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# Thoreau, Parrhesia, and the Socratic Tradition of Philosophy

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## Abstract

Most objections against Henry Thoreau aim at his “unfriendly” provocations. In this article, I argue that we need to situate his exhortative style in the context of practicing parrhesia or the bold expression of truth in the Socratic tradition of philosophy. Philosophical parrhesia can be defined as the practice of speaking the truth with an eye to bringing home the realization that one must change one’s life. The transformation Thoreau has in mind is hinged upon acquiring the practical knowledge of cultivating the senses through what he calls “excursion.” This, I argue, is his key contribution to the said tradition.

## Résumé

En général, la plupart des objections aux écrits d’Henry Thoreau se penchent sur ses provocations « inamicales ». Dans cet article, je propose que nous examinons son style par rapport à la pratique de la parrhésie, c’est-à-dire l’expression de la vérité d’après la tradition socratique de la philosophie. La parrhésie est la pratique consistant à dire la vérité dans le but de prendre conscience de l’importance de changer sa propre vie. La transformation envisagée par Thoreau dépend de l’acquisition d’un savoir-faire à l’égard de la culture des sens, et ce, à travers ce qu’il appelle « l’excursion ». Voilà ce qui constitue sa contribution fondamentale à ladite tradition.

**Keywords:** Socrates; Henry Thoreau; parrhesia; philosophy as spiritual exercises; 19<sup>th</sup> century American philosophy

**Socrates:** [T]hey do say that I am a very odd sort of person, always causing people to get into difficulties. You must have heard that, surely?

**Theaetetus:** Yes, I have.

**Socrates:** And shall I tell you what is the explanation of that?

**Theaetetus:** Yes, please do.

(*Theaetetus*, 149a8–b2)

## 1. Introduction

The Socratic method and its reliance on bringing about the experience of shame is based on the underlying assumption that such experience is a necessary step toward the formation of moral character. Socrates believed that the shame of realizing one's ignorance about the most important aspects of life was a necessary step in one's venture into the life of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> In his definitional dialogues, not only did Plato epitomize a specific way of life but also introduced a whole set of rhetorical techniques that came to define the orientation of philosophy as spiritual exercises. In this regard, an effective way of establishing the continuity of the tradition of philosophy as spiritual exercises is to show the continuity of the same methodological and rhetorical techniques in the works of contemporary and modern thinkers. By way of clarification, the first time Pierre Hadot used the phrase philosophy as "spiritual exercises" was in 1973 (Sharpe & Ure, 2021, p. 3). The phrase "spiritual exercises" seems to be derived from St. Ignatius of Loyola's handbook, *Exercitia Spiritualia*, which focuses on ways of spiritual transformation. However, Hadot clearly states that what St. Ignatius means by spiritual exercises is a "Christian version of a Greco-Roman tradition" (Hadot, 1995, p. 82). Hadot admits that the term "spiritual exercises" is rather "disconcerting for the contemporary reader" (Hadot, 1995, p. 81). But he insists on using the term for valid reasons. For one, none of the other adjectives and terms (moral exercises, ethical exercises, psychic exercises, etc.) could do justice to the fact that these exercises "correspond to a transformation of our vision of the world, and to a metamorphosis of our personality" (Hadot, 1995, p. 82). I think Hadot is quite right in his insistence on using the term but perhaps it is equally right at least to acknowledge that not everyone is happy with the connotations of using the adjective "spiritual" in defining the spirit of ancient philosophy. Perhaps a key point to consider when one refers to "philosophy as spiritual exercises" is the fact that the notion of exercise is referring to *askesis* or working on oneself according to an ideal of wisdom. One might argue that "philosophy as spiritual exercises," the "Socratic tradition of philosophy," or the "Socratic conception of philosophy" could all be used interchangeably since they refer to the ideal of philosophy as "care of the soul" (*Laches*, 186e3). Socrates' emphasis on a total transformation of our inner lives epitomizes the common practices and activities among ancient philosophers, which would aim at such transformation. Philosophy, in this view, is not a "theoretical" discipline but an "activity" toward transforming oneself based on a philosophical conception of the good. As such, there is a clear distinction between philosophy as a theoretical discourse and philosophy as a way of life.

In what follows, I situate Henry Thoreau in the Socratic tradition and I examine the ways he practiced philosophical parrhesia in his works. A general way of classifying Thoreau is to situate him in the tradition of liberal individualism, and introduce him as a radical libertarian who is not keen on participatory projects and initiatives in the public spaces. But such way of characterizing Thoreau fails to do justice to the complexity of his socio-political philosophy and his contribution

<sup>1</sup> As in *Euthyphro* 15d6; *Apology* 17b1, 24d6, 29b6–e; *Crito* 45e, 52c7–53c4; *Theaetetus* 196d10; *Sophist* 230b4–d3; *Symposium* 184b, 216b2; *Gorgias* 477c3–d2; *Lesser Hippias* 364d3; *Republic* VI 506c5, among others.

to deepening our understanding of community engagement and of democracy as a participatory project. As Shannon L. Marriotti argues, Thoreau's withdrawal from the public space is itself a highly political engagement as it critiques what Alexis de Tocqueville calls the "tyranny of majority." For Thoreau, the backbone of a true democracy is "the capacity to think against conventions, to critique, to think for one's self" (Marriotti, 2010, p. 8). Withdrawal into nature could be an attempt to revitalize our alienated senses of identity and autonomy. On this view, Thoreauvian withdrawal is a highly political form of engagement. That is, there is a communal component to his solitary excursions. In assessing Thoreau's body of work, the false dichotomy between "the public" and "the private" needs to be collapsed since it fails to do justice to his political project. If we constantly consider Thoreau as a highly individualistic philosopher, we might overlook the fact that the moral awakening of the "neighbours" is at the core of his social and political thought (Gougeon, 1995/2006; Malachuk, 2016).

