

## PHILOSOPHY AS EMPIRICAL EXPLORATION OF LIVING

### AN APPROACH TO COURSES IN PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE

STEVEN HORST

---

**Abstract:** This essay describes an approach to designing a course in philosophy as a way of life (PWOL) around a set of immersive “spiritual exercises” through which students might examine their desires, engaging students in a process of testing their own experience against philosophical theories and theories against their own experience. These are used to tie together the units of a course covering classical Western and Eastern philosophical traditions, and to supplement traditional philosophical analysis of texts and arguments with ways of exploring what it might be like to live as a Platonist, Stoic, or Confucian. The essay details several exercises, engages perspectives on PWOL from Pierre Hadot and John Cooper, and addresses the question of how to assess immersive exercises.

Keywords: assessment, John Cooper, cultivation, desire, Pierre Hadot, immersive assignments, moral education, moral psychology, pedagogy, philosophy as a way of life, PWOL, self-understanding, spiritual exercises, teaching philosophy.

---

When Pierre Hadot wrote his landmark book *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Hadot 1995), he would probably have been surprised if anyone had suggested that there would eventually be a movement of philosophers developing college courses exploring philosophical ways of life, some of them integrating what he called “spiritual exercises.” Indeed, organizers of recent summer institutes exploring such courses were themselves surprised by the number of applicants, some of them people who were already teaching such courses and others who were intrigued by the idea and wanted to learn more about how to begin teaching them.<sup>1</sup> I have been teaching such courses for several years now, and courses involving immersive exercises for much longer. In this essay, I wish to share my experience

<sup>1</sup> Wesleyan University hosted an NEH Summer Institute entitled “Reviving Philosophy as a Way of Life” in 2018. <http://nehwayoflife.com>. In 2019, the University of Notre Dame hosted the first of a three-year program of summer institutes funded by the Mellon Foundation. <https://philife.nd.edu>.

in teaching such courses and offer some ideas about how to use a series of immersive exercises to help tie together the units in a course.

First, a bit of background. In the late 1990s, I began to teach a course called “Moral Psychology: Care of the Soul.” This was not a course focused narrowly on the psychology of moral cognition but one focused on “moral psychology” in the older sense of the intersection of theories of the good life, theories of the soul/mind/self/psyche, and practices of therapy and self-cultivation. That particular class was a bit different from what I would now think of as a philosophy as a way of life (PWOL) class, in that a good half of it consisted in readings from more contemporary authors from fields other than philosophy: theoretical psychologists, psychotherapists, spiritual practitioners, and cognitive ethologists. But it was around that time that my colleague Brian Fay drew my attention to Pierre Hadot’s *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, which had recently appeared in English, as he saw that it had a great deal in common with what I was exploring. (I should perhaps note that, although Hadot’s books have provided much inspiration for my classes, they have proven very difficult to use successfully as assigned readings in introductory-level courses. The central lecture of *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, in particular, is written for fellow scholars familiar with the traditions with which Hadot is dealing and does not make for a good point of entry for students.) I recently began to teach a PWOL course based principally on the classical Western and Eastern philosophical schools. This was something that another colleague, Stephen Angle, had begun a few years before, and a third colleague, Tushar Irani, was exploring in his courses in classical Western philosophy. I have now taught the course four times, all as first-year seminars that combine reading and discussion of texts with what Hadot called “spiritual exercises.” Some of these exercises are taken from the well-known Live Like a Stoic Week.<sup>2</sup> Others were devised to explore other classical schools by Professor Irani, and still others are of my own devising.<sup>3</sup>

PWOL courses are quite different from most of the courses I have taught, and certainly different from any that I took as a student. Designing them involves some of the same issues we face in designing most of our classes, such as the trade-offs between depth and breadth. But they involve different sorts of issues as well, particularly issues of how to give students some sort of experience in trying to live philosophically, whether by trying to emulate (for a brief period) some of the experiences one might have found in the ancient schools or by finding new ways to explore philosophical ideas in daily practice. Initially, both my moral psychology class and

<sup>2</sup> <https://modernstoicism.com>.

