

PHILOSOPHICAL LIVES IN THE RENAISSANCE

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ABSTRACT: One striking feature of the Renaissance recovery of ancient philosophy was the attention paid to biographies of ancient philosophers. One of the first to receive attention was Seneca: Gasparino Barzizza wrote, in the words of Letizia Panizza, “the first Humanist Latin biography of Seneca”. Gianozzo Manetti later wrote parallel lives of Socrates and Seneca, inspired by Plutarch. There was great excitement when the *Vitae philosophorum* of Diogenes Laertius was rediscovered and translated into Latin. Its appearance prompted Leonardo Bruni to write a new humanist biography of Aristotle. Biographies of Plato followed, including one by Marsilio Ficino. Early printed editions of the works of philosophers – such as the Aldine Aristotle – opened with a biography, to be read before the works, following the ancient Neoplatonic tradition of studying the life of a philosopher before their ideas. While some historians of philosophy might be tempted to ignore this Renaissance fascination with biographies, dismissing it as a historical and philological distraction, I argue that it might tell us something important about how philosophy was conceived during this period. In particular, I argue that it adds support to the claim made by a number of recent scholars that during the Renaissance philosophy was often conceived as a way of life.

1. Introduction

Is there any good reason to be interested in the biography of a philosopher?¹ If philosophy is an activity primarily concerned with arguments, deductions, proofs, concepts, and the theoretical underpinnings of other disciplines, as many philosophers in the broadly analytic tradition might claim, there seems little reason to be particularly concerned with the details of the lives of the people who happened to propound them. Similarly, at the opening of a series of lectures on Aristotle, the decidedly non-analytic Martin Heidegger commented that all one needed to know about Aristotle the man is that “he was born [...], that he worked, and that he died”.² Everything else is irrelevant.

Yet in certain periods in the history of philosophy, people have paid significant attention to the biographies of philosophers. This is most striking in antiquity – to which

¹ The first version of this chapter was written for and read at the conference held in London (May 2018) in honour of Letizia Panizza. My reflections here were inspired in part by Letizia’s wonderful article on Gasparino Barzizza, on which more below. Subsequent versions were read to audiences at Lisbon (June 2018) and Warwick (November 2019), and I am grateful to all three audiences for their comments. In what follows I use one abbreviation, ISTC, for Incunabula Short Title Catalogue, online at <http://istc.bl.uk/>.

² See Martin Heidegger, *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy*, trans. Robert D. Metcalf and Mark B. Tanzer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 4.

we shall return shortly – but we also see this ancient preoccupation continue during the subsequent history of philosophy. In particular, we see a sustained interest in philosophical biographies during the Renaissance. This phenomenon is worthy of our attention, I suggest, for what it might tell us about how philosophy was conceived during the Renaissance. A common view among historians of philosophy in the Anglophone world is that the Renaissance is a slightly embarrassing period: the rich medieval Scholastic tradition is in a period of decline and fall, Ficino resurrects some of the more questionable aspects of late Neoplatonism (magic, theurgy, mysticism), while the humanists might talk a lot *about* philosophy but don't really engage in serious philosophical argument.³ With regard to the latter, Paul Oskar Kristeller famously commented that the humanists were “on the whole neither good nor bad philosophers, but no philosophers at all”.⁴ After all, one of the things that some of the humanists did was to become really interested in biographies of philosophers, and why would a serious philosopher want to do that?

In recent years a number of commentators have tried to push back against this scepticism about the value of Renaissance philosophy by reflecting on alternative ways to conceptualize it. In particular, some have suggested that Pierre Hadot's account of ancient philosophy as a way of life may offer a helpful framework through which to approach the work of some Renaissance humanists.⁵ The suggestion is that these humanists embraced that ancient way of thinking about philosophy themselves, having encountered it in the ancient texts they were reading. If they did, then perhaps this might help to explain why they became so interested in the biographies of philosophers. The life of a philosopher can hardly be irrelevant to philosophy understood as a way of life.

My own interest in this topic was prompted by reading Letizia Panizza's study of Gasparino Barzizza's Renaissance commentary on the *Letters* of Seneca.⁶ As well as

³ See, as just one example, the judgements in Robert Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes 1274-1671* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011), 93 and 419.

