FROM SOCRATES TO FOUCAULT: THE PROBLEM OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL LIFE

James Miller

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In the winter of 1984, Michel Foucault devoted his last series of lectures at the Collège de France to the topic of *parrhesia*, or truth-telling in classical antiquity. Contemplating possible antecedents for the unusual character of his own approach to the truth, Foucault examined in turn the life of Socrates, and the far more colourful life of Diogenes the Cynic, legendary for living in a tub, masturbating in the marketplace, carrying a lit lamp in broad daylight, and telling anybody who was curious that 'I am looking for a man.'

Anecdotes like this once played a central role in philosophy and its cultural transmission. To be a philosopher had entailed living one's life in a certain way, and embodying in practice a certain style of thought – no matter how scandalous the implications. Still, as Foucault well knew, the lore surrounding Greek sages like Diogenes has, in our own day, rarely been taken seriously. The arguments found in Plato's dialogues are routinely parsed in philosophy departments, while questions about how Socrates lived and died are more often left in the shadows. As Karl Jaspers once put it, 'If philosophy is "doctrine", [then] Socrates is not a philosopher.'[1]

1. Karl Jaspers, *Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus*, trans. Ralph Manheim, New York 1962, p7.

For his part, Foucault emphatically deplored what he called our own modern 'negligence' of the problem of the philosophical life. This problem, he speculated, had gone into eclipse for two different reasons: first, because religious institutions had absorbed, or (in his words) 'confiscated' the 'theme of the practice of the true life'; and second, 'because the relationship to truth can now be made valid and manifest only in the form of scientific knowledge.'

Foucault, in passing, then suggested the potential fruitfulness of further research on this topic. 'It seems to me,' he remarked, 'that it would be interesting to write a history starting from the problem of the philosophical life, a problem ... envisaged as a choice which can be detected both through the events and decisions of a biography, and through [the elaboration of] the same problem in the interior of a system [of thought], and the place which has been given in this system to the problem of the philosophical life.'[2]

2. Michel Foucault, Collège de France lecture, 14 March 1984.

Ever since encountering these lectures, I have been intrigued by the prospect of undertaking a history of the sort that Foucault described. In my own view, a history of the problem of the philosophical life that started with Socrates and Diogenes might also include, for example, Zeno; Chrysippus; Seneca; Plutarch; St. Anthony; St. Augustine; Erasmus; Montaigne; Rousseau; Kierkegaard; Emerson; Nietzsche; Bataille, perhaps Wittgenstein; I would say Heidegger; and certainly Foucault himself.

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These names, to me, suggest a coherent tradition within the larger history of western thought. It is, broadly speaking, a tradition inspired by the famous maxim inscribed on the façade of the temple of Apollo at Delphi: 'Know Thyself.' Preoccupied by this deceptively simple admonition, and often developing their ideas in conversation with one another, the philosophers working through this tradition comprise a family of figures similar to – though not identical with – those writers recently grouped together by Stanley Cavell as exemplars of what he calls 'moral perfectionism'.[3]

I would like to sketch out, in a series of more or less fragmentary reflections, some of the puzzles that I have encountered in trying to think about, and write about, various facets of this occluded, often disparaged current of philosophy. How might one approach the family of figures I have just enumerated? What must one know about the facts of a philosopher's life to do justice to what is truly 'philosophical' about that life? And why is the problem of the philosophical life so rarely taken seriously – not least by professional philosophers?

3. See Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, Chicago, 1989, pp1-5. In his own work, Foucault emphasized the importance of caring for the self, rather than simply knowing the self: a distinction of some importance for the stress he would lay on spiritual exercises in antiquity.

Despite a recent surge of interest among Anglo-American philosophers in questions of identity and selfhood (I am thinking, for example, of Martha Nussbaum's *The Therapy of Desire*, and also of Charles Taylor's recent magnum opus, *Sources of the Self*), it seems fair to say that most philosophers today have a 'resistance' – Cavell's word – to the very notion of the philosophical life. This should come as no surprise. After all, philosophy since Kant has been largely an academic calling. As it is normally taught today, it is a discipline that revolves around the analysis and justification of concepts and arguments, a practice in which students are routinely taught, among other things, that the truth of a proposition should be evaluated independently of anything we may know about the person holding that proposition. This is a curriculum that imparts crucial skills. But it does not pretend to present a model of how to live.

