

Working Papers in Philosophy:  
Registers of Philosophy

Szerkesztők: Kovács Gábor  
Paár Tamás

2018/2

# Is Living An Art That Can Be Taught?

Alexander Nehamas

*Princeton University  
Academy of Athens*



---

**Institute of Philosophy**  
Research Centre for the Humanities  
Hungarian Academy of Sciences

---

## About the author

**Alexander Nehamas** is Carpenter Professor in the Humanities at Princeton University and holds the Chair of the History of Philosophy in the Academy of Athens. He is the author of *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, *Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Socrates*, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*, and *On Friendship*.

## Abstract

The essay is an attempt to recapture at least part of the conception of philosophy, characteristic of ancient Greek and Roman authors, as a way of life. It is based on a specific, individualist, interpretation of Plato's Socratic dialogues and traces their influence on several modern authors, particularly Montaigne and Nietzsche. The model for such a conception of philosophy depends on our understanding of the arts, which welcome variation and diversity and lack a manner of comparing works to an idea that is common to all, without lapsing into relativism. In just that way, the individualist conception of philosophy as an art of living refuses to accept one kind of life as the best kind of life for every human being but is capable of distinguishing between better and worse lives. But although philosophy might be able to show us how to live, it is incapable to show us how to live well: that is something we can only learn, and do, on our own.

## **Alexander Nehamas: Is Living an Art That Can Be Taught?<sup>1</sup>**

The language and rhetoric of morality are on the verge of taking over the full range of human relations. Collectively, nations and other groups commonly justify their policies, to which moral notions are commonly inapplicable, on moral grounds – consider, for example, what many Germans have been saying about the Greeks and what many Greeks have been saying about the Germans or the recent rhetoric of the President of the United States. But moral discourse limits the range of accommodations and compromises that are crucial to politics and allows each side in any debate to represent themselves as morally superior to their opponents, who react to them, in turn, as evil hypocrites and think of themselves as the only supporters of truth and goodness. Individually, perhaps more in the United States but gradually in other countries as well, even personal interactions are becoming subject to moral description and evaluation. The rise of “professional ethics” in politics, medicine, business, law and university life is one among many sad indications of our inability to envisage standards of proper behavior toward others unless they are enforced by means of explicit rules and detailed sanctions. The oxymoronic concept of “ethics laws,” which address not only what is legal within an institution or profession but also what counts as decent or proper, and sometimes simply what accords with etiquette and what doesn’t, is now part of everyday life. Many believe that rules and principles should govern even the most intimate personal relations – relations among family members, lovers and friends – and believe that the only values that determine whether a life is worth living fall within the domain of morality: one obvious example is the willingness to criticize, denounce, and even refuse to fund the arts when (as the arts often should) they offend one’s particular moral sensibilities. And more recent developments, for example, the demand that great artists also be (morally) good people, which has resulted in the firing of major artists from their positions, have added a new, and very complicated dimension, to this already complex issue.

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the conference “Registers of Philosophy IV.,” May 26, 2018, Budapest, organized by the Institute of Philosophy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

The moral ideal of impartiality and the equal treatment of everyone is a great accomplishment of modernity, and the very idea of human rights would never have secured its (so far very imperfect) hold on our imagination and practices without the sense that something common and essential to our species ties our own well-being to that of everyone else. But that attitude can't be appropriate to the whole range of human relationships. The values of morality are the values of our commonalities; they are grounded in our similarities to one another – similarities that are actual or at least hoped for. But they are not the only values there are. There are also values that are grounded in our differences from one another, which depend on, and aspire to, independence and individuality – values that prize one's own, particular way of doing things. We must acknowledge that many factors on which we depend for understanding and evaluating ourselves and our lives are not moral. Which is not to say that they are immoral instead.

Contemporary philosophy, too, has focused primarily on moral values and general rules, neglecting the vast range of non-moral values that permeate our lives. And the abstractness of its substantive concerns is reflected in the impersonality of much philosophical writing, which is modeled on the scientific paper and the legal brief – forms suited to detached investigation, aiming to suppress the personality of their author and allow the facts to speak, so to speak, for themselves. For that reason, authors who write – not by accident – in styles that differ radically from philosophy's currently canonical styles, thinkers like Montaigne, Pascal, Emerson, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Foucault are often excluded from philosophy's domain. (Plato, as always, has remained an equivocal exception: in substance, perhaps, with the former, in style, certainly, with the latter).