With these two introductory clarifications in mind, in this article, I argue that situating Thoreau in the Socratic tradition, to which he first and foremost belongs, would put us in a much-informed position to understand not only Thoreau's contribution but also the continuity of certain ideas and rhetorical methods in the history of philosophy.

In the process of situating Thoreau in the Socratic tradition, I argue that the point of contention in his philosophy — his unfriendly provocations — was on the whole the result of practicing philosophical parrhesia, or the bold expression of truth with the intention of bringing about the realization that one must change one's life. Such a practice, however, is bound to face resistance and has its own limitations, ones that are applicable to any philosopher who believes the "labour" of the soul is a necessary step toward self-transformation.<sup>2</sup> I first discuss the role of *átopia* (strangeness) in the works of ancient philosophers and its implications for the way we can approach Thoreauvian *átopia*. In the second part of the article, and in the background of arguments made in the first part, I argue that the significance or relevance of any philosopher in the tradition of philosophy as a way of life can be appraised not based on their shared or common practices but on the novelty of their solutions to the problem of life. As for Thoreau, his "environmental imagination"<sup>3</sup> and his belief in the urgency of cultivating the senses to perceive the beauty and vitality of natural phenomena is one of his key contributions: the conviction that a first-hand experience of the world is hinged upon acquiring the practical knowledge of cultivating the senses through "excursion."

## 2. What Does Make a Philosopher *Átopos*?

An underlying message in the Socratic dialogues is the idea that human beings live in the realm of *doxa* or unexamined beliefs and opinions. We come to believe and appraise things based on the nature of our associations and circumstantial interests. Some of these beliefs, as Plato argues in *Theaetetus*, are quite beneficial (like the

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Theaetetus* 151a6–d2. Unless indicated otherwise, all references to Plato's dialogues are from Plato (1997).

<sup>3</sup> As established in the pioneering work of Lawrence Buell (1995).

conviction that one must pay one's debts). But not all beliefs and opinions turn out to be beneficial or consistent upon examination. Most of us, for example, are fairly confident that we can provide an account of the constitutive elements of the good life. But when we closely examine our confident opinions and beliefs, we might find deficiencies in our arguments about the good life — deficiencies that make us lose confidence in our system of beliefs. If I consider myself a pious person but then, in the process of a dialogue, I realize that I am unable to defend my arguments and justify my definition of piety, I might feel a wide range of emotions, from shame and anger to confusion and bewilderment.<sup>4</sup> According to Socrates, such moments are crucial because they invite or compel us to ask a question with far-reaching implications: what if my whole system of beliefs can be collapsed upon close examination? What if I have been in the dark my entire life about the most important aspects of life?<sup>5</sup> At these moments of *aporia* or puzzlement, one — at the same time — will be in a state of problematizing the ordinary or the given. Such a person, in other words, finds herself in a state of mind totally separated from the conventional states of affairs. She finds herself on the verge of a break from what is considered to be norm or commonsense. She is anxious to arrive at a state of certainty that cannot be questioned, because the deadlock or impasse in the dialogue has left a void in her belief-system. A general sense of *aporia*, in other words, has its strange ways of pushing her toward a state of strangeness or *átopia*. Now, as Hadot puts it:

we have a better understanding of *átopia*, the strangeness of the philosopher in the human world. One does not know how to classify him, for he is neither a sage nor a man like other men. [...] For such a man, daily life, as it is organized and lived by other men, must necessarily appear abnormal, like a state of madness, unconsciousness, and ignorance of reality. And nonetheless he must live this life every day, in this world in which he feels himself a stranger and in which others perceive him to be one as well. And it is precisely in this daily life that he must seek to attain that way of life which is utterly foreign to the everyday world. (Hadot, 1995, p. 58)

Note the way Hadot alludes to a mutual sense of mistrust between the philosopher and “others” as the former finds himself at a crossroad between unproblematic conventions of society and the requirements of living a philosophical life. The philosopher sees the sounds and the fury, the despair, and the conformity of conventional life, and others see a “stranger” who often seems to be lost or out of place. As we

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<sup>4</sup> In *Sophist*, Plato sums up the role and the necessity of shame in Socrates' elenctic method and highlights different emotions that interlocutors experience upon being refuted. They “lose their inflated and rigid beliefs about themselves that way, and no loss is pleasanter to hear or has a more lasting effect on them. Doctors who work on the body think it can't benefit from any food that's offered to it until what's interfering with it from inside is removed. The people who cleanse the soul, my young friend, likewise think the soul, too, won't get any advantage from any learning that's offered to it until someone shames it by refuting it, removes the opinions that interfere with learning, and exhibits it cleansed” (*Sophist*, 230b–d4).