<sup>3</sup> Some of the resources for these can be found at Notre Dame’s Philosophy as a Way of Life site: <https://philife.nd.edu/resources/>. A downloadable PDF of the 2018 syllabus with exercises can be found at [https://philife.nd.edu/assets/322484/fullsize/horst\\_wesleyan\\_pwol\\_course\\_f2018\\_with\\_exercises.pdf](https://philife.nd.edu/assets/322484/fullsize/horst_wesleyan_pwol_course_f2018_with_exercises.pdf).

my PWOL class may have ended up being something of a motley: anything between a single class session to two weeks on each of a number of different philosophical traditions, exploring their ideas and trying out some practices, with a bit of intellectual comparison of the theories. At first, I thought of this as introducing students to a number of separate ideas and activities that they could “try on,” in the hopes that they would find some that would help them to lead richer and more reflective lives. I have, however, continually sought ways to try to tie the units of the course together into something more unified, even though the course necessarily presents a number of very different and often incompatible ways of life. This essay presents some of what has emerged from that, in the form of an open-ended set of exercises that build upon one another and can be adapted to fit with many different readings.<sup>4</sup>

Before I describe these exercises, however, a few brief words about my own orientation toward the idea of philosophy as a way of life and to teaching PWOL courses.

### **Brief Orienting Reflections**

The most important foundational texts in the revival of PWOL are Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1995) and *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* (2004) and John Cooper's *Pursuits of Wisdom* (2013). My basic perspective on PWOL is closer to Hadot's than to Cooper's. I take Hadot's central claim to be that each of the ancient Western philosophical schools had its own distinctive way of life. That is, Hadot's claim was not that there is a single, well-defined thing called “philosophy” that has a unique “way of life” associated with it. Rather, there are a variety of schools we call “philosophical,” each with its own way of life. (Indeed, as many of the schools had their own internal conversations, disagreements, and developments, there might be more than one possible way of life associated with broad categories like “Platonism” and “Stoicism.”) Cooper's view, by contrast, seems to be more that what we call “philosophy” is characterized by something quite specific—seeking a life guided entirely by Reason—and that whatever the differences among the classical schools, what made them count as *philosophical* was a particular shared view of how a life might be guided by Reason: in particular, that Reason provides motivation to action that can be definitive in determining how we act. Hadot's emphasis on exercises, in Cooper's view, was misplaced: at most, they played a role in only a few of the schools of late antiquity (Stoicism, Neoplatonism) and were tangential to what made those traditions philosophical. While Cooper is no doubt correct that an emphasis on Reason,

<sup>4</sup> In the 2019 version of the class, I began with a week of these exercises. The content of these should be sufficiently clear from this essay, but instructors wishing to obtain copies of the exercises as used in class may contact the author.

as a central and perhaps determinative motivating force, is a distinctive feature shared by the Western schools, I side more with Hadot on the question of whether spiritual exercises also played an important role in most or all of them. Cooper may be correct that formal exercises (of a sort that might be compared with the Ignatian exercises) played central roles in only a few schools of late antiquity. But it is difficult not to read things like Plato's prescriptions for *musike* and *gymnastike* as recommending particular forms of practice (*Republic* 376e–379b). And we find similar elements in other Western schools as well: for example, the Epicureans practiced a distinctive communal form of living, and the Pythagoreans seem to have practiced a variety of religious rituals and followed a specific diet in addition to cultivating Reason through mathematics and natural philosophy.

I am also inclined to go beyond explicit statements by Hadot (though I think this is compatible with his view) to include non-Western traditions like Confucianism, Daoism, some forms of Buddhism, and some Vedic traditions as “philosophical,” even if they lack the distinctive emphasis on Reason found in the Greco-Roman philosophers. Most of these clearly have distinctive practices aimed at the cultivation of the person, some of which could quite plausibly be counted as spiritual exercises even in a narrow sense. (For example, some of the Confucian Rites and the variety of Buddhist mindfulness techniques.) As this is a statement of a *perspective* rather than a *thesis*, I shall not argue for it, except to say that viewing the field in this broad way allows important commonalities to stand out that might otherwise be overlooked and also allows for a multicultural curriculum. I shall, however, stress one implication: that the focus thus becomes on *philosophies* as *ways* of life rather than a single thing called “philosophy” that has a single way of life qua philosophy. This, however, does not mean that the different traditions have nothing in common: in particular, they are all *reflective* ways of life in which there is an important interaction between theoretical reflection and practice, and this is an important part of what makes them count as *philosophical*.

