

## PHILOSOPHY AS A PRACTICE OF A WISE LIFE<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *The formation of philosophy as a form of consciousness of its own kind was accompanied by the belief that its creators were some strange people, belonging to a special strain, amiss (atopos), just as their reality in the world of people (atopia). Philosophers have affirmed these qualificatives throughout the history of philosophy. They were building their identity through a pure spiritual aspiration to uncover the highest principles of everything that was happening, with an open critical opinion of the existing social reality and a particular way of living. Their existence in the world, characterized by a constant effort to rise above the sphere of everyday life, is a process of a tense state of mind between the set paradigm of a wise life and the attempt to achieve it. This tension manifests itself in the discursive plane through the abstract - speculative reflection about the essential questions of the world and man, and in the existential plane through the constant need to step out of the world of trivial things. Ancient philosophical experience shows that this stepping out entailed contemplation on which not only the most profound theorizing but also the process of self-change was based, through gaining independence from external goods (autarchy) and releasing oneself from passion (ataraxia), which should have ultimately led to the realization of the highest social good. In addition to the contribution of ancient philosophy to building the spiritual and moral integrity of philosophers, this paper actualizes another practical role of philosophy in improving life that has stemmed from the imbalance status of a modern-age individual who is increasingly in need of counseling support from practitioner philosophers for the purpose of stimulating the individual in self-perceiving of problems, establishing a secure thinking base and finding solutions to specific life and professional issues.*

**Keywords:** *integrity of philosopher; life wisdom; critical consciousness; spiritual exercises.*

### **Introduction**

The changes philosophy faced in its historical course necessarily affected its holders, so we can rightly wonder if there are common qualificatives that make up the essence of philosophy and philosopher, unique to all epochs, i.e., are the differences that exist between philosophy and philosophers of the ancient world,

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the Middle Ages, the modern and the present age merely different forms of their appearance with the same philosophical essence? In order to see what their distinction rests upon and how far their differentiation reaches, it is necessary to methodologically distinguish the essential features of philosophy and the way philosophers exist in the world in the broader historical context of their existence.

### **Ancient philosophers and the wisdom of life**

The beginning of ancient Greek philosophy, i.e., its setting apart as a special form of consciousness, was marked by the emergence of the theoretical activity of the mind as a critical - contemplative relation toward the world fueled by the disinterested and pure need of the spirit to unravel the last essentials of things using the mind. Although Aristotle (Greek: Αριστοτέλης) classified theorizing as a sublime activity of the mind in the way of life most worthy of man as a rational being, ancient Greek philosophers still saw the ultimate goal of philosophy not in theoretical discourse but in discovering paths that lead to realizing the meaning of existence and achieving a good life. The principle followed by philosophers in their daily existence is in line with Socrates' (Greek: Σωκράτης) view that the best lives are lived by those who seek to become better, and the most pleasant ones are lived by those who notice they get better, meaning that the good life implied cognitive-moral self-change (Ksenofont, 1980: 127). This is the essential feature which the whole philosophy of ancient times was based on as the philosophy of life.

The beginnings of the formation of the identity of philosophers and philosophy can be traced back to Pythagoras (Greek: Πυθαγόρας) and Pythagoreans, who were not only dedicated to discovering the highest laws of cosmic existence, for which they were respected as mathematicians, theorists, and esotericists, but were also especially concerned with establishing and preserving a moral way of life based on observing the akousmata, the rules they themselves had laid down. The fraternity aimed at not only general education but also exercised towards perfecting the cognitive powers and moral integrity of personality. Thus, joining the fraternity was contingent on two requirements. One concerned handing over all of one's property, as the path to gaining autarchy, and the other was the vow of silence which, through careful listening, spiritual observation, intense thinking, refraining from premature judgment, should lead to secure knowledge and virtue, especially self-control, by subjecting the will to rational principles. In this type of requirement, Hegel recognized an adequate method of getting into the philosophical way of thinking and the wise way of life as can be seen from his perspective: "We are in the habit of saying that the understanding is cultivated through questioning, objecting and replying, but, in fact, it is not thus formed, but made from without. What is inward in man is by culture got at and developed; hence though he remains silent, he is none the poorer in thought or denser of mind. He rather acquires thereby the power of apprehension, and comes to know that his ideas and objections are valueless; and as he learns that such ideas are valueless, he ceases to have them" (Hegel, 1991:23). For Pythagoreans, refraining from answering was not only practicing attention focused on the problem being studied

