University of Windsor
Scholarship at UWindsor

The Canadian Society for Study of Practical Ethics / Société Canadienne Pour L'étude De L'éthique Appliquée — SCEEA

CSSPE/SCEEA Vol. 1, 2017: Practical Ethics: Issues and Perspectives

Ask the philosopher: practical advice and self-help in antiquity and today

Dimitrios Dentsoras
University of Manitoba, dentsora@cc.umanitoba.ca

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.uwindsor.ca/csspe

Part of the Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons

Dentsoras, Dimitrios, "Ask the philosopher: practical advice and self-help in antiquity and today" (2017). *The Canadian Society for Study of Practical Ethics / Société Canadienne Pour L'étude De L'éthique Appliquée — SCEEA*. 3.
http://scholar.uwindsor.ca/csspe/vol1/1/3

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Philosophy at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Canadian Society for Study of Practical Ethics / Société Canadienne Pour L'étude De L'éthique Appliquée — SCEEA by an authorized administrator of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact scholarship@uwindsor.ca.

Section 2: Paper 3

Ask the philosopher: practical advice and self-help in antiquity and today

Dimitrios Dentsoras

University of Manitoba

Introduction

Philosophers do not have much of a reputation for being practical people. Neither did they have any such reputation in the days of philosophy's infancy, if we are to believe Plato's anecdote from the life of Thales, the "first of the philosophers." According to it, Thales once fell in a well while walking and gazing at the stars, earning the ridicule of a slave girl standing nearby.[1] Plato also tells us that, in his own days, most people thought of philosophers as good-for-nothings who could not take care of their own lives, let alone the lives of others.[2] This is to a great extent a consequence of the multitude's lack of philosophical understanding. But philosophers seem to have done quite a bit to earn popular disdain, by advancing the most outlandish views, and by focusing on the most impractical (and hopelessly irresolvable) questions.

Yet, we also find out that ancient kings and emperors often brought philosophers with them while campaigning, and discussed with them a wide array of professional and very personal matters in times of peace.[3] In fact, some of our finest surviving literature on moral philosophy can be found in treatises and letters, such as those of Epictetus and Seneca, which aimed at providing philosophical advice to well-educated philosophical laymen who found themselves in the midst of a personal crisis, usually caused by the loss of a beloved person, exile, or a

professional failure. This practical and personal aspect of philosophy, which had all but disappeared in the period since Marcus Aurelius, has been enjoying a survival in the form of philosophical practice, a discipline aiming at using philosophical reasoning in order to help people overcome a wide range of personal issues, from minor anxieties to the truly disruptive emotional outbreaks. Nevertheless, the majority of academic philosophical works, even those discussing so-called 'practical ethics,' still approach their subject from a detached theoretical standpoint, often not really expecting the reader to act out their recommendation – which is, after all, a theoretical conclusion. And even in cases where there is some concrete position on an existing moral or practical issue, the advice is most of the times general, not really addressing the specific needs of a specific person. This detached and generalizing feature of philosophy is what contemporary philosophical practitioners try to amend, modeling their methods and advice on the personalized practice of psychotherapy and counselling.

This paper examines the genre of practical philosophical treatises in antiquity, contrasting it with contemporary literature in philosophical practice. Its main focus concerns the role of the philosopher as a guide to practical everyday concerns and the relationship between theoretical and practical ethics. An important question for ancient works on practical philosophy (and to a lesser extent their contemporary equivalents) has to do with whether, and to what extent, adopting the philosopher's advice also requires an adoption of that person's broader philosophical framework (Stoicism, Neoplatonism, Skepticism, etc.). Philosophers tend to put heavy emphasis on the existence of a broader philosophical theory that coheres logically with the practical advice a philosopher may offer. This emphasis is clearly reduced in contemporary works on practical philosophy. I discuss some evident advantages of the ancient philosophical

approach in connecting theoretical principles with practical advice, and conclude with some thoughts on how philosophers might write popular works on practical philosophy nowadays.