<sup>5</sup> For an engaging account of the Socratic method of inquiry and its implications on the interlocutors, see Dylan Futter (2013).

will see in the case of Thoreau, this sense of mistrust was taken to such extremes that he would consider his own strangeness more commonsensical than the conventions and the commonsense of daily life. His revolt against “the incredible dullness” of average life and his dismissive assertion that “The commonest sense is the sense of men asleep, which they express by snoring” (Thoreau, 2007, p. 261),<sup>6</sup> point at a notable feature of his works: a sense of disregard for our ordinary social life. “Yesterday,” he writes in his journals, “I was influenced with the rottenness of human relations. They appeared to me full of death and decay” (Thoreau, 1906, X, p. 427).<sup>7</sup> As Jane Bennett suggests, Thoreau is wary of any kind of “influence” on him that is not rooted in his own experience of the natural world (Bennett, 2021, p. 21. In fact, he goes so far as to claim that “you cannot have a deep sympathy with both man and nature. Those qualities which bring you near to the one estrange you from the other” (*Writings*, X, p. 435). In other words, the intensity of his estrangement from the world of human relations and common aspirations is to the extent that he finds himself immersed in the world of “nature,” with all its quiet revolutions that go unnoticed by “the mass of men” (9).

With regard to Thoreau’s lack of “sympathy” for the plight of ordinary people, consider, for example, his remarks in the opening pages of *Cape Cod*, where he describes the aftermath of a shipwreck by the seashore of Massachusetts. Two days after the tragic incident, he notes, people were still scattered on the shore trying to recover swollen and disfigured bodies, while “the sea was still breaking violently on the rocks” (*Writings*, IV, p. 6):

On the whole, it was not so impressive a scene as I might have expected. If I had found one body cast upon the beach in some lonely place, it would have affected me more. I sympathized rather with the winds and waves, as if to toss and mangle these poor human bodies was the order of the day. If this was the law of Nature, why waste any time in awe or pity? If the last day were come, we should not think so much about the separation of friends or the blighted prospects of individuals. (*Writings*, IV, p. 11)

Thoreau’s tendency to sympathize more with natural phenomena than with the plight of ordinary people has been met by a similar kind of disdain toward him.<sup>8</sup> What Ralph Waldo Emerson characterized as Thoreau’s “habit of antagonism” (Emerson, 1862/2008, p. 24) has been a common thread in the literature since the 1850s. There is no shortage of commentaries that often begin with dismissive anecdotes about Thoreau’s way of conducting his life before undermining his work as “monotonous” or extravagant.<sup>9</sup>

I contend that we need to resist the urge to examine Thoreau’s body of work as a natural extension of his idiosyncratic personality. One might argue, along with

<sup>6</sup> All forthcoming standalone page references refer to *Walden* (Thoreau, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> All forthcoming references to the classic collection of Thoreau’s works, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau in Twenty Volumes*, will be abbreviated “*Writings*” with volume and page number(s) in-text.

<sup>8</sup> See, among others, Walter Harding (1966, p. 309); Harding & Michael Meyer (1980, p. 204); Bob Pepperman Taylor (2015, pp. 1–15).

<sup>9</sup> In Russell James Lowell’s words, upon reading Thoreau’s works, “A feeling of sameness comes over us as we read so much. Trifles are recorded with an over-minute punctuality and conscientiousness of detail. He registers the state of his personal thermometer thirteen times a day” (Lowell, 1856/2008, p. 121).

Ludwig Wittgenstein and William James, that one's philosophy is on the whole a reflection of one's temperament. And Thoreau's philosophy is not an exception. But I'm referring to an uncritical tendency to rely on the cultural image of Thoreau as a subversive hermit, as in Kathryn Schulz's irresponsible account of Thoreau's philosophy of life (Schulz, 2015).<sup>10</sup> By situating his work in the larger context of the tradition of philosophy as spiritual exercises and fleshing out some points of convergence between Thoreau and other philosophers in the said tradition, we would be in an informed position not only to see the link between his exhortative style in relation to the tradition of philosophy as spiritual exercises but also to appraise his original contributions to it.

For Thoreau, *átopia* or strangeness of a philosophical life has to do with the strangeness of trying to remain self-conscious about the conduct of one's life or, in general, about the way one receives the world: that is, the strangeness of "being forever on the alert" (91). He embraces solitude, celebrates "poverty," and looks down at our established conventions as he finds them incompatible with the self-sufficient life of discovery and original appreciation of the world. One might argue that de-problematizing *átopia* is a defining feature of *Walden*. For if the alternative is the life of conformity to social conventions and subservience to all forms of perceived or real authorities, if the "cost" of a normal life is to exchange all the potential discoveries and excursions for a "civilized" life, then being an *átapos* needs to be celebrated.<sup>11</sup> Difference is a promise of "vitality." And originality, by definition, is bound up with strangeness.

It is noteworthy that traditionally commentators have been focused more on the strangeness of Thoreau and less on his originality. The history of criticizing Thoreau started long before the publication of his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* in 1849. Nathaniel Hawthorne's journal entry on 1 September 1842 and his remarks about Thoreau's aversion to "all regular modes of getting a living," and the "absence" of "any systematic effort for a livelihood," is one of the earliest accounts of Thoreau's unorthodox way of life on record (Hawthorne, 1842/2008, p. 8). This unimpressed manner of looking at Thoreau's work with an unmistakably *ad hominem* tone culminated in Robert Stevenson's notorious assertion: "In one word, Thoreau was a skulker" (Stevenson, 1880/2008, p. 31). The word "skulk" or some variations of the word, sound familiar in Platonic dialogues.<sup>12</sup> Consider the uncanny resemblance between Stevenson's characterization of Thoreau as a skulker and Calicles' description of philosophy as a form of skulking in *Gorgias*. Socrates' main goal in the dialogues was to establish the inconsistencies in the interlocutors' definitions of X (justice, virtue, courage, etc.), hoping that the shame of being found inconsistent and ignorant about what matters the most

<sup>10</sup> For a refreshing collection of essays focusing on Thoreau's "border life" between the world of nature and the world of politics and social life, see François Specq et al. (2020).