But this is not the only self-image philosophy has ever had of itself. In ancient Greece and Rome philosophy was considered, and considered itself, not only as a theoretical or investigative discipline but also as a discipline for living: from Socrates to Boethius, from Plato to Plotinus, philosophy was primarily a τέχνη τοῦ βίου – an art of living. Naturally, the ancient philosophers, like their present-day descendants, engaged in the investigation of abstract issues, produced complicated arguments, and espoused complex theories; but that was only part of what qualified them as philosophers. Unlike, say, merchants or engineers, philosophers were supposed to live according to the values that were consonant with their theoretical views. The purpose of

their investigations was not merely to acquire knowledge but, more important, to live their life in harmony with the knowledge they acquired.

Such a conception of philosophy originates in part in Socrates as Plato portrays him in his aporetic works – aporetic because in them Socrates, although convinced that “the unexamined life” is not fit for human beings, never succeeds in convincing others to join him in the examination and pursuit of virtue and wisdom. When people, as they always do, reject his exhortation to continue their discussion with him and choose to go their own way, Socrates can only stand helplessly by – words fail him: he has no arguments that ensure that others must agree that, as he says in his *Apology* (29d-e) nothing is more important than “the care of the self” – neither money nor fame nor honor. He has a universalist ideal – the life of virtue should be everyone’s pursuit – but not a universalist method – he has no means that might prove that others are logically obliged to follow his lead.

In the *Republic*, however, Plato articulates a radically different and deeply controversial view. He still believes, like Socrates, that the life of virtue is the ideal human life. But he now thinks that virtue can be pursued only as part of a more general pursuit, the pursuit of the world’s very structure, the way it can be known, the education that can lead to that knowledge, and the organization of the state that can make such a pursuit possible – a pursuit he is the first to name “philosophy.” And he also thinks that philosophy has resources that are enough to convince everyone that the life philosophy leads to is the best type of life to which anyone can ever aspire. His conception, that is, is universalist in both content and method. And although Plato’s ancient successors disagreed deeply about what exactly the right philosophy and the correct understanding of virtue are, they were at one with him in thinking that the philosophic life is the only path to virtue and happiness.

But a different vision of Socrates’ conception has emerged in the work of several modern thinkers – a conception that differs from ancient philosophy because it is universalist in neither content nor method and from modern philosophy because it is not simply theoretical. These authors’ approach is *individualist*: they believe that philosophy provides them with their own ideal life but concede that life takes many forms, none of which is ideal for everyone. They hold

that no particular set of values, moral or any other kind, determines how life is to be lived and refuse for that reason to articulate in general terms what a good life should be.

Many believe that such a position may be, and actually is, simply a form of relativism: my way of life is good for me, your way is good for you, and there's no point in discussing the matter any further. But philosophical individualism is not relativistic. It doesn't claim that any life is as good as any other – only that no single human life is best for everybody. In that regard, philosophical individualism is *aestheticist*: its model is art.

Why art? Because, to begin with, art is pluralistic and yet does not yield to relativism. There is a contrast here between the concerns of art and those of any activity whose goal is to establish a factual claim, whether in everyday or in scientific contexts. In the latter case, our purpose is to find the one right answer to our question, reach consensus, and move on to new problems, new projects. Some scientists and philosophers even believe that there may come a day when we will have a complete, ideal scientific theory of the world – a “theory of everything” – that will be able to explain every worldly phenomenon and result in universal agreement: The goal here is convergence and unity.

It is not that way with art. We can't even begin to imagine such a thing as an ideal painting that will produce a perfect representation of the world and make all other representations obsolete: the idea is ludicrous. On the contrary, what we prize here is the opportunity to envisage a new way of dealing with the world in line and color, words, or musical notes, the creation of a new movement, a new genre, a new medium that adds to our existing repertory without for that reason reducing the value of everything that precedes it and making it obsolete. In art, we welcome the multiplication of possibility, the invention of a new manner of doing things: here, the goal is creative disagreement and plurality.

In the sciences, discovery and innovation are supposed to bring us *closer* to the truth. In the arts, there is nothing to get *closer* to. What Aristotle said about virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1060b28-35) is true of the sciences: there are many ways of being wrong but only one way of being right. In the arts, by contrast, there are many ways of being right, and discovering yet another is a great accomplishment. And so also with life: there are many ways of living well,

and establishing yet another, expanding the realm of human possibility, is a source of joy and a reason for admiration.

But why is this not relativism? Isn't it just to say that any form of life is as good as any other, that there are no standards that allow us to judge which among them is better and which is worse than others?