Practical philosophy in antiquity

Our ancient sources uniformly credit Socrates for being the first person to shift philosophical inquiry from contemplation of the physical world and its origin towards human nature and action. In this way, Socrates introduced the questions that would become central in moral philosophy. What is the ultimate purpose of human action? What kinds of actions are most profitable from a personal standpoint, and which for society as a whole? What are the benefits of morality? In asking these and other similar questions, Socrates did not merely aim at constructing a moral theory. Rather, as he proclaims in Plato's *Apology*, the aim was to change the way in which his fellow Athenian citizens led their lives.[4] Moreover, if are to believe some of Socrates' followers, such as the historian and adventurer Xenophon, the scope of Socrates' moral and practical interests were rather broad, ranging well beyond what a modern philosopher would consider ethics, to include advice about hygiene, household management, etc.[5] But there was a unique element to Socrates' approach to practical questions, which set him apart from sophists, orators, and politicians, rendering his advice and admonitions distinctly philosophical. This uniqueness of Socrates' practical advice has to do with the primacy of rational argument. Rather than employing rhetorical strategies or appealing to established moral and religious beliefs, Socrates seems intent on offering practical advice by employing rational argument and little else.

This strategy has two important consequences. On the one hand, it deepens the level of analysis to expose a bedrock of basic metaphysical, epistemological, and psychological

principles. Without taking any social moral conventions for granted, the moral and practical views of Socrates, and his future followers, had to be grounded on a foundational philosophical theory. Socrates, of course, never completed such a foundational work. But he did provide a number of insights, which led to the second consequence of his philosophical practical advice. This is the *radical* nature of the moral views and corresponding advice. Persistently, up until his final demise, Socrates confronted the Athenian populace, from the most illustrious to the most humble, and implored them to abandon their pursuit of money and fame in favour of a life of moral goodness and knowledge, primarily of their own selves.

Socrates' example, both as a philosopher and as a social critic and moralist, looms large in the philosophical schools that dominated the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Stoics, Epicureans, Platonists, and Pyrrhonian Skeptics engaged in a series of heated moral debates, presenting and defending a wide range of ethical views and practical advice. But they also shared some common conceptions regarding the purpose of philosophy and its connection to life. One such common conception had to do with philosophy's goal. Rather than a merely theoretical enterprise, philosophy was seen by the Hellenistic schools as a "craft of life," analogous to other crafts, such as medicine or carpentry, whose goal was to bring about the happy life, just as medicine and carpentry aim at restoring health or making a table.

On the other hand, many of the Hellenistic schools saw philosophy as an intellectual discipline that demanded a long and challenging education.[6] Rather than being open to the public, as Socrates' impromptu discussions were, philosophy became an "academic" discipline under the Hellenistic schools. The promise of the schools was that a thorough philosophical training would not only provide one with some sort of practical knowledge, but would also prepare one for living a virtuous and fruitful – in other words, happy – life. In order for this to be

achieved, one had to undergo instruction on a wide spectrum of philosophical questions, logical, metaphysical, psychological, etc.[7] In the course of this instruction, the foundational tenets of each school were presented and defended. These included doctrines in physics (e.g. Stoic and Epicurean materialism), theology (e.g. the notion of Stoic divine providence), or psychology (e.g. the Platonic tripartition of the soul). In addition, membership in a Hellenistic school also required living a specified kind of life, with strict rules about practical matters, such as dietary habits, (e.g. Epicurean vegetarianism), or exercises aiming at eliminating emotions (in the case of the Stoics), or even beliefs (in the case of the Skeptics).[8]

How did the Hellenistic philosophical schools relate to non-philosophers? Did they have any practical impact on their lives? Judging from the structure and operation of the philosophical schools, there seems to have been little concern with non-philosophers, or desire for making an impact on their lives. With only some exceptions, such as the public lectures of the Stoics, or the occasional member of the Cynics making an outrageous display of his anti-conventional morals in the streets of Athens, the Hellenistic philosophical schools were rather secluded. These seem to be two main reasons for this stark contrast between the extensive practical guidance for members of a school and the exclusion from public engagement. The first is the schools' insistence on the wholesale adoption of their metaphysical, epistemological and moral doctrines. One could not be a Stoic with respect to moral theory without also being a metaphysical materialist and an epistemological dogmatist, for example. Related to this was the fact that study in the Hellenistic schools was a lengthy and rigorous process that did not offer much of a professional or social reward.