<sup>11</sup> As Thoreau writes in *Walden*, "The cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run" (27).

<sup>12</sup> Take, for example, the "Century Dictionary" definition of "skulking" as quoted from Samuel Arthur Jones: "To withdraw into a corner or into a close or obscure place for concealment; lie close or hidden from shame, fear of injury or detection, or desire to injure another; shrink or sneak away from danger or work" (Jones, 1901/1976, p. 1).

would carry enough motivating power to make them embrace the life of *philo-sophia*.<sup>13</sup> From this vantage point, it is quite unusual to see the table turned in *Gorgias* for a brief moment as Callicles elaborates on the shame of being a philosopher and admonishes Socrates to “abandon philosophy and move on to more important things” (484c–3). Philosophers “live out their lives *skulking* in some corner whispering with three or four boys, never saying anything grand, great, or important” (485e2, emphasis added, Nehamas’ (1999) translation). What is striking in Callicles’ admonitions is not merely the fact that Socrates remains uncharacteristically quiet about a series of serious charges against the whole idea of doing philosophy but to note perhaps one of the earliest records of characterizing philosophy as a disempowering undertaking that would leave one in a state of detachment from the real world.

This image of philosophers as “inexperienced in the ways of human beings altogether” (484d5) is similar to Stevenson’s judgement against Thoreau. However, when we examine his assessment with such philosophical and historical backgrounds in mind, we could suggest that, contrary to what Stevenson claims, Thoreau views philosophy as an empowering and validating “excursion” that requires a certain level of “vitality.” Whereas for Callicles “men” earn their “pre-eminence” in the centres of the city and the marketplaces, Thoreau advances philosophy as a pre-eminent excursion into the life of self-discovery. Philosophy is not the love of whispering in a corner and capturing the results of one’s armchair contemplations; it springs from a whole-hearted wish to:

live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, [...] to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. (74–75)

In contrast to Stevenson and Callicles, Thoreau views philosophy not as a theoretical occupation but as an “excursion,” which requires a wide range of practical engagements with the world (Cf. Mooney, 2009, p. 9). He aims at revising the goal of philosophy to cultivating a character from whom, in Emerson’s words, “no trait of beauty could escape” (Emerson, 1982, VII, p. 134). Given the *vitality* of this aspect of Thoreau’s philosophy, it is curious that, traditionally, the image of Thoreau as someone who “did not feel himself except in opposition” (Emerson, 1862/2008, p. 14), one who carried with him an uneasy mix of “moral shyness” and conceit, has overshadowed other aspects of his pioneering works. But, without trying to downplay the “severity” of Thoreau’s ideals, I situate his works in the larger context of the Socratic tradition of philosophy, and argue that, stinging as they seem, Thoreau’s exhortations and his “unfriendly criticism of life” (Stevenson, 1880/2008, p. 40) fall within a standard practice in ancient philosophy and to that extent they are not as bad as they have been perceived by detractors, and not as radical or revolutionary as any admirer might otherwise think. His goal in practicing

<sup>13</sup> For more on the implications of the Socratic method, see Alexander Nehamas (1998). For a study on limitations of elenctic method, see Reza Hosseini (2020, Chapter 2).

philosophical parrhesia, as Joel Porte puts it, is to expose our “folly” and to “shame” the world “out of its nonsense” (Porte, 2004, p. 23). What I would like to emphasize and expand next is the variety of ways such a project of shaming the world requires a specific rhetorical technique, which has been employed in its complex forms in the tradition of philosophy as a way of life since its inception in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.

### 3. Thoreau and His Practice of Philosophical Parrhesia

Parrhesia, roughly defined as the bold expression of truth or the right or freedom to say almost anything, is a practice that to a large extent has come to define the Socratic tradition of philosophy. Embedded in such definition is the understanding that the parrhesiast or the person who practices parrhesia is not merely practicing the freedom to express benign truths. Instead, he is concerned with bold expression of truth to the point of disrespecting other people and putting his own reputation at risk. In extreme cases, the parrhesiast puts his own life at risk (*Apology*, 28b5).

Practicing philosophical parrhesia found its radical forms in the words and deeds of Cynics such as Diogenes, Antisthenes, and Crates. And there are notable resemblances between Thoreau and the Cynics in their resistance to cultural conventions, living in agreement with nature, and advancing the values of simplicity, freedom, and self-reliance. As Douglas Anderson argues, Cynics differentiate between three modes or types of freedom: “*eleutheria*, or what we would call negative freedom or liberty; *autarkeia*, self-sufficiency or self-reliance; and *parrhesia*, the freedom to speak directly and bluntly” (Anderson, 2011, p. 192). It is interesting to note the interconnection between Thoreauvian values of freedom from limiting conditions of social life (*eleutheria*), cultivating the physical and mental capacity to be self-sufficient and resourceful (*autarkeia*), and gathering the courage to speak the truth (*parrhesia*). Indeed, as Anderson suggests, strictly speaking, we could call Thoreau the “American Cynic” (Anderson, 2011, p. 197).