To this I shall add three somewhat theoretical claims, though given the scope of this short essay I shall not attempt to argue them in a scholarly way. First, I regard each of the philosophical schools as a kind of *empirical* or *experimental tradition* in which people were attempting to live well, and often doing so in a community of living dialogue and pedagogy. This indeed involved the formulation and propagation of theoretical ideas, not only about the nature of the good life, but also (in varying degrees and mixtures) about moral psychology, epistemology, metaphysics, political philosophy, logic, and natural philosophy. But it also involved practices of cultivation. And the theory and practice stood in an important reciprocal relationship. On the one hand, theory was grounded in self-examination and observation of individuals and communities; and both theory and particular practices were tested through reflection upon attempts to live out the theory through the practices. Conversely, practice was guided by

theory, and in some cases by a dialectic between different theoretical positions, both within and between philosophical schools. Think, for example, of Aristotle's disagreement with Plato on how to cultivate the moral virtues (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.13–2), or disagreements within Neoconfucianism about the importance of their practice of “quiet sitting” (see Mabuchi 2016). There were clearly *debates* about the merits of particular cultivating practices, but it also seems almost certain that these were informed by experiments with different practices and reflection upon their outcomes.

Second, those who considered making a “profession” of philosophy often tried out several different schools and their ways of life, and the schools competed for adherents.<sup>5</sup> Aspiring philosophers were indeed attentive to the *arguments* of the different schools, but the biographies and *apologies* of the founders and major proponents of the schools also played important roles in the process of “conversion” (*metanoia*), and I cannot help but think that many who were attracted to philosophy made a decision between schools by trying out their various ways of life and seeing what was most beneficial in their own aspirations to life-transforming philosophical cultivation.

Third, in some cases, this led to a kind of syncretism that combined elements drawn from more than one school. Much of this may be difficult to document—who knows how many people led lives woven from strands of different philosophical schools? But we also see it in the ways that dialogue both within and between schools led to changes within particular schools or the formation of new schools. In the West, Socrates inspired not only Plato but also the Cynics and Skeptics, and Stoicism grew out of these. Neoplatonism combined elements of Platonism, Aristotelianism, and Stoicism. In medieval China, many neo-Confucians incorporated ideas and practices that had originated with Daoists and Buddhists. (And, conversely, Chinese Buddhism became something quite different from Indian Buddhism.) In some ways, I regard it as quite natural for students in a PWOL course to undergo a similar process of discernment by exploring several philosophical schools and perhaps adopting something from each of them, though of course on a much shorter timescale.

### Issues in Designing a PWOL Course

This process of exploring and drawing from several schools presents interesting issues for how to teach a course in PWOL. If my perspective is apt, pursuing a philosophical way of life is not something that a person could do within the scope of a college course—it is more of a lifelong journey. Moreover, taking a modern college course is something quite different

<sup>5</sup> The word “profession” meant something quite different in ancient philosophy from what it means today. It did not mean pursuing philosophy for pay in an academic setting but meant something like an explicit adoption of a philosophical way of life.

from going to live in an Epicurean garden, a Buddhist monastery, or Plato's Academy: one is not subscribing to the teachings of a single school or committing to its lifestyle, and indeed a modern university would quite rightly be suspicious of a course that even hinted at such an undertaking, much less an instructor who sought converts to his or her teachings or personal devotees as a kind of guru. The furthest one might go in this direction would be, say, for a professor of Buddhism who was also a Buddhist teacher to offer instruction in mindfulness practices or a practicum in following the Eightfold Path for the semester, or for a Jesuit to offer a unit or a course in the Ignatian exercises. (And doing even this much would require a great deal of sensitivity to things like the personal religious commitments of individual students, with explicit forewarnings to potential students.) At the other end of the spectrum, we might find more traditional courses that taught *about* the theories of the good life presented by one or more schools and described their practices without asking students to try them out. In the middle—and I think that this middle ground is what most faculty interested in PWOL classes are exploring—are courses that present the theories and practices of several schools, with an attempt to provide students with some ways of trying out some of them for themselves—say, by offering immersive spiritual exercises as a part of the course. This has been my own approach, and indeed the only approach available to me, as I do not consider myself a sage or philosophical master in any one school.

As with any course, there is a trade-off here between depth and breadth. One could easily develop a *very* full course that integrated theory and practice that was confined to, say, just the major classical Western or Chinese schools, and even such a course would really do little more than scratch the surface. While I worry about the extreme of a course that could be caricatured as “If it's Tuesday, it must be Aristotle,” I think that a bit of eclecticism is actually quite in the spirit of what the person in late antiquity who was considering making a profession for philosophy might have experienced, listening to teachers of the different schools and perhaps trying several out. And if I am correct about the syncretism and the empirical nature of philosophical exploration, such an eclectic course can, I think, capture the spirit of PWOL if it succeeds in engaging the student in reflective self-examination and a dialogue between theory and practice by studying and trying out several alternative philosophical paths. While I do not wish to encourage the “cafeteria” view of “self-improvement” that fuels popular self-help movements, I do think that getting students to think about living philosophically requires more than educating them about the *views* and *practices* of the schools purely as book learning; it involves getting them to engage reflectively with their own lives in a fashion that allows them to make the most of what has already been explored by several traditions, and to determine for themselves what rings true and what proves to be edifying. Just as Socrates never accomplished more than to inspire others to start out upon philosophical journeys of their own,

our best hope is to do so as well, but with the addition of orienting them to certain guideposts that have withstood the tests of time.

