effort and perseverance of its practitioners. This makes it to some extent elitist, despite its universal appeal. But this paradox, too, is part of the ancient heritage.[17]

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[16] For the art of life (in the philosophical sense) today see esp. Schmid (1998).

[17] An earlier Dutch version of this article, ("Levenskunst") appeared in *Lampas. Tijdschrift voor classici* 40.4 (2007) 234–42.

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