

How Ancient Greek Philosophy Can Be Made Relevant to Contemporary Life

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Abstract

In this paper, I will explain how ancient Greek philosophy can be made relevant to our lives. I do this by explaining how an instructor of a course in ancient Greek philosophy can teach Greek philosophy in a way that makes its study relevant to how the students in the course live their lives. Since this is the most likely way in which its relevance to contemporary life might be realized in practice, I explain its relevance from this perspective. I contrast the different ways in which ancient Greek philosophy is taught, and give examples of how it can be taught that calls attention to the ways in which what the Greeks said are relevant to how students live their lives.

In this paper, I will explain how ancient Greek philosophy can be made relevant to contemporary life. The form in which I will explain this is by discussing how an instructor of a course in ancient Greek philosophy can teach Greek philosophy in a way that makes its study relevant to how the students in the course live their lives, since this is the most likely way in which its relevance to contemporary life might be realized in practice.

One of the ways in which many instructors of courses in ancient Greek philosophy attempt to make its study relevant to the interests of their students is to teach the course from the perspective of contemporary analytic philosophy.¹ This way to teach the course makes it relevant to students who have a background in contemporary analytic philosophy or wish to pursue a career as a professional philosopher or to seek a historical background to contemporary philosophy.² A more traditional way to make the course relevant is to teach it as

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¹ A good example of this approach is how most instructors discuss Plato's *Sophist* in terms of questions about existential, predicative, or identity senses of "is" and "is not," when in fact Plato does not draw such distinctions. For a detailed account of the misleading character of his approach see my *Plato's Sophist: A Translation with a Detailed Account of its Theses and Arguments* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005).

² Many courses in ancient Greek philosophy taught in research institutions are so closely tied to the secondary literature on the subject that they have little relevance to, or interest for, their students who have no plans to pursue an academic career in philosophy. Such courses tend to become training grounds for specialists in ancient Greek philosophy. In fact, most courses in philosophy taught in

a course in which students are introduced to the theories and arguments of the Greek philosophers that have historical importance. This way of teaching the course is relevant to students interested in the history of philosophy as history, including students of ancient and medieval history. I wish to suggest here a radically different alternative to these two, one that provides students with an opportunity to assimilate into their lives the genuine insights of the Greeks about fundamental philosophical questions about life rather than simply to prepare them for an academic career or give them information about the history of Western philosophy. The study of ancient Greek philosophy, from this third point of view, is a study primarily conducted for the sake of helping students to gain the wisdom that makes meaningful life possible.³ This approach to teaching the course is also relevant to the goal of changing the society in which students live, since significant change in society is likely to occur when its youth is provided with a truly liberating (aka liberal) education of the sort envisioned by Plato's Socrates. This is a course in which students are taught Greek philosophy in a way that inspires them to ask themselves the fundamental philosophical questions of the sort the Greeks asked themselves and to study the different ways in which the Greeks used reason to answer these questions to help them formulate their own answers.

The instructor facilitates this process by introducing students, in the very first class period, to the idea of using their study to create an "inner philosopher," a philosophical mind, which like Socrates, is devoted to self-examination for the purpose of discovering a form of life that makes life worth living.⁴ The instructor introduces the traditional contrast between *mythos* and *logos*, but not only as a way to explain the emergence of rational inquiry in the ancient world. The instructor also explains to students what the *mythos* is in their own case: the conventional story they were told about themselves and their world and accepted before they were capable of using the *logos* or rational discourse to examine and evaluate it. This *mythos* is the unexamined life, a life in which only a semblance of freedom from constraint can be attained, since true

research institutions are in effect taught for the sake of training specialists in different areas of philosophy. The reasons for this development are the subject of another paper.

³ Students, of course, are not evaluated on this basis, but on the basis of their mastery of the theories and arguments presented by the Greeks.

⁴ This approach is based on the idea of Jungian archetypes. The inner philosopher, as an archetype, confronts the inner king, queen, sophist, rhetorician, etc., rather than the students themselves playing the part of the inner philosopher, so that the philosophical quest begins a dialogue between the archetypes that are models of how to live life.

freedom requires self-knowledge.