and which was not discussed before studied in-depth, but also mastering the skill of controlling oneself and developing prudence (Greek: [φρόνησις](#)) as practical wisdom. Hence silence was not a sign of lack of knowledge, but a process of inner speaking and a way to expand knowledge and gain virtue (Greek: [ἀρετή](#)) in the prudent silence of spirit (Živković & Petrović, 2008). This kind of wisdom was also possessed by Heraclitus (Greek: Ηρακλειτος) who, after withdrawing completely from public life in displeasure at the unjust persecution of his friend Hermodor, devoted his entire being to examining nature and himself, writing a scripture which he made non-understandable to anyone who lacked the power of logical thought and purified ethos. That these qualities constituted his philosophical identity is evidenced not only by the work in which, through concise thoughts, he expressed the truth about the cosmos, nature, and man, but also the whole mode of his existence, in line with the highest spiritual and moral principles. This is evidenced by his response to King Darius's invitation to come to his court in Persia to interpret and expose to him the power of wisdom contained in his writings "On Nature". In his response, Heraclitus says: "All the men that exist in the world, are far removed from truth and just dealings; but they are full of evil foolishness, which leads them to insatiable covetousness and vain-glorious ambition. I, however, forgetting all their worthlessness, and shunning satiety, and who wish to avoid all envy on the part of my countrymen, and all appearance of arrogance, will never come to Persia, since I am quite contented with a little, and live as best suits my own inclination." (Laertije, 2005: 382). The supreme goods which Heraclitus holds onto, namely truth and just dealings, are not merely theoretically conceived paradigms which, in their exemplary conceptual form, reside in the ideological sphere of his philosophy. On the contrary, in Heraclitus, they are the life values that form an integral part of his existential reality.

The passion for exploring truth and living life according to the principles of virtue as two essential elements contained in the notion of philosophers are in a specific way implied in both the character and philosophy of Socrates's life. His overwhelming desire to examine the nature of the cause of things, why they occur, why they exist and why they deteriorate<sup>2</sup> which preoccupied him at a young age, did not abandon him for the rest of his life, except that in adulthood, it was brought down from heaven to earth and turned to the questioning of life and morality, good and evil (Platon, 2015).

Starting from the teleological approach, i.e. by setting good as the purpose of action, Socrates also directed his cognitive method toward ethical knowledge and its practical effectiveness. Hence the basis of his philosophy is the unity of wisdom of thought and life. He put the equality sign between the truth and acting according to it, because he believed that the knowledge obtained by an individual through the effort of his own thought, and not by passively taking over the learned,

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could not remain inactive, as the mind as the strongest spiritual power in man strives for his incarnation. So, when asked if he considered the wise those who knew what they should do but did the opposite, he replied: "I hold that *those* who follow the wrong course are *neither wise nor prudent*" (Ksenofont, 2005: 120). According to Socrates, wisdom was not just about exercising in abstract theorizing or acting in accordance with rules; it involved a unique way of existing that required the spiritual transformation of an individual who has so much self-control that nothing on the outside can disturb the state of his peace of mind.

Such a mode of philosophical thinking and existing was the starting point of the Stoicists and the Epicureans as well, who affirmed the value of living in the unity of thought preoccupation with matters of logic, physics and ethics, and in the effort of the spirit to achieve autarchy and ataraxia. The path to autarchy led through mastering one's personal desires, suppressing passions, depriving oneself of the desire to acquire material possessions, getting rid of caring for perishable things, despising money, distinguishing things in our power from those in the power of external forces. Such a value attitude put into life enabled ataraxia, i.e. being free from unnecessary fears, mental anguish, and anxiety with a full sense of spiritual serenity and satisfaction (Ado, 2016). The ideal of the philosopher's life was to attain such a level of inner peace which nothing from the outside could disturb, and the progress toward wisdom was confirmed through returning the soul from everyday worries to the simple joy of living (Ibid. 25)

Insisting on the need and importance of the revitalization of ancient philosophy as a spiritual exercise of self-change, contemporary philosopher Pierre Hadot points to the difference in the interpretation of ancient philosophy as a discourse on philosophy and the interpretation of philosophy as a way of life (Ado, 2011). In the form of theories on cosmology, physics, ontology, and anthropology, it met the pedagogical demands of teaching in the educational system in philosophical schools of the time. However, its ultimate meaning went beyond theoretical reach, in the sense that it was not enough to form theories of right thinking, physical world, and moral action, but it was necessary to think and speak rightly, to contemplate nature, to perceive oneself as an integral part of it, to obey its laws, to develop the skills of a virtuous life, and to exercise practical wisdom.

