

## THE BIG IDEAS

**Sophists vs. Philosophers**  
Know the ultimate game.

**Arete & Eudaimonia**  
Feeling happy vs. *being* happy.

**Illeism**  
A new way to talk to yourself.

**The Rhetoric**  
Of demagogues.

**Put Your Philosophy**  
Into practice.

# How to Think Like Socrates

Ancient Philosophy As a Way of Life in the Modern World

BY DONALD ROBERTSON · ST. MARTIN'S PRESS © 2024 · 368 PAGES

“Socrates was a real person—a famous Athenian philosopher. However, despite a rich tradition of literature, many details concerning his life and thought remain uncertain. The challenge of sorting out truth from fiction in our sources, which has vexed historians throughout the ages, is known as the ‘Socratic problem.’ ...

We are therefore best to consider the Socratic dialogues of Plato and Xenophon as largely make-believe. They employ the character of Socrates as a literary device, used to imagine what he *might* have said *if* such a conversation had taken place. As the twentieth-century philosopher Karl Jaspers put it, we have inherited such contradictory information that it may simply be impossible to reconstruct an accurate image of the real man.

Nevertheless, the anecdotes once told about Socrates deserve to be retold for modern readers who are interested in his philosophy. This book therefore contains a *dramatized* and *semi-fictional* account of the life of Socrates, designed to make his thought more accessible, while also highlighting connections with modern psychology. I believe that is the best way to help the largest number of people benefit from his story. Even if we ‘forgo a historical Socrates,’ this does not prevent us from continuing to derive immense value from the literary character of ‘Socrates’ passed down to us from ancient sources.”

~ Donald Robertson from *How to Think Like Socrates*

Donald Robertson is a writer, trainer, and cognitive-behavioral psychotherapist.

He’s also one of the world’s leading scholars and practitioners of Stoic philosophy and has played a leading role in helping bring this ancient wisdom to our modern world.

He has been one of my absolute favorite writers and Stoic thinkers/practitioners since I read one of his earlier books called [The Philosophy of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy](#) and his more recent book called [How to Think Like a Roman Emperor](#).

This book cemented that position in my mind. It’s a remarkably creative, thoughtful, and practical exploration of the life and wisdom of the founder of Western philosophy.

I highly recommend it. Get a copy [here](#).

As you’d expect, the book is packed with wisdom. As always, I’m excited to share some of my favorites, so let’s jump straight in!

P.S. In addition to being one of my favorite teachers, Donald is ALSO one of the most thoughtful, kind, and generous human beings I know.

I started creating this Note the day before the family and I flew out to Athens to connect with nearly 200 members of our Heroic community to train our next cohort of Heroic Workshop Instructors (Class III!!). I finished it the week after returning.

*“But men of faint heart  
never yet set up a trophy  
... wherefore you must go  
forward to your discoursing  
manfully, and, invoking the aid  
of Apollo and the Muses,  
exhibit and celebrate the  
virtues of your ancient  
citizens.”*

~ Plato, *Critias*, 108c

*" Could there be a whole philosophy of life based on, or at least consistent with, the fundamental insights of modern psychotherapy? Socrates, like most ancient philosophers, saw the quest for wisdom and the promise of emotional well-being as two sides of the same coin. He insisted that the mission he undertook, in the spirit of Apollo, the god of healing, was not only philosophical but also therapeutic."*

~ Donald Robertson

*" Democracy worked if the people behaved rationally, but once they fell completely under the spell of a demagogue, rule by the people became a form of tyranny in disguise."*

~ Donald Robertson

*" To become angry with my attackers seemed as pointless to me as blaming an ass for kicking me or a dog for barking at me."*

~ Socrates

Donald joined us in Athens to share his wisdom. He did a talk on the ancient grounds of Plato's Academy (which Donald is bringing back to life!) and also gave a couple of spontaneous talks on the Acropolis. The trip was absolutely HEROIC. Want to join us for a future Heroic experience? Learn more about upcoming events and join us [here](#).

P.P.S. Learn more about Donald [here](#) and learn more about his work with Plato's Academy [here](#).