To this, one had to add the fact that many of the Hellenistic schools also required adherence to strict practical and moral rules. The schools promised a happy life to their students,

but what they aimed at was *their particular* conception of happiness, and not at the happiness that the young men who entered the schools may have had in mind originally (professional success, public recognition, etc.). This is most clearly evident in cases such as Stoicism, which required the complete rejection of all emotions and proclaimed that one is condemned to live an utterly unhappy life until the final stage of *apatheia* can be reached.[9] A similar all-or-nothing strategy was also adopted by the Skeptics, who proclaimed that a happy state of imperturbance (*ataraxia*) could only follow complete suspension of judgment.

Given the evidently exclusive character of the philosophical schools and their stark rejection of popular morality and practises, it is rather surprising that philosophers enjoyed a high repute through the Hellenistic period and all the way up to the Roman imperial times. While philosophers remained politically insignificant,[10] and were often treated as intellectual curiosities whose moral views should be taken with reservation,[11] their presence in their higher social circles was considered an indication of, if not a requirement for, intellectual refinement. Part of philosophy's popularity, no doubt, was due to the genius of Plato, Aristotle, and other popular philosophers whose books adorned the shelves of bookstores in Athens.[12] But a second, and perhaps more important, role was played by a gradual yet noticeable shift from the intellectually complex and almost impracticable doctrines of the Hellenistic schools towards a more common-sense version of philosophical theories that offered achievable, and often personal, advice for real-life situations.

The popularization of moral philosophy during the Roman period coincides to some extent with the rise of philosophical dilettantism and eclecticism. Rather than committing to a single philosophical school's doctrines (including its metaphysical, epistemological, and moral tenets), well-educated Romans with a soft-spot for philosophical discourse felt free to construct

their own philosophical theories by combining the doctrines from each philosophical school that seemed most acceptable.[13] Often, the more intellectually demanding parts of philosophical theories were left out, both because of their obscurity and also (and, perhaps, more importantly) because they did not have any clear application to practical questions that the philosophical dilettantes were mostly concerned with.

Similarly, one notices a diluting of the practical demands that different philosophical theories make. Rather than insisting on the complete eradication of emotion that the Stoic Chrysippus demanded,[14] later Stoics suggest a mere "lessening" of emotions, while still allowing for their existence. Similarly, the strict lifestyle of Epicureans was replaced with practical advice that focused more on enjoying pleasures than enduring pains with equanimity. Often, the arguments for this "light" practical advice were based on non-philosophical practical concerns, rather than logical coherence with basic metaphysical or moral beliefs. For example, Chrysippus prohibited mourning for the death of a beloved person on the basis of the fact that death is not an evil but rather something indifferent (which itself was a claim that followed from Stoic metaphysical and theological views). Later writers, on the other hand, accept that some mourning is acceptable and even appropriate, but point to the fact that it should never get out of control, to the extent of disrupting one's life and psychological well-being.[15]

A cursory look at the themes that dominate the moral treatises of the Roman period demonstrates a concern with practical issues that concern everyone, and not only philosophers. How to deal with death, both of those around me and – eventually – of myself? How can I combat anxiety and excessive ambition? How can I make friends and be liked by others? How can I make my life happier and more content? These are, of course, questions that earlier philosophers had also discussed. But in Roman times, their treatment takes a decisively personal

tone. This is noticeable in the increased use of the moral epistle, which often addresses a personal misfortune, such as the death of a beloved person.[16] Moreover, one notices an expanding use of rhetorical techniques that aim at helping non-philosophically trained people cope with all sorts of practical concerns, from the quotidian to the extraordinary.[17] The success of the phenomenon of philosophical advice, in the Roman period, seems to have been considerable, leading to the expansion of the practice from philosophers, such as Seneca, to philosophically trained professionals, such as the orator Cicero, the historian Plutarch, or the doctors Galen and Sextus Empiricus.

