

## **Teaching ancient practical ethics and philosophy as a way of life**

**Abstract:** In this article, I describe an approach to teaching ancient practical ethics that encourages learners to engage actively with the ideas under consideration. Students are encouraged to apply a range of practical exercises to their own lives and to reflect both independently and in collaboration with others on how the experience impacts their understanding of the theories upon which such exercises are built. I describe how such an approach is both in keeping with the methods advocated by the philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome, and also well supported by a wide range of contemporary educational research. I suggest that such active learning strategies encourage students towards a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the philosophical theories under consideration. Practical recommendations for incorporating such an approach into the teaching of applied philosophy are given. I finish by considering the impact such an approach may have on student motivation.

**Keywords:** *active-learning, teaching, practical philosophy, philosophy-as-a-way-of-life*

## **Teaching ancient practical ethics and philosophy as a way of life**

### **Introduction**

For many of the ancient philosophers of Greece and Rome, the primary goal of a philosophical education was to help us understand how to live well.<sup>i</sup> Whilst philosophy here was often conceived of as being comprised of the three intimately related topics of physics, ethics and logic,<sup>ii</sup> for the likes of Socrates, Diogenes, Epictetus or Epicurus, it was questions of practical ethics that took on primary importance.

For such thinkers, teaching, learning and doing philosophy could never therefore be something entirely consigned to books, or left in the classroom at the end of the day. Philosophy was something which was to be acted out, lived through, and incorporated into the very way one lived one's life and conceived of the world.<sup>iii</sup>

To embark on a philosophical education then in the spirit of a Socrates, a Seneca, a Diogenes or an Epicurus was to embark on an education aimed towards a fundamental shift in one's way of being. Such a philosophical education aimed at securing a life of fulfilment, impervious to the whims of fortune and in control of one's own happiness.<sup>iv</sup> For many teachers of philosophy today, the purpose of a philosophical education is of course conceptualised in significantly different terms.<sup>v</sup> Many teachers of philosophy today would no doubt agree that a philosophical education should equip students with the skills in critical thinking, reasoning and philosophical argumentation needed to navigate effectively through life. Few however would likely agree whole-heartedly with Epictetus' claim to his students that the fruits of their learning would be shown above all in the way they carry out the day-to-day activities of eating, drinking or carrying out their public duties.<sup>vi vii</sup>

Given the suggestion from education scholars that our intended learning outcomes should shape and inform our teaching methods,<sup>viii</sup> we might then wonder whether the educational approaches of an Epicurus or an Epictetus for example can meaningfully inform the pedagogical method of contemporary teachers of philosophy today. In this article, I will argue that the teaching and learning

of ancient practical ethics in all settings is enhanced and enriched by emulating some of the practically focussed approaches found in the teaching and practise of philosophy, such as it was conceived at this time.

In the first section, I describe the practical philosophy workshop I have been running in recent years, and the approach to teaching and doing philosophy that informs it.<sup>ix</sup> I then discuss a range of pedagogical literature which has informed the approach to teaching ancient practical ethics that I have described. In so doing I draw on research from education and psychology, whilst also discussing approaches used commonly in my professional teaching practise where I teach in a university department of clinical psychology. I finish by giving some practical recommendations to teachers interested in trying out this approach to teaching philosophy, and by considering what impact such an approach may have on student engagement and motivation.

### **Teaching ancient practical philosophy in community settings**

Over the last few years, I have been running small philosophy workshops in which participants are introduced to the ideas of a number of ancient philosophical thinkers and encouraged to try out these ideas in their day-to-day lives. I have run these workshops in local community spaces, with mental health organisations and online, and participants have included a broad range of people across age, gender, occupation and previous experience with philosophy. Participation in the workshops is free and participants register either after seeing an advert online or in local community spaces, or having heard about the workshops through word of mouth. Group sizes have been between 4 and 10 and the workshops have run over a period of 3 to 6 consecutive weeks.<sup>x</sup>

The course is designed to introduce participants to a number of philosophical approaches. Participants are encouraged to engage actively with the ideas discussed through applying them in their day-to-day lives and through reflective, in-session discussions facilitated by myself. The first week begins by introducing participants to an understanding of ancient philosophy as a subject intended to shape the lives of those who practise it.<sup>xi</sup> For many of the participants who have loosely encountered

philosophical ideas and toyed with philosophical questions throughout their lives, but who have only rarely encountered philosophy in a more formal setting, this conception of philosophy is a liberating and appealing one. Whilst for many today, philosophy remains a subject held out of reach to them – in universities or academic textbooks – I try in this workshop to open the doors to the subject, encouraging active participation with philosophical ideas and discussions from the beginning.<sup>xii</sup> Interestingly, for those participants who have more formal experience of philosophy (those who have graduated with philosophy degrees for example) this conception of and approach to philosophy has also been an appealing one. For such participants, the workshop provides an opportunity to collaborate with others in an effort to further explore the subject they know so well in new ways.

### *Overview of the approach*

Sessions are divided into two 50-minute sections, separated by a 15 minute break. Week 1 begins as we have seen with an introduction to the idea of ‘philosophy as a way of life’, before introducing one of the included thinkers in the second half. Throughout, I work to establish an open and discussion based approach, encouraging participants to reflect on the ideas being introduced. In the second half of the session, I deliver something closer to a typical lecture, providing a general introduction to the philosophy practised by the particular thinker who is the focus of that session.

For each included thinker, I set out between three and five practical exercises (or ‘spiritual exercises’ to borrow the phrase of Hadot<sup>xiii</sup>) which I have taken or adapted from their philosophy. As a group, we read and discuss the section of work that inspired each exercise and I lead a conversation about how this exercise relates to the thinker’s wider philosophical project. Additionally, I provide handouts in which I include the exercises and provide a set of reflective prompts to accompany each one. These prompts are discussed in more detail below, and are intended to help participants draw as much learning from the practise of these ideas as possible.