## SOPHISTS VS. PHILOSOPHERS

"Before we can even begin to *help* ourselves, we need, moreover, to figure out what our goal is. Self-help is no help unless we know what it is we're trying to achieve. First, we need to learn how to focus on the bigger picture and, as Socrates insisted, ask ourselves some difficult questions concerning our values. For instance, should our 'self-improvement' be measured in terms of achieving external goals, such as wealth or reputation, or inner ones, such as wisdom and self-mastery? What really constitutes human flourishing or a good life?"

The internet is awash with self-help advice. Young people in particular, drink from a veritable firehose of opinions about how they should be living. The youth of Athens faced essentially the same problem. Their 'influencers' were called the *Sophists*, self-proclaimed 'experts' or 'wise men.' Ancient Athenians attended speeches given by Sophists, who claimed to improve their students, just as today we consume videos by those who profess to be self-improvement experts. The Sophists charged hefty fees for teaching young Athenians how to become more persuasive speakers, with promises that they would thereby achieve success in public life. Modern influencers often profess to teach us how to succeed in our careers and relationships. Nevertheless, despite being separated by over two thousand years, certain ancient Sophists and modern-day influencers can, at times, sound uncannily alike. That's because they're often telling their audiences what they want to hear, or what they know will capture their attention—something Socrates described as pandering. They compete with their peers for praise—ancient Sophists for applause; social media influencers for 'likes.' That inevitably leads them to appeal to our existing prejudices rather than challenge them. But what if this very relationship does us more harm than good?"

*Sophists vs. Philosophers.*

<- I find the distinction (and the connection to modern-day social media influencers!) absolutely FASCINATING. So much so that, at the end of his talk on the ancient grounds of Plato's Academy, I asked Donald to talk a bit more about the distinction.

Now... After marking up the couple pages in the book in which Donald shares this wisdom (pages 8 and 9, for the record!), at the bottom of the pages I wrote:

"ULTIMATE GAME. 2,500-YEAR-OLD CHALLENGE. SEDUCED: FAME/WEALTH/HOTNESS. HERCULES! VICE VS. VIRTUE. SPA VS. HOSPITAL."

Let's quickly unpack what I was thinking.

First, we need to remember the fact that having the wisdom to know the ULTIMATE GAME we're playing (and how to play it well!) is a 2,500-year-old challenge. We've had "influencers" "pandering" to our craving for fame, wealth, and hotness for A VERY LONG TIME.

Remember The Choice of Hercules? I got that story from Donald. In [How to Think Like a Roman Emperor](#) he shares the story Socrates and the ancient Stoics used to tell about young Hercules BEFORE he was Hercules. It goes like this...

Young Hercules is walking in a forest by himself. Two goddesses approach him. One rushes in front of the other. She's overly made up and preening—you can almost see her getting ready to snap a selfie and post it on Instagram to get some more likes as a modern-day influencer. ;)

*"This is the worst sort of ignorance, which I will call double ignorance. For, ignorant of his own ignorance, man conceitedly takes himself to know what he doesn't know."*

~ Donald Robertson

*"Some people describe angry rumination as a failed attempt at problem-solving."*

~ Donald Robertson

*"For I do nothing but go around persuading you all, old and young alike, not to worry about your reputation or your property but to make it your greatest concern to achieve the greatest improvements possible in your own character. Moral wisdom is not acquired through money. On the contrary, such wisdom is a source of true wealth and everything else that is good for man and for the city."*

~ Socrates

She tells him that her name is Happiness. She's lying. Her name is vice. She tells him that, if he follows her, his life will be filled with everything he wants—with zero effort. She's lying.

The second goddess waits patiently. Then she steps forward. She has an austere but beautiful presence. She tells Hercules that the other goddess is lying. She tells him that if he follows her, she will promise him a life of hardship and challenge.

But... In the process of forging the strength to overcome these challenges in service to something bigger than himself, he will earn the respect of the gods. Her name? *Arete*.

A sophist. And a philosopher.

Which one are YOU paying attention to? Choose wisely.

TODAY.

