

Philosophy

To become human, thought philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, you must adopt a 'life-view' full of values and purpose.

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What is a life lived well?

Becoming a philosophical human being is a life-long process of living with the end in mind.



If you saw Socrates lying under an olive tree in the Athenian countryside, he'd look as out of place as a man in a pin-striped suit sunning on the beach. He refused to venture outside of the city walls, he said, because everything he needed to know he could learn inside them. Apart from the Peloponnesian war, the only time Socrates passed through the gate into the country was to follow his friend Phaedrus, who'd promised to recite a speech on love written by a wise man. Socrates had a weakness for speeches and wise men; so easily did our city boy get seduced out of it despite objections that birds and olives had nothing to teach him.

Maybe Socrates went a little too far. Nature can teach us lots of things, like where food comes from

and what it sounds like when a South Texas chachalaca gets woken up by a train. Nature also heals. I'm told negative ions float outside just waiting to cheer us up, so I walk daily to collect my share. But as much as I enjoy my (curated) contact with nature, I take comfort in Socrates' unabashed preference for people and words. Even as an introvert, I'd rather have a conversation with someone inside the city walls than study an acacia outside of them.

If you'd have visited Athens on a more typical day, you'd have seen Socrates in his natural habitat: roaming shoeless around the marketplace or gymnasium, sniffing out individuals to talk to and flirt with. As much as we remember Socrates for loving knowledge, he loved men more. They were his path



to knowledge, to ideas, and ultimately to a good life. Conversation was an essential component in Socrates's definition of philosophy. How else but by talking to people are you supposed to know what you think, or whether what you think is even worth thinking? Without companions, how are you supposed to live a good life? It's true that philosophers, who descended from Socrates, are literally called "lovers of wisdom", but it's more accurate to say that we're lovers of men. And women. And non-gender-conforming humans. We'll love anyone who'll help us choose wisdom and avoid living what Henry David Thoreau called a "life of quiet desperation".

Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard would push even harder on the importance of the urban walk-and-talk. Introvert and curmudgeon though he was, Kierkegaard never missed his daily "people-baths", where he'd absentmindedly run his companion off the road. Children do this too, before they learn that in civilised society, good manners are prized higher than spirited conversation. Kierkegaard remained faithful to Socrates's definition of philosophy: intentional communication between people about topics worth their salt.

If you want to be a philosopher, you'll have to start acting like Socrates and Kierkegaard: question people about deep stuff. Since there's no requirement that we talk to loads of people, even the most socially anxious

of us are up to the task; one interlocutor will do. Picking a salty subject is the hard part, especially if you've been taught to stay at the water's edge. It likely means foregoing conversations about *The Queen's Gambit*, who's eligible for vaccination when, and what-unusual-weather-we're-having, in search for answers to absurd questions like What's it all for? What purpose am I serving? How did I get here? If you're like me, you'll need a constant reminder that we're perpetually wrong about two things, the first is that one becomes a philosopher. The good news is that we were born philosophers, and our only job is to withstand the societal pressure to "go along to get along". Salty ideas often piss people off, and that's a good thing. It shows we're alive.

Socrates was put on trial for insulting some of the men he professed to love. To his mind, philosophy wasn't philosophy if it didn't challenge worldviews - his and theirs. Even in his defence speech, where he could have sweet-talked the jury into exiling him to another city, Socrates chose to rub salt in the wound by accusing his accusers and jurors of living carelessly and warning them that killing him would constitute the mistake of the century. He even contemplated aloud about what he'd do if a plea bargain were offered to him: stop philosophising in exchange for your freedom. One was never offered, probably because Socrates pre-emptively announced that he'd refuse it. So,



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like martyrs and saints before and after him, Socrates got killed because he wouldn't keep his mouth shut.

Some of us are already expert at irritating friends and strangers; we've got no problem being the horse fly that Socrates said he was, the one that stings its prey just when it relaxes. Others have to work on this skill. Disturbing people (including ourselves) is not just a characteristic of philosophers, which leads to the second conceptual mistake we routinely make: thinking we're born human. The bad news is, we're not.

It may come as a surprise to you, as it did to me, the suggestion that you might not be a human being yet, and that perhaps you will never become one. Despite what the science textbooks say, Kierkegaard believed you could grow old and die without ever becoming human. A handful of us reach philosophical humanity; a gaggle of us end up closer on the scale to 'alive' or 'breathing'. We all get to choose, however, what to do with what Mary Oliver called our "one wild and precious life". Socrates suggested becoming a philosopher. Kierkegaard suggested becoming human. Maybe they're not so different.

In this upside-down world where everyone's a philosopher but only some of us are human, you've got some decisions ahead. To honour the philosopher in you, begin scratching at itches you can't reach, ask loaded questions and reject vacuous answers, and occasionally

sting your friends to keep them woke. To become human, though, Kierkegaard suggests you adopt a "life-view" full of values and purpose. Train yourself to grow curious instead of complacent. And try living with your end in mind. COVID has made it obvious that our end is not optional. Fully human beings sit in this darkness sometimes instead of always reaching for a light. Socrates and Kierkegaard never said living well would be easy, but they died believing it was a kind of salvation.

How many of us, when we were small and got asked what we'd like to be when we grow up, answered "philosopher", or worse, "human"? If we'd known about Socrates or Kierkegaard then, we might have believed that becoming a philosophical human being is the highest feat a person can achieve, more difficult than becoming an astronaut or a president. Philosophical humans don't study to know more things or even to understand the world. They're born full of wonder, and they keep sight of it. They reject plea bargains that involve silencing themselves. And they struggle with existential questions instead of shrugging them off as teen- or middle-aged angst. The life-long career of a philosophical human being consists of self-knowledge, vulnerability, and connection with other people (and maybe even with birds and olives). Socrates called philosophising training for death, but it's also a practical guide to becoming human.

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