How might students be encouraged to question their own previously unchallenged assumptions, as the ancient Greek philosophers did, about what is real, what is good, how to achieve what is good in their lives, and how all of this is known? This cannot be done unless the instructor is passionately engaged with questions such as whether or not we truly exist, why we exist in the way we do, what our place is in the world, whether or not we can escape the human condition of birth, sickness, injury, old age and death, etc.⁵ If the instructor takes these questions seriously,⁶ most students will naturally follow suit.⁷ This is the best way to help students assimilate the insights of the Greeks, insights such as that we all have a natural desire to gain knowledge of ourselves and our world⁸ and that the knowledge we desire primarily concerns questions about ourselves and our world the answers to which will show us how to live well.⁹ Only the instructor is in a position to bring to life the questions the Greek philosophers raised and the different answers they gave.¹⁰

Here I will illustrate just a few of the ways in which the instructor of a course in ancient Greek philosophy can make the course more relevant to how students live their lives. After explaining to them that the implicit goal of the course is to study Greek philosophy in order to learn how to use the *logos* to examine the *mythos* and to gain the wisdom that makes life meaningful, the instructor has them read Plato's *Apology*. He or she explains the dialogue not only as a representation of a historical occurrence and/or as Plato's rendition of Socrates' defense of philosophical pursuits, but also as a warning about what

⁵ It may be doubted that the ancient Greeks, for instance, were concerned about escaping the human condition, etc., but this cannot be reasonably doubted in the case of Pythagoras, Empedocles, Plato, and Plotinus. It is even plausible, as I will suggest below, that this was part of Parmenides' motivation for his journey to the goddess, who taught him that the sensible world is not real.

⁶ It is indeed a problem for such a course to find an instructor of this sort, since most instructors of courses in ancient Greek philosophy have not themselves learned how to do this. They were trained as professional philosophers rather than as lovers of wisdom.

⁷ It was the Greeks who taught us that learning is imitation.

⁸ "All human beings by nature desire to know," Aristotle tells us in the first sentence of the *Metaphysics*. His word for "to know" means to know the causes of things, especially the end for the sake of which beings change.

⁹ "The good has been well described as that at which everything aims," Aristotle says in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

¹⁰ Hence, what is said here about what the students need to learn also applies to the instructor. The dissemination of the Socratic pursuit of wisdom, as Plato knew, is by means of a transmission from those already inspired and trained. It cannot be learned simply by reading a book. Hence, it is important to begin a transmission by means of taking courses in ancient Greek philosophy taught in an impassioned matter. Most academic philosophy, unfortunately, is not concerned with such ideas.

might happen to the students' own "inner Socrates" if they actually begin to question their own beliefs and values. Plato is interpreted as implying, in the *Apology*, that his readers, who are the students, are themselves Athens, and that there are citizens within their Athens who cling to the beliefs and values of Athens and are threatened by the activity of the inner philosopher. The *Apology*, in other words, is also taught as a simile for an inner life-and-death struggle that takes place between these invested parts of themselves and their inner philosopher, each appealing to the student, as Athens, to make a decision about whether to put the inner philosopher to death or to risk the death of Athens as the students know it by allowing him to continue his work. The inner philosopher and his opponents make their arguments and it is up to the students to decide whether or not to condemn him or allow him to question the ideas and values in which Athens believes.

The point of presenting this allegorical interpretation of the *Apology* is to help students confront the fact that if they actually allow their inner philosophers to do his work in their own Athens there are others in their Athens who will attempt to have him put him to death by calling upon the fear that the Athens with which they are familiar may perish. Underlying this struggle is the fear students have about change, which is symbolized by the fear of death. The threatened citizens, who uphold the conventional beliefs and values of Athens charge the inner Socrates with false beliefs and values (i.e. the atheism and sophism with which Socrates is charged), claim that he will destroy the city if not banished or put to death. The defenders of the status quo realize that the danger he poses is that the youth in Athens (i. e. the newly emerging part of Athens, the inner student, who may someday rule) are shown how to question the *mythos* that now governs the city and that if the *mythos* is overturned, the city as it now exists will perish.