Writing a century before Foucault and Cavell, and anticipating their point of view on these matters, Nietzsche put it this way: 'The only critique of a philosophy that is possible and that proves anything, namely trying to see whether one can live in accordance with it, has never been taught at universities: all that has ever been taught is a critique of words by means of other words.'[4]

4. Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Schophenhauer as Educator', in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, Cambridge 1983, p187.

To start, it will be useful to recall briefly that first and most daunting of models for the philosophical life – namely Socrates. In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates famously asserts his ignorance while steadfastly defending his own reasoned convictions about how to live and die rightly. Scorning the dictates of the conventional wisdom on these topics, Socrates explains how he has tried to act in harmony with his inner *daimon* and the injunction he received from the oracle at Delphi: 'to live the life of a philosopher, to examine myself and others.'[5]

5. Plato, *Apology*, 28e.

As Plato recounts his speech before the Athenian jury, Socrates takes some

pride in the consistency of his beliefs and actions. 'Throughout my life,' he declares, 'in any public activity I may have engaged in, I am the same man as I am in private life.' Conveying his views 'not in words but in action,' his defiant attitude towards the jury demonstrates that 'death is something I couldn't care less about, but that my whole concern is not to do anything unjust.'[6]

6. *Ibid.*, 32d-33a.

In short, to appreciate Socrates as a philosopher, we are invited – by Plato, certainly – to judge his *integrity*; and this requires understanding how his personal character harmonizes, or fails to harmonize, with his declared convictions.[7]

7. I owe this point, and much else besides, to Robert Solomon. See Robert C. Solomon, 'Nietzsche *Ad Hominem*: Perspectivism, Personality and *Ressentiment*,' to appear in Bernard Magnus, (ed), *Nietzsche* Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.

The English word 'integrity' is derived from the Latin word *integritas*; like its classical cognate, it has a range of connotations: from wholeness and completeness to soundness and freedom from defect. In English, integrity in certain contexts has a slightly archaic, even moralizing ring: the man or woman of integrity is said to be sincere, chaste, pure; perhaps even innocent, in the sense of freedom from sin. But in other contexts, integrity has a more concrete bearing, as when we speak of a sound physical structure – an intact bridge, say – as having integrity.

One thing seems to me clear. Whether or not it is used in a moralizing context, the concept of integrity, when applied to a human being, presupposes a certain capacity in that being for resoluteness and constancy, a certain power to organize and *integrate* one's impulses and impressions, habits and beliefs into a characteristic form of life, a form that, because it endures over time, allows us to speak of a coherent soul, or self.

Among the ancients – in writers from Plato to Seneca – the ability to produce a sound form of life was traced to the power always to will the same things, and always to oppose the same things; and this power was thought to grow out of the goodness of a will governed by reason. Integrity was a matter of just order in the soul.

Within virtually all of the classical schools, maintenance of a just order in the soul required adherence to a reasoned pattern of conduct. Integrity could be achieved, if at all, only through a break with the ingrained beliefs and habits that routinely regulate everyday life, followed by a potentially endless process of self-examination and personal reformation. In almost every school, this process entailed a rigorous exercise of thought, and also a more or less formalized regimen of spiritual, and sometimes corporeal exercises. The conviction animating all of these exercises was that a life of contemplative introspection, thoughtful dialogue, and proper subordination of the body to the soul might afford an earnest student some special measure of wisdom, or happiness, or peace of mind.

Now the value of such exercises has by no means been uncontested, least of all in our own day. Foucault of course challenged Plato's notion of a well-ordered philosophical life, referring acidly in *Discipline and Punish* to 'the soul, prison of the body'. And Richard Rorty, to cite still another prominent sceptic, has expressed equally strong doubts about the ability of *anyone* to

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achieve a state of perfect integrity. The philosopher, in Rorty's sarcastic words, would then have to exemplify 'an ideal human being: one who perfectly unites wisdom and kindness, insight and decency'. Like a lot of professional philosophers, and like a lot of ordinary people, Rorty has trouble taking this vision of the ideal philosopher seriously: 'All of us,' he writes derisively, 'hope to find such a guru – someone who will be everything our parents were not.'[8]

Such quips and ridicule, as Rorty doubtless knows, scarcely do justice to a figure like Socrates, who – at least if we credit the idea of an 'historical' Socrates – sincerely professed his ignorance, and refused (unlike Plato) to formulate a universal code of conduct. Nor does Rorty's sarcasm, or Foucault's inversion of Orphic formulas, discredit a living exemplar of philosophical scepticism like Montaigne. Indeed, for a wide variety of figures preoccupied with the living of a philosophical life after Plato, what I have called 'integrity' can not be simply conflated with the acquisition of knowledge of an immutable good, or attainment of an unblemished moral purity, or subordination of the body to an immortal soul, certainly not in Plato's terms. By the modern period, the teleological model of integrity elaborated by such Christian thinkers as Augustine had been supplemented by a quite different standard for the living of a coherent philosophical life, a standard that Nietzsche, for one, described in frankly aesthetic terms.