Given the never-ending popular need for advice and desire for help with personal difficulties, one may wonder what accounts for the popularity of practical *philosophy*, rather than some other kind of practical advice in antiquity. What weight did being a philosopher add in writing works on practical ethics? What did it bring to the table? Some answers to this question are given by Cicero, himself not a professional philosopher, but someone who was concerned with practical questions throughout his life and decided to devote the last part of his life to the study of philosophy.[18] As Cicero notes, it is certainly not the fact that philosophers possess the truth about moral and practical matters that sets them apart. After all, the obvious difference of opinion among philosophers should be a clear indication that they do not possess a factual expertise the way that doctors and builders do. On the other hand, the moral and practical advice of philosophers, varied as it may be, is superior to that of others, for a number of reasons. The most evident is that philosophers have a comprehensive view of different moral opinions, unlike perhaps other specialists, and have devoted a long time to thinking seriously about moral and practical questions. Moreover, philosophers, and philosophers alone, validate their practical advice by placing it within a general moral framework, rather than taking for granted moral

beliefs from a variety of sources (laws and customs, popular beliefs, etc.), as other professionals do (clearly so, in the case of politicians and orators).

The philosophical practical advice that Cicero and other thinkers of the Roman period offered was often tailored to the needs of an elite that was too busy or indolent to engage in lengthy metaphysical debates. In some cases the philosophical practical advice was accompanied by short summaries of the relevant philosophical positions, perhaps even a "suggested readings" list. Cicero, for example, supplements his practical advice and words of encouragement about dealing with the fear of death in his *Tusculan disputations* by presenting a survey of philosophical opinions on the nature of the soul, presumably with the thought that knowing what the soul is would give us a better idea on what the proper response to death is. But he does not insist on any particular psychological theory. Philosophical eclecticism, after all, would allow one to pick philosophical theories from any school, in order to come up with practical advice that often amounted to little more than common sense, combined with a watered-down version of some broad philosophical doctrines.

Despite its popularity during the Roman period, philosophical practical advice was eventually replaced by a wholly new sort of practical guidance: Christianity. With the spread of the new faith, philosophy lost its claim to being "medicine of the soul"[19] to a new set of soul-doctors, namely Christian priests and saints. In many respects, the practical advice of the Christian priests did not differ much from that of pagan philosophical precursors. But Christianity offered, in addition, what philosophical advice had gradually renounced in the past centuries, namely a greater narrative and a foundational theory of the world. The Christian narrative did not possess, at least on the surface, the demanding complexity and sophistication of the Hellenistic philosophical theories, making it much more intelligible. On this narrative of the

Creation, the Incarnation, and the Kingdom of Heaven (and all the episodes in between), Christianity built a nexus of practical advice and rules covering all aspects of human life.

Practical advice and self-help today

An ocean of technological, social, and intellectual developments separates us from the Roman aristocrats seeking philosophical advice, or from simple people of the Middle Ages asking their local priest for spiritual and practical guidance in dealing with the hardships of life. Yet very little has changed regarding the need for personal advice and guidance itself. If anything, the need seems ever-increasing, given the burgeonng, multibillion market for professional practical advice, from psychological counselling to self-help books. No longer the realm of religious guidance, our anxieties, challenges, insecurities, and overall bafflement about the meaning of it all, are open to a wide range of professionals and self-proclaimed experts, who are willing to offer their advice, and make a living from it.

While a large part of the treatment of personal hardships and psychological conditions occurs within the regulated confines of modern-day "medicine of the soul"—psychotherapy--and its related disciplines, an ever-increasing number of people are seeking new, alternative, methods for dealing with life's challenges, from the minor to the disruptive. This is testified by a ballooning market for self-help books, lectures, and workshops.[20] In the case of self-improvement books, two groups of authors dominate the field currently. One group is comprised of best-selling psychologists, who have adapted their academic research and made its main features available to (relatively well-educated) non-experts.[21] Their works on popular science are mostly concerned with defending a particular psychological theory concerning the causes of anxieties and happiness.[22] Some of these expert-written books present methods for dealing with one's own difficulties (although they suggest that professional personal advice and help should

be sought, also). Others are more theoretical and avoid providing any concrete advice, focusing mostly on presenting a particular science-illuminated worldview.