This interpretation, however, is not merely presented to students. The students themselves discuss the pros and cons of putting their own inner philosophers to death, thereby having them engage their different archetypical selves in a sort of role playing, unleashing fears and doubts the students have about seriously questioning their own beliefs and values and embarking upon a new way of life. The battle is about who will educate the youth of their city, the inner Socrates or those who champion the conventional beliefs and values that have governed the city for so long. At the end of the discussion, the instructor, speaking for the inner philosopher, makes a plea to the students not to put the

inner philosopher to death because they fear change and are attached to their unexamined values and beliefs.¹¹ Although the old Athens may not survive the questioning, the instructor argues, a new Athens may emerge as a new, more reflective and mature human being. He or she may add, as Socrates does in the *Apology*, that it is pointless, in any case, to put their inner philosopher to death now, since another inner philosopher will surely enter their city, calling its beliefs and values into question, if they continue with their present unreflective form of life,¹² which sooner or later crashes on the rocks of meaninglessness.

Having set the stage in this impassioned way, the instructor uses the different philosophical works students study in the course to call attention to the philosophical questions pertinent to how we live our lives and to how the different Greek philosophers attempt to answer them. There are many examples of how to do this, and it is not possible to discuss them all here, in this short paper. For instance, the instructor might easily draw upon parts of Plato's *Phaedrus* or *Philebus*, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Epictetus' *Manual*, Epicurus' letters, Plotinus' *Enneads*, etc., to have them engage in deep reflection about how to live life in a meaningful way. But the relevance of the issues raised in such works is too obvious and uncontroversial for my purpose here, which is to show how even a part of ancient Greek philosophy believed to be unrelated to how to live a good life in the contemporary world is in fact related. So, instead, I will discuss the Greeks' attempt to solve a metaphysical problem whose relevance to how we live our lives, as far as I know, has not been discussed in contemporary courses in ancient Greek philosophy. The full significance of this problem to the lives of students, however, can now be realized, since Western philosophy, like so many other things in this world, is being re-evaluated from a more global perspective. In this case, the new perspective has been made possible by the introduction into the West of Mādhyamika Buddhism.

When the Chinese took over Tibet in 1959, the scholar monks of Tibetan Buddhism began to migrate to the West.¹³ The practical significance of the problem to which I wish to call attention became clear to me when I began to study the Mādhyamika philosophy with these monks. My study, which involved

¹¹ In support of this use of rhetoric see what Plato says about philosophical (vs vulgar) rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*.

¹² This is one form taken by the so-called "mid-life crisis."

¹³ The story of the reception of Buddhism into the West has been told in several books on the subject. See, for instance, Rick Fields' *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, Third Edition, Revised and Updated (Boston & London: Shambhala, 1992).

a study of the Indian philosophical traditions opposed by the Mādhyamikas, revealed that one of the central metaphysical problems with which the Greek philosophers were concerned is not of mere antiquarian interest, but is of great practical importance, and is also one of the central metaphysical problems with which Indian philosophy is concerned. It is the problem of whether or not the world of many changing things we experience is real in the way we assume it is, and if it is not, how it affects our decisions about how to live our lives.

According to the Dalai Lama, who is now the leading exponent in the West of the Mādhyamika tradition of Buddhist thought, we all unnecessarily suffer because we misapprehend ourselves and everything else as real entities. It is possible, he says, to free ourselves from this misapprehension, and so to free ourselves from suffering, by realizing, in deep meditation, that no phenomena possess being by themselves, apart from being apprehended, apart from coming to be from causes and conditions, and apart from the phenomena in dependence upon which they are apprehended. That nothing we experience possesses being by itself, he cautions us, does not mean that nothing possesses any sort of being: it only means that nothing we experience possesses being in the independent way it appears to possess. According to the teachings of this form of Buddhist philosophy, when the mind apprehends its objects, it causes them to appear as if they possess being by themselves. Phenomena do possess being, the Mādhyamikas add, but only in dependence upon being conceived in relation to other things dependently conceived, and for this reason all phenomena are in fact mentally constructed. In this way, they claim, Mādhyamika Buddhism provides us with a middle way view that lies between reificationism, the view that phenomena possess real existence, and nihilism, the view that nothing exists at all. In dependence upon realizing in meditation the truth of this middle way view, they emphasize, we can assume a form of life that is a middle way between a self-destructive egoistic attachment to what we experience and the equally self-destructive rejection of our lives as meaningless. The Mādhyamika way to create lives that are constructive and meaningful is to take responsibility to work not only for our own liberation from suffering, but also for the liberation of all suffering beings, since our capacity to become free depends upon others with whom our lives are interdependent.¹⁴