⁴ Paul Oskar Kristeller, “Humanism and Scholasticism in the Italian Renaissance,” *Byzantion* 17 (1944–45): 346–74, at 354. Later, in *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964), 4–5, Kristeller gave a more nuanced assessment, acknowledging that some of the humanists made at least some contribution to philosophy. For a recent discussion and assessment, see Jill Kraye, “Beyond Moral Philosophy: Renaissance Humanism and the Philosophical Canon,” *Rinascimento* 56 (2016): 3–22. I have commented on this further in John Sellars, “Renaissance Humanism and Philosophy as a Way of Life,” *Metaphilosophy* 51/2–3 (2020): 226–43.

⁵ See in particular Christopher Celenza, “What Counted as Philosophy in the Italian Renaissance? The History of Philosophy, the History of Science, and Styles of Life,” *Critical Inquiry* 39 (2013): 367–401, drawing on Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995). I have discussed this approach further, including criticisms raised against it, in Sellars, “Renaissance Humanism and Philosophy as a Way of Life.”

⁶ Letizia Panizza, “Gasparino Barzizza's Commentaries on Seneca's Letters,” *Traditio* 33 (1977): 297–358. I also benefitted from reading Juliusz Domański, *La philosophie, théorie ou manière de vivre?*

writing a commentary on Seneca's *Letters*, Barzizza wrote "the first Humanist Latin biography of Seneca",⁷ drawing on the recently rediscovered works of Tacitus. Barzizza's biography formed part of the introductory material to his commentary. I was struck by the way in which this echoed an ancient tradition of prefacing the study of a philosopher's works with an examination of their biography. We see this especially clearly in the late ancient Neoplatonic tradition, where it was commonplace to begin the study of Plato or Aristotle by reading an account of their life.⁸ We also see a wider fascination with the biographies of philosophers in antiquity, particularly in the work of Diogenes Laertius, where a history of philosophy is written as a series of lives.⁹

There are a number of questions one might ask about this. What did people think one might gain from studying the biography of a philosopher? Why was it thought important to study the life of a philosopher before turning to their works? What light was the biography supposed to shed on the works? These sorts of questions are not often asked by ancient philosophy specialists who may be more inclined to dismiss ancient biographies of philosophers as mere unreliable anecdote. Indeed, Diogenes was once described as "that great ignoramus".¹⁰ But even if it is true that such works are full of unreliable anecdote, the question remains why people in antiquity placed such weight on the study of these biographies and, in the present context, why people in the Renaissance did the same. As we shall see, a wide variety of people during the Renaissance became interested in the biographies of ancient philosophers – in both the ancient biographies of those philosophers and in writing their own new biographies as well.

2. Ancient Lives

Before turning to philosophical biographies in the Renaissance, it may first be useful to say a little more about their role in antiquity. It has been suggested that the ancient

Les controverses de l'Antiquité à la Renaissance (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1996), esp. 102–4.

⁷ Panizza, "Gasparino Barzizza's Commentaries," 298.

⁸ See in particular Jaap Mansfeld, *Prolegomena: Questions to be Settled Before the Study of an Author, or a Text* (Leiden: Brill, 1994). I have discussed this briefly in John Sellars, *The Art of Living: The Stoics on the Nature and Function of Philosophy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 21–31.

⁹ On Diogenes Laertius and philosophy as a way of life, see Giuseppe Cambiano, "Diogenes Laertius and Philosophical Lives in Antiquity," in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, ed. James Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 574–7. This way of writing the history of philosophy continued into the middle ages; see the *Liber de vita et moribus philosophorum*, once attributed to Walter Burley, edited in Hermann Knust, *Gualteri Burlaei Liber de Vita et Moribus Philosophorum* (Tübingen: Litterarischen Verein in Stuttgart, 1886). On Diogenes Laertius as a source for Pseudo-Burley, see Tiziano Dorandi, *Laertiana: Capitoli sulla tradizione manoscritta e sulla storia del testo delle Vite dei filosofi di Diogene Laerzio* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 205–12.

¹⁰ Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture, III: The Conflict of Cultural Ideals in the Age of Plato*, trans. Gilbert Highet (Oxford: Blackwell, 1945), 330.

preoccupation with philosophical biography began in the wake of Socrates.¹¹ That Socrates wrote nothing himself meant that his ideas needed to be recorded by others, primarily in dialogues written not just by Plato but by numerous other authors as well, along with more anecdotal accounts of his life such as we find in Xenophon. These records of what Socrates supposedly said, composed in the early fourth century BC not long after his death, claim to report not just the things Socrates said (or may have said), not just his philosophical views, but also his behaviour. We are not just told that Socrates argued that one ought to obey the laws of the *polis* in which one lives; we are also given a dramatic account of how he was prepared to live according to this principle even at the cost of his own life. What we get, then, are not just arguments in favour of certain philosophical positions but also accounts of Socrates putting his philosophy into practice. In the early Platonic dialogues we see Socrates insisting on the value of harmony between an individual's words and their deeds,¹² while in the *Apology* we see Socrates lay out his conception of philosophy as something that ought to shape one's life, while at the same time showing us what that might actually entail through his behaviour during his trial.¹³