The second, and more successful in terms of readership, group of self-improvement authors is a heterogeneous collection of self-proclaimed experts and advisers, often people with a business and sales professional background, as well as spiritual gurus and advisers.[23] Their books focus, as expected, on concrete practical advice about how to deal with a large array of personal challenges – challenges that, to some extent, everyone faces in their everyday life. These popular self-help books display significant variation in sophistication and concreteness. But some general features appear almost universally, defining to some extent the self-help book genre in the case of non-scientifically expert authors.

One almost universal feature of such books is the frequent use of real-life examples, parallel to narrations of the authors' personal experiences. The authors often advertise the fact that they are not ivy tower academics, and that their books are the product of actually having gone through the situations they describe (usually, an unhappy life that is turned around), or coming in contact with people that had such experiences.[24] This strategy was also often employed by moral philosophers of the Roman period. But, while in the case of the Roman philosophers most examples are taken from the lives of illustrious public men, contemporary self-help authors mostly use examples of common people, with the obvious intention of convincing their readers that they could be just like the men and women who managed to turn their lives around.[25] At the same time, self-help writers intermittently refer to examples of extremely successful people – primarily themselves – with the comment that the readers can also enjoy a similar success.[26]

In general, it would be fair to say that most of the advice offered in popular self-help books is really not much more than common sense. In fact, it is often presented precisely as being simple, rather than profound. But, when appropriately implemented, this common-sense advice is supposed to have impressive and even miraculous effects.[27] Through repetitive observance of a few rules and basic ideas, usually in the form of oft-repeated slogans, the authors of self-help books promise that we will be able to face our anxieties and fears, feel better about ourselves, and be more successful in life.[28]

At this point, one may ask what counts as being successful in life. The answer, usually given implicitly, is that success is defined by whatever one considers important. If money, love, and friends are what one wants, this is what following the author's advice will help them acquire. If it is a quiet and peaceful life, the same advice can lead to this, too. After all, the advice is not about what one *should* want, but about *how* one could get what one happens to want. In this respect, contemporary self-help books differ significantly from much of the practical advice offered by philosophers in antiquity. Rather than adopting a *radical* moral position and prompting people to re-evaluate what they consider important in life, as Socrates did, contemporary self-help gurus merely propose ways in which people can get whatever they happen to want or make themselves feel better about what they happen to have. This, undoubtedly, seems rather selfish, and unabashedly so. But it does not differ much from the approach of psychotherapy, which aims primarily at making people feel better, rather than making them better people.

Contemporary philosophical practice and counselling

To the two aforementioned categories of self-help books (those by psychologists and those by businessmen and gurus), one can add a third. This is the category of self-help books by philosophers. These are not theoretical books on practical ethics, but books modeled after psychotherapy, and aiming at providing guidance with respect to a variety of psychological challenges, from dealing with anxieties, to becoming happy, to finding meaning in one's life.[29] The authors of these books refer to the discipline as philosophical practice or philosophical counselling.[30] As philosophical practitioners often note, the idea that philosophy could, and perhaps should, help people deal with everyday challenges, and provide meaning and direction in their lives, is almost as old as philosophy itself. And, in fact, quite a few recent works on philosophical practice have sought inspiration from ancient philosophers, such as Socrates, Aristotle, or the Stoics.[31] But how do contemporary works on philosophical practice compare to ancient works on practical ethics?

A look at the most popular books on philosophical practice, such as Lou Marinoff's *Plato, Not Prozac*, reveals more similarities with contemporary self-improvement books than with the practical ethics of Roman writers, with the practical moral treatises of the Hellenistic schools remaining a distant relative. For the most part, works in philosophical practice defend no particular philosophical theory, but rather paste different ideas from very different theories, in a manner similar to the eclecticism of some Roman thinkers and amateur philosophers. Sometimes, works in philosophical practice provide short summaries of diverse philosophical positions, but make little out of the metaphysical and epistemological foundations of each theory.[32] In most cases, the philosophical foundations are left out altogether, taking historical moral views as parting points, without providing any account of how they arose. Isolated quotes, rather than structured philosophical theories, is what the reader primarily receives.[33]