### **Finding a Unifying Strand**

In order to make an exploration of multiple philosophical traditions into something more than a hodgepodge of views, however, it is useful to have a unifying strand. There are doubtless many ways to do this. I wish to present one approach, which has emerged out of several years of teaching PWOL courses, and before that, courses in moral psychology.

The unifying strand of this approach is the notion of what we *want* or *desire*. Our wants, desires, and appetites are of course an important topic in most classical philosophies, and the various schools take different views on such matters as the *nature* of desires, *which* desires are to be cultivated and which to be resisted, and the best *techniques* for addressing them. It is also an easy point of entry for the beginning student. Philosophical theories may be difficult, abstruse, even alien to the novice student. But the question “What do I want?” is something anyone can relate to, even if it turns out to lead into reflections that might cause the student to conclude that it is not such a simple question after all. (And that, in itself, is an important kind of philosophical maturation. Realizing that we do not really understand the things we have always taken for granted is at the core of philosophy in the Socratic lineage.)

Over the years, I have developed a set of exercises involving reflections upon desire, which can be deployed in different ways depending upon the topics, traditions, and readings selected for a course. They introduce a student to things like reflection, self-examination, and mindfulness. They also provide practical ways of looking at what might otherwise seem like purely theoretical claims in texts. And they provide a point of entry for the empirical project of testing one’s own experience (clarified successively in several types of self-examination) against philosophical theories, and vice versa.

### **The Foundational Activity: Compiling an Inventory of Desires**

The foundational exercise is quite simple in outline. I ask students to take a period of time (perhaps half an hour to an hour) and make a list of things they want or desire. It is important that they understand from the outset that this list—at least in its initial form—is for their eyes only, as otherwise they might censor their list. Doing this initial exercise, even by itself without others that build upon it, can be an important philosophical initiation in more than one respect. Taking an inner inventory of their desires invites students to be reflective in ways they may never before have been—perhaps not yet *critically* reflective but engaged in self-examination. But there is also more than this. For students used to studying to the test,

it can be quite a novel experience to be asked to do an exercise that no one, including the teacher, will ever see. This is something that most have them have never before experienced—and, I daresay, something that most readers of this essay have never assigned. And it can in itself be quite a powerful experience. Indeed, if we are trying to get students to live philosophically, there may be no accomplishment more crucial than breaking them out of the mind-set of doing things for external validation or figuring out how to play the system to get a good grade.

Taking an inventory of one's own desires can also lead to the beginnings of practices of *mindfulness*. Sometimes I have done the first exercise in class, which necessarily makes it a very short exercise. Sometimes I have had students do it as a homework assignment, which allows more time. But, both in my own experience in doing it for myself and in what I have seen from my students, it is something that takes on a life of its own. Once we begin to be attentive to our desires in an explicit exercise, we are likely to begin noting more of them as they occur and eventually to end up with a much richer inventory of desires than we might have come up with the first time we thought about it. Here is how it went for me. Personally, I started out with high-minded goals and aspirations. I thought of things like this: *I want world peace. I want to do good for others. I want to be a successful and respected scholar whose work makes a difference in the lives of others.* Then I realized there were a motley of other respectable things I want. *I want to be a good cellist and give others pleasure in my playing. I want to be healthy, perhaps even athletic. I would like to see Prague, the Grand Canyon, and the Alhambra before I die.* Then I realized there were many little things I wanted at the moment—*I really want a cup of coffee, I really like fatty food.* Then perhaps some things I was ambivalent about: *I'd like to have a mansion on the sea, be famous,* and so on. And eventually things were tugging at my mind that I indeed wanted but suppressed as taboo. (I shall not disclose the details of these, and of course your students should not disclose theirs to you. You might also do well to make contact with resources in behavioral health and spiritual counsel should some students come up with something they find they need to talk about. There is the outside chance that you may have a budding Hannibal Lecter in your class. More likely, you will have someone with gender or sexuality issues, or problems with rage, depression, or despair, that he or she finds distressing to think or talk about. Unless you are a trained psychotherapist or spiritual director, you should not take these on but should be sensitive to their signs and know your local resources for referral. Reflective philosophical exercises can bring serious psychological issues to the surface that most philosophy professors are not trained to deal with, and it is wise to know in advance whom to turn to should they arise.)