Week 2 begins with a collaborative reflection in which participants discuss their experience of trying out and applying the philosophical activities introduced the previous week and carried out since the

last session. After the break, we move in the second half on to the next included thinker. In a recent version of this workshop, delivered online via webcam owing to lockdown restrictions, the structure was as follows:<sup>xiv</sup>

	<b>Topic covered</b>	<b>Brief overview of included content</b>
<b>Week 1</b>	<b>Part 1:</b> Introduction to 'philosophy as a way of life'	~ What did the philosophies that dominated Hellenistic and Roman thought see as the purpose of philosophy? ~ Can philosophy teach us how to be happy and to live well? ~ What did it mean to do philosophy at this time?
	<b>Part 2:</b> Introduction to Epictetus	~ General introduction to Stoic philosophy ~ Introduction to Epictetus and his particular form of Stoicism ~ Overview of key ideas informing Epictetus' practical ethics (e.g. distinction between what we can/can't control, notion of 'assent' and making correct use of our impressions) ~ Introduction to a set of practical exercises informed by Epictetus' teaching (e.g. applying the 'reserve clause' to some of your upcoming actions).
<b>Week 2</b>	<b>Part 1:</b> Group reflection on practising the ideas and exercises of Epictetus	~ Guided, collaborative reflection on the key themes practised over the last week. Discussion topics such as: ~ How did acting with a 'reserve clause' change the way you felt about the thing you did? ~ How did it inform your understanding of the Stoic notion of control?

	<p><b>Part 2:</b></p> <p>Introduction to Marcus Aurelius</p>	<p>~ Expanded discussion of Stoicism</p> <p>~ Introduction to the ethical themes of Stoicism prominent in Marcus' <i>Meditations</i> (e.g. one's place in the cosmos/time, the development of virtuous character, using reason to resist the pull of unhelpful emotions)</p> <p>~ Introduction to a set of practical exercises informed by Marcus' thought (e.g. preparing oneself for the day ahead by thinking through some of the challenges you may expect to meet).</p>
<b>Week 3</b>	<p><b>Part 1:</b> Group reflection on practising the ideas and exercises of Marcus Aurelius</p>	<p>~ Guided, collaborative reflection on the key themes practised over the last week.</p> <p>Discussion topics such as:</p> <p>~ How did this morning activity impact the way you approached your day or responded to challenges that arose?</p> <p>~ How did the activity influence your thinking about Stoic ideas of control, rationality or good character?</p>
	<p><b>Part 2:</b></p> <p>Introduction to Epicurus</p>	<p>~ Introduction to Epicurus and his philosophy</p> <p>~ Introduction to some key Epicurean ideas (e.g. pleasure as the goal of life, the division of desires, the significance of friendship)</p> <p>~ Introduction to a set of practical exercises informed by Epicurean philosophy (e.g. prioritising the satisfaction of natural and necessary desires).</p>
<b>Week 4</b>	<p><b>Part 1:</b></p> <p>Group reflection on practising the ideas and</p>	<p>~ Guided, collaborative reflection on the key themes practised over the last week.</p> <p>Discussion topics such as:</p> <p>~ How did your experience this week influence the way you thought about the Epicurean conception of pleasure?</p>

	exercises of Epicurus	~ How did the exercises influence your understanding of Epicurus's claim regarding the goal of life?
	<b>Part 2:</b> Conclusion – on living philosophically	~ Summary of topics covered and common themes between the philosophers we have encountered (e.g. the extent to which individuals were seen to have control over their own happiness)  Closing group reflection with topics covered such as:  ~ What does it mean to live 'philosophically'?  ~ To what extent do these ideas still have relevance for people today?

### *The handouts*

For each included thinker I have produced a workbook of approximately 20 pages. The workbooks introduce the main ideas of the philosophy practised by the subject and provide some historical and philosophical context to aid understanding. The workbooks include a combination of direct quotes from original works, and my own descriptions and explanations of the philosophical framework within which the central figure was working. This overview helps to provide the context for the practical exercises I have introduced in the lecture and describe in each workbook. These workbooks detail much of the information covered in the lecture and ultimately they serve the purpose of supplementing the teaching on the included philosophers. It is typical for these workshops to include several participants who have never formally read any philosophy before and several others who are not familiar with the thought of this specific thinker. As such, these workbooks provide a source of information to which participants can return in the week and they are designed to help deepen the understanding they have of these philosophers beyond what can be covered in the 50-minute introductory lecture. For the purpose of this article, it is important to note that the workbooks themselves are not considered essential to adopting this approach to teaching ancient practical ethics. To replicate elements of the approach I am describing here, it would by no means be necessary to

produce similar workbooks. Whilst explanatory handouts created for the teaching will likely be helpful and common practise anyway, teachers may of course also choose instead to set reading assignments of primary texts or scholarly interpretations as would be common on any course of philosophy.

### *The practical nature of the approach*

As can be seen from the sketch given above, a key focus of both the workbooks and the weekly sessions is to encourage participants to try out the practical exercises in their day-to-day lives. Rather than reading or studying ideas as though detached from everyday life, the workshop encourages participants to experience the ideas themselves. Two reasons are central for this. Firstly, as we have seen, the included philosophers themselves insisted that philosophy was something to be practised in this way. In what we know of Socrates, Diogenes the Cynic, Epictetus, Epicurus and such figures we find repeated entreaties to applying these ideas practically.<sup>xv</sup> The idea of philosophy being a purely academic subject, confined to books and forgotten about once one leaves the classroom and undertakes the activities of daily living, was repeatedly castigated in ancient sources.<sup>xvi</sup> Secondly, and as discussed in more detail below, a range of contemporary educational research suggests that ‘active-learning’ strategies produce better learning outcomes. Consequently, I suggest that this active, engaged and practically informed approach to teaching ancient practical ethics will help promote a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the ideas included.