It isn't. Although it may be silly to ask whether Raphael, Rembrandt, or Manet is the "greatest painter," it is not at all silly to claim that Rembrandt is a better painter than Franz Hals, who is a better painter than Jacob van Loo, and that all three are vastly superior to the many millions of people, professional and amateur, who have tried their hand at painting during the course of human history, including the thousands who devote themselves to painting portraits of Elvis Presley on velvet. For all these pictures, and many others besides, are art – but like most art, by far its greatest portion, its overwhelming majority, they are also terrible. And we have no trouble saying so. We might sometimes disagree about our evaluations and orderings but we do establish orderings: We often disagree – but we sometimes come to an agreement.

Let me quote from a marvelous passage from Nietzsche entitled "One thing is needful":

To "give style" to one's character – a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye [...] In the end, when the work is finished, it becomes evident how the constraint of a single taste governed everything large and small. Whether this taste was good or bad is less important than one might suppose, if only it was a single taste!<sup>2</sup>

Style plays the same role in both art and life. An artist's style is like a person's character: It unifies the works of the one and the actions of the other and at the same time distinguishes them from the behavior of the rest of the world. It is a difficult thing to develop: It requires, Nie-

---

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Random House, 1974, 232, sec. 290.

Nietzsche writes in the same passage, “long practice and daily work” but those who acquire it “enjoy their finest gaiety in such constraint and perfection under a law of their own.”<sup>3</sup>

Three things are important here. First, style is “a constraint.” It involves rules and practices we must learn to subject ourselves to and which limit the number of choices we can make at any particular point. In limiting them, though, it makes choice possible in the first place because the ability to choose anything is in the final analysis identical with the ability to choose nothing. It is for that reason that what some consider “the tyranny of [its] *capricious* laws” is, according to Nietzsche, responsible “for all there is or has been on earth of freedom, subtlety, boldness, dance, and masterly sureness, whether in thought itself or in government, or in rhetoric and persuasion, in art just as in ethics.”<sup>4</sup> It is a constraint that is a compulsion, it is not imposed from the outside; it is, on the contrary, a prerequisite of freedom:

Every artist knows how far from any feeling of letting himself go his “most natural” state is – the free ordering, placing, disposing, giving form at the moment of “inspiration” – and how strictly and subtly he obeys thousandfold laws precisely then, laws that precisely on account of their hardness and determination defy all formulation through concepts.<sup>5</sup>

Style is not a compulsion because to have a style is to have internalized its rules in such a way that the choices it presents to us are not dictated from a source that is external to us: They are simply our own particular way of doing things. Instead of limiting our power to act on our own, style makes action possible.

The second thing to notice is that these rules “defy all formulation by concepts,” which is another way of saying that, as the passage on style says, that they are “laws of [one’s] own.” But what kind of laws are these laws that apply only to those who have created them? Why can’t they be formulated through concepts? In part, because they are not rules that can be stated independ-

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Random House, 1968, 290, sec. 188.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



ently. We can't hold them steady, so to speak, and decide whether to follow them or not, as we can do, say, with legal statutes or the laws of grammar. The rules of style determine how we see things in the first place, they structure our very awareness of our place in the world and the various possibilities of action the world presents to us without having to be explicitly stated. They are like the rules that, according to Aristotle, allow the virtuous to *perceive* directly the right kind of action in every situation without having to consider consciously whether to apply them or not.

Picasso once spent four months (December 1954–April 1955) making fifteen paintings, countless drawings, and several lithographs inspired by Delacroix's two paintings of *The Algerian Women*. Part of his project was to satisfy both sight and touch, to show what pure sight shows us – one side of a person's surface, as in the figure of the left – and what touch allows us to feel – different parts of the body at the same time, as in the figure on the right, who seems to be lying both on its stomach and on its back. That may have been Picasso's aim from the very beginning (who knows?) but the question whether it is something that could be done at all did not have an answer until he actually did it, until the picture seemed right to him and allowed him to leave it along and go on to other things.

This brings me to the third point to notice in Nietzsche's comment on style. It, too, is connected to the expression "a law of their own." To a great extent, success in this sort of enterprise is measured by the nature of the difference between one's works or actions and everyone else's, by the extent to which they manifest a *single* unified and distinguishing attitude and approach. Style and character individuate: they constitute one's own way of doing things, one's own way of living. Art and life mirror each other once again:

Artists seem to have more sensitive noses in these matters, knowing only too well that precisely when they no longer do something 'voluntarily' but do everything of necessity, the feeling of freedom, subtlety, full power, of creative placing, disposing, and forming reaches its peak – in short, that necessity and "freedom of will" become one in them.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 329-330, sec. 213.