For Diogenes and other Cynics, the philosopher’s ability to disparage common conventions and beliefs is an indicator of his ability to draw our attention to the root cause of anxiety and apathy in our lives. There is an abundance of disparaging remarks in the writings of the Cynics and to the extent that such standard admonitions are concerned, in general, it would be difficult to tell apart the admonitions of Hellenes philosophers from their modern counterparts like Emerson, Thoreau, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein. One might suggest that the overall similarities between ancient philosophers in terms of their rhetorical strategies can at least partly be attributed to similar methods of practicing parrhesia. As Michel Foucault argues in his *Discourse and Truth* lecture series, insofar as we are talking about philosophy as a form of parrhesia and the philosopher as a parrhesiast, we are really referring to parrhesia less as a form of freedom and more like a call of duty. The philosopher cannot help but go against the currents as she realizes that in the pursuit of philosophy one is bound to choose truth over falsehood, the risk of death over the conformity of a quiet life, and admonition over empty compliments. Parrhesia, in Foucault’s words:

[I]s a certain verbal activity in which the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relation to himself through danger, a certain relation to law through freedom and duty, and a certain relation to other people



through critique (self-critique or critique of other people). More precisely, it is a verbal activity in which the subject expresses his personal relation to truth and risks his life because he recognizes that telling the truth is his own duty, so as to improve or to help other people. (Foucault, 1983/2019, pp. 45–46)

The role of Socrates, on this view, is a parrhesiastic role as he constantly confronts “people in the street” (Foucault, 1983/2019, p. 60). We might say that *Apology* is the ultimate parrhesiastic act, as Socrates defends his way of engaging Athenians at the risk of losing his own life. He insists on the truth of his “unpopular” (24a3)<sup>14</sup> testimony that the charges against him have to do with the discovery that in his conversations he “found that those who had the highest reputation were nearly the most deficient, while those who were thought to be inferior were more knowledgeable” (*Apology*, 22a2–4). Socrates summarizes parrhesia as a calling when he tells the jury that “wherever a man has taken a position that he believes to be best, or has been placed by his commander, there he must I think remain and face danger, without a thought for death or anything else, rather than disgrace” (28d4–e).

Socrates’ philosophical parrhesia aims at persuading and convincing the interlocutor that he must “change his life” (Foucault, 1983/2019, p. 156).<sup>15</sup> Here we are no longer practicing parrhesia with an eye to persuading assemblies in the agora or to expressing dissent but to bring about a gestalt shift in the interlocutor’s whole way of being and seeing. The change in question is not an idiosyncratic change in the orientation of one’s life. It is guided by a philosophical conception of the good life. As such, in Hadot’s words, we “must always approach a philosophical work of antiquity with this idea of spiritual progress in mind” (Hadot, 1995, p. 64). That is, we need to study it as an invitation to a gestalt shift which, in Thoreau’s words, is only possible if we love “wisdom” enough “to live according to its dictates” (14).

I must acknowledge here that at first glance any comparison between Socrates and Thoreau might seem suspect. Socrates thrives in social gatherings, Thoreau shies away from them. Whereas one famously announces that “landscapes and trees have nothing to teach me — only the people in the city can do that” (*Phaedrus*, 230d3–5), the other is consumed with trees and landscapes wherein all living things with no “etiquette” dwell. In all of his dialogues, Socrates carries a cheerful yet composed demeanour, whereas Thoreau rather paradoxically carries with him the sheer loneliness of trying to put all of the pieces of the world together before building a home in it. At some point, he did find that world in Walden Pond, and he did build a home there, but then he left and became a “sojourner in civilized life again” (5).

Yet, despite all their differences, they both remained committed to lives of philosophical parrhesia as embodied in the unjust death of Socrates and in Thoreau’s unequivocal support of the abolitionist movement. Of course, they had their own fundamental differences in their ways of encountering or responding to unjust laws. Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” was in essence based on the radical conviction that violating “unjust laws” is a moral imperative. His conviction that

<sup>14</sup> In *Apology*, Socrates alludes to his unpopularity at least four times. On one occasion, he directly attributes his unpopularity to his practice of parrhesia (24a).

<sup>15</sup> Compare with Rainer Maria Rilke’s poem, “Archaic Torso of Apollo.”

“Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison” (*Writings*, IV, p. 370) is a true reflection of what he considers as the stakes of a parrhesiastic life. In the face of “unendurable” injustice “it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize” (*Writings*, IV, p. 361). Note the parrhesiastic tone of Thoreau when he continues: “There are thousands who are *in opinion* opposed to the slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them” (*Writings*, IV, p. 362). Most of us are law-abiding citizens, waiting for others “to remedy the evil,” and precisely in doing so we become “agents of injustice.”

In comparison, for reasons that are beyond the scope of this article, Socrates held the belief that upholding the law of the polis as a citizen was more important than an individual’s life. He believed that he had a moral obligation to abide by the verdict of the court, even though he disagreed with it. He believed that by disobeying the law — for example by fleeing from prison — he would send the message that he was indeed guilty of “corrupting” the youth (*Apology*, 24b6–c1).

Yet, despite their clearly different stances on the legitimacy and authority of the law, philosophical parrhesia remains a major connecting link between the two philosophers. One might say, for a Socratic philosopher like Thoreau, parrhesia is inevitable and it reveals itself whenever the opportunity arises, whether in the lyrical moments of *Walden* or in his more political writings, from “Civil Disobedience” and “Slavery in Massachusetts” to “A Plea for Captain John Brown” and “Life Without Principle.” Parrhesia as a form of relation to truth, a way of revolving one’s life around it, is bound to impact the way one speaks and relates to others. One’s considerations of conformity and common courtesy pale into insignificance in the face of a solemn wish to stand right in the world and live up to the callings of parrhesia. For we are here to read “not *The Times*,” but “*The Eternities*” (*Writings*, IV, p. 475). The goal is always to “wake my neighbours up” (84), to “leave out all the flattery and retain all the criticism” (*Writings*, IV, p. 456).