Whilst it seems likely that the ancients themselves were intuitively aware of the educational value of such an approach,<sup>xvii</sup> the emphasis found in their thought on the practical application of ideas was primarily because they had a practical goal in mind. As discussed above, philosophy here was supposed to shape one’s way of living, so it could never be cut off from the reality of everyday life. As we have seen, it was claimed that following these philosophies and using their ideas to shapes one’s way of living would lead ultimately to a life of contentment and happiness. It is important to note that our goal in these workshops however is fundamentally different, and our venture into the



question of whether philosophy can tell us something important about how to live a happy life is one of tentative and open-minded exploration.<sup>xviii</sup> If practising the ideas of Stoic, Socratic, Cynic or Epicurean philosophy can provide the helpful and therapeutic effect to some that their originators claimed they could, then clearly this is a positive outcome.<sup>xix</sup> But this is neither the explicit goal of these workshops nor the sole reason I suggest that this approach to teaching philosophy is valuable. My suggestion here rather is that this practical approach to teaching ancient applied philosophy is helpful in terms of supporting learners to understand the philosophical ideas and theories covered.<sup>xx</sup>

In the following section, I discuss three key features to the teaching approach I am describing here that I suggest help in this regard.

### **Using practical exercises, reflection and collaborative learning approaches to increase student engagement and encourage deep-processing of material**

A challenge familiar to teachers of all levels and of all disciplines, is how to engage and stimulate learners. Indeed, this challenge has been discussed recently in terms of teaching ancient philosophy to undergraduate students,<sup>xxi</sup> and the notion that students will engage in different ways and to different degrees is a commonly recognised one in education literature.<sup>xxii</sup> In an influential series of articles beginning in the 1970s,<sup>xxiii</sup> Marton and Saljo described what they called ‘surface’ and ‘deep’ approaches to learning. ‘Surface’-level processing results in a superficial level of understanding, effective for the short-term retention of declarative information, but resulting in knowledge that is little more than a disjointed collection of facts that are retained poorly over time. ‘Deep’-processing on the other hand facilitates a fuller understanding of material, one in which students go beyond the surface meaning of texts or words and seek to grasp what is meant and what the text signifies.<sup>xxiv</sup> Over recent decades, education scholars have given much consideration to how deep-process learning can be facilitated. A large body of evidence<sup>xxv</sup> suggests that ‘active-learning’ strategies, in which students are required by the learning activity itself to use the higher-order cognitive strategies associated with deep-level processing, can support this approach to learning. Active-learning strategies are many and

varied in form, but united by the way in which they require students to pose questions and to speculate, to theorise about content, to construct meaning and to generate solutions to problems instead of adopting the position of a passive ‘recipient’ of knowledge.<sup>xxvi</sup>

I suggest that the active approach to teaching ancient practical ethics that I am describing here features three ways in which students are encouraged towards adopting a ‘deep’ approach to learning. In the following section, I describe each of these features in turn and discuss how each one is grounded in contemporary educational theory and also in keeping with the educational and philosophical aims of the philosophers considered. In addition to this, I briefly describe practical advice for how to promote them in the classroom.

### **The educational value of practising these ‘spiritual’ exercises**

As described above, these workshops seek to encourage participants to engage practically with the ideas we cover in the way that ancient students and followers of figures such as Diogenes, Epictetus or Epicurus would have done. For such figures, these practical exercises were important for helping students and followers memorise and understand key elements to the philosophical system, and ultimately to embed the philosophical ideas into their way of living.<sup>xxvii</sup> As we have seen, the reason for this practical focus in the ancients was that they believed the job of philosophy was to show us the way to living happy and fulfilled lives. As described above however, I suggest that contemporary educational theory demonstrates that such an approach also promotes a ‘deep’ approach to learning, making it a highly useful active-learning strategy for modern teachers of philosophy.

By trying out these practical exercises, participants are required to think in detail about the theory on which such ideas are built. When taking time in the morning to reflect on the day ahead and the challenges one may expect to meet, as Marcus Aurelius is known to have done for example,<sup>xxviii</sup> participants are required to go beyond a merely academic understanding of the value or purpose of such ideas. This experiential element to the teaching approach brings the ideas to life and encourages learners to engage critically with them. What value do I take from thinking of my day ahead in this

way? What does it tell me about my capacities for foresight, reason or sociability? How does such an exercise sit with the wider Stoic worldview? From this active and involved position, learners are encouraged away from the position of a passive recipient of knowledge. Instead, by trying the ideas out and considering them in the context of the philosophical framework from which they emerged, they are encouraged towards an active, critical and involved perspective.

An interesting parallel can be drawn here between this approach to teaching and learning practical ethics, and an evidence-based teaching approach used widely in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy training programmes called Self-Practice/Self-Reflection.<sup>xxix xxx</sup> In SP/SR, therapists try out the therapy techniques they are learning on themselves, and then reflect on that experience afterwards in a structured fashion. In recent years, a number of studies have demonstrated the way in which SP/SR helps improve a range of learning outcomes relevant to the development of clinical competence.<sup>xxxi</sup> Most interestingly for our purposes here, evidence suggests that these self-practise exercises also help to improve trainee understanding of the theory behind the interventions they are practising.<sup>xxxii</sup> Not only, it seems, do therapists become more competent at carrying out cognitive therapy in clinical situations as a result of the self-practise of therapy techniques, they also report understanding the *theory* of the cognitive approach in more detail too. Could it be therefore, that practising the exercises of withholding assent to impressions<sup>xxxiii</sup> or avoiding some forms of luxury<sup>xxxiv</sup> could positively impact understanding of the Stoic and Epicurean doctrines upon which such ideas are built? The literature on the self-practise of therapy techniques in trainee therapists gives good reason to believe this may be so. The existing literature on SP/SR suggests that by practising interventions on themselves, therapists are granted a new perspective on these techniques. This practical and personal experience appears to provide an opportunity for learning that goes beyond theoretical or text-book learning, and in practising these ideas, therapists see the inner workings of therapeutic techniques for themselves. Challenges in implementing techniques are experienced and overcome, and the theoretical underpinnings of the interventions are set out clearly in one's experience. Having then experienced the techniques themselves 'from the inside out'<sup>xxxv</sup> therapists report a deeper and more detailed understanding of the intervention's rationale, as well as how to implement it clinically.