'One thing is needful,' Nietzsche writes in a famous passage in *The Gay Science*: 'to "give style" to one's character – a great and rare art! It is practised by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then 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 and formed 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!'[9]

Let us suppose for a moment that we are, in fact, interested in recognizing – and appraising – a quality like integrity, or singleness of taste, call it what you will, in the life of a philosopher. What features of a philosopher's life should a biographer regard as pertinent? For that matter, what features of his or her life should a *philosopher* regard as pertinent?

Consider one of the sentences that opens one of the most famous of classical philosophical biographies, the life of Zeno by Diogenes Laertius: 'They say he was fond of eating green figs and of basking in the sun.'[10]

At first glance, these seem to be idle details, of no philosophical consequence. Quite apart from the dubious evidentiary value of the vague reference to what 'they say', what is one to make – if anything – of Zeno's fondness for green figs and basking in the sun? Of what possible relevance can this be to understanding his professed convictions?

Several pages later in his life of Zeno, Diogenes Laertius implicitly answers these questions. 'The food he used required no fire to dress, and the cloak he wore was thin,' he writes. 'Hence it was said of him:

8. Richard Rorty, 'Taking Philosophy Seriously', a review of Victor Farias, *Heidegger and Nazism*, in *The New Republic*, April 11, 1988, p33.

9. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, no290. Alexander Nehamas makes this aphorism a centerpiece of his masterful book – which has inspired a great deal of my own thinking – *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* Cambridge, Mass. 1985

10. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R.D. Hicks, Cambridge, Mass. 1925, Vol.II, p111.

The cold of winter and the ceaseless rain
Came powerless against him: weak the dart
of the fierce summer sun or racking pain
To bend that iron frame. He stands apart
Unspoiled by public feast and jollity:
Patient, unwearied night and day doth he
Cling to his studies of philosophy.'[11]

11. *Ibid.*, Vol.II, p139.

This, in my view, is not a pointless piece of antique doggerel. By documenting the popular image of the philosopher, Diogenes Laertius rather allows us to understand Zeno's fondness for green figs and basking in the sun as consistent with, and partially constitutive of, the ethos of contemplative self-sufficiency that he preached in what survive of his books.

It is perhaps worth making explicit what my view entails. In principle, *anything* about a philosopher's life may prove relevant to appraising his or her integrity. It all depends on how one interprets the evidence.

In his *Essays*, Montaigne points out a problem raised by the possible relevance of *anything*, from the most sublime of treatises to the most trivial of character traits, to living – and judging – a properly philosophical life. It is not that Montaigne has any difficulty in believing that a fondness for green figs might be of deep philosophical significance, certainly for anyone preoccupied, like himself, in honouring the Delphic precept, to 'Know Thyself'. On the contrary. 'Each particle,' writes Montaigne, 'each occupation of a man betrays him and reveals him just as well as any other.'[12]

12. Montaigne, *Essays*, trans. Donald M. Frame, Stanford, 1958, I, 1, p220.

The problem is what surveying this open-ended variety of evidence quickly reveals: namely, the apparent inconsistency of our beliefs and behaviour much of the time. Most of us divide our lives into different, often isolated compartments. If we examine honestly all of a human being's different aspects, we seem bound to find *in*coherence and contradiction. 'There is some justification for basing a judgment of a man on the most ordinary acts of his life,' remarks Montaigne, 'but in view of the natural instability of our conduct and opinions, it has often seemed to me that even good authors are wrong to insist on fashioning a consistent and solid fabric out of us.'[13]

13. *Ibid.*, II, i, p239.

One might suppose that Montaigne would therefore be sympathetic to Rorty's rejection of the very ideal of a philosophical life. Indeed Montaigne concedes that 'in all antiquity it is hard to pick out a dozen men who set their lives to a certain and constant course.'

Still, Montaigne in his *Essays* does not simply reject the classical ideal. Instead, he effectively *reinvents* it, showing us (in his words) 'a new figure: an unpremeditated and accidental philosopher!'[14]

14. *Ibid.*, II, xii, p409.