### **From analytical to practical competencies**

Throughout its history, philosophy has lost the role it had in ancient schools. However, the closure of Plato's Academy did not mean a break with Hellenic philosophical heritage, for it continued to live through the Neo-Platonist schools and later through Aristotelianism in scholastic teachings. In the new age that hinted at the dominance of the religious-theological spirit, philosophy sought new possibilities of existence. At the Universities of Alexandria, Cappadocia, Constantinople, it was studied together with mathematics, rhetoric, grammar, physics, astronomy and other natural sciences and manifested as a kind of a combination of discursive and intuitive consciousness, faith and reason, using rich logical apparatus for the purpose of ontological proving and exegesis of theological

dogmas. During its course of a thousand years, medieval philosophy was understood as either external, exoteric, worldly, based on the natural "light of reason" or as internal, esoteric, revealed, inspired by divine logos that transcends human wisdom. (Majorov, 1982). All knowledgeable theologians were mostly philosophically educated as well, which allowed them to interpret religious dogmas in an abstract-speculative way. But in addition to this learned, theological philosophy, the Middle Ages nurtured a philosophy as a form of spiritual asceticism, silent and ascetic life, which, according to Hesychius, achieves a "sweet silence in the heart and a blissful state of mind, free from fantasy" (Dobrotoljublje, 2002: 10).

The new century suppressed the theologization of philosophy and put the development of the scientific-mathematical spirit at the forefront, gradually leading to the scientification of philosophy, which was further strengthened by the demand for its constitution as rigorous science, producing at one point a self-critical attitude towards the meaning of one's own existence. However, one form of the emergence of philosophy that has its roots in medieval education, and which has not lost its continuity to this day, refers to the form of academic philosophy, i.e. its transfer from the sphere of free philosophizing and spiritual exercise to the space of teaching, university activity. One of the most developed forms of this orientation is analytical philosophy with various disciplinary fields, from philosophy of language to philosophy of science and philosophy of spirit. The most influential philosophers of this orientation belong to deductive theorists known for their rigorous logical-linguistic performances and for their meticulous development of the system of abstract concepts. However, in modern philosophy, apart from philosophers of this orientation, there are those who approach philosophy as wisdom capable of meeting the needs of the deepest human aspirations, eliminating existential fears, and resolving life and moral dilemmas.

One of the new practical competencies that modern philosophers have developed in the face of emerging issues produced by the rapid development of science, medicine, and technology is counseling one, which is realized through two forms of practice. One covers the broad domain of consultative engagement of philosophers within ethical committees as regulatory bodies acting in a counseling capacity for institutions, agencies, and corporations. They take care of protecting their professional interest by introducing ethical oversight and adopting a procedure for regulating moral conduct. This role becomes all the more necessary bearing in mind the general decline tendency of moral credibility, which calls into question the legitimacy of both individual and institutional integrity. The need to engage ethicist philosophers and apply knowledge of ethical theories to address contemporary specific issues has become more and more prevalent. New scientific discoveries backed by sophisticated technology become problematic not in the horizon of their practical realization, but in the domain of their moral justification. In conditions where virtue has not been developed as the bearing moral principle of "ethics of care", codes of ethics become the most effective compensatory

mechanism for protecting ethical correctness and maintaining a balance between personal, company and the broadest social interests.

The other form of philosophers' counseling competence has the character of individual and group philosophical practice, at the heart of which lies the realization of the demand for returning philosophy to real life. Practitioner philosophers argue that engaging in philosophy cannot be reduced to a teaching, lecturing activity existing in the institutional education process, and that its revival and bringing back interest in it can only be achieved if it again confronts the fundamental questions of human existence and becomes an integral part of real life.<sup>3</sup>

Inspired by such thinking, German professor Gerd B. Achenbach abandoned the career of a university professor in Berlin in the 1980s and decided to apply his academic knowledge to counseling work in direct philosophical practice within the "Society for Philosophical Practice" (1982) and the "School of Philosophical Practice." Soon, through the form of the philosopher's counseling role, the movement of applied philosophy spread to the United Kingdom, where Alain de Botton, as a philosophical counselor, founded the "School of Life" in London, while in 1992 Ran Lahav applied philosophical counseling at the University of Haifa in Israel, which he organized through workshops for 15 years. The movement also affected America, where, in 1992, Elliot D. Cohen, Paul Sharkey and Thomas Magnell founded the "National Philosophical Counseling Association", and in 1998, New York University Professor Lou Marinoff founded the "American Philosophical Practitioners Association", which served as a model for the "Serbian Philosophical Practitioners Association". In addition to being engaged in organizations and associations through which they support the application of philosophy as a life-enhancing practice, practitioner philosophers are also involved in publishing highly influential journals, such as "Practical Philosophy" in the UK and "Philosophical Practice" in New York, as well as other works by which they popularize and actualize this philosophical orientation.<sup>4</sup>