With respect to the philosophical advice offered, one notices a clear contrast between the radicalism of ancient practical ethics and contemporary philosophical counselling. While ancient philosophers focused on showing their readers that the goals they have set in life are gravely misdirected and could not be justified by philosophical reflection, contemporary philosophical counsellors do not challenge the general primary goals of their audience; rather, they aim at mitigating the effects that perceived personal failures have on the psychological well-being of its members. There are good practical reasons for this. It is hard to convince someone that money is completely unimportant and that the death of a beloved person should not be seen as a cause of unhappiness. It is much easier to simply try to make one's readers feel less obsessed with amassing wealth or less depressed by personal misfortune, while admitting these are significant concerns. But, for the moral philosophers of antiquity, practical concerns took second place to portraying philosophical truth and constructing a rationally coherent system of beliefs. Socrates' self-destructive insistence on this principle can only serve as a reminder to this.

What can one say about the nature of the advice one can find in contemporary works on philosophical practice, then? To a large extent, philosophical practice works seem to be a blend of folk psychology and common sense, often reminiscent of other, non-philosophical self-improvement books.[34] The general idea they promote is that rational reflection on one's life and a its level-headed re-evaluation can help with overcoming one's problems. Philosophical practice is primarily forward-looking, offering advice on how to plan for and deal with the future, rather than overcoming past events. Rationally calculating our actions, philosophical practitioners maintain, has positive consequences. This seems an obvious common-sense point that anyone should accept. But, what role does philosophy play in all this? Well, it depends on how one understands philosophy, the practitioners could reply. For some philosophical practitioners,

philosophy seems to be a rather loose repository of ideas, pieces of wisdom that one can use in order to construct one's own "philosophy" and make one's life easier. The thread that holds it all together is critical reasoning, and this is what philosophy presumably supplies.

Of course, this is not how academic philosophers understand philosophy. For most of them, philosophy is a discipline that aims at telling us something about the world, and not only an exercise in critical thinking that can be used as a tool for sorting out personal problems. Surely, the notion of philosophy as critical self-reflection figures prominently in ancient times – the call for common sense might not be that different from what Socrates tried to do when he urged Athenians to know themselves. But Socrates also had a broad theory in mind, which contained radical thoughts such as "it is better to suffer injustice than commit it." One does not seem much of this is in contemporary works on philosophical practice.

In conclusion, one could say that, despite the evident need for philosophical advice that reaches beyond academia and has an effect on the lives of common people, philosophical counselling still has a way to go towards becoming an established and effective discipline. The place of philosophical practice is clearly not as an antagonist to the scientific psychotherapeutic establishment.[35] Its primary goal, rather, should be to demonstrate the need for a specifically *philosophical* rather than psychoanalytic or merely common sense approach to practical challenges. But what is a particularly philosophical approach? In answering this question, I believe we could take a lesson from the development of practical ethics in antiquity. The most important lesson, I think, is the need for a general philosophical theory, including basic metaphysical, epistemological, and moral doctrines that serve as the philosophical foundation of the proposed practical advice.[36] Moreover, philosophical practice should provide some guidance with respect to the goals that one *should* have in life. Some of these general goals may well be

quite different from what is usually considered desirable. But this is in no way a discouraging or negative feature of philosophical practical advice. The spread of philosophy into the Roman upper classes in antiquity and the extraordinary appeal and influence of Christianity over the centuries only show that people need a narrative and a general worldview, as much as they need concrete guidance with respect to life's daily challenges. Philosophical practitioners, and philosophers in general, could, and should, provide both.