Affirming the human being's 'infinite capacity to produce innumerable forms', and consequently abandoning any assumption that the soul is, or ought to be, embarked on a logical pilgrimage toward one common and unchanging goal (call it the good, or call it God), Montaigne through his essays explores

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another possibility. Following his whim with unhesitant courage, he details the superficially chaotic contents of his inner experience, assaying his apparently amorphous individuality with studied sincerity – and so, paradoxically, precisely by writing his *Essays*, reveals the integrity of a unique and unmistakeable character, recognizable (in his own words) by 'a certain constancy of opinions'. Self-consciously emulating such pagan precursors as Socrates and Seneca, Montaigne strives mightily to bring together life and work: 'In other cases,' as he remarks, 'one may commend or blame the work apart from the workman; not so here; he who touches the one, touches the other.' At the same time, by frankly scrutinizing *all* aspects of himself, no matter how trivial, transient or – in the eyes of most ordinary philsophers – unseemly (by the end, for example, we know all about the author's struggle with sexual impotence), Montaigne demonstrates how (in Nietzsche's words) 'the constraint of a single taste' may integrate a large number of disparate elements, offering us a unified portrait of the 'freest and most vigorous of spirits' (as Nietzsche once described Montaigne).[15]

15. Ibid., III, vi, p692; II, i, p240; II, xii, p428; III, v, p677. For Montaigne's rejection of classical entelechy, see also Hugo Friedrich, *Montaigne*, trans. Dawn Eng, Berkeley, 1991, p218.

Still, the revelation, through uninhibited self-examination, of a 'constancy of opinions' or singleness of taste is no simple matter, whether we are interested in expressing what is uniquely 'free and vigorous' about our own selves, or rather interested in recognizing what is unique in the opinions and tastes of someone else. In appraising how a life and work may hang together, we must, as Montaigne puts it, 'refuse to judge men simply by their outward actions; we must probe the inside and discover what springs set men in motion.' Since we must nevertheless take our bearings at the start largely from outward actions and those character traits an 'accidental philosopher' like Montaigne (or for that matter Foucault) may display, willy-nilly, in his writing, we are confronted, as Montaigne stresses, with 'an arduous and hazardous undertaking.'[16]

16. Montaigne, *Essays*, II, i, p244.

In attempting to compose my own modern version of a philosophical life, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, I took as my model for this 'arduous and hazardous undertaking' the work of Jean Starobinski, the great Genevan literary critic. In one of his characteristically incisive essays, Starobinski counsels a kind of 'free-floating attentiveness' to the matter at hand. Though he is speaking explicitly about how to read and interpret a text in order to appraise its possible psychological significance, his words can stand as well for the probing of *all* outwardly expressive acts, in search of their inner springs. Starobinski writes.

> There must be an initial phase, a phase of [primarily passive] experience. In vigilant neutrality the gaze goes out to meet the reality presented to it without undue haste to identify definitive structures, for the danger is great that it would simply impose its own. As far as possible, one refrains from interpreting and simply takes in data for interpretation ... Little by little certain themes, certain similarities, will stand out. Attention is drawn to what [in a piece of writing, for example] the work passes over in silence, as well as

> the qualities of its intonation, its rhythms, its verbal energy and organization. Structures, connections, and 'networks' ... begin to take shape as if of their own accord, as the work develops a complex presence whose organic structure must be identified.[17]

17. Jean Starobinski, 'Psychoanalysis and Literary Understanding', in *The Living Eye*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Cambridge, Mass. 1989, p143.

From Starobinski's point of view, it makes no sense to speak of a hidden, latent integrity that the analyst brings to light. 'Rather than latent it is better to say *implicit*,' writes Starobinski: 'what is present *in* the work, not *behind* it, but which we were unable to decipher at first glance.'

Starobinski calls his procedure 'stylistics'. Through a subtle application of this procedure, he thinks that we may come to appreciate how 'the work, sustained by the individual who produces it, is itself an act of desire, a revealed intention.' Life and work will then no longer appear as incommensurable realities. Regarding the lifework as one irreducible whole, we will discern 'an expansive, continuous melody', as Starobinski puts it, 'that is at once life and work, destiny and expression.'[18]

18. *Ibid.*, pp143, 145.

It is at this juncture that Michel Foucault parted ways with the approach taken by Starobinski, whose work he both knew and otherwise admired.[19] The great danger of Starobinski's approach – as Starobinski himself freely acknowledged – was the unwarranted imputation of wholeness, or structural integrity, to a lifework. In search of coherence, we are all too likely to find just what we are looking for. The historian of a philosophical life unavoidably runs the risk of producing a one-sided or, worse, factitious account of coherence.