P.S. Later in the book, Donald tells us: "Socrates, however, said that this meant orators resembled confectioners. At first this perplexed everyone, but Socrates explained what he meant. 'Confectioners,' he said, 'come up with recipes for sweets, which appeal to the tastes of their customers. They learn, through trial and error, how to give people what they want regardless of whether it's good for them or not.' Socrates said that he therefore considered both rhetoric and confectionary to be forms of pandering to others, by attempting to gratify them: one with sweets, the other with fine words."

And: "Pandering,' said Socrates, 'pays no attention to the best interests of its subjects and instead catches the foolish with the bait of pleasure, tricking them into esteeming it more highly than their own good.' On this definition, of course, the vast majority of 'politicians' would be panders, or demagogues, rather than genuine statesmen. These men employ rhetoric in order to gain power instead of studying justice and learning how to benefit society."

Plus: "They are far more concerned with the appearance than truth, and they create the impression of possessing wisdom and virtue despite being ignorant of their nature. 'Rhetorical is to the mind,' said Socrates, 'as confectionary is to the body—both are knacks that their practitioners have developed for pandering to the desires of the ignorant, and neither pay any attention on what is in anyone's best interest.'"

## ARETE & EUDAIMONIA

"'Virtue' is the conventional translation for the Greek word *arete*. Modern academics tend to prefer 'excellence,' as *arete* refers to those qualities that make something exceptionally good. A good table, for instance, is one that is sturdy and even, a good horse is one that is strong and fast—but what makes good humans? ...

What does it mean to live well and flourish? The Greek word used to denote this concept is *eudaimonia*. It's an unusual word and difficult to properly translate, but *eudaimonia* basically refers to the condition of someone who is living a good life, or rather the best possible life. It has traditionally been translated by the word *happiness*, but this derives from an outdated English usage. 'Happy' once meant *blessed* or *fortunate*. There's still a trace of this earlier meaning in its antonym *hapless*, which means *wretched* or *unfortunate*. Happiness, in its original sense, is the opposite of being hapless. Happiness is more than just a feeling, in other words: it's a state of being.

A good therapist will tell you that there's a big difference between 'feeling good' and 'being good,' or even between 'feeling happy' and 'being happy.' It's an example of our tendency to confuse appearance and reality—feeling good seems good to us. An addict, for instance, might be happy in the sense of feeling good but be utterly hapless in the sense of living badly. The word *eudaimonia*, by contrast, means having a happy life in the sense of being fortunate or flourishing.

*"Instead of working in stone, crafting likenesses of the gods, Socrates would therefore begin roughing out his own character. He would sculpt himself, chiseling away the debris of false beliefs, in the hope of revealing the true nature of his own soul."*

~ Donald Robertson

We no longer even have a satisfactory word in English to describe this concept, whereas the ancient Greek philosophers took it to be the most important thing in life. Maybe that's a sign that over the intervening centuries we've grown more complacent, more dependent on the opinion of others, and neglect to reason for ourselves about the fundamental goal of life."

That's from a chapter called "The First Philosopher."

As you know if you've been following along, Objective I in EVERYTHING we do together (from [the book](#) to [Basic Training](#) in the app to our [Heroic Coach program](#) to the Heroic Workshops our instructors give in their communities!) is simple: We need to know THE ULTIMATE GAME.

What is the ultimate game? As the ancient Greek and Stoic philosophers tell us: We want to live with *ARETÉ* so we can experience *EUDAIMONIA*. Or, as the modern positive psychologists put it, we want to put our virtues in action so we can flourish.

I absolutely love the connection Donald makes between *happiness* in its original sense and its antonym *hapless*. I also love the distinction between FEELING happy and BEING happy—which reminds me of [Ward Farnsworth](#)'s wisdom from [The Practicing Stoic](#).

He tells us: "*Stoics regard virtue as sufficient to produce happiness on all occasions, and also as necessary for it. The happiness centrally valued by the Stoic is eudaimonia, or well-being—the good life rather than the good mood. But the Stoic believes that virtue gives rise to joy and to peace of mind as well. Virtue produces these good consequences as side effects. The primary mission of the Stoics, in other words, is to be helpful to others and serve the greater good, and they don't do this to make themselves happy. They do it because it is the right and natural way to live. But doing it in that spirit, as it turns out, makes them happy.*"

Let's connect this wisdom to the first Big Idea.

