

The Real Purpose of Philosophy



True philosophy doesn't involve exotic rituals, mysterious liturgy, or quaint beliefs. Nor is it just abstract theorizing and analysis. It is, of course, the love of wisdom. It is the art of living a good life. As such, it must be rescued from religious gurus and from professional philosophers lest it be exploited as an esoteric cult or as a set of detached intellectual techniques or brain teasers to show how clever you are. Philosophy is intended for everyone, and it is authentically practiced only by those who wed it with action in the world toward a better life for all.

Philosophy's purpose is to illuminate the ways our soul has been infected by unsound beliefs, untrained tumultuous desires, and dubious life choices and preferences that are unworthy of us. Self-scrutiny applied with kindness is the main antidote. Besides rooting out the soul's corruptions, the life of wisdom is also meant to stir us from our lassitude and move us in the direction of an energetic, cheerful life.

Skilled use of logic, disputation, and the developed ability to name things correctly are some of the instruments philosophy gives us to achieve abiding clear-sightedness and inner tranquility, which is true happiness.

This happiness, which is our aim, must be correctly understood. Happiness is commonly mistaken for passively experienced pleasure or leisure. That conception of happiness is good only as far as it goes. The only worthy object of all our efforts is a flourishing life.

True happiness is a verb. It's the ongoing dynamic performance of worthy deeds. The flourishing life, whose foundation is virtuous intention, is something we continually improvise, and in doing so our souls mature. Our life has usefulness to ourselves and to the people we touch.

We become philosophers to discover what is really true and what is merely the accidental result of flawed reasoning, recklessly acquired erroneous judgments, well-intentioned but misguided teachings of parents and teachers, and unexamined acculturation.

To ease our soul's suffering, we engage in disciplined introspection in which we conduct thought-experiments to strengthen our ability to distinguish between wholesome and lazy, hurtful beliefs and habits.

The First Step



The first step to living wisely is to relinquish self-conceit.

See the delusional folly in being a nervous know-it-all whose giddy mind is always prattling on about its knee-jerk impressions of events and other people, forcing current experiences into previously formed categories: “Oh yes, this thing here is just like such and such.”

Behold the world fresh—as it is, on its own terms—through the eyes of a beginner. To know that you do *not* know and to be willing to admit that you do not know without sheepishly apologizing is real strength and sets the stage for learning and progress in any endeavor.

The wisest among us appreciate the natural limits of our knowledge and have the mettle to preserve their naiveté. They understand how little all of us really know about anything. There is no such thing as conclusive, once-and-for-all knowledge. The wise do not confuse information or data, however prodigious or cleverly deployed, with comprehensive knowledge or transcendent wisdom. They say things like “Hmmm” or “Is that so!” a lot. Once you realize how little we do know, you are not so easily duped by fast-talkers, splashy gladhandlers, and demagogues. Spirited curiosity is an emblem of the flourishing life.

Arrogance is the banal mask for cowardice; but far more important, it is the most potent impediment to the flourishing life. Clear thinking and self-importance cannot logically coexist. Humanity has no inherent pecking order, despite outward appearances. *Everyone* in this world is important. If you really want peace of mind and success in your endeavors, forego self-importance.

Conceit is an iron gate that admits no new knowledge, no expansive possibilities, nor constructive ideas. Indulging in excessive pride in your own knowledge, abilities, or

experiences and attempting to take on more power or authority than is your due is fatal. Such preening not only alienates others, since an overbearing lout is suffocating to be around, but also leads to complacency, precluding change in a wholesome direction. You keep running around in the same familiar circles; you get caught in the same sticky webs. Nothing novel or festive ever happens.

Stop jabbering like a magpie. Notice what's *actually* happening, not just what you *think* is happening or *wish* were happening. Look and Listen.

To do anything well you must have the humility to bumble around a bit, to follow your nose, to get lost, to goof. Have the courage to try an undertaking and possibly do it poorly. Unremarkable lives are marked by the fear of not looking capable when trying something new.

New experiences are meant to deepen our lives and advance us to new levels of competence; they are not meant to be used by the self-important as fodder for shoring up their previously adopted views and conclusions.

Important knowledge and personal guidance dwell in unexpected places. If you wish to see them and avail yourself of them when you come upon them, then guard yourself lest you become vainglorious and uncritically smug.

The legitimate glow of satisfaction at accomplishing a hard-won *worthy* goal should not be confused with arrogance, which is characterized by self-preoccupation and lack of interest in the feelings or affairs of others.