¹⁴ There is, of course, much more to the Mādhyamika philosophy than what I explain here, but since I want here only to call attention to how its thesis, that we assume ourselves and our world, as they are ordinarily conceived, to exist in a way we do not and it does not, plays an important role in the history

The thesis of the Mādhyamika philosophy that is also taken up in ancient Greece is that sensible changing things do not possess the independent being they appear to us to possess. The suffering that arises from the mind's misapprehension of sensible objects as real entities, i.e. as things in themselves, is explicitly called to our attention by the ancient Greek Sceptics, as has been noted in the literature,¹⁵ and it is implicit in the world of Heraclitus, the Pythagoreans and Parmenides. So when in class the philosophy of the ancient Greek Sceptics is discussed, the full import for life of the mind's misapprehension of sensible objects as real entities, i.e. as things in themselves, is made explicit. Because the instructor will stress that the Greek Sceptics are claiming that the students are causing themselves to suffer, he or she, for instance, (i) will present the ten modes of argument used by the Greek Sceptics to bring themselves to suspend their dogmatic judgments about what appears to them to be real entities as actual practices students themselves can use to relieve their suffering, and (ii) explain how, in spite of suspending judgment, they can, according to the Greek Sceptics, avoid nihilism by living in accord with appearances without assenting to their false appearance of being things in themselves.

Nāgārjuna and the Greek Sceptics use many of the same arguments to support their thesis that what is conceived by the mind does not exist in the way it appears to exist. One of the most basic principles that underlies many of their arguments is that since objects, as apprehended by the mind, appear to it to possess being by themselves, they cannot change or be divided into parts that possess being by themselves, since what has being *by itself* cannot be caused to possess or lose its being and cannot be analyzed into real parts. The paper on which I am typing this sentence, for instance, is experienced by me as existing by itself, yet I also assume, inconsistently, that it changes and can be torn into pieces that also exist by themselves. We deal with the data of experience by creating concepts of things that cause the things conceived to appear to exist by themselves, and we assent to this appearance, and without reflecting on our assent to this appearance, blithely take for granted that the things so apprehended change and can possess real parts. We hide the fact of this

of ancient Greek philosophy, I will ignore these other parts of this philosophy.

¹⁵ One of the most recent and extensive accounts of the similarities between the Greek skeptical philosophy and the Mādhyamika philosophy can be found in Thomas McEvilley's *The Shape of Ancient Thought* (New York: Allworth Press, 2002), pp. 450–90.

inconsistency by the supposition that the objects apprehended persist through change and are divisible into real parts by assuming that they inhere in an underlying subject, i.e. in what Aristotle calls matter or substratum, even though we do not, strictly speaking, perceive this matter when conceiving the object itself.

But if the appearance of things existing by themselves is incompatible with their change and actual divisibility, should we abandon our judgment that they exist by themselves or should we abandon the judgment that they change and are divisible? Heraclitus, Parmenides, the Greek Sceptics and the Mādhyamikas believe that we should abandon our judgments that the objects of sense-perception possess real existence.¹⁶ Although the Greek Sceptics were the first Greeks to make it perfectly clear that the way the mind apprehends its objects causes us to suffer, this view is implicit in the teachings of Heraclitus, to whom their idea, that it cannot be shown that anything sensed can possess a fixed nature of its own by virtue of which it has being, can be traced. By contrast, Parmenides believes that the incompatibility of true being with real change and real divisibility shows that an object apprehended by the mind does not really change and is not divisible into real parts. He assumes that an object of the mind does in fact possess true being and argues that its incompatibility with change and divisibility shows that our judgment, that it changes and that it is divisible into real parts, is false. Plato and Aristotle both attempt to solve these problems, but in radically different ways.