Know this: The SOPHIST acts like a confectioner. They'll pander to your desires to have a life of ease and luxury with zero effort. They'll sell you get-rich and get-fit and get-happy quick schemes that "taste good" and make you FEEL good in the moment but AREN'T actually good for you.

The PHILOSOPHER, on the other hand, who wants you to actually BE good will act less like a confectioner selling you candy and more like a doctor giving you bitter medicine that doesn't taste good in the moment but will lead to enduring happiness.

This is why the old school Stoics would say that attending a lecture by a Sophist would typically end in applause for the speaker and make you feel all fired up whereas a lecture by a philosopher would often end in stunned silence. The sophist makes you feel like you just got a nice, relaxing massage. The philosopher makes you feel like you just had surgery. :)

*"How can I help you best?" replied Socrates. 'By false praise or by urging you to become a good man? No... if you want to be thought good at anything, you must try to be so; that is quickest, the surest, and the best way.' This became a famous maxim of Socrates. We should be as we wish to appear."*

~ Donald Robertson

## ILLEISM

"A closely related method involves referring to our own thoughts and actions as if we were talking about those of someone else. Third-person self-talk is known as 'illeism' (pronounced ILL-ee-ism), from *ille*, the Latin pronoun for 'he.' We don't even need to use our imagination for this, just our words. For example, rather than thinking 'I'm really upset and don't know what to do!' (in the first person), I might say to myself 'Donald is really upset and he doesn't know what to do!' (in the third person).

A recent pair of studies on illeism asked a total of 555 participants to record their thoughts in a journal for four weeks. To test whether wise reasoning could be cultivated in daily life, participants were to write about various social experiences that happened each day, one group using first-person and the other third-person language (illeism). Those employing illeism were found to have improved on ratings of 'wisdom,' measured in the same way as above. The study also found that in some cases illeism reduced negative emotions, such as anger or frustration, in participants' relationships."

*"Someone who realizes he is ignorant about the most important things in life will naturally be keen to learn from someone he considers wiser than himself, according to Socrates. The real danger consists in believing that we know what is good for us when, in reality, we do not know anything of the sort. Knowing what we do and do not know is the most important form of self-knowledge."*

~ Donald Robertson

One of the things that makes Donald so special as a modern-day (Stoic!) philosopher is the fact that his background is as a cognitive behavioral therapist. He knows how to APPLY this wisdom and what works and what doesn't in a VERY practical way.

Right before that passage, he says: "In one study, [researchers] described a hypothetical relationship problem to participants in two groups. One group was asked to imagine it was a friend's problem, the other group's participants, to view it as if it were their own. The group examining the problem as if it happened to a friend scored 22 percent higher on ratings of intellectual humility, 31 percent on open-mindedness, and 15 percent on compromise."

Right after that passage, he tells us: "Similar verbal techniques have long been used in cognitive psychotherapy. Aaron T. Beck and his colleagues advised clients suffering from anxiety disorders to practice detached self-awareness: 'Look at your thoughts, feelings, and act as if you're a friendly, but not overly concerned, bystander.' They describe this as learning to 'watch myself watching myself,' in language highly reminiscent of Socrates's analogy of the eye that looks at itself. Moreover, using third-person language can, they claim, help a client to 'increase self-awareness by voluntarily choosing to distance himself from his anxiety.'"

Illeism.

It does a Hero good.

Try it. Today.

P.S. The basic idea here is similar to what other CBT practitioners describe as "defusing" from our thoughts. Check out our Notes on [Stephen Hayes' Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life](#) and [Russ Harris' The Confidence Gap](#) for more.

## THE RHETORIC OF DEMAGOGUES

"Socrates believed that rhetoricians and demagogues used several ingenious contrivances to win an argument by persuading people of things that weren't necessarily true. In our dialogue above, Alcibiades resorts to several of these tactics while trying to persuade Socrates that rhetoricians and tyrants are the most powerful men in politics. First, he attacks Socrates's character in order to discredit him, next he appeals to popular opinion, then he tries to scare him by describing graphic scenes of violence, and finally he mocks him in an attempt to portray what he is saying as ridiculous. Not one of these tactics would be capable of proving Socrates wrong. They are, if you like, ways of winning an argument by manipulating the audience or, put bluntly, cheating. ...