That Socratic image of philosophy as a way of life comes to the fore with a number of subsequent philosophers. It is especially clear with the Cynics, who, following Socrates, see philosophy as a matter of virtuous deeds rather than words.¹⁴ For philosophers who think this, accounts of their behaviour gain a new importance. The anecdotes surrounding Diogenes of Sinope are far from incidental to an understanding of his philosophy. That might in part simply reflect the fact that his own written works are lost, but there is more to it than merely that. The anecdotes that we have, primarily from the biography in Diogenes Laertius, are the perfect vehicle for the practical moral lessons that he hopes to teach. Indeed, in antiquity a special literary genre developed of anecdotes designed to illustrate some specific moral or philosophical point, and this had its origins in accounts of Socrates and the Cynics.¹⁵

We see this focus on anecdote and biography continue throughout ancient philosophy, especially in connection with ancient philosophers who chose not to write, sometimes inspired by the example of Socrates though not always, and we might note Pyrrho and Epictetus as two well-known instances. In later antiquity we see this develop further and one particularly important example is Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*, which he

¹¹ See in particular Albrecht Dihle, *Studien zur griechischen Biographie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956), 13–34, and discussed briefly in Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography*, Expanded Edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 17 and 46–7.

¹² See further Sellars, *The Art of Living*, 20.

¹³ I have discussed this further in John Sellars, "Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, A Metaphilosophical Text," *Philosophy and Literature* 38 (2014): 433–45.

¹⁴ See e.g. the anecdote involving Hegesias in Diogenes Laertius 6.48.

¹⁵ This is the *chreia* tradition, noted by Quintilian (*Institutio Oratoria* 1.9.3–5) and discussed in Jan Fredrik Kindstrand, "Diogenes Laertius and the *Chreia* Tradition," *Elenchos* 7 (1986): 217–43.

attached to his edition of Plotinus's writings, the *Enneads*. Porphyry's biography sets the pattern for a philosophical life that is a mixture of scholarly apparatus and anecdotes claiming to recount the behaviour of the philosopher. Porphyry's account opens with an anecdote reporting that Plotinus refused to sit for portraits, exclaiming that it was already enough to be encased in an image, and he did not want an image of an image.¹⁶ An anecdote such as this, read before the philosopher's works, would illustrate to a prospective student just what sort of transformation in attitude might follow from a thorough understanding of the texts about to be read.

Porphyry set the agenda for the subsequent Neoplatonic tradition. It quickly became standard to study the life of a philosopher before studying their works. In the Neoplatonic context, this primarily meant the lives of Plato and Aristotle, but we also find biographies of Pythagoras (by Iamblichus) and Proclus (by Marinus). In the case of Plato, Olympiodorus prefaced his commentary on the *Alcibiades*, which was the first of the Platonic dialogues to be read by students in the Neoplatonic curriculum, with a life of Plato.¹⁷ And in the school of Ammonius, biographies of Aristotle circulated that were studied before turning to Aristotle himself.¹⁸

Thus, in antiquity great stress was placed on biographies of philosophers, both in what we might call the practical ethical tradition surrounding the Cynics and the more sober, scholastic tradition of the late ancient philosophical schools. We also find it among Latin philosophical authors who would prove to be so influential for the early humanists. Cicero, for instance, wrote in his *On Invention* that "one ought to estimate what a writer meant from the rest of his writings *and* from his acts, words, character, and life".¹⁹ If one thinks that, then surely one must read the biography alongside the writings of a philosopher.

3. Lives of Seneca

It should not come as so surprising, then, to find that people with philosophical interests during the Renaissance, reading this ancient material, developed their own interests in biographies of ancient philosophers. Interest in the biography of Seneca received a fresh impetus in the wake of Boccaccio's discovery at Monte Cassino of a manuscript

¹⁶ See Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 1, lines 5–10.

¹⁷ Olympiodorus' biography of Plato is translated and discussed in Olympiodorus, *Life of Plato and On Plato First Alcibiades 1-9*, trans. Michael Griffin (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), esp. 43–6 and 72–7.