Although in his poem, “On Nature,” Parmenides does not explain how his arguments against a being that changes and is divisible into real parts are relevant to how we are to live our lives, Diogenes Laertius’ report, that he studied with the Pythagoreans, provides a clue. If this report is correct, the upshot of his poem is likely to have been that the goddess who appears to him reveals how he may escape suffering and rebirth through knowledge of the true nature of all things. In relation to this purpose, Parmenides’ argument against the divisibility of being plays an important role in the development of Greek philosophy, giving rise to the infamous “problem of the one and the many,”

¹⁶ There are other important differences, of course, between their views. For instance, the Madhyamikas believe that we can have a special sort of cognition that reveals the way in which the objects of cognition really exist, but the Greek Sceptics do not, and so recommend only that we suspend judgment. That Heraclitus believes that the objects of our perceptions exist apart from being perceived is confirmed by what Plato says about his view in the *Theaetetus*, 151d-61b. Compare what Aristotle says in the *Metaphysics*, Gamma, 4–8.

since it has great significance for how we live our lives. The monism he teaches, which is comparable to that taught in the Advaita Vedanta philosophy in India, has practical ramifications that the instructor can explain. However, because of considerations of the limits of this essay, I will not take up this aspect of Parmenides' contribution to Greek philosophy, except to say that insofar as he claims that this knowledge is the knowledge that all things are one, he is one of the earliest of the Greek philosophers to introduce the major theme of the philosophies of Plato and Plotinus, that we are to escape rebirth in the body and realize our true godlike nature through a knowledge of the One.¹⁷

Here I will focus only on how the instructor can gloss Parmenides' argument, that what possesses being by itself cannot change. He or she can present this argument in the context of the belief that we cause ourselves to suffer because we fail to realize that we misapprehend the world of many changing things as real. Parmenides' argument will not be explained to students, therefore, as it normally is, as an abstract puzzle later philosophers attempt to solve. When it is explained how the Greek pluralists, Empedocles, Anaxagoras and Democritus made attempts to show that behind the world that appears to consist of changing beings there can be found a world of many unchanging beings whose combinations and separations create the false appearance of changing beings,¹⁸ they are attempting to provide a foundation for the belief that the world of sense, in spite of its changes, possesses a borrowed reality. In this way they sought to avoid the apparently nihilistic conclusion that the sensible changing world possesses no being at all. Their attempts to provide some reality for the sensible changing world, however, were crude and incomplete. It was left to Plato and Aristotle to provide subtler accounts of the appearance of the world containing changing beings.

Plato agrees with Parmenides that since sensible things change, they cannot possess being by their own nature. In order to explain why we attribute being to sensible changing things he distinguishes things that change from the forms of

¹⁷ To Parmenides' account of the One, however, Plato and Plotinus objected that the One itself transcends being. There are now a number of scholars who recognize that Parmenides and other early Greeks introduced a mystical tradition of this sort. See, for instance, the inspired account by Peter Kingsley, in *Reality* (Inverness, California: The Golden Sufi Center Publishing, 2003), and for a more academic treatment, see Thomas McEvilley's *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, already mentioned in footnote 12.

¹⁸ They sidestepped Parmenides' argument for the thesis, that being itself cannot be divided into many beings, by supposing that the world of experience arises not from one unchanging being, but from a number of such beings combining and separating.

which they partake and which themselves possess being by their own natures. He says that things that change are not beings by their own natures, but only insofar as they partake of forms, which are the objects of the mind that do in fact possess being by their own natures. He claims that we apprehend changing things to possess being by themselves because we project the mind's recollections of the forms onto the changing things that partake of them, thereby causing changing things to appear to us to possess being by themselves. The cognition in which a form is confused with a changing thing Plato calls "opinion" (*doxa*), which is by convention true if the changing thing partakes of the form and is by convention false if it only appears to partake of the form.¹⁹ In the *Phaedo* he makes it clear that we suffer rebirth because we believe that the sensible world has being by itself, which belief seems to be supported by the physical pleasure and pain to which it gives rise.²⁰ The full implication of this view, as Plotinus makes abundantly clear, is that the root cause of our fall into the sensible changing world is not only the belief that the sensible changing world is reality, but also that we, as the sensible beings we ordinarily conceive ourselves to be, are real entities. They teach us that we are attached to our world and to our material self, even though we are, in fact, immaterial beings who belong to the world of the forms, from which place we in fact exercise our powers of moving matter in order to create moving images of the true reality. The Platonic path by which we escape the sensible changing world of suffering and realize our god-like nature is beautifully explained by Plotinus, who often urges his readers to follow this path.²¹