As I argue in the next section, if Thoreau’s philosophical parrhesia is one of the connecting links between him and the philosophers in the Socratic tradition, his key contribution to this tradition is the conviction that one’s spiritual progress is hinged upon “settling in the world” (70) — upon the formation of a moral character receptive to the perception of beauty. I attend to this aspect of Thoreau’s philosophy next.

#### 4. Perception of Beauty as a Moral Test

In the previous section, I argued that we would be in a well-informed position to examine Thoreau’s works if we situate his provocative style in the context of practicing parrhesia, a practice that in its philosophical form can be traced back to Socrates’ definitional dialogues. But the significance and the contribution of any philosopher in the Socratic tradition of philosophy, including Thoreau, is determined not by establishing their shared practices and common aspirations but, more importantly, by the *novelty* of their solutions to the problem of life and the persuasive power of their words to communicate their ideas. In other words, we need to move beyond establishing the continuity of certain ideas and techniques in their works and look for what Thoreau calls “the marrow of life” in their way of seeing. From this vantage point,

one might say, Thoreau's key contribution is his refreshing way of relating to the sense of beauty in the natural world and his conviction that cultivating the capacity to "read" the language of natural phenomena is hinged upon a first-hand experience of them (84). Such a way of experiencing the world has aesthetic and moral values at the same time. In fact, he goes so far as to suggest that "The perception of beauty is a moral test" (*Writings*, X, p. 126).

Thoreau consistently draws our attention to the sharp contrast between what he calls "an incessant influx of novelty into the world," and our incredibly uneventful lives (266). We are "well nigh crushed and smothered under" (6) the weight of life. Consumed by "factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life," (7) we are "creeping down the road of life" (6).

Instead of waking up to "the morning" of the world, we attend to "trivial things" and our thoughts are "tinged with triviality" (*Writings*, IV, p. 475). In order for us to see such incongruity between the possibilities of an original life and the reality of acquiescence and dejection, he pursues a dual strategy of exposing the oppressive timidity of our way of living (parrhesia) and, in parallel, capturing the beauty of the wild in its most detailed forms. On the one hand, for example, he writes:

Some of you, we all know, are poor, find it hard to live, are sometimes, as it were, gasping for breath. [...] It is very evident what mean and sneaking lives many of you live, for my sight has been whetted by experience; always on the limits, trying to get into business and trying to get out of debt, [...] contracting yourselves into a nutshell of civility [...]. (7–8)

And on the other, he shares a detailed account of his excursion into the wild to bring home the message that a first-hand experience of the world, by necessity, goes beyond self-consuming worries and reflections, an experience that ranges from looking "through each other's eyes for an instant" (10) to encountering the wild in all its fresh manifestations.

In this persistent interchange of admonition and inviting description of natural phenomena, Thoreau tries to prepare the reader for a change of aspect that could lead to a change in one's way of life. The task of *Walden* is to show us how to live "deliberately," how to "earn and spend our most wakeful hours" (Cavell, 1971, p. 5). Moral reform in *Walden* requires the awakenings of all of our senses. He wants us to look at the world with the same stamina and dedication as the bees look at the mountain flowers.<sup>16</sup> From a sea of birds, a falcon marks one and dives. Thoreau's emphasis on detecting "earthiness" (*Writings*, X, p. 40) and cultivating the senses, as Lydia Willsky-Ciollo argues, has to do with the conviction that our senses are "the sites of engagement with the natural world and the divinity" (Willsky-Ciollo, 2021, p. 266). "What kind of gift is life," Thoreau writes in his journals, "unless we have spirits to enjoy it and taste its true flavor?" (*Writings*, X, p. 6). He believes a wholesome experience of the world inevitably requires re-educating our

<sup>16</sup> He writes in his Journals, "How to live? — How to get the most life? As if you were to teach the young hunter how to entrap his game. How to entrap its honey from the flower of the world. That is my everyday business. I am as busy as a bee about it" (*Writings*, IV, p. 53).

senses to see and taste and listen and feel better. In fact, he goes so far as to suggest that education is nothing but “to develop these divine germs called the senses” (Thoreau, 2004, p. 382). As Branka Arsić argues, by redirecting our attention to the things themselves, and their “sensuous” properties, he is trying to “emancipate” us “from abstractions” (Arsić, 2016, p. 11). Take *Walden* as a proclamation of emancipation in its own right — emancipation from apathy and quiet retreats into oblivion and acquiescence. He is entirely focused on efforts “to generate techniques of perceiving designed to alter the way humans experience the world” (Arsić, 2016, p. 39).

