

Please note – this was the basis for the talk on Saturday. It is not a verbatim record.

I encourage anyone reading this to use it as a basis for their own study, rather than take anything here as authoritative.

There are lots of books that give summaries and synopses of philosophical thought – some more accessible than others.

But more interesting, there have been a number of books that have pointed to the practicality – the current and relevant practicality of – philosophers and philosophy.

Not the same as studying the philosophers themselves, but it's a start.

And I would like to express my gratitude to three in particular.

- *Consolations of Philosophy* by Alain de Botton (note that this is not restricted to the ancient Greeks)
- *Philosophy for Life and Other Dangerous Situations* by Jules Evans
- *Pursuits of Wisdom* by John Cooper

All three of these books are focused on western, actually European, philosophy

What I found fascinating in these books and the inspiration for this talk is the stress the authors place on philosophy being practical and, indeed, that the philosophers that they quote intended that. The philosophers assert that philosophy is a guide for life – life then, life now.

That isn't necessarily a general rule about philosophers.

For many philosophers of antiquity we have no evidence to suggest that they were offering a way of life.

Their work seems to have been motivated by nothing more than what motivates most philosophers nowadays. They seem to have found philosophical ways of thinking, and the questions that philosophy addresses, interesting, even engrossing.

They enjoyed logical analysis and argument, and were fascinated by logic and paradox, as philosophers of all ages have always been. They found some of the questions of philosophical debate at their time fascinating and worth thinking about, for their intrinsic intellectual value....

And, of course, they found doing philosophy rewarding: they seemed to be good at it, and others' reactions to their work confirmed them in their impression.

This is not to say that the traditional branches of philosophy are without merit – they may present interesting challenges and have real practical

uses (Ship of Theseus Paradox); but they do not set out to provide a guide for how to live one's life.

To reiterate, today we're drawing on those philosophers who are asserting that philosophy is practical and should be central to one's life.

So just a bit more about the books before we get stuck in. For Alain de Botton the inspiration was a painting: *The Death of Socrates* by Jacques-Louis David painted in 1787.



The Death of Socrates – Jacques Louis David 1787

I think we all would have guessed that Socrates and his student, Plato, were going to figure in this talk. The scene is representative of the ***Phaedo*** dialogue where, although in prison condemned to death and about to take the hemlock, Socrates is discoursing amongst other things on the immortality of the soul.

For Alain de Botton the painting exhibited that Socrates was the only one in the painting who was practising what he had been teaching, whereas his followers are clearly distraught having appeared to have forgotten what Socrates is teaching – even as he is teaching it! Secondly, Socrates is putting into practice the key virtues of fortitude, justice and temperance at a time when it would have been easy to have set them aside

From his observation of this painting Alain de Botton went looking for other philosophers who appeared to put into practice in their own lives what they had been preaching.

His book lists six, Socrates being one.

Socrates, Epicurus, Seneca, Montaigne, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche

Jules Evans lists twelve: Socrates, Epictetus, Musinius Rufus, Seneca, Epicurus, Heraclitus, Pythagoras, Sceptics, Diogenes, Plato, Plutarch, Aristotle

John Cooper lists six: Socrates, Aristotle, Stoicism, Epicurus, Scepticism, Plotinus and the Platonists - two are schools rather than individuals

Anyway, it is nice to have some commonality across all three.

So, to start, I am going to draw on the work by Mr Cooper.

It does appear that for the 1000 years or so from the time of Socrates **[469-399 BCE]**, in ancient Greece and then in Rome, philosophy was widely pursued as the best guide to life – as both the intellectual basis and the motivating force, the emotional ground, for the best human life ...For these philosophers, philosophy is itself the best steersman or pilot of a life. Philosophy was assiduously studied as the best way to become good people and to live good human lives.

There are different branches of philosophy, most of which we can leave. Today, we can restrict ourselves to what might best be called ethics or moral philosophy, which deals with questions about how one (how anyone) ought to live.

Since everyone has a life to live, this subject professes to concern everyone, and not in some incidental way, or in some way that can be left to others (to experts, professors, authors, etc.).

It is inherently a practical subject, as it engages directly with universally applicable questions of how to live and what to do ...

The essential tool for the ancient Greek philosophers was the use of reason.

And as with any other aspect of human development the more that reason is used the better it gets. Practice makes perfect.

And the practice that strengthens reason is philosophy itself. Philosophy, being the pursuit of wisdom and ultimate truth, is the intellectual accomplishment – they would claim, the only one – whereby reason is made perfect.

As Aristotle would put it, the function of reason in all its aspects is to get things right, to judge and decide correctly - and in so doing to find the underlying order, balance and harmony, in the phenomena being thought about.