Though of course by no means definitive evidence of this, participant feedback on these workshops almost unanimously suggests that practising the philosophical exercises we explore also has this effect. A representative piece of feedback (provided after the week of practising Epicurean ideas) on this point is given below:

Actually doing the practical exercises gave me different perspectives on the concepts behind them. For example cutting out all cold drinks (including beer!) last week and replacing them with water really made me grasp the difference between ‘natural and necessary’ and ‘natural and unnecessary’ (Anne, March 2020)

My suggestion therefore is that by encouraging students and learners to practise these ideas in their day-to-day lives, we can help them develop a richer and more nuanced understanding of the philosophical theory upon which such exercises are built. By going beyond the ‘academic’ understanding one may develop from reading about the Epicurean division of desires for example, those who experiment with living in accordance with Epicurean principles for a period are afforded a new and involved perspective on the idea. Like the therapist who sees and understands cognitive therapy in a new way once having tried it on himself, the student of practical ethics who tries out the exercises he is learning may then also develop a fuller and more comprehensive understanding of the philosophical theories he explores. Having implemented the ideas practically, he experiences them from the inside and sees the inner workings of the ideas for himself.

In a recent article describing an attempt to build practical and experiential elements into the teaching of philosophy, Drew Leder has commented how ‘Instead of thinking, with the hope it may sometimes effect our doing, we can ask our students to do something that provokes them to think anew’.<sup>xxxvi</sup> A similar sentiment informs the approach described here. By working through and living out these ideas and exercises, participants are encouraged to think in new and involved ways about the theory that supports them. Interestingly, research has also demonstrated that self-referenced material is better

recalled.<sup>xxxvii</sup> As such, it seems likely that learners' memory and recall of the ideas and theories they try out and apply in this way will also be improved as a result of having applied them in one's day-to-day life.

Whilst evidence suggests therefore that this may be a useful and innovative pedagogical approach to build into our teaching, the practical reality of encouraging students to practise philosophical techniques in their day-to-day lives is not always an easy one. Even the most interested or motivated of students will often find it difficult to find the time for such exercises, and finding ways to incorporate such exercises into their week is not always going to be easy. As such, to increase the likelihood of students doing these exercises, and thus taking the educational value from doing so, it is important to draw on available evidence from behaviour change theory.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Encouraging students to commit in advance to specific times at which they will try the exercises each day is important. Similarly, providing students with a meaningful rationale as to why carrying these tasks out may be useful seems critical.<sup>xxxix</sup>

## **Reflection**

As described above, central to the approach I have described here is the conviction that there is significant educational value both in applying the taught philosophical exercises practically, and in reflecting deliberately on the experience afterwards. Of course, the idea that reflection has an important role to play in education is a well-established one,<sup>xl</sup> and many teachers of philosophy will already seek to promote this.

In their book-length study of reflection in adult education, Boud and colleagues note how 'one of the most important ways to enhance learning is to strengthen the link between the learning experience and the reflective activity which follows it'. They go on to say that 'at the simplest level this can be achieved... by the scheduling of a debriefing period for a group or by setting specific time aside for keeping a diary of events and one's reactions to them'.<sup>xli</sup> In the following sections, I describe how the

reflective prompts used in the workbooks, and the collaborative discussions held during the workshops, are intended to play this role.

The specific form of reflection encouraged in this approach to teaching ancient practical ethics comes close to what Schön famously termed ‘reflection-on-action’.<sup>xlii</sup> This deliberate, after the fact reflection on experience has been shown to be deeply significant from an educational perspective,<sup>xliii</sup> and as such, I seek in these workshops to support learners to adopt this critically reflective approach to thinking about their experience of carrying out the included exercises.

Interestingly of course, many of the ancient philosophers we cover in the workshop themselves saw the value of such after-the-fact reflection. The practise of nightly self-examination and reflection described by Seneca in *On Anger* is perhaps the most well-known example of this,<sup>xliv</sup> but evidence of similar practise is evident in Epicurus,<sup>xlv</sup> Epictetus,<sup>xlvi</sup> Marcus<sup>xlvii</sup> and Socrates<sup>xlviii</sup> too.