One of the greatest challenges we face today is how to defend ourselves against rhetoric. Today's Sophists are called 'influencers,' and arguably most of our politicians behave more like demagogues than true statesmen. We're easily manipulated into believing things that we don't know to be true. We are the victims, not only of other peoples' rhetoric but also of our own. We frequently exaggerate, trivialize, and generalize, and are selective with the facts, thereby persuading ourselves to believe things that may be false. For instance, research shows that people who are anxious tend to overestimate risk, whereas those who are angry do the opposite, like the Athenians who called for this expedition, underestimating the dangers they would face."

That's from a chapter called "The Sicilian Expedition."

We'll skip the details of the catastrophe that was that expedition and focus on the demagogues and the tricks they use to manipulate people.

As I read that passage, I thought of [Yuval Noah Harari's](#) brilliant book [Nexus](#) and [Max Fisher's The Chaos Machine](#). As I've said several times, those two books are as close to must-reads as I can imagine. If you want to understand the rise of populist demagogues and the potentially catastrophic political polarization we're seeing around the world, check out those Notes.

*"Whereas the earlier philosophers taught moral maxims, or rules, Socrates encouraged his students to question them. It seems to me he realized that true moral wisdom requires some degree of openness, flexibility, and adaptability in our thinking. In a word, it's healthier in the long run for us to learn to think for ourselves than to depend too much on memorizing the sayings of wise men."*

~ Donald Robertson

*"According to Plato, for instance, we're told that Socrates himself would have advised us as follows: 'If you take my advice, you'll care little for Socrates but much more for the truth. If you think I'm speaking the truth, agree with me; but if not, resist me with every argument you can muster.'"*

~ Donald Robertson

I actually chatted with Donald about this over dinner one night in Athens. He's writing a new book on anger and I encouraged him to consider including his perspective on the algorithms driving user engagement on modern social platforms. The content those algorithms relentlessly promote? The content that induces the most "moral outrage." Demagogues know how to exploit those emotions to gain power.

Of course, we are victims of our OWN rhetoric. Donald tells us we need to work on our own "cognitive distortions." [Jonathan Haidt](#) talks about the same themes in depth in HIS great book [The Coddling of the American Mind](#). Check out the Notes for more.

## PUT YOUR PHILOSOPHY INTO PRACTICE

"When it was nearing sunset, you said it was time for you to take a bath. You wanted to save the women the trouble of washing your corpse. Crito asked about your final instructions concerning your sons and what little property you owned. After listening to you, he also asked, 'What can we do that would please you the most?' You said the same thing as always: We would please you, and ourselves, by always taking good care of our own souls. 'You will do yourselves the most good,' you explained, 'if you put your philosophy into practice, because even if you agree with every word I say today, you will achieve nothing if you neglect to take care of yourselves tomorrow, and every day thereafter.'"

That's from the final chapter of the book called "The Swan Song."

As he does throughout the book, Donald breathes new dramatic life into Plato's dialogues. In this case, we get to spend time with Socrates in his final hours.

Right before that passage, Donald has the narrator of that dialogue remind us of the power of rehearsing our deaths as we strive to live our best lives by becoming as good as possible.

And, I absolutely love how Socrates answers the question of what his friends could do to most please him. It happens to be precisely the answer I always give when someone asks me what they can do to thank me for the support they have received from me.

I repeat: *"You will do yourselves the most good if you put your philosophy into practice, because even if you agree with every word I say today, you will achieve nothing if you neglect to take care of yourselves tomorrow, and every day thereafter."*

It's time to move from theory to practice to mastery as we forge excellence, activate our Heroic potential, and help create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by the year 2051.

Today's the Day, Hero.

Let's go!

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
*Heroic Philosopher CEO*

## About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson is the Co-Founder + CEO of Heroic Public Benefit Corporation and the author of [Areté: Activate Your Heroic Potential](#). He's 50% Philosopher and 50% CEO and 101% committed to helping create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by the year 2051. Learn more at [heroic.us](#).

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