19. Apart from several passing references to Starobinski, Foucault devoted appreciative longer essays to the psychoanalytically-influenced work of J.-P. Richard on Mallarmé, and of Jean Laplanche on Holderlin.

It is true, I suppose, that most of us exhibit some minimal degree of coherence most of the time, in so far as human beings raised within a culture perforce become predictable creatures of habit, rational, obedient, dutiful even to the point of dullness.

But a wise, or unusually happy, or thoughtfully stylized type of coherence – the sorts of coherence at issue in the philosophical life ostensibly exemplified by Socrates, or that more plaintively described in the books of Nietzsche – surely appears in the lifework of only the rarest of men or women, if it appears in the lifework of anyone. As Foucault once expressed his own scepticism on this score, 'the simultaneous unravelling of poetic and psychological structures will never succeed in reducing the distance which separates them.'[20]

20. Michel Foucault, 'The Father's "No",' in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard, Ithaca, NY 1977, p85.

In this context, Starobinski's metaphor – of life and work harmonizing in a single melody – will not seem apt. Better to speak of dissonance, and to expect contradictions and unresolved tensions. As Nietzsche once remarked of Rousseau's avowed failure to realize a perfect sense of integrity, '[his] life ran along beside [his] knowledge like a wayward bass which refuses to harmonise with the melody.'[21]

21. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, Cambridge 1982, p192.

A philosophical biography that evoked some air of dissonance would best honour Foucault's own insistence on the irreducible distance between life and work; a gap (say, between the structure of one's philosophy and one's psychology) that may represent, among other things, the failure of a philosopher to

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It is telling, I think, that Foucault at the end of his life, despite his doubts about our ability ever to integrate fully life and work, nevertheless entertained the frankly utopian hope that, in a different society, perhaps organized under different rules of conduct, *all* of us might be able, despite the difficulties, to exemplify what I have been calling 'a philosophical life'. 'Couldn't everyone's life become a work of art,' wondered Foucault: 'Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?'[22]

To a hard-boiled pragmatist like Richard Rorty, it is tempting to write remarks like this off as symptomatic of an absurd, because impossible, wish to live (in Rorty's words) 'a life of self-creation ... as complete and autonomous as Plato thought a life of contemplation might be.'[23]

But let us again grant what Rorty (in this respect like Montaigne and Rousseau and Nietzsche and Foucault) asserts, namely, that any life, of course, is *always* bound to seem incomplete at death, that any philosophical or poetic effort to transform 'the blind impress' of chance events into a coherent thing of virtue, or wisdom, or beauty, is *always*, finally, in some sense, bound to be a failure.

Is the game worth the candle?

Since I have neither the time nor the wisdom even to begin to answer that question – which I suspect is what really lies behind the resistance of many professional philosophers, as well as many ordinary people, to the vision of what I have been calling the philosophical life – I will instead close by citing a passage from America's greatest preacher of this life, one who cherished the democratic vistas he felt that Everyman's quest for self-creation might yet help to open up. This passage by Ralph Waldo Emerson I think speaks not only to Foucault's own unfinished quest for a life of philosophical integrity; but also to Richard Rorty's suspicion that a yearning for expressive wholeness boils down to a puerile wish to place one's self in the care of a perfect parent (even if that 'parent' turns out only to be one's own nagging sense of one's own better self).

'Patience and patience, we shall win at last,' Emerson writes bravely; although the impatient assertiveness of his language here betrays the fact that this particular sermon on the philosophical life amounts to a kind of prayer:

> We must be very suspicious of the deceptions of the element of time. It takes a good deal of time to eat or to sleep, or to earn a hundred dollars, and a very little time to entertain a hope and an insight which becomes the light of our life. We dress our garden, eat our dinners, discuss the household with our wives, and these things make no impression, are forgotten next week; but in the solitude to which every man is always returning, he has a sanity

22. Michel Foucault, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of a Work in Progress,' in *The Foucault Reader*, Paul Rabinow (ed), New York 1984, p350.

23. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge 1989, p43.

and revelations, which in his passage into new worlds he will carry with him. Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat: up again, old heart! – it seems to say, – there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power.[24]

24. Emerson, 'Experience', from Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, New York 1983, p492. The insight that there is an aspect of prayer to this essay about loss, I owe to Stanley Cavell: see Cavell. *This New Yet Unapproachable America* Albuquerque, 1989, pp112-14.

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