The ancient philosophers, following Socrates' innovative lead, are proposing – and it is up to us to decide how much we accept the proposition – they are proposing that we live our lives from some set of argued through, rationally worked out, rationally grasped, and rationally defended, reasoned ideas about the world and our own place in it.

They propose that we live from these ideas precisely on the basis of just that reasoned understanding... The key here is the idea of reason...

To live a life of philosophy is to live committed to following philosophical reason wherever it may lead. The promise is that by doing so – but only by doing so – one will achieve the best possible human life.

The premise is that by contrast we live our lives through a mindset, for want of a better term, of already established ideas, values and beliefs – but it is as if they are hidden from view and have been acquired we know not how.

It is clear from a little self-examination that we act in certain habitual ways, we think in certain ways, we respond to situations in certain ways, we have preferences, likes and dislikes – and my ways are different from your ways.

And most of the time these ideas just operate without us being aware of them - and even should we become aware of them we cannot honestly say that these ideas that govern our life have been argued through, rationally worked out, rationally grasped, and rationally defended.

And yet here we have the example of Socrates at his trial and even at his preparation for his death holding fast to philosophical reason, wherever it may lead.

How would we do in such a situation? And while none of us have yet been in the same situation as Socrates, and hopefully never will, nonetheless I suspect that we have all been in situations where our ideas, beliefs, values have been tested and maybe our actions have been found wanting. And not even or just the serious situations.

As Alain de Botton puts it, he found that, quote, "in Socrates' life and death lay an invitation to intelligent scepticism" – and what is he inviting us to be intelligently sceptical about? To those sets of ideas and beliefs that we hold to be true – or at least hold dear – that have come from we know not where. As Socrates puts it "the unexamined life is not worth living"

For Socrates, [loc 870].in Plato's *Apology*, he famously maintains that one's soul and its condition, whether good or bad, is the most important thing for anyone: he says that is what he has gone about the city of Athens all his life trying to convince his fellow citizens of, both old and young.

For Socrates and the other Greek philosophers the soul is the most essential aspect of the human being. It is the spiritual dimension. So this statement that "one's soul and its condition, whether good or bad, is the most important thing for anyone" is the crucial claim on which Socrates' philosophy, and the Socratic way of life is grounded.

The condition of the soul became a foundational principle for the whole later tradition of ethical philosophy among the ancients. For Socrates, the soul is vastly more important than any other valuable thing

And what are these other so called valuable things:

(bodily health, physical strength, wealth, bodily or other pleasures, social and personal relationships, fame and position, and so on) ...,

Indeed the soul is so vastly more important that it makes these other valuable things not just pale by comparison but totally dependent upon it.

The point that Socrates makes is that the condition of the soul is most important because when your soul is in good condition, you have something of unconditional value.

All other goods are only conditionally good: their value depends on how they are used, how they fit into your life. They can only make a positive contribution to our lives because of what we ourselves make of them, how we regard them, how we react to having or lacking them, and what we do with them.

The soul is that emotional ground from which we live our active lives: our value system, our beliefs, our decisions, our desires, our choices – all these depend upon it.

As long as our soul is in its good condition, which Socrates calls its “virtue” or wisdom, we will live well because if we have this most importantly valuable thing in good condition all other potential values become actually valuable for us. With a good, well conditioned, soul we can make proper and good use of these other valuable things and so live good lives. [By contrast] with a bad soul we will have bad desires, make bad choices, misvalue and misuse such other potential goods and, as a result, make a bad life for ourselves.

If you possess “virtue” in your soul you will know the truth of Socrates’ own claim about the pre-eminent value of the soul, and the merely conditional value of money, position, health, etc.

Since you will never value anything else more highly or even at anywhere close to the same level as your soul, you will never value at more than their true worth either “external” goods such as possessions, social position, and the like; “goods of the body” such as health, strength, bodily pleasure, etc.; nor what might be termed “goods of the nature”, such as a good memory or sense of humour etc. Their true worth is that of [being] something to be used “virtuously”, and none of them have value apart from what results from that good use.

For Socrates, then, whatever else it may include or imply, virtue is wisdom. Virtue, the good condition of the soul, is the state of being in which one firmly grasps and understands the full system of human values, in comparison and relationship with one another.

With wisdom one will always live on the basis of that system of values, and so one will live completely happily and fulfilled.

There is an important implication here; that understanding the truth about what is good or bad for you, your soul, inevitably and necessarily leads you to act in the way that is indicated in that knowledge. The wise man, with wisdom and understanding, will always act in what is in fact the right way.

This is why for these philosophers, philosophy is a way of life: it leads to – it demands – that we act philosophically.

Aristotle notes that one of the aspects of virtue is perfection of our power of reasoning, and the function of virtue is to lead a person to have the right strength of feelings (in the given circumstances) and act just as much as is right. The right feeling and the right action will be ones that

are properly measured in relation to the circumstances; they are neither more nor less than is right and so, in that sense, they are intermediate.