To promote this reflective approach, I supplement each of the practical exercises encouraged with a series of reflective prompts. The use of reflective prompts has been shown to be an effective pedagogical tool<sup>xlix</sup> and again, it encourages learners away from the position of passive recipients of knowledge and towards a more engaged and critical position in which their learning is constructed actively. For the purpose of this article, I have included an example of a set of reflective prompts provided to learners below. In the context of learning about the Epicurean division of desires into ‘natural and necessary’, ‘natural but not necessary’ and ‘unnatural or groundless’,<sup>1</sup> participants are encouraged to try replacing some object of ‘natural but not necessary’ desire that usually features in their day, with a ‘natural and necessary’ replacement. Having made this swap across the week, participants are encouraged to think through and write out answers to the following:

**The thing I gave up/swapped:**

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**Was there anything difficult about this activity? If so, what?**

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**Did it get easier or more difficult over the week?**

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**Looking back over the week now, did it have any impact on my overall level of happiness?**

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**What does this tell me about the role of such goods in my life?**

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It is important to note that as such, these reflective prompts are not intended to direct participants towards any particular conclusion. Not all participants end up agreeing with Epicurus's views on pleasure for example, and some return having concluded that they are now even more sure that the many and varied goods of their 'natural but not necessary' desires truly do *increase* their happiness, rather than simply vary it.<sup>li</sup> Others return, surprised to find that despite challenges at the outset, they realised through reflection that overall their happiness was not in the slightest bit diminished by replacing their usual delicious daily lunch for a plain bowl of lentils (as one participant once reported!). I suggest that the thinking that these reflective prompts encourage supports a deeper and more critical understanding of the ideas engaged with. As such, I believe they are a useful vehicle for supplementing this practical approach to teaching ancient practical ethics. Whilst simply providing reflective prompts in this way of course does not ensure that the desired reflective activity takes place, feedback from these workshops suggests that these are helpful additions that can and do support participants to think more critically about the ideas they are practising.

### **Collaborative learning**

The final defining feature of this approach to teaching ancient practical ethics is the importance placed on collaborative learning. 'Collaborative learning' is a term used to describe a range of educational methods in which students collaborate in working towards a particular educational goal. In collaborative learning approaches, the emphasis is placed firmly on how learning can be a collective and shared undertaking as opposed to something carried out alone.<sup>liii</sup> It has been suggested that such collaborative and group focussed tasks are a critical ingredient to engaging students in higher-



education generally<sup>liii</sup> and in ancient philosophy in particular.<sup>liv</sup> Collaborative approaches to learning and doing philosophy were a central feature of many of the philosophical approaches discussed in these workshops for example. Epicurus's advice to practise philosophy both alone and with others<sup>lv</sup> for example demonstrates the way in which he recognised that working together on a common educational goal could help students in their learning. Similarly, the Socratic method of inquiry is itself inherently collaborative by nature. Contemporary scholars of ancient philosophy have also reflected on the significance of collaborative approaches for teaching Greek philosophy to undergraduate students. In a recent article for example, Daniel Vázquez has suggested that such approaches are 'crucial' for supporting a deep understanding of ancient philosophical texts. For the likes of Vázquez, collaborative approaches are significant for the way in which they encourage interaction between students; facilitating open discussions and encouraging the exchange of multiple viewpoints in ways that help provide deeper understandings of philosophical issues, or help to decipher the meaning of cryptic phrases from ancient texts.

The intuitions about collaborative learning that are evidenced by teachers of philosophy both ancient and contemporary are indeed supported by a range of evidence, with research suggesting that collaborative learning approaches have positive impacts on a variety of learning outcomes, including academic achievement.<sup>lvi</sup>

The group discussions that comprise the first half of each session in these workshops then are intended to promote the concept of working together as a group to come to a fuller understanding of the topics we discuss. Again, whilst by no means demonstrating efficacy, it is interesting to note that workshop participants frequently comment positively on this aspect to the sessions, with one recent participant for example commenting how 'The open sessions were good to hear mixed opinions and viewpoints' (Luke, March 2020).

Whilst encouraging open discussion and expecting conversations to take us into unforeseen areas, I use pre-prepared questions and prompts to guide these reflective discussions. As with the reflective prompts discussed above, these reflective discussions are designed to support participants to reflect on how applying ideas practically influenced their understanding or appreciation of the theoretical ideas

underpinning the philosophy in question. How do they now think of the Epicurean division of desires, having attempted to live by it over the last week for example? What do they think to the Cynic claim that philosophy teaches us to be ready for anything?<sup>lvii</sup> or the Stoic assertion that nothing but moral goodness is truly worthy,<sup>lviii</sup> having spent a week living out and reflecting on the ideas underpinning these respective philosophies? Do they agree with any of the claims made by these philosophers and how has the practise of these ideas influenced that? Similarly, we reflect on the therapeutic or resilience building qualities that these philosophers claimed their philosophies had. Is the unexamined life really not worth living?<sup>lix</sup> And is happiness in the reach of us all once we have taken on board the Epicurean ideas regarding the end of life? Indeed, should we take those ideas on board? And if there are shortcomings, where do they lie?<sup>lx</sup>

As such, these group discussions provide an opportunity for participants to reflect together both on their experience putting these ideas into practise, and also the way that this has influenced their understanding of the theoretical ideas underpinning the philosophy. My role as facilitator here is one built on the notion, described by Elder and Paul in an article on critical thinking, as one in which ‘thinking is driven by questions, not by answers’.<sup>lxi</sup> These discussions build directly on the practical exercises and reflective activities that participants have been carrying out over the previous week. By now working through these ideas together and reflecting as a group, participants are given the opportunity to raise questions, articulate their understanding of ideas, and hear opposing views on the usefulness or logical rigour of the philosophy that has informed their past week. As such, these sections are eminently collaborative in their goals and we are working together as a group to come to an enhanced understanding of the philosophical ideas covered. Whilst I will guide the discussions, addressing points of misunderstanding and offering clarification or examples where needed, the emphasis here is on collaborative discovery, and participants are encouraged to see this as a collective undertaking in which we are working together towards a common goal. Such collaborative approaches to learning are a well-established pedagogical method that are well suited to the goals of these classes. In such environments, where skills in reasoning, critical thinking and philosophical argumentation are as much the goal as declarative understanding, these open and discussion-based

sessions seek to provide a space both to refine participant understanding, and develop skills in reasoning and philosophical argumentation.

