

Formulating One's Philosophy of Life as a Learning Exercise

Mary Beth Ingham, CSJ
Loyola Marymount University

In his recent research, Pierre Hadot calls our attention to the original vocation of the philosopher: not as scholar but as sage. Hadot attempts to recapture the early understanding of the study of philosophy as an entry into a *mode de vie*, a way of life richly satisfying and personally rewarding. The challenge for us today, he claims, is to rediscover the unity between two different visions of philosophy: philosophy as scientific discourse and philosophy as way of spiritual enlightenment. As scientific discourse, philosophy cannot exist as a reality in and for itself. It is only the expression of the experience and reflection of the philosopher. As a way of spiritual enlightenment, philosophy is closely linked to the discourse within which it is expressed. (*Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* pp. 19-21). For our students today, philosophy is neither scientific nor a way of life. For them, it is either a tiresome activity of word-haggling or a discussion which never settles questions to anyone's satisfaction. In the contemporary atmosphere of Post-Modernism, such a perspective engenders either cynicism or frustration. Hardly ever does it promote the sort of humility before the truth which can be the first step of the philosophical journey. Even less often does it promote in the student the conviction that they do, indeed, have moral stars by which they can navigate in life.

In my ten years of university teaching, I have noticed an increase in student energy and attention when we deal with issues of personal authenticity, the development of the real self and the question of the afterlife. Clearly, our students today are narcissistic, but they also demonstrate an eagerness to engage in philosophy as a "spiritual exercise." Over the past eight years I have tried to develop an introductory course which capitalizes on the current student profile and which re-presents philosophy to the students in its original vocation: as guide from the world of confusion and deception to the world of truth. The writing assignment is the centerpiece for the course and all reading and discussion are designed to create an intellectual atmosphere within which the students can consider, develop and defend their own philosophy of life. The argument for their philosophy of life is developed over the entire semester. Students submit the argument in two stages, as described below.

The first stage is written during the first half of the semester, where we read Plato's *Gorgias*, *Apology* and *Phaedo*. In these works, we discuss the important question of "What is the best life for a person to live" (*Gorgias*), the nature of a life which is examined (*Apology*) and the qualities of a good argument in defense of one's position (*Phaedo*).

Consistently, I work to make the connection between the discourse proper to philosophy and the intimate link to personal aspirations. The second stage of the paper brings out the practical aspects of their philosophy. Here we discuss the philosophy of Stoicism (Seneca) and the Christian perspective (Augustine). Finally, we conclude with a consideration of the nature of evil and its impact upon human life and the choice for a life that is meaningful in spite of personal tragedy (Frankl).

Without fail, this is an assignment which transforms the student. At various times in the semester, students stop by to tell me of their "breakthrough" moments, which hardly ever occur at the same pace. At the end of the semester, they are able to discuss the value of their "theory" for anyone. Several students continue to stop by to tell me, long after the class is over, how their life is different because of the assignment. It is the most difficult and most rewarding experience they have ever had. One student recently remarked, "I always thought philosophy was about systems and ideologies. I never realized it was about making the turn." By giving the students the opportunity to make the "internal turn," the assignment has shown them the spiritual world to which they belong.

Philosophy 160 Paper assignment - Fall 1997

The assignment for this semester is to develop a clear statement of your own philosophy of life. This paper will be submitted in 2 stages.

Preliminary stage: During the first two weeks of the semester, I will ask you to write out your tentative philosophy of life or an explanation of your goal in life. This will be the basis for your writing assignment this term. This preliminary paper will not be graded and is meant as an opportunity for you to get some thoughts on paper. It should be no longer than 2-3 pages, but should represent your best thinking at this moment, prior to any formal study of philosophy. Due Thursday, September 4.

Stage 1: due Tuesday, October 14:

The first paper presents an argument for your philosophy of life. In this paper, you will

- 1) present your goal/philosophy of life;
- 2) clarify any assumptions which are the basis for your position;
- 3) offer three reasons why your position is a sound one;
- 4) raise two possible objections against your own argument and
- 5) respond to the objections.

This paper will be judged on clarity and precision of presentation, soundness of argument and upon your ability to respond to possible objections. It should be approximately 3-5 pages in length, typed double-space.

Stage 2: due Tuesday, November 25:

The second stage of this paper develops the practical aspects of your philosophy of life. Here, you will enhance your argument from the first paper, addressing specifically practical issues. Here you will draw out implications of your position and answer the following questions:

- 1) What if everyone held your position? What kind of society or world would there be?
- 2) What will you be like in 10 years, if you continue to follow this philosophy of life?

3) Are there any values related to your position which have come to light in the course of writing this paper?

Finally, you will conclude the paper with a critique and evaluation of your entire position, now that the course is reaching its conclusion. Has your argument been a strong one? Can you identify its weakpoint(s)? How would you rate yourself as a philosopher? This second paper is 6-10 pages in length, but it is in fact a rewrite and expansion of the first paper.

As part of the final exam, you will be asked to reflect upon your own philosophy as it relates to the issues of evil, suffering and death. This will be one essay on the final and will be the fruit of the entire semester's reflection on the meaning of life.