This intermediateness is, for Aristotle, a key feature of virtue. He states that for every virtue there stands in opposition two vices: the vice of defects and the vice of excess.

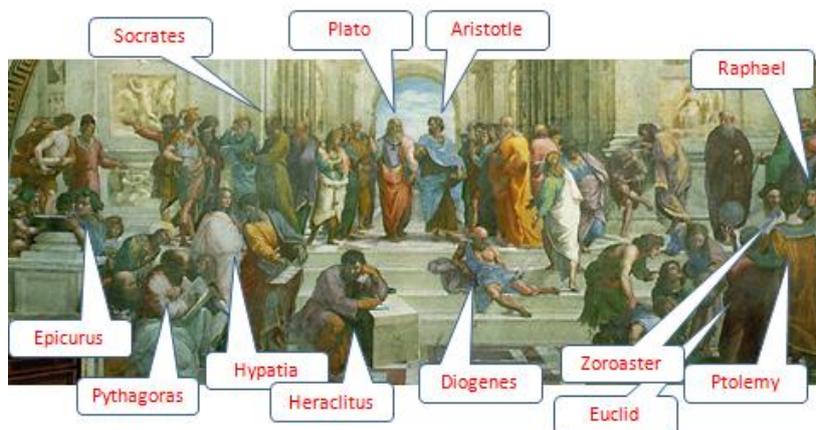
While we may say that it is not possible to have an excess of wisdom, we certainly have the phrase that it is possible to have too much of a good thing.

Most people know that inscribed on the temple at Delphi was the phrase "Know thyself". But one of the other inscriptions was *Meden agan*, nothing overmuch, or measure in all things.

So, for Socrates, this wisdom, this knowledge of value for the soul gives its possessor a basis for evaluating situations and circumstances as one becomes aware of them. This leads to a clear determination of the best thing to do under the current conditions (as one understands them to be).

It is part of human nature always to do what one thinks is best in the given circumstances. And by best is meant that which is best for the soul. And since reason ensures a proper valuation between what is good for the soul as against the value of other goods, their actions based on that knowledge will lead to the best result. And for Socrates the best result is a life that is lived well, lived happily and fulfilled.

This brings me to a point where I can bring in one of the other books and another picture



School of Athens, by Raphael, in the library of Pope Julius II, who also commissioned Michelangelo to paint the Sistine Chapel ceiling

Jules Evans comments that he found it surprising to find a painting depicting so many of the pagan philosophers at the heart of the Vatican in the Pope's private library

Mr Evans suffered from panic attacks, mood swings, depression and anxiety.

He found help through Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT).

When I first came across CBT, its ideas and techniques seemed familiar. They reminded me of what little I knew of ancient Greek philosophy. By 2007, I had become a freelance journalist, so I started to investigate the origins of CBT. I travelled to New York to interview Albert Ellis, who'd invented cognitive therapy in the 1950s. I did the last interview with him before he died, and wrote his obituary for The Times. I also interviewed Aaron Beck, the other founder of CBT, as well as other leading cognitive psychologists over the next five years.

The Greek Philosophers from Socrates onwards had different beliefs and there were significant differences between their belief structures and their approaches – magnified as well over time and by their followers.

But, Mr Evans asserts, they (or at least the ones in his book) all follow the following Socratic steps:

1. Humans can know themselves. We can use our reason to examine our unconscious beliefs and values.
2. Humans can change themselves. We can use our reason to change our beliefs. This will change our emotions, because our emotions follow our beliefs.
3. Humans can consciously create new habits of thinking, feeling and acting

He continues that these three steps are in essence what CBT teaches and that there's a good evidence base to support these steps. They are the basis for teaching "thinking skills". But they say nothing about purpose, ethics or moral values.

However, the ancient philosophers all had an extra, a fourth, step:

4. If we follow philosophy as a way of life, we can live more flourishing lives.

For Socrates this flourishing life is I believe what he meant by the earlier statement of "live well, happily and fulfilled"

I feel it is time to say something briefly about Epicurus – who must be one of the most misrepresented of the ancient philosophers, at least in how his name is used. People may not really understand fully what the terms mean when they say Socratic, platonic, stoic – but they are not so far from the mark as when they use the term Epicurean. If you Google "epicurean" you are going to find sites devoted to the pursuit of sensual pleasure, especially to the enjoyment of good food and tastes. An epicure is one with sensitive and refined taste, especially in food and wine.

There is no doubt that Epicurus said "pleasure is the beginning and the goal of a happy life" and "the beginning and root of every good is the pleasure of the stomach. Every wisdom and culture must be referred to this."