I think it is a good idea to give instructions for this exercise that involve keeping a journal or at least a piece of paper that can be added to over the following days or weeks. I sometimes invite a few students to present a



bowdlerized list (without the bits they do not wish to disclose) to the group, and the comparisons of these often lead students to realize that there are whole classes of “desires” that they had not thought about. (Some may have thought only of fleeting desires and not life goals, and others the reverse. Some may have only listed desires for themselves and not for others, or vice versa. And some may find items on other students’ lists that they realize they share as well, though they had not initially thought of them.) And whether or not this is the case, once you have started thinking about your desires, you may well become more attentively mindful to your inner life and realize, a few days later, that there are all these other things that could be added to the list. I believe that this is a very easy and gentle *introduction to a practice of mindfulness*, in which students become more reflectively attentive to the things they desire, which can pave the ground for further, deeper, and more intentional mindfulness practices, should you include them.

### **Next Steps: Mapping Desires and Empirical Engagement with Texts and Theories**

How does one introduce such an exercise? Often, I have done so in conjunction with a text, and as part of a longer sequence of exercises. For example, both Plato and Aristotle talk about how we do some things for their own sake and other things for the sake of something else. You can do the first exercise without signaling how it will later be connected to texts, or you can do it in conjunction with a text like Plato’s discussion of means and ends in book 2 of *Republic* or Aristotle’s in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.1, or indeed in looking at the Sophists’ view of the good life as getting what you desire, either in conjunction with a Sophist text or a longer reading of Plato’s *Gorgias*, which has the additional merit of vividly contrasting the philosophical way of life with that of Sophists and rhetoricians.

A follow-up exercise I use is to ask students to take items from their list and make them into a diagram of the relations between their desires: whether some are means to the others as ends. For example, a student might list “get good grades,” “get into medical school,” and “become a doctor,” which clearly stand in a means-ends relationship. I ask students to connect means to ends with arrows, producing a kind of map or diagram of their motivations. A third step would be to consider passages where the philosophers claim that there is some one thing *all* our actions aim at—“the Good” (Plato, *Gorgias* 468a) or *eudaimonia* (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7)—and ask students, first, to see whether this corresponds to how their diagram already shapes up and, second, whether their diagram might reasonably be put into greater order by adding this.

In these second and third steps, we have begun a dialectic between experience and theory. On the one hand, do means-ends analysis and the idea

of a final end help make better sense of what one has discovered in oneself through a naive listing of desires? On the other hand, does what one finds in one's own experience confirm or perhaps challenge such analyses? Are there things that we pursue for their own sake that are not pursued for the sake of happiness or that even we ourselves might not indeed consider good?

These are questions that ought to be pursued in any philosophical course examining such texts: for example, are the authors' claims *correct*? In a more traditional course, this question might be pursued chiefly by examining the authors' *arguments*. We analyze and evaluate arguments in my PWOL classes as well. But questions about the nature of our desires, the relations between them, and the effective means of transforming them are not questions that can be settled by a priori argumentation, as they are at least in part empirical questions about human psychology. A PWOL approach invites students to explore these in the one case about which they have direct evidence and the ability to test claims through experience and experiment—their own—and then discuss their findings together. Even if a course is not specifically devoted to PWOL—if it is, say, a course on classical Western philosophy—this seems like a useful and salutary addition to the reading and analysis of texts and arguments.

### **An Entry Point to Further Exercises**

Such preparatory exercises also provide the basis for a number of further sorts of exercises. I have never used all of them in a single course—they are more like a stockpile of activities to be drawn upon. Some of these are practical and pedestrian. I might, for example, ask my students to reflect on one or more of the following topics:

1. Is it really possible to attain *all* of the desires you have listed, or are some in conflict with one another? As a friend put it to her daughters, “You can do *anything* you want, but you can't do *everything* you want.” For example, perhaps you could become a surgeon *or* a concert pianist, but probably not both. Perhaps you can be famous and widely celebrated or you can choose to lead a quiet and secluded life, but probably not both, because they involve incompatible ways of living. How would you go about resolving the practical conflicts?
2. Are there some goals on your list that would require you to do other things you are not now doing in order to accomplish them? If so, what other desires, habits, skills, and practices might you need to cultivate in order to realize them? (If, for example, you wish to become a doctor, you will have to study and succeed at some very particular things, and this may in turn require greater habits of self-discipline.)

3. Are there things on the list that you cannot realistically expect to attain—perhaps because you do not really have the aptitude for them or perhaps because they depend on factors that are outside your control? If so, what should you do about these?