Aristotle argues that a being can in fact change because it is composed of both form and matter, since its matter persisting through its change and a new form is acquired or lost in the change. He claims that Parmenides mistakenly thought that a being cannot change because he lacked the conception of matter, which in union with form, the object of the mind, comprises a being that can change.²² He acknowledges the truth of the claim that a form cannot change,

¹⁹ This is the account of opinion that explains Plato's account of it in the *Republic*, V (475d-480a), where true opinion is called opinion (*doxa*) and false opinion is called ignorance (*agnoia*), and his account in the *Republic* VI (509d-511e), where true opinion is called belief (*pistis*) and false opinion is called "imagination" (*eikasia*).

²⁰ See the *Phaedo*, 80c-84b. Compare *Theaetetus*, 176a-177b, and *Phaedrus*, 243e-257b.

²¹ For instance, see *Enneads*, I.3, V.I.

²² Aristotle learned of Parmenides' error from Plato, who in the *Sophist* argued that the non-being Parmenides said could not be is otherness than a being to which reference is also being made rather than the absence of being. See J. Duerlinger's *Plato's Sophist: A Translation with a Detailed Account of its Theses*

and claims that even though this is so, the form exists in a matter that persists through the composite being's change of form. The implication is that there is no reason to suppose, as Parmenides and Plato do, that there is an incompatibility between real being and change and that we cause ourselves to suffer by the supposition that the world of sensible changing things possesses being by itself.

However, later in the course the instructor can draw upon the philosophies of the Greek Skeptics and Plotinus to challenge Aristotle's "solution" to the problem. That problem, the Greek Skeptics and Plotinus agree, arises because the mind conceives its object as possessing being *by itself*, and what possesses being by itself cannot change. What Aristotle calls matter, as he himself admits, does not appear to the mind when the mind conceives a form. Hence, on what basis does Aristotle claim that he has solved the problem? He thinks that the existence of matter must be posited in order to explain how change is possible, and that it is *obvious* that change exists.²³ But when he says that it is obvious that change exists, what exactly does he think is obvious? Although it is obvious that change exists if it is assumed that the object of the mind is a form that exists in matter, it is not obvious that the form exists in matter. Aristotle has no argument for this assumption other than that it makes change possible; nor does he address the implied claim that we suffer because the mind apprehends sensible changing things as possessing being by themselves.

There is, of course, much more to be said about this problem, whose upshot is that we cause ourselves to suffer by judging sensible changing objects to possess being by themselves. The instructor, of course, should also call attention to the circumstance, that since the Greek Skeptics do not accept Plato's doctrines of the immortality of the soul and the separate world of forms, their conception of the goal of philosophy is radically different from that of Plato. They make its goal simply to live our lives free of the suffering caused by our dogmatic judgments. Such lives are possible, they argue, because we can follow the conventions of society without assenting, as others do, to the false appearance of mentally created objects that exist by themselves.

At the end of the course the instructor, after telling this philosophical story and others, presents what he takes to be (i) the inner philosopher's credo, which is that the unexamined life is not worth living, that philosophy is the pursuit of the wisdom that makes life worth living, and that this wisdom is the

and Arguments, second edition. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009).

²³ See *Physics*, I.

self-knowledge that is the means to the achievement of the human good, and (ii) the lessons the study of Greek philosophy that are learned by the philosophical mind. The enumeration of the lessons learned varies according to the works of the Greeks the students happen to have studied in the course. The very last point the instructor makes, of course, is a warning to the students not to kill off their inner Socrates before he accomplishes his goal of transforming their Athens into a city that can flourish in the contemporary world, and to this end, they are encouraged to continue their study of ancient Greek philosophy.

Bibliography

The most important work on the ancient Greek conception of philosophy pursued for the sake of making life worth living are the following:

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