“We should learn from artists,” Nietzsche also writes, “while being wiser than they are in other matters. For with them this subtle power usually comes to an end where art ends and life begins; but we want to be the poets of our life.”<sup>7</sup> And that, for him, is the same as to want to “become those we are – human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves.”<sup>8</sup> But to be new, unique, incomparable is, for Nietzsche, to be *an individual*.

Such a goal is impossible to achieve, in art or in the rest of life, by following instructions that are generally available, rules that are not to some extent or other of our own making and apply, in their totality, only to us. The reason is that an individual is just someone who differs significantly from the rest of the world. The difference must be significant because everyone is already an individual in a trivial sense.<sup>9</sup> Since no two people ever have the same history, no two people can ever be, strictly speaking, identical – but that is no accomplishment: everybody is in that sense “unique.” What deserves notice or praise is not difference in its own right but being newly, importantly, strikingly, admirably, unexpectedly (also disturbingly, dangerously, perhaps even barbarically) different from the rest of the world: someone who for one reason or another stands out, in comparison to whom the rest of the world is simply background.

For better or worse, though, it is impossible to specify what counts as new, important, admirable, or barbaric in general terms. There are no rules or laws, that is, that establish how one can become an individual. Submission to such explicit rules is submission to rules that may have led others to individuality. But to follow such rules, far from giving laws to ourselves, is to obey the laws set down by others and produce, at best, an imitation of another. But imitation destroys individuality. Such an undertaking is self-undermining.

How to make a painting, how to write a short story, how to compose a sonata, even how to go about life in general – all that can be taught in general terms and depends on rules that establish what constitutes a recognizable work of art or social role. But what cannot be so taught are “the capricious rules” that, according to Nietzsche, produce something “for whose sake it is

---

<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 240, sec. 299.

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 265, sec. 335.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

worth while to live on earth; for example, virtue, art, music, dance, reason, spirituality.”<sup>10</sup> These rules, however, always go one step beyond where the rules expressed and followed by other can lead us. Uniqueness and individuality require breaking some of these rules and replacing them with new ones, establishing a new direction that we couldn’t possibly have predicted beforehand: innovation necessarily transcends prediction. On its own, however, neither breaking nor inventing rules can affect the quality of what is produced: the intervention must be, as we say, creative, original, or justified in some other way. But creativity, originality, and justification can no more be specified in general terms than significance, unexpectedness, or barbarity. “Paint a landscape” explains what to do in general terms but, if followed, may result in an aesthetic atrocity; “Paint a beautiful landscape” doesn’t explain anything, neither where I am to go nor how to get there: it is at best an inspirational slogan, not sound advice. Painting a landscape is a matter of choice; painting a beautiful landscape, though, is a matter of ability.

Suppose, then, that the basic principles of painting I learned in art school are not enough for me: I want to do better. So, I ask my teacher how to paint a great picture and my teacher – after laughing at me – holds up a late Rembrandt self-portrait: “That’s how you do it,” he says. So, I am to paint like Rembrandt. How to go about it? If I take my goal to be to produce a painting that is just *like* Rembrandt’s self-portrait, I will certainly fail to produce a great picture: I will only make a copy – something that is, by definition, neither new nor valuable. Success requires that I aim to paint a picture that is *as good as* Rembrandt’s. I might still have to copy his self-portrait but my goal now would not be to reproduce his picture but to learn about his mode of painting from it, and then go on to learn from other works of his, as well as from the works of other painters. Having gradually incorporated (or internalized) what I learn from them, I might – if I am talented, work hard enough, and have considerable luck – produce something worthwhile. But if I do, my work, whatever else it may be, will also have to be significantly *different* from my models’ work in ways that neither I nor anyone else could have imagined until I brought them into being. My work must express my own features and abilities just as Rembrandt’s expresses features and abilities that are distinctly his. In a paradox that is, in fact, only apparent, it

---

<sup>10</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 291, sec. 188.