Endnotes

---

[1] Plato, *Theaetetus* 174a. Aristotle paints a more complimentary portrait when narrating an anecdote of Thales' entrepreneurial abilities in *Politics* 1259a.
[2] The image has been immortalized by Aristophanes in his comedy *The Clouds*, with Socrates playing the role of the practically inept philosopher.
[3] On this, see Elizabeth Rawson, "Roman Rulers and the Philosophic Adviser." In *Philosophia Togata: Essays on Philosophy and Roman Society,* M. Griffin and J. Barnes, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).
[4] Aristotle proclaims a similar goal for his *Nicomachean Ethics*, at 1103b: "Our present inquiry does not aim, as our others do, at knowledge; for the purpose of our examination is not to know what virtue is, but to become good, since otherwise the inquiry would be of no use to us."
[5] See, for example, Xenophon's Socratic dialogue *Oeconomicus* (*On household management*). A similar breadth can, of course, be seen in the works of Aristotle.
[6] Not all the philosophical schools of the Hellenistic period were like this, however. Some, such as the Cynics, actually denounced all formal instruction. The Epicureans were also infamous for focusing almost exclusively on ethics, and only cursorily dealing with the other two main divisions of philosophy, logic and physics.
[7] Cf. the rigorous philosophical training that Plato requires from the future rulers of the state in the *Republic*.
[8] Some of these practices, such as the adoption of poverty by the Cynics (on this, see W. D. Desmond, *The Greek Praise of Poverty: Origins of Ancient Cynicism* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006)), or fasting by the Epicureans, also became Christian practices, at a later stage. For a revealing treatment of the influence that the Stoic theory of emotions and the related practices had on Christian thought and practice, see also Richard Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind: from Stoic agitation to Christian temptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
[9] On Stoic *apatheia*, and the way one can progress towards it, see Margaret R. Graver, *Stoicism and Emotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
[10] The relative political insignificance of philosophers had only a few exceptions. After Plato's presumed failed attempt to establish a rule by philosophers in Sicily, philosophers remained

distanced from political matters in Greece. Some philosophers occupied somewhat important positions in the Roman imperial court (for example, Augustus' adviser and Stoic philosopher Arius Didymus), culminating with the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius.

[11] An example of such a response by Roman citizens can be seen in their reception of the 155 B.C.E. Athenian delegation of philosophers, invited to showcase the Athenian philosophical schools.

[12] While our surviving works of Aristotle, the so-called "esoteric" works (commonly assumed to be lecture notes from Aristotle's instruction at the Lyceum) are rather demanding and not particularly eloquent – certainly no material for a general audience – his published work intended for public circulation (the so-called "exoteric" works, of which little survives) was, apparently, much more approachable and stylistically polished. (Cicero, who had read the exoteric works, describes Aristotle's prose as "rivers of gold" in *Ac. Pr*. 38.119.) Contrary to Aristotle's lost exoteric works, Plato's complete published works survive to our day. Of course, it would be hard to determine how popular Plato, Aristotle, and other philosopher were in antiquity (we certainly know that Plato and Aristotle were not the only popular philosophers, or even the most popular ones). But it is clear that there was a public demand for philosophical works.

[13] On eclecticism in ancient philosophy, see John Dillon and Anthony A. Long, *The Question of "Eclecticism": Studies in Later Greek Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

[14] Chrysippus was particularly concerned with emotions and the attitude one should have towards them, writing four books about them, one of which, according to Galen's *De locis affectis* 8.138, dealt with their therapy. On Chrysippus' work *On emotions* and the claim that emotions would not be mitigated but rather eradicated, see Hans von Arnim, *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1964), vol. 3, pp. 108-133.

[15] See, for example, Epictetus, *Encheiridion* 16, who advises us to sympathise with those who mourn and even mourn ourselves, for as long as this does not let the sorrow "within oneself" get out of control. Also, for a stoic-leaning account of one's proper attitude towards the emotions, which nevertheless insists on the fact that they might be useful and should not be completely eradicated, see Cicero, *Tusculan disputations* books III and IV.

[16] For examples of the use of the epistle by Seneca, see Brad Inwood's commentary in *Seneca: Selected Philosophical Letters* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2007).

[17] For a detailed account of such strategies in the case of the historian and philosopher Plutarch, but also parallels with other philosophers, see Lieve van Hoof, *Plutarch's Practical Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010).

[18] See Cicero's praise of philosophy in the opening paragraphs of each of his *Tusculan disputations.*

[19] On philosophy as medicine and therapy, see Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) and Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[20] It is hard to calculate the size of the self-improvement market. A recent study by Marketdata Enterprises calculates it to eleven billion dollars, noting the potential for significant further increase.