Such questions might quite reasonably be incorporated, say, into a unit on the Sophists, who view the good life in terms of getting what you desire.

A second set of exercises would involve trying to apply the interpretive lenses of different philosophical schools to one's list. For example, in a unit on Confucianism, students might be prompted to ask themselves, *Which items on the list are what Confucians describe as desires for "profit" or "the pleasures of the eyes and ears"?* *What attitude would Confucians recommend that we take toward such desires? Are any of them manifestations of Mencius's four sprouts?* (Mencius 2001, 2a6). *Does your list confirm or refute Xunzi's claim that "human nature is bad?"* (Xunzi 2001). In a unit on Socratic/early Platonic thought, *Can all of your desires reasonably be interpreted as beliefs that the things desired are good?* (Or, conversely, are there some that you find you *desire* even though you also believe them to be *bad*?) Here we are engaging the student in an empirical project of testing a theory against experience and experience against theory.

A third type of exercise involves deeper exploration of moral psychology. This might be done in connection with a text or as an open exploration. I have already described one such reflection: whether the Socratic or early Platonic view that desires are beliefs about what is good (*Gorgias* 468) is psychologically realistic. This might involve, not only an analysis of the desires themselves, but also exercises in trying to alter desires by changing beliefs and seeing if doing so is effective in changing desires. If you wish to stress moral psychology heavily, you might go on to introduce modern ideas like cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), which proceeds on the assumption that changing beliefs can alter desires. (And even if you do not bring it up, you may well find that some of your students are intimately familiar with CBT, as they have been involved in that form of therapy.) I have also often contrasted this intellectualist psychology of the *Gorgias* with Plato's later tripartite psychology, which adds nonrational types of motivation from the appetites and *thumos* (*Republic* bks. 4, 9), and with Aristotle's discussion of the differences between intellectual and moral virtues (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.13).

Aristotle's account of moral virtues, of course, is itself a wonderful topic for exploring moral psychology. From the perspective of PWOL, one of the most useful things to do here is to have exercises that attempt to test the view that moral virtue can be cultivated by way of continence through habituation (*Nicomachean Ethics* bks. 2, 7). Reflection on desires may well have put students in a position where they recognize that there is something they need to cultivate—say, courage or temperance—even if only because they realize they will also need these things in order to

attain the things they already desire. A straightforward exercise is to pick one of these, formulate a practicum of things to do to try to “fake it ’til you make it,” and see if it bears fruit. Even if the period allotted for the exercise is unrealistically short for this to be effective, students will have been introduced to a *strategy* they can apply over a longer span of time for themselves well after the course is over.

One could also do something similar with Plato. In my view, there is a striking difference between the moral psychology put forward by Socrates in the *Gorgias* and the richer tripartite theory of the *Republic*, which introduces nonrational sources of motivation (the appetites and thumos). I have sometimes paired a reading of the myth of the many-headed Beast in book 9 of the *Republic* (588b–89b) with an exercise in which I ask students to draw a picture of their own souls (or motivational structures) as a beast with many heads corresponding to their different appetites, drives, or sources of motivation, labeling these and tying them to their more particular desires. (That is, there might be more than one relevant *level* of analysis: one type of *drive* might be the source of many distinct *desires*.) For some students, exploring such a topic artistically rather than verbally opens up new insights for them, even if they are not talented artists. I then ask them to reflect upon Plato’s claim that Reason can domesticate these (with the help of thumos) by knowing and working with their natures—not trying to cut off the heads like Heracles cutting off the heads of the Hydra, but like animal trainers or gardeners working with their knowledge of the natural tendencies of the plants or animals (*Republic* 589b). I ask the students to think about such questions as these: *If you were to regard your own soul in this manner, what would the implications be? What are the “beasts within” that need to be tamed? What are their natures, and how can you use your understanding of these in an attempt to gentle them? Can you find a way to love, care for, and nurture them rather than either giving in to them or regarding them with repugnance and shame?* The text also offers opportunities for comparison with other theories: for example, how does Plato’s view of the appetites differ from Xunzi’s (2001) characterization of them as “bad,” and what different types of “therapy” do the different theories seem to recommend?