must differ significantly from Rembrandt's work if it is to be similar to it. That may have been what Montaigne had in mind when he described himself as a person "who learn[s] better by contrast than by example, and by flight rather than by pursuit."<sup>11</sup> Only those works that are importantly *different* from Rembrandt's can survive comparison with his because only they are, in the relevant sense, *like* his: one has to become different from one's models in order to imitate their *accomplishment* and produce, therefore, something that is significant and admirable in its own right. But what will make my work significant and admirable is exactly what my teacher – or anyone else – can't ever tell me. To paint like Rembrandt, when that refers to an accomplishment and not an imitation, is precisely *not* to paint like him. Nietzsche was aware of the paradox involved here: "*Imitators* – A: 'What? You want no imitators?' B: 'I do not want people to imitate my example; I wish that everybody would fashion his own example, as *I* do.' A: 'So?'"<sup>12</sup> One can be taught how to paint portraits, write novels or make shoes – but not how to write good novels, paint significant portraits, or make excellent shoes. Such things, as Socrates intimates (though not in regard to shoes), may perhaps be learned but they certainly cannot be taught. Art, including the art of living, can be taught; good art, including the art of living, cannot.

Philosophical individualism is incapable of giving general guidelines for how one should live, admits that this is so, and does not consider it a shortcoming. Montaigne, more than anyone else, makes that clear when he writes that "I . . . wish to make a show only of what is my own, and of what is naturally my own" – his own, that is, though it is based on his having "made a bunch of other people's flowers, having furnished nothing of my own but the thread to tie them."<sup>13</sup> Philosophers like Montaigne and Nietzsche provide examples of admirable lives, but in order to imitate their example, just as in the arts, we must live a life that is distinctly our own. That is why I called them aestheticist.

These philosophers stand out not only for the significance, depth, or even the truth of their ideas (which is, naturally, the subject of continuing dispute) but also for the personalities

---

<sup>11</sup> Michel de Montaigne, "Of the art of discussion," in *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, trans. by Donald M. Frame. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1958, 703.

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 216-217, sec. 255.

<sup>13</sup> Michel de Montaigne, "Of physiognomy," in *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, 808.

that emerge through their works. The portrait of “Michel” that emerges from Montaigne’s *Essays* matters as much to philosophy as his skepticism, his stoicism, and his stunning humanness toward the “primitives” his contemporaries tried to “civilize” – and only succeeded in exterminating. It matters not only what Montaigne believes, but *who Michel is*. And who Michel is matters although it is neither desirable nor even possible for anyone else to be like him – a fact he knows and celebrates: “What I write here is not my teaching, but my study; it is not a lesson for others, but for me.”<sup>14</sup> Such a project, however, could not succeed unless the writings in which these unusual characters are expressed are themselves distinct and unusual in style, marking in that way their authors’ differences from the more widely shared styles and approaches of theoretical philosophy as well as from the styles of one another. But what sort of philosophy *is* it that aims – perhaps primarily – at providing instances of admirable lives that are not and cannot be models for others to follow? What can it hope to accomplish? What is its *point*? Here, too, the parallel with the arts is helpful.

As in the arts we can admire a work without having to use a single work or artist as our standard of perfection, so also in life. And as in the arts every expansion of human possibility, every new manner of writing or representation is a source of joy, so also in philosophy.

George Eliot was right: “The growing good of the world is dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”<sup>15</sup> We owe deep respect to these nameless people: but the fact remains that they *are* nameless and our respect and gratitude toward them are collective and impersonal; it takes nothing short of the imagination of a George Eliot to depict the life of someone who might have belonged among them – and who, perhaps paradoxically, remains no longer among them. If, however, we admire – and we do – features that make some people different from one another; if we value – and we do – not only the bonds that tie us together, but also the features that make us stand apart; if we honor – and we do – the exceptional figures whom we commemorate in monuments either of ours or of their own devis-

---

<sup>14</sup> Michel de Montaigne, “Of practice,” in *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, 272.

<sup>15</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch*. New York: Penguin, 2003, 838.

ing (“I have erected a monument more durable than bronze,” Horace said of his poetry – *Odes*, III. 30) – then philosophy, if we continue to think of it merely as abstract reflection and general description and persist in limiting its domain to the values of morality, is doomed to pass by the sense and the value of life as surely as Odysseus’ companions, their ears sealed with wax, passed by the Sirens.