### **Enhancing student motivation**

Although clearly the workshops I have used to describe this approach to teaching ancient practical ethics are significantly different from university or college philosophy courses, I suggest that the approach I have described can be usefully adapted to teaching ancient applied philosophy in any setting. Not only courses with an explicit focus on the notion of philosophy as a way of life<sup>lxii</sup> but any programme centred around thinkers in the mould of those I have described here will lend itself well to this approach. As well as encouraging learners into an active and involved position that helps develop a deeper processing of material, I argue that incorporating such practise into teaching at any level is also likely to increase student engagement and motivation.

Importantly, I suggest that such an approach to teaching and learning philosophy will be valued and enjoyed by many students. Whilst of course it is unlikely that any single teaching strategy will appeal equally to all students, it is significant that several recent articles describing attempts to bring more active-learning and experiential approaches into the philosophy classroom have noted how the practical components of the course have been the most valued by students.<sup>lxiii</sup>

Participant feedback from my workshops too suggests that carrying out these practical exercises is highly valued. Participants frequently report having enjoyed trying out the ideas, even when the experience has lead them to raise questions about the validity or usefulness of the philosophy.<sup>lxiv</sup> As one recent participant noted:

‘I really enjoyed the exercises to live like an Epicurean. I thought it was really interesting to try this out and I felt by the end of the week as though I understood his claim that pleasure was the goal of life better. But in truth, the week also made me realise further that I didn’t agree with this claim. Pleasure is clearly important, but I think if we aim all of our action

towards pleasure in this way, we miss something important about what it means to be human' (Cass, March 2020).

Interestingly, a number of participants have reported continuing to apply these practical ideas long after they attended the workshop.<sup>lxv</sup> This suggests that the enjoyable and practically beneficial nature of some of the exercises means that for some learners at least, the exercises may become self-reinforcing.<sup>lxvi</sup> As such, whilst acknowledging of course that this has not been empirically tested, several factors here combine to suggest that for many learners, carrying out these philosophical exercises will be something experienced as enjoyable and interesting. As such, many learners will likely engage in these activities with a good deal of autonomy.<sup>lxvii</sup> Intrinsically motivated behaviour in the classroom has been repeatedly associated with better learning and more creativity,<sup>lxviii</sup> and consequently, approaches which may enhance this are beneficial. Encouraging students to try out and experiment with the ideas of practical ethics that run throughout much of ancient, applied philosophy then, may be a useful pedagogical tool. These tasks, which are frequently perceived as interesting and enjoyable, may thus provide a significant opportunity for teachers of philosophy seeking to enhance their students' motivation to engage with learning activities. Perhaps few reading assignments are likely to be experienced as positively by learners as these practical exercises. And yet, as we have seen, the way in which such practical exercises can support academic learning is clear.

### **Practical considerations**

As with any pedagogical method, some preparation and consideration is required at the outset in order to get the best out of this approach. Importantly, my experience suggests that this need not require an extensive investment of time however, and once established, this approach serves as a flexible and engaging method that can be used repeatedly with little additional preparation.

Teachers familiar with the work of these thinkers for example will find a vast array of possible exercises that can be easily drawn or adapted from their work. When preparing such teaching

activities, I have found it useful to try any proposed exercise out on myself, and to fully work through and write out responses to any of the proposed reflective questions that may accompany it, before setting the task. I have found that doing so has enabled me to refine exercises and reflective questions in ways that have made the tasks clearer and more attainable.<sup>lxix</sup>

Teachers interested in adopting such an approach may also note that (as with any pedagogical method) this approach will appeal more to some students than others. Large-group, open discussions for example will appeal to some students but may leave others feeling unconfident and unable to contribute. As such, I have occasionally found it useful to begin the reflective sections of sessions by breaking people off into smaller groups and providing people with points for discussion there before bringing things back to the whole group. When doing so, I have tended to move between groups, sitting in briefly on the discussion and facilitating where needed. Whilst this has occasionally meant that less ground is covered (as some time is spent breaking people into groups, discussing there and then subsequently bringing everyone back together to further elaborate on our ideas), it seems in general to have helped those who often sit quietly through the larger group discussions to participate more actively. Given the importance placed here on actively constructing learning through collaboration with others, such attempts to facilitate an environment in which people feel as comfortable as possible to contribute have felt important.

As mentioned briefly above, for the large-group, collaborative discussions, I have found it beneficial to be prepared with several reflective prompts, questions or topics for discussion and I would recommend that teachers interested in trying the approach consider doing the same thing. Whilst we have not always discussed each planned point in detail, I have found it useful to have a number of clear and well-defined points of discussion to anchor things to when needed. My experience suggests that teachers using this approach should be willing to allow discussions to develop, and for ideas amongst the group to be advanced beyond the initial prompt point. Some of the most stimulating discussions I have facilitated in these groups have been those where participants have felt confident to draw out their ideas and develop them in relation to real life issues. There have also however been occasions where these discussions have veered perhaps a little too far from the starting point, and

there is the risk of losing sight of the philosophical issue which prompted the discussion if the conversation is not contained to some degree. To this end, I quickly discovered that having pre-prepared and clearly defined points or questions was helpful, to draw things back to when needed, or to re-ignite the discussion on a new issue if a previous point runs its course or struggles to get off the ground.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have described an approach to teaching ancient practical ethics that places significant value on engaging practically with the ideas taught. In so doing, I have suggested that this approach emulates some of the pedagogical methods of the ancient philosophers themselves, and provides an innovative, flexible, creative and enjoyable approach to teaching philosophy that is also well grounded in contemporary educational research. Though the efficacy of this approach to teaching philosophy has not yet been empirically examined, participant feedback from my workshops and a range of relevant research from psychology and adult learning suggests that this may be a useful and interesting approach to teaching philosophy that could be easily replicated by teachers in schools, universities, colleges or community settings.