Plato’s tripartite psychology also provides one of many good entry points to invite deeper analysis of the things we started out labeling as “desires.” If you agree with the classical philosophers that Reason itself can motivate but also allow that there are other, nonrational sources of motivation, it turns out that things we initially called “desires” are of several different psychological kinds. Aristotle’s claim that the virtues motivate in a way different from Reason, and require a different type of cultivation, introduces the same kind of issue, and we could similarly pose the question of whether Mencius’s “sprouts” are sorts of psychological faculties different from whatever produces the motivation for profit or the pleasures of the eyes and ears. There is ample material here to lead students to be

more reflective about their own moral psychology by examining the implications of different theories and testing them against their own experience. If one wishes to bring in materials from outside the classical traditions, an additional useful topic to include might be Hume's claim that reason and belief cannot themselves provide any motivation at all—that this comes *solely* through the emotions, including moral emotions. This is a fundamental challenge to the classical Western schools, particularly as described by Cooper, and knowing about it helps students to understand how radical those schools' view of Reason really was. Similarly, in my moral psychology class, I have used John Riker's *Ethics and the Discovery of the Unconscious* (Riker 1997), which presents challenges to Western intellectualist ethics arising from philosophical and psychological theories of the unconscious developed by such figures as Nietzsche and Freud. I think it is also useful to give students pointers to the ways these questions are still being debated, not only in philosophy, but also between different schools of therapeutic psychology, even if these are not part of the course syllabus. (This is something I emphasize more in a class on moral psychology but might supply suggestions for additional reading in a PWOL class.)

It would also be possible, however, to begin such an examination without direct connection to a classical text. Indeed, the more perceptive students may realize, in looking over their list of "desires," that they are not all of the same type. Some might be something like ultimate life goals, others core values, fleeting momentary wants, or even troubling compulsions. A few students might even suggest in discussion that we really need a more nuanced set of terminology rather than lumping all of these under the single heading of desire. The most analytically minded students may be able to come up with their own vocabulary that reflects what they see as the major divisions into psychological categories, but this is also a topic that makes for excellent classroom discussion if students are asked to work together to sort through the different types of "desire" and produce a classification of different sources of motivation. In a seminar-sized class, this could be done as a whole-class exercise; in a larger class, it could initially be done in small groups, followed by a comparison of the categories different groups have come up with and further plenary discussion. This, in effect, invites students to do what philosophers like Plato, Mencius, and Aristotle were doing in formulating their theories: beginning with experience and ordinary language, and moving beyond them to try to craft a more psychologically realistic theory.

### **Grading, Assessment, and Feedback**

What I have tried to describe here is not exactly a concrete plan for a course. It is more like a set of related exercises that might be regarded as a deck of cards that can be played differently, depending on which philosophical

traditions you wish to explore in a particular class. This will, I hope, provide readers with a set of ideas and activities that can be worked into courses of their own design. I should add that these are not the *only* types of exercises I use in my course. For example, I generally have students do a full week of “Live Like a Stoic” exercises, write their own apologia, and try basic mindfulness techniques involving quiet sitting, breath control, or repetition of a word or phrase. And the course syllabus was originally organized not around the desire exercises but by philosophical schools, with exercises assigned throughout the semester in conjunction with particular texts. In the 2018 version of the course, there were units on Confucianism, Daoism, the Sophists, Socrates, the Cynics, Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, existentialism, Buddhism, and Christianity, and the desire exercises were assigned in conjunction with book 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In 2019, I began the course with a full week of the desire exercises before having the students read any texts, and several subsequent exercises invited students to bring particular philosophical treatments of desire they were reading about to bear in interpreting their own lists and desire maps. Students reported that this worked very well, as it got them reflecting on themselves before being introduced to any philosophical interpretations that might influence their reflections, and they had a variety of interesting observations at the end of the course about how the desires they had initially listed had changed, or how they now regarded them in a different light. I believe this was a successful experiment, and I plan to keep this format in future versions of the course.

But how does one give a *grade* in a course where much of the work consists in reflective exercises? My own brief answer is that I do *not* grade the students. My university allows professors to offer courses pass/fail, and this has been my practice for PWOL. I realize that this is not something that is possible at every institution, but I think it is an option worth considering if it is available. I initially decided against letter grades specifically because so much of the course is oriented toward self-reflection. On the one hand, there are some types of reflection that are really not possible to grade. A student’s list of desires simply is what it is. If I see students’ lists at all, I might regard what I see on one more positively than what I see on another, but that does not make one more academically respectable than another, and I am not in the business of evaluating students’ character. On the other hand, doing such an assignment for a grade would make it into a different kind of assignment, in which the students are guided by whatever they may assume the standards of evaluation to be, rather than one in which they are trying to be transparent to themselves. Indeed, as I said earlier, I do not even collect the initial exercise in unedited form, and at most ask for volunteers to share expurgated versions of their lists.