A question is bound to come up at this point: Does this approach to philosophy *constitute* an admirable life or does it merely *describe* one? Did Nietzsche actually live the kind of life he praises in his works (how else could it be shown that such a life is possible?) or is the character who emerges through his work merely a will-o’-the-wisp? The problem is serious because, since no one else can live the life our philosophers praise, we can resolve it only by asking whether a philosopher’s own life belongs to the mode of life described in his works. And here a huge gap may seem to emerge between philosophy and reality. Nietzsche, for example, led a life that many consider deeply depressing – modest, unfulfilled, plagued by illness, loneliness, and lack of recognition, quite unlike the life and personality he praises in his works. When he praises power and adventure, when he urges us to “live dangerously, and when in *Ecce Homo* (itself not a haphazard title) he characterizes himself as “dynamite” or “a destiny,” many of his readers hear nothing but the ravings of a madman. I myself once thought that “in engaging with his works, we are not engaging with the miserable little man who wrote them but with the philosopher who emerges through them, the magnificent character these texts constitute and manifest.”<sup>16</sup>

That was a serious mistake. The view that Nietzsche’s life was terrible, like the distinction between “the miserable little man” and “the magnificent philosopher” – the “life” on the one hand and “the work” on the other – depends on taking “the life” to be everything that belongs to someone’s biography except for the work, as if the work is a less important part of life than the bills, the meals and casual conversations, the illnesses and disappointments that are the inevitable accompaniments of every human life. It is an even worse mistake when one is, like Nietzsche and Montaigne, so devoted to the work that he subordinates the rest of his life to it. No, the work is an integral part of a philosopher’s life: you cannot think of Nietzsche’s life without including

---

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985, 234.

everything he wrote within it. But, now, does a life that includes not only Nietzsche's difficulties, diseases, pains, and disappointments but also his works and their significance for our world – is such a life quite as terrible as it may have seemed at first? Didn't Nietzsche garner all his strengths and marshal every accident of circumstance, even his weaknesses, in the service of his most important task – creating a body of work that declares that a life that garners every strength and marshals every accident of circumstance, even one's weaknesses, in the service of one's most important task is the most admirable life of all? Isn't such a life, far from being terrible, not only admirable but also enviable?

Another – the last – aesthetic dimension of philosophical individualism depends on its insistence that extra-moral values are crucial to the quality of human life. As I wrote at the beginning of this essay, the values of morality rest on our commonalities and tend toward universality and impartiality. But there also values that rest on our differences from one another and are neither impartial nor universal. These values, most clearly found within the arts, aspire to distinction and individuality, and however deeply we admire a particular manifestation of them, we are under no obligation to accept them as our own. As E.M. Forster once wrote, "If I ever have to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friends, I hope I'll have the guts to betray my country."<sup>17</sup> Just as, although I love Cavafy and Proust, I don't believe that everyone else should love them as well, so I can admire Nietzsche's mode of life without wanting either myself or anyone else to live like him. We have neither an *obligation* nor a *duty* (the fundamental notions of morality) to live like those who lived well, just as no one has the obligation to become an artist (and, certainly, not a great one). If a life of morality is what you want, no one is going to stop you; if you have no interest at all in living well, that, too, is something no one can force you to do. The existence of these two kinds of value, however, makes it possible for them to clash. And when they do, when beauty and virtue conflict, I am not at all certain that virtue – the values of morality – must always take precedence.

Perhaps, then, the effort to establish an original and individual approach to life has several features in common with the arts. But what about it makes distinctly a philosophical project?

---

<sup>17</sup> E.M. Forster, "What I Believe" in *Two Cheers for Democracy*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1966, 68.

Is it limited to figures like Socrates, Montaigne, and Nietzsche or are Aeschylus, Rembrandt, and Proust also engaged in it? How, in fact, is a philosophical life different from every other activity – not just artistic but also scientific, political, military, philanthropic, or even commercial – that, when practiced successfully, might result in an admirable life? The answer is that a philosophic life revolves around two questions – What constitutes a good life? and How can we engage in it? – and that the effort to answer them is itself an indispensable part of one’s way of living.

When Socrates said that the question that mattered to him was how one should live, he introduced a conception of how one *could* live, a way of life whose goal – to live well – was to be reached through an examination of that very goal – the good life – and only through a continual examination of its nature. It is primarily the reflective and self-referential character of Socrates’ project – the mutual interpenetration of thought and action – that gives it its specifically philosophical character. To be sure, once his original questions raised others, in the areas we have come to know as “metaphysics,” “epistemology” or “ethics,” which are considered independently philosophical, we are often tempted to think that simply asking such questions is enough to make a life philosophical. But it is not: a life devoted to asking philosophical questions is not necessarily a philosophical life – not unless these questions lead to a life that is guided by them and by the answers one may give them.

Someone can always teach us what questions have been already asked and what answers they have received and knowing these things is necessary if one is to move beyond them. But no one can teach us – though the philosophers of the art of living may *show* us – how to incorporate them in our life and how, sometimes, we can do so in an admirable manner.