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<sup>i</sup> See for e.g. Epicurus *Letter To Menoeceus* 122; Socrates *Apology* 38a; Seneca *Letters* 13.

<sup>ii</sup> In John Cooper's *Pursuits of Wisdom* (2012) he provides an insightful description of how philosophy was conceived both in ancient times and today (p.3). Interestingly, this topic has been one of some debate, with scholars such as Pierre Hadot for instance maintaining that it is not philosophy proper, but rather philosophical discourse that can be so divided (Hadot, 1995 p.266).

<sup>iii</sup> This is a point on which the scholarly literature has not unanimously agreed. Though for influential thinkers such as Pierre Hadot, philosophy is an inherently practical subject informing a whole way of being (Hadot, 1995 p.265), others have rejected elements of this thesis (see for e.g. Cooper, 2012; Nussbaum, 1994). For the likes of Cooper, whilst philosophy is undeniably a practical subject at least in part, its core is instead 'the art or discipline that develops and perfects the human capacity for reason' (Cooper, 2012 p.6). Irrespective of these

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scholarly disagreements however, it is widely accepted that philosophy in these times was at least in part interested in practical questions of how to live.

<sup>iv</sup> Diogenes of Sinope, *Lives of The Eminent Philosophers* 6.63; Socrates, *Apology* 29d-30a; Epicurus *Principle Doctrines* 21.

<sup>v</sup> Discussing their attempts to more closely align philosophy with the business of daily life, Hutchinson and Loughton recently noted how ‘we have found that the audiences most disdainful of the idea that the subject has any relevance to the ‘real world’ are those made up largely of professional philosophers’ (2009, p.41)

<sup>vi</sup> *Discourses* 3.21.5-6

<sup>vii</sup> Even where teachers may be inclined to accept this criterion, the requirements and expectations of a teaching post in schools or universities would of course require a focus on the more traditionally academic practises of amassing declarative knowledge about a range of topics from the history of philosophy or developing skills in writing in a philosophically valued way etc. The argument I will develop in this article is that incorporating a practical focus to teaching applied ethics can help enrich and enhance the teaching and learning of philosophy in this regard too.

<sup>viii</sup> Biggs, 2014

<sup>ix</sup> Writing in this journal, John Rudishell has set out a distinction between *studying* and *doing* philosophy (2011). On Rudishell’s definition, a student who ‘studies’ philosophy learns about which philosopher made which argument and so forth, whilst the student who ‘does’ philosophy exercises ‘a set of intellectual skills in the service of reaching greater clarity with respect to a broad range of issues’ (Ruddishell, 2011 p.243). I suggest that the workshop and approach described here, with its emphasis on practical engagement with ideas and collaborative attempts to discuss, defend and articulate philosophical theories, is one which firmly encourages the doing – as opposed to the ‘mere’ learning – of philosophy.

<sup>x</sup> Over the last few years, I have run variations of this workshop five times, to a total of approximately 35 people.

<sup>xi</sup> In this regard, the description of ancient philosophy I give is one heavily informed by the work of Pierre Hadot and portrayed as being a subject intended – as Hadot himself was so fond of saying (Davidson, 1995 p.20) – to ‘form, rather than inform’ the student.

<sup>xii</sup> In this first session, I often introduce the idea from Hadot (1995) that in ancient Greece, ‘every person who lived according to the precepts of Epicurus or Chryssipus was every bit as much of a philosopher as they’ (Hadot, 1995 p.272)

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<sup>xiii</sup> The notion of ‘spiritual exercises’ is central to Hadot’s interpretation of ancient philosophy. See Hadot (1995; 2009).

<sup>xiv</sup> At other times, thinkers covered in the workshop have included Socrates, Diogenes of Sinope, Seneca and Aristotle.

<sup>xv</sup> See for e.g. Epictetus *Discourses* 3.21.4-6; Epicurus *Letter to Menoeceus* 135; Plato *Apology* 38a; or what is said of Diogenes of Sinope *Lives of The Eminent Philosophers* VI.22

<sup>xvi</sup> Diogenes Laertius for example reports how Polemo was known to have warned against becoming like the man who knows a text book by heart but who has never applied any of the ideas it contains to his life and thus who lives at variance with his learning (*Lives of The Eminent Philosophers IV, 18*)

<sup>xvii</sup> For a discussion of how certain practical exercises were seen to play an important educational role in Epicurean education for example, see Asmis (2001)

<sup>xviii</sup> In essence, the goal of these workshops is to provide interested participants with an opportunity to learn about, discuss and engage with the various philosophies covered.

<sup>xix</sup> Interestingly, participants in these workshops frequently do in fact report finding the practise of these ideas helpful in terms of building resilience and increasing happiness. Though this is not the aim of the workshops (and the workshops certainly make no therapeutic or happiness inducing claims) this is perhaps not surprising given that several of the ideas central to the philosophies discussed have gone on to become significant influences for contemporary evidence-based therapeutic and positive psychology interventions. See for e.g. Robertson (2010).

<sup>xx</sup> Elsewhere I have discussed the recent rise of popular books on philosophy with explicitly resilience-building or therapeutic aims. In that article I have argued that authors with these practical aims in mind should encourage readers both to practise the ideas of ancient practical ethics and also to reflect on one’s experience of doing so afterwards. I have suggested that contemporary research from modern training programmes suggests that to do so will help such authors in their efforts to impart some of the practical, therapeutic or resilience-building qualities of ancient philosophy to their readers. In this article, I am suggesting that the value and significance of a practical, engaged and reflective approach also extends beyond this and in to the more typically academic arena of enhancing student knowledge and understanding of these philosophies. (Owen, 2020).