For people seeking professional help from psychologists and psychotherapists to solve problems that put them in a state of fear, suffering, anxiety, the emergence of philosophical counselors has brought a whole new approach to perceiving problems, forming attitudes, decision-making in conflict and risk situations and their resolution (Marinoff, 2018). Primarily, individuals who have problems of this kind are not treated by philosophical counselors as patients in need of medication therapy or sessions seeking the causes of their condition through the analysis of emotionally experienced frustrations from childhood and subconscious desires; they rather concentrate on the present state and the realistic hypothetical framework of the future. They are approached as healthy individuals

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<sup>3</sup>Lahav, R. *Philosophy and Self – Transformation*. <http://philopractice.org> (Accessed on February 01, 2019.)

<sup>4</sup>Milacic, M. *The Healing Power of Dialogue*. [www.etika.edu.rs](http://www.etika.edu.rs) (Accessed on February 01, 2019.)

who have moral dilemmas regarding family, personal or professional issues, who are anxious, but do not have a more reliable mental stronghold for understanding and solving these problems. Counselors help by conversations through which they reveal the beliefs, value system and moral character of the client and accordingly suggest an approach that could help in self-understanding of the problem and in isolating and classifying its components and implications. In the counseling practice, there is no one general method, but each counselor uses the one that has proven to be most effective in its empirical application.

Lou Marinoff starts from the fact that every man has his own "operational principles" he acts upon, that is, a personal philosophy he follows in his life. However, it is precisely this personal philosophy that can be the cause of the problem if it is based on misconceptions; therefore it is necessary to first articulate and understand its essence in order for it to become useful and not harmful to its holder (Marinoff, 2017: 11). In his counseling work, Lou Marinoff has perfected a practice that includes several stages: 1) problem identification, 2) expressing emotion, 3) analyzing options, 4) contemplation and 5) equilibrium. However, he warns that if you adopt a philosophical stance you do not accept at heart, the most you can hope for is some kind of compensation or rationalization of your situation. And this cannot bring you any true and lasting relief (Marinoff, 2017:50) An attitude that does not appreciate all the elements of the existing state and the inner world of one's own philosophy can make the situation more difficult. In the counseling process, the counselor should help the client to, as independently as possible, form an adequate attitude, aligned with philosophical wisdom and own mental affinities, so that the application of that attitude can bring inner peace. It is precisely this approach in counseling that helps the individual get to know both the situation and himself, reject what was harmful in his previous life philosophy and reinforce what has proven to be good in order to gain philosophical self-sufficiency, i.e. as much thought independence as possible in approaching life's temptations and maintaining emotional health and moral integrity

### **Final consideration**

In pursuit of the main characteristics that determine the nature and role of a philosopher, we come to two competencies that constitutively determined belonging to this particular "strain of people" in ancient Greece. These are the pursuit of truth and the pursuit of self-change. The way of thinking and the way of life were indeed the determining qualifications that made them atypical members of society. They found confirmation of their mental nature in theorizing, and confirmation of the meaning and dignity of their own existence in practical action aligned with virtues. Their need for philosophizing stemmed from the belief that the unexamined life is not worth living, and that the highest human goal was constant self-examination and self-development. After the loss of dominant social status and the decades-long search for self in the modern world with doubts about the justification of the meaning of one's existence, a special orientation of

philosophy and philosophers fully aware of the relevance of their practical activity in the world has differentiated itself.

On the basis of the demand for restoring philosophy, practitionerphilosophers stood out who put their academic knowledge, methodical skills and their own experiential experience of the value of philosophy in the service of providing incentives to individuals in preparing them to solve specific life issues independently. However, while we have written testimonies of ancient philosophers stating that they despised money, abstained from anger, cultivated patience, freed themselves from the fear of death by spiritual exercises transposing it into believing in the immortality of the soul, when it comes to contemporary philosophers, apart from the information about the way of theorizing of analytically oriented philosophers and the method and results of work of philosophers of practical orientation, we remain deprived of information about the way of their personal existence in the world. We can only assume, at least when it comes to successful practitioners, that they could not properly exercise the counseling role without having deeply lived and directly experienced the benefit and power of philosophical wisdom.

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