Consider all of the moments in Thoreau’s works when he engages our senses, moments that remind us of Emerson’s famous moment of ecstasy in “Experience,” when he claps his hands “in infantine joy and amazement” (Emerson, 1984, p. 414). Our happy confirmation that “Every man looks at his wood-pile with a kind of affection” (202), or the fresh sense of “borrowing” an “old axe” from a man and returning it sharper than when it was received because it was “the apple of his eye” (35). On a most primal level, most of us could relate to the realization that fire is a form of company:

I sometimes left a good fire when I went to take a walk in a winter afternoon; and when I returned, three or four hours afterwards, it would be still alive and glowing. My house was not empty though I was gone. It was as if I had left a cheerful housekeeper behind. (203)

We might have forgotten that horses need to be broken before they can be of use to “men” and, likewise, there are “men” who are yet to be broken to become “fit subjects for civilization” (Thoreau, 2007, p. 773). Perhaps there is a chance to be unchained once more. Thoreau’s ability, in Emerson’s words, to throw a “poetic veil” over our experience — that is, his investment in what we could call an “excursive aesthetics” — is one of his key contributions: the idea that capturing the vitality of the world is hinged upon excursions into the wild. By paying attention to this aspect of Thoreau’s writing, we can revisit other important aspects of his works. Consider, for example, his equal attachment to the wild and the good:

I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good. (170)

He is equally gravitated toward the wild and the good as he believes a spiritual life that is not receptive to the sense of the wild is impoverished in an important sense. The wild plays a central role in Thoreau’s theology because he is trying to reconnect us with the “mystery” of the world (Dustin, 2009), which reveals itself to those who are willing to “front” it in their own first-hand excursive exercises (74).

There could be another reason for the juxtaposition of these two forces in Thoreau’s work. One might suggest that Thoreau is trying to resolve a deeply seated tension between two modes of experiencing life, which, in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s words, is the result of having “two souls” dwelling in one’s being (Goethe, 1808/1962, p. 145). Thoreau’s “experiment in self-discovery” (Porte, 2004,

p. 149) was based on the conviction that, by mutually recognizing these two modes of life, he could resolve the tension. But the fact remains that he left the woods for as good a reason as he went there (259). The idea of living in the woods could be exhilarating to someone who believes that only in first-hand experience of the world can one find definitive affirmations of life. But ultimately insofar as those experiences need to be captured, perhaps as a souvenir for the “civilized world,” one is far from the wild even if one is at the heart of it.

## 5. Conclusion

I have focused on two issues that are ultimately interconnected. First, I situated Thoreau’s “unfriendly criticism of life” in the larger context of practicing philosophical parrhesia and, second, I highlighted his key investment in ways of acquiring the practical knowledge or skill to approach natural phenomena “from the point of view of wonder and awe, like lightning” (*Writings*, X, p. 158). With regard to the former, one might say, undermining the world of ordinary people did not begin with Thoreau and, ironically, to that extent his cynicism was the least original aspect of his philosophical parrhesia in “the new world.” As for the latter, Thoreau advanced the ideal of an original “man” in the wild since he believed such a person would be able, in Bennett’s words, to capture “the fugitive vitality of things” (Bennett, 2002, p. xxiii). It is beyond the scope of this article, but even as we acknowledge the importance of such contribution, we could still investigate what would happen if and when philosophical “excursion” of the kind Thoreau had in mind turns into a “new form of Dandyism,”<sup>17</sup> which aims at offering a trendy model of life to those who can afford it. In other words, in dealing with Thoreau, it is imperative that one doesn’t turn into a restless *philotheamōn*, “a lover of sights,” instead of becoming a philosopher, a lover of wisdom (Cf. Nehamas, 2007a, p. 17).

In closing, we could receive Thoreau as the American parrhesiast whose works are still relevant in our saturated world of *doxa*, defined by echo chambers of life, without “rhythm or grace” (*Republic*, 411e2). Undermining Thoreau based on *ad hominem* grievances does not change the fact that those who find their way to philosophers like him will do so despite the sharp edges of character in their words and deeds, and not because of them. For the realization that one must change one’s life will be stronger than one’s devotion to a sense of propriety. The change or the transformation Thoreau has in mind is hinged upon acquiring the practical knowledge of cultivating the senses through what he calls “excursion.” One might argue that Thoreau’s key contribution to the Socratic tradition of philosophy as spiritual exercises is the conviction that excursion is a form of spiritual exercise and to that extent he considers philosophy without excursion a disoriented enterprise. Excursion, on this view, is the very act of parting ways from the limiting conventions of society, in search of all “the little wild things” he documented in those 20 volumes of works. For Thoreau, philosophy as excursion is itself a parrhesiastic exercise since it is one’s testimony of living up to the “dictates of wisdom.” The parrhesiast seems to be in possession of nothing but “a vast horizon” (72) and a

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Hadot’s criticisms against Foucault’s “aesthetics of existence” (Hadot, 1995, p. 211).

few old truths — or, as Socrates puts it in *Apology*, he looks at his own “poverty” as a living testimony that he speaks “the truth” (31c3). This point alludes to a crucial fact about the tradition of philosophy as spiritual exercises: that the relevance of a philosopher is not entirely measured by the level of her popularity. Thoreau is still relevant because he manages to leave — or in Porte’s words, to burn — “an image of himself on the consciousness of the world” (Porte, 2004, p. 142). We all need reminders, time and again, that the life of discovery is possible if we cultivate the capacity to see the world anew. And cultivating such capacity more often than not requires a change in our way of being in the world. A change of perspective could lead to a change of life. Admittedly, such a way of doing philosophy, exemplified in the works of ancient philosophers and their modern counterparts, from Emerson to Wittgenstein, is in essence at odds with the overall orientation of our “hyper-professionalized” academic philosophy. In the parrhesiastic, yet poignant, words of Thoreau, “There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live” (14). What makes these words poignant is the implied conviction that the absence of philosophy alludes to the absence of life. But without undermining the significance of rigorous argumentation and theoretical conceptualizations, one could always ask, along with Plato: how does an argument hit us?<sup>18</sup> I’m referring to an argument that is not made with an eye to score points but with the hope to have an impact on our understanding of life and of the sheer strangeness and wonder of the passing of the world. Socratic philosophers have their fair share of thinking about such questions and they often offer insights we could take away from their ways of seeing the world. But again, such ways of seeing, such wisdom, is not readily “translatable” into the professional standards of current academic philosophy. Nevertheless, perhaps such reality tells us more about the untranslatability of wisdom, as Socrates has shown, than its irrelevance.