<sup>xxi</sup> Vázquez, 2014

<sup>xxii</sup> Biggs, 1999; Scager et al., 2017

<sup>xxiii</sup> see for e.g. Marton & Saljo 1976a; Marton & Saljo 1976b

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<sup>xxiv</sup> Marton & Saljo, 1976a; Marton & Saljo, 1976b

<sup>xxv</sup> see for e.g. Biggs, 1999; Marton & Saljo, 1976b; Prince, 2004

<sup>xxvi</sup> Biggs, 1999

<sup>xxvii</sup> See the chapter on ‘Spiritual Exercises’ in Hadot (1995) for a full discussion of the role played by such exercises in one’s philosophical education.

<sup>xxviii</sup> *Meditations* 2.1

<sup>xxix</sup> Bennett-Levy et al., 2001

<sup>xxx</sup> See (Owen, 2020) for a detailed exploration of the parallels between ancient ethical philosophy and contemporary psychotherapy training.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Davis et al., 2014; Thwaites et al., 2015

<sup>xxxii</sup> Bennett-Levy et al., 2001

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Epictetus *Discourses* 2.18-24

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Epicurus *Letter to Menoeceus* 130; Seneca *Letter* 18

<sup>xxxv</sup> Bennett-Levy, Thwaites & Haarhoff, 2015

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Leder, 2009 p.82

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Hartlep & Forsyth, 2000

<sup>xxxviii</sup> The COM-B model, developed by Susan Michie and colleagues for example, suggests that any given behaviour occurs only when one has the capability (C), opportunity (O) and motivation (M) to do that behaviour (B). They have shown that identifying and enhancing factors relevant to each of these components (COM) can increase the likelihood of target behaviours being carried out. In light of this model, it is important that when encouraging students to carry these exercises out, we give attention to how their capability, opportunity and motivation to do them can be enhanced. Providing clear explanations of the exercises and how they work for example will enhance students’ capability to carry them out. Giving time during teaching for students to plan ahead and work out when in the coming week they will put the time aside to carry these exercises out will also help increase their opportunity to do so. Similarly, making clear the expectations that the collaborative discussions in the subsequent teaching block require everyone to have tried the exercises will act as a motivator. See Michie et al., 2011 for further information.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Reeve et al., 2002. In the context under consideration here, drawing students’ attention to the way in which such a method aligns with ancient philosophers and contemporary educational theory seems likely to be beneficial.

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<sup>xi</sup> Boud & Walker, 1985; Moon, 2000

<sup>xli</sup> Boud et al 1985, p.26

<sup>xlii</sup> Schön, 1983

<sup>xliii</sup> Schön, 1983; Moon, 2000; Bennett-Levy, 2006

<sup>xliv</sup> On Anger, 3.36

<sup>xlv</sup> Asmis (2001) discusses the practise of spiritual reflection in the Epicurean school, whereby students discussed their actions and behaviours with more advanced friends and guides, and were helped through this process to improve in their philosophical development. (2001, p.225)

<sup>xlvi</sup> *Discourses*, 3.10

<sup>xlvii</sup> *Meditations* 5.31

<sup>xlviii</sup> *Apology*, 38a

<sup>xlix</sup> Harrison & Fopma-Loy, 2010

<sup>l</sup> *Principal Doctrines*, 29

<sup>li</sup> *Principal Doctrine*, 18. See also the Scholia note to *Principal Doctrine*, 29

<sup>lii</sup> Prince, 2004

<sup>liii</sup> Zepke & Leach, 2010

<sup>liv</sup> Vázquez, 2014

<sup>lv</sup> *Letter to Menoeceus*, 135

<sup>lvi</sup> Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1998; Prince, 2004

<sup>lvii</sup> *Lives* 6.63

<sup>lviii</sup> *Lives of The Eminent Philosophers* VII.94-95

<sup>lix</sup> *Apology*, 38a

<sup>lx</sup> All of the questions in the preceding passage are ones I have used during these collaborative reflections.

<sup>lxi</sup> Elder & Paul, 1998 p.298

<sup>lxii</sup> The University of Warwick in the UK for example is currently running a postgraduate module on 'Philosophy and the good life'

<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/philosophy/studywithus/postgraduate/modules/ph9g8/>

<sup>lxiii</sup> See for e.g. Joyce, Lamey & Martin (2018); Leder, 2009

<sup>lxiv</sup> It is of course important to acknowledge that these participants, having enrolled onto a course in practical philosophy, may be particularly inclined to find practical, philosophical exercises enjoyable. However, it is

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worth noting that participants know very little about precisely what they will do before they begin the workshop and so in some respects need not be considered altogether more certain to enjoy such activities than students who have chosen to take a degree in the subject for example.

<sup>lxv</sup> Whilst I do not follow up with participants after involvement in the workshop, several past attendees have contacted me independently to comment on how they have continued to implement some of the ideas we covered.

<sup>lxvi</sup> Interestingly, this is a finding that has been mirrored in controlled studies assessing the value of positive psychology interventions, in which participants have reported continuing independently to use the interventions long after the study itself had finished. e.g. Seligman et al., 2005.

<sup>lxvii</sup> It is worth noting that whilst clearly not an unbiased sample, participants in these workshops almost always carry out all of the included exercises each week. Naturally, in the context of a free workshop, participants understand that there is no negative outcome associated with not carrying the exercises out, and the only reward for doing so is the interest, enjoyment or learning associated with actually doing them.

<sup>lxviii</sup> Niemic & Ryan, 2009

<sup>lxix</sup> On a number of occasions for example, it has not been until I have tried things out on myself that I have realised that the time needed for an exercise is more than I would have anticipated. Similarly, I have found that it has only been once I've tried answering the reflective questions in full myself that I have been able to feel confident that it fits well with the task and is likely to stimulate useful thinking.