I have also come to see another and more fundamental reason that *not* grading PWOL courses has value. Many students think of school work as something that they do entirely for external validation and approach an

assignment or a course thinking “What do I have to do to get an A?” This, however, is entirely the *wrong* attitude with which to approach PWOL. Trying to live philosophically in order to get an A is not trying to live philosophically at all. And I have found that some students actually find the reorientation toward their work that can ensue from this—thinking of an assigned activity as something to be done because one actually finds it rewarding in its own right—to be the most important thing they get out of the course. Last year, for example, one of the comments in the course evaluations went something like this: “The most important thing I got out of this course was when I realized I had an assignment that would not be turned in or graded. I could have blown it off, but I did it anyway, just for its own sake, and got a lot out of it, and this totally transformed my orientation towards learning.” This in itself was at least as much of a step toward living philosophically as anything the student might remember from the *content* of the course.

This does not mean that assignments involving or based upon exercises cannot receive some form of evaluation and feedback. Even with something like the exercise in which students trace the means-ends relationships between their desires it is possible to assess how thoroughly and perceptively they have identified such relationships. This could be assessed and assigned a grade, but personally I find the more important type of feedback to come in the form of suggesting further questions they might wish to explore. For example, I might say: “You have listed ‘being a doctor’ as a goal that does not have a further goal beyond it. Is being a doctor really something you seek only for its own sake, or is there also some further goal you have not considered, like status, financial security, a sense of fulfillment, or making a difference in the lives of others?” Or, if the map tends to focus on just one sort of desire—becoming a particular kind of person, achieving particular things, receiving external goods, or perhaps only desires for abstract things like world peace—I might prompt the student to think about whether there are also things he or she desires in some of the other categories. This helps students to understand that thinking about a question is not really finished when they turn in a paper or have it returned—in philosophy (and in many other subjects as well), when you do something well, it tends to open up further questions to pursue, and the more philosophical you have become, the more you will wish to pursue them. I could, of course, assess how much work a student has put into such an assignment and how well he or she has seen connections, but I prefer to tread carefully here. There can be psychological reasons, having nothing to do with academic skills or diligence, that students might experience difficulty examining their own experiences or be unwilling to express them, and I am not in a position to know whether the fact that a student did not go further might be the result of healthy psychological defense mechanisms that it would be dangerous to try to push past outside a psychotherapeutic relationship. On a short assignment like this one, I tend

to comment on one thing they did well and suggest one thing to work on more or think through further.

Of course, even in an exercise-intensive course, it is also quite appropriate to assign more traditional papers as well. I often assign such familiar topics as comparing (early) Plato and Aristotle on the question of whether virtue consists entirely of knowledge, or Mencius and Xunzi on human nature. Such essays can be evaluated as they would be in any other class, though they may end up being deeper and more vigorously engaged if students have first done exercises that provide direct evidence on the questions addressed in the essay. If a PWOL course is to be graded, the bulk of the assessment leading to the grade can come from much more traditional assignments and whatever standards an instructor uses to assess classroom participation, and the exercises can be given “completion points.” (That is, you get the points simply for doing the exercise without it being graded for quality.)

### Conclusion

The recent initiatives in teaching PWOL classes are, to my mind, an exciting development in philosophy, and I think that Hadot would have been pleased to see his work bearing this kind of fruit. I have been surprised, in my discussions with other professors interested in such courses, at just how varied their approaches to them can be. What I have offered here is only one model, and perhaps one that makes about as much use of immersive exercises as is prudent or practical within a college curriculum. The *kinds* of exercises I have described, however, can also be used more selectively in more traditional kinds of courses. And I have found that crafting and teaching such courses is also an empirical undertaking: we try things out, see what works, and try to improve upon a course each time around, and we learn as well from the experiences of our colleagues.

*Department of Philosophy*  
*Wesleyan University*  
*Middletown, CT 06459*  
*USA*  
*shorst@wesleyan.edu*

### References

- Cooper, John. 2013. *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hadot, Pierre. 1995. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. Translated with an introduction by Arnold Davidson. Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell.



- . 2004. *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* Translated by Michael Chase. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Mabuchi, Masaya. 2016. “‘Quiet Sitting’ in Neo-Confucianism.” In *Asian Traditions of Meditation*, edited by Halvor Eifring, 207–26. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.
- Mencius. 2001. “*Mengzi* (Mencius).” Chapter 3 of *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, Second Edition, edited by Philip J. Ivanhoe and Brian W. Van Norden, 115–60. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Xunzi. 2001. “Human Nature Is Bad.” Translated by Eric L. Hutton. In *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, Second Edition, edited by Philip J. Ivanhoe and Brian W. Van Norden, 255–310. Indianapolis: Hackett.