Moreover, in highlighting *ad hominem* responses to Thoreau, my primary aim was not to vindicate him apologetically. Instead, I argued that by situating Thoreau in the context of practicing philosophical parrhesia we would be in a better position to acknowledge, and even appreciate, his contribution to the Socratic conception of philosophy as a way of life. At the same time, it is rather striking to observe how many of the early commentaries on Thoreau, perhaps until the publication of F. O. Matthiessen’s classic in 1941, are marked by “reviewing” Thoreau’s eccentricities. These commentaries, in a sense, were the groundwork upon which the cultural image of Thoreau as a hermit was built. I have argued that a major way of establishing the continuity of the Socratic tradition is to establish the continuity of certain ideas and practices such as philosophical parrhesia in the said tradition which was meant to bring about the formidable realization that “You must change your life.”

I also argued that our reception of Thoreau is not because of his unfriendly parrhesia but for the simple reason that those who find themselves lost, as in the beginning of Emerson’s “Experience,” might turn to Thoreau or *Walden*, hoping that he has something to say about the lives they are living quietly, with or without “desperation” (9).

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Republic* 345b, “And how am I to persuade you, if you aren’t persuaded by what I said just now? What more can I do? Am I to take the argument and pour it into your soul?”

In its single-mindedness, in its resolve to solve the problems of life once and for all, in its open declaration of war against the domination of society, and in its uncompromising attitude toward our social conventions, *Walden* is, and will remain, a polemical work and to that extent it keeps attracting those who are prone to radical remedies of life. Such “extravagant” desire to experience the totality of the world, and to capture its senses, however, runs the risk of closing in an equally extravagant despair, the reality of which was recognized with much more complexity in the later works of Emerson.<sup>19</sup>

In the final analysis, the significance of philosophers in the Socratic tradition is to the extent that their solution to the problem of life speaks to the most general problems experienced by a wide range of people from different walks of life. The works of representatives of philosophy as a way of life are a collection of reflections on our fundamental responses to the universe. As such, the goal in engaging them is to take away the elements that are responsive to the assessments of time or, in Hadot’s words, to flesh out the “imperishable spirit” of their works (Hadot, 1998, p. 309). We need to approach Thoreau’s corpus with the same mindset. If we bracket the rough edges of character in his writing and view his works, in Iris Murdoch’s words, with a “loving gaze” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 327), we could see a whole new set of possibilities and insights on life, available for us to be internalized. He is simply putting “a new aspect on the face of things” (88). In this regard, perhaps the very experience of reading *Walden*, or his other parrhesiastic works, with a loving gaze and seeing the possibility of education in the encounter is an *excursion* on its own, one in which we are “provoked” more and flattered less (89). From this perspective, we have good reasons to argue that the very act of *reading* Thoreau could be a spiritual exercise since it provides us with the possibility of practicing “care of the soul” (Cf. *Laches*, 185e3; *Republic*, IX, 585d1). In patience, we move beyond his parrhesiastic urges to admonish and, in gratitude, we remember instead the enduring appeal of his other observations, like when it suddenly dawns on us that “The rays which stream through the shutter will be no longer remembered when the shutter is wholly removed” (91). Thoreau shows us that understanding the language of nature requires the discipline of “being forever on the alert” — a discipline that requires patient observations, “voluntary poverty,”<sup>20</sup> “simplicity, simplicity, simplicity,” and “solitude.” Evidently, such discipline, such way of life, is neither simple nor common. But, in Baruch Spinoza’s reassuring words, “all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare” (Spinoza, 1677/1994, p. 265; Cf. Hadot, 1995, p. 275).

What was excellent about Thoreau’s way of seeing was the conviction that the contemplation of beauty is more of a practical skill (*technê*) than a passive reception of it. Almost every philosophy student knows that Socrates said, “The unexamined life is not worth living” (*Apology*, 38a5). But he was even more radical in his parrhesia when, on a different occasion, surrounded with friends this time, he said “Only in

<sup>19</sup> On this point, compare the complex development of Emerson’s ideas from the radicalism of his early works to his pragmatic turn in his later writings in the 1850s, and Thoreau’s single-minded focus on the preservation of the wild and civil disobedience. For more on Emerson’s pragmatic turn, see Hosseini (2018, 2020, pp. 103–120); David M. Robinson (1993).

<sup>20</sup> “None can be an impartial or wise observer of human life but from the vantage ground of what we should call voluntary poverty” (14).

the contemplation of beauty is human life worth living” (*Symposium*, 211d).<sup>21</sup> In his persistently detailed observations of life in the wild, which was his way of capturing the sense of vitality in the world, Thoreau added a commentary to *Symposium* with far-reaching implications: that *theoria* or contemplating the beauty of the world is a practical excursion, informed and elevated by all of our senses.<sup>22</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that was, in essence, the American way of adding a footnote to Plato.

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<sup>21</sup> As per Nehamas’ translation in Nehamas (2007b, p. 97).

<sup>22</sup> It is noteworthy that the word *theoria* in Greek can be defined, depending on the context, as “gazing upon,” “contemplating,” and “watching.”



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