[21] Such works include, indicatively, best-sellers such as Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of*

Optimal Experience (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), or David D. Burns, *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999).

[22] See for example, Csikszentmihalyi's influential "Flow" theory.

[23] Such works include, indicatively, best-sellers such as Ken Blanchard, *One Minute Manager* (New York: Penguin USA, 1985), Tony Robbins, *Unlimited Power* (New York: Free Press 1986), Stephen Covey, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), and Dale Carnegie, *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

[24] See, characteristically the long appendix of people that narrate their experiences in Carnegie, *How to Stop Worrying*.

[25] Contrast this with saints, who Christianity has used for centuries as exemplars. Noble though the altruism of saints may be, most people believe that they could never imitate them. In such a case, being told that they should act like an extremely heroic or altruistic person will not have the desired effect; people will just give up, thinking they cannot be like their ideal.

[26] The sporadic mention of famous people and their strategies for success is supplemented by the frequent use of quotations from them (without much discussion of their context), which are usually presented as corroboration to the author's theory (even if their original context is completely irrelevant).

[27] Examples of such practically superficial advice abound. See Robbins, *Unlimited Power*, p. 29: "If you want to achieve success, all you need to do is find a way to model those who have already succeeded." This is followed by a caveat, which almost negates the previous advice: "My goal, my outcome for you, is not just that you master the patterns I'm describing here. What you need to do is develop your own patterns, your own strategies."

[28] For the most part, the advice offered by best-selling self-help books is rather general, although the authors repeatedly criticise any cookie-cutter advice (compare the case of dieting: every dietician would claim that no diet is for everyone, while maintaining that theirs is the best for most). More personalized advice is often advertised as available directly by the author, of course, at a high cost.

[29] Some of the most popular titles include, indicatively, Lou Marinoff's *Plato, Not Prozac: Applying Philosophy to Everyday Problems* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), Elliot D. Cohen's *What Would Aristotle Do? Self-Control through the Power of Reason* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003), and Peter Raabe's *Philosophical Counseling: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000).

[30] As the discipline's name indicates, part of it is devoted to actual one-on-one counselling, as in the case of psychotherapy. I will not discuss this aspect of the discipline, although it is intimately linked to the philosophical practice books.

[31] See Christopher Phillips' *Six Questions of Socrates: A Modern-Day Journey of Discovery* (New York: Norton, 2004), Elliot D. Cohen's *What Would Aristotle Do?*, and Donald Robertson's *The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT): Stoic philosophy as Rational and Cognitive Psychotherapy* (London: Karnak, 2010).

[32] This is clearly the case in Marinoff, *Plato, Not Prozac*, where the philosophical summaries seem to be included in order to demonstrate the philosophical credentials of the author, rather than to ground some general and coherent moral view.

[33] There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. Robertson, *Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy*, for example, provides a rather extensive and well-rounded account of the basic

principles of Stoicism, relating them to the contemporary practice of cognitive-behavioural therapy. The work, though, is rather academic in its nature and has more value as a clear history of ideas than a self-improvement work.

[34] A characteristic example of this is Marinoff's five-step "PEACE process": identify the Problem, take stock of your Emotions, Analyze your options, Contemplate your entire situation and then reach Equilibrium. This seems to be little more than common sense, something that anyone could offer as advice and not something with a clear connection to any philosophical theory.

[35] By the admission of philosophical practitioners, as well as academic philosophers, philosophical practice has been beleaguered by the tendency of some practitioners to view it as an alternative to or, even worse, an antagonist to psychotherapy. On the related debates, see the thought-provoking article, "The Socratic Shrink", by Daniel Duane in the March 21, 2004 edition of *The New York Times*. Recent developments in the philosophical counselling community only exacerbated the debate on the relationship between philosophical practice and psychotherapy.

[36] In this respect, works in philosophical applied ethics seem to fare better, since they are usually based on a foundational theory. See for example, Peter Singer's works on practical ethics, which are based on Utilitarianism.