

A Guidebook for Philosophical Life



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This loving book, *A Guidebook for Philosophical Life*, is written for those with ears to hear. It seeks to provide a path to—as well as a radiant vision of—a good and beautiful life.

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1. Genre

A book that is written for the general public is made to seem as if it were shot straight out of a canon. It is presumed that some figure commonly dubbed the 'general reader' will pick up the book, roll it between his thumbs, and make some very good sense of it, as is his wont. The modern book seems made to be ported, tucked into a shoulder bag, and, later on, placed atop the bookshelf like some trophy or relic or fetish. Done, we say. By the time we have finished reading the modern book, however, we rarely feel changed, never converted to a new way of being, though we may have gathered up a few more scraps of information, a few more trinkets and bobs on a 'subject of considerable interest.'

Strange to say, the ancient philosophy book was never intended to be widely circulated. Rather, it was an 'esoteric' creature filled with 'esoteric' songs. Indeed, these were books written, like living dialogues, like love letters, in the spirit of edification. To begin with, they were not truly books—not finished documents, not self-enclosed records, not total systems of thought or dogmatic tomes—but rather lectures or dialogues set down, often by pupils, on a particular occasion to be shared with and passed onto fellow pupils. Accordingly, they were written words springing from a particular set of exchanges with a particular set of aims. Second, they were addressed firstly and largely to one's philosophical friends. Written in the

ethos of friendship, they could only be read, truly and humbly and wholeheartedly, by friends—by those already committed to this philosophical way of life. Third, they were intended to effect self-transformation, a fundamental change in one's self-understanding, the aim being more to 'form' the pupil's soul than to 'inform' her about the nature of reality. In short, a book was addressed to these friends on this particular occasion for these reasons with this aim. When the philosopher wrote, he thought of you, to you, with you in mind.

The genre of the written work—the Socratic dialogue, the metaphysical poem, the letter of counsel, the tragic drama, and so on—becomes one especially helpful key for understanding the purport of the philosopher's written words. On this score, my philosophical guide Pierre Hadot has written that 'the meaning of an assertion must be interpreted as a function of the literary genre chosen by the author, and of the context in which this assertion is inscribed.' Deracinating a work from its lifeworld, therefore, is rather like transplanting a delicate flower from its native soil: both are acts of defilement, both the work of violence.

This loving book, *A Guidebook for Philosophical Life*, is written *only* for those with ears to hear. It is thereby intended to serve as a guide to old conversation partners and new and also as a way of introducing one to the other. As an introduction to philosophical life, it seeks to give shape and understanding to a set of shared philosophical questions; to show us how to carry on and inquire with and alongside each other; to point us, if only by means of signposts, mile markers, and pathmarks, to the philosophical life we long to lead together.

But in what sense can it be said that this little book is a *guidebook*? In a figurative sense, most surely. A guidebook of a town, a mountain, or a country typically alerts the novice to points of attraction, provides maps for navigating the region, and sheds light on the nature of what is to be seen, experienced, and valued. A guidebook *for philosophical life*, however, cannot hope to be so literal-minded or straightforward in its approach. It is difficult to imagine what a philosophical mountain would look like, let alone feel like. Instead, a philosophical guidebook must give us some dim, emerging vision of a way of being, some intimation of this flourishing way of living. And the question would undoubtedly be, 'Do you see yourself *in this*?'

Do you see yourself in philosophy? By my lights, the philosophical life just is the search for the most excellent ways of being in the world. And if 'the most excellent ways of being in the world' can be glossed, in a word, as 'radiance,' then it follows that

Philosophy is the search for radiance.

Whatever else it turns out to be, radiance surely is generosity exhibited with grace. This book, accordingly, is a gift: it is written out of love; it owes much to the thoughts of those who are around me and to those who have come before me; and it is offered, again and again, to those with ears to hear. Offered with hands folding into a poem:

Water acts
an unexpected joy
a pail filling and unfilling:

so we come to be.