However, it would disappoint most modern epicures to discover that Epicurus himself drank water rather than wine and was happy with a dinner of bread, vegetables and a palmful of olives. He famously asked a friend "Send me a pot of cheese, so that I may have a feast whenever I like".

So we have to be careful with our terms. Happiness or pleasure can be easily misconstrued – not just today but equally so in the 3rd Century BCE.

Epicurus wrote:

"When we say that pleasure is the end aim of life, we do not mean the pleasures of the prodigal or the pleasures of sensuality, as are understood by some through ignorance, prejudice or wilful misrepresentation. By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and disturbance in the soul. It is not an unbroken succession of drinking bouts and of merrymaking, not sexual love, not the enjoyment of fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table, which produces a pleasant life; it is sober reasoning, searching out the grounds of every choice and avoidance, and banishing those beliefs through which the greatest disturbances take possession of the soul."

The view of Epicurus is that this state of happiness is natural and, as it were, already present. We simply have to identify the causes of our unhappiness, of pain, fear, dissatisfaction, etc.; know them for what they are - the "thieves of our contentment" - and transcend them. Remove the pain and nothing more need be done: the happiness is naturally here.

So whereas many people – obviously none in this room – would come up with an interesting list of what would make them happy, especially if money were no object, Epicurus comes up with a simpler list.

Top of the list was Friendship. The second was Freedom – not to be governed by the dictates of society or the opinion of others; and the third is Thought – real thought based on reason, not the habitual circling thoughts and imaginations that we happen to have picked up.

So finally onto one of the lesser known but key stoic philosophers: Epictetus.

Epictetus spent a significant portion of his life as a slave and sometime in his life became lame. So it may not be surprising that he articulated a philosophy of resilience [5]

On the first page of his *Handbook* we read "Some things are up to us, and others are not."

Epictetus makes a list of the things not in our control and Mr Evans has added a few.

- Our body
- Our property
- Our reputation
- Our job
- Our parents
- Our friends
- Our co-workers
- Our boss
- The weather
- The economy
- The past
- The future
- The fact that we're going to die

In our control: our beliefs.

Another key idea from Epictetus is that we misunderstand two zones of control.

A lot of suffering arises, Epictetus argues, because we make two mistakes. Firstly, we try to exert absolute sovereign control over something in zone 2, something external which is not in our control. Then, when we fail to control it, we may feel helpless, out of control, angry, guilty, anxious or depressed.

Secondly, we don't take responsibility for Zone 1, our thoughts and beliefs, which are under our control. Instead, we blame our thoughts on the outside world, on our parents, our friends, our lover, our boss, the economy, the environment, the class system, and then we end up, again, feeling bitter, helpless, victimised, out of control, and at the mercy of external circumstances.

We may, in everyday speech, become "philosophical" about it and say that that's just the way things are – which may be true when it comes to Zone 2 but is not when it comes to Zone 1.

Remember that Epictetus said that the robber of your free will does not exist.

I have only touched on some of the philosophers from the School of Athens.

Jules Evans' book intersperses his accounts of the different philosophers with vignettes of real life incidents where the individual wittingly or unwittingly has drawn on this philosophy of resilience. Some of them make grim reading but all are inspiring.

However, I don't want to suggest that it is only in dire situations that philosophy is useful – the use of reason, the self examination of the movements of the heart, the exercise of self-control and reflection on

what it is that makes us happy or unhappy is open to all of us and is as relevant, nay more than relevant, is as vital to us today as it has ever been.

So in summary, it seems that the Greek philosophers, starting with Socrates, are stating:

- that philosophy is practical and is a guide for life
- that reason and self-examination are the tools
- that virtue, the good condition of the soul, is of unconditional value – and everything else is of conditional value only
- that the view of Epicurus was root out the pain and what is left, what is natural and already there is happiness
- and that Epictetus, as well as following Socrates, prescribes the key tool: to discriminate between what is and what is not within our control, and to take responsibility for that which is in our control

Taken together, Socrates would say that this will lead to a good, happy and fulfilled life.

And I would contend that there is nothing more ordinary, more every-day and more universal than to seek for ourselves how to lead a life well, happily and fulfilled

This aim of this talk was to show that the ancient Greek philosophers are relevant to and resonate with our life today. But not just today. If one looks through artistic, philosophic and religious writings through the ages one can find a continuous, harmonious resonance.

So, I would like to finish with a well-known 19th century poem that has been popularised recently by Nelson Mandela, Clint Eastwood and now Guinness.

Invictus (“unconquered”)

Out of the night that covers me
Black as the Pit from pole to pole
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul
In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed
Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.
It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll.
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul

William Ernest Henley

(writing from his hospital bed. His indomitable spirit led him to triumph over the amputation of his leg)