¹⁸ For discussion and editions of the ancient biographies of Aristotle see Ingemar Düring, *Aristotle in the Ancient Biographical Tradition* (Göteborg: Elanders, 1957). They are said to date back to a fourth century Neoplatonist called Ptolemy (Ptolemy the Obscure, as he was known in the Arabic tradition) and they continued to circulate during the Middle Ages (ibid., 469–72). The version used in Ammonius's school is now known as the *Vita Aristotelis Vulgata*, for which see ibid., 120–39.

¹⁹ Cicero, *De Inventione* 2.117: *qua in sententia scriptor fuerit, ex ceteris eius scriptis et ex factis, dictis, animo atque vita eius sumi oportebit.*

preserving the *Annales* of Tacitus.²⁰ Seneca's reputation during the Middle Ages and early Renaissance was shaped in large part by Jerome's judgement in his short biography in *On Illustrious Men* (*De viris illustribus*), which was often reproduced in manuscripts containing Seneca's works.²¹ Although brief, Jerome's remarks implicitly affirmed the authenticity of the correspondence between Seneca and St Paul and commented on the virtuous character of Seneca's moderate life (*continentissimae vitae fuit*).²² If Jerome had described Seneca as a pagan equivalent of St Paul, Tacitus presented his death as a heroic martyrdom on a par with that of Socrates. Boccaccio drew on both of these accounts in his commentary on Dante's *Divina Commedia*, written in 1373–4. There, Dante had placed Seneca in Limbo as an unbaptized pagan (*Inferno* 4.141). Boccaccio tried to rescue Seneca from this fate by arguing that i) the correspondence with St Paul suggested that the apostle saw Seneca as a Christian and ii) that Jerome confirmed this judgement. The newly discovered testimony of Tacitus showed that Seneca's death was not really suicide, but an execution ordered by Nero, albeit one carried out by Seneca's own hands. Not only that, the pool in which Seneca opened his veins became, on Boccaccio's reading, a baptismal font in which Seneca was baptized before his death.²³ Thus, Seneca could be saved. A number of writers elaborated on these matters and wrote their own lives of Seneca, the most important of whom were Gasparino Barzizza and Giannozzo Manetti.²⁴

The earliest of these, Gasparino Barzizza (1360–1431), wrote not only a biography of Seneca but also a commentary on the *Letters to Lucilius* and a commentary on the correspondence with St Paul. Although his commentaries on Seneca never made it into print, his biography was often included in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century editions of Seneca's works, although shortened and either printed anonymously or mistakenly attributed to Sico Polenton.²⁵ These works were the by-product of lecturing on Seneca at the University of Padua, at some time between 1407 and 1421. In his biography of the Stoic, Barzizza followed Boccaccio in claiming that Seneca was baptized moments before death, but then went one step further by claiming that the mixture of Seneca's own blood with the water constituted baptism by blood, i.e. martyrdom.²⁶ In the introduction to his commentary on the *Letters*, he praises Seneca as pre-eminent among ancient philosophers

²⁰ For some discussion of this see Cornelia C. Coulter, "Boccaccio and the Cassinese Manuscripts of the Laurentian Library," *Classical Philology* 43 (1948): 217–30.

²¹ See the discussion in James Ker, *The Deaths of Seneca* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 182–5.

²² Jerome, *De Viris Illustribus* 12.

²³ See Giovanni Boccaccio, *Boccaccio's Expositions on Dante's Comedy*, trans. Michael Papio (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 234–5.

²⁴ See Panizza, "Gasparino Barzizza's Commentaries," 317, and her "Biography in Italy from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance: Seneca, pagan or Christian?," *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* 2 (1984): 47–98. Further lives of Seneca were written by Sico Polenton and Paolo Pompilio.

²⁵ See Panizza, "Gasparino Barzizza's Commentaries," 337.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 323–4.

for guidance about how to put theory into practice,²⁷ comparing him with Socrates. Seneca's moral philosophy offers both medicine for the soul and spiritual guidance which is second to that of no other ancient author.²⁸ Indeed, Seneca's pre-eminence above all other Greek and Latin authors is precisely because his philosophy is focused on practical questions about how to live well.²⁹

In the case of Gianozzo Manetti (1396–1459) we find a life of Seneca paired with a life of Socrates, explicitly modelled on Plutarch's parallel Greek and Roman lives.³⁰ For Manetti, Seneca is the prince of Latin philosophers and the greatest moral philosopher.³¹ He was a friend of St Paul and the author of not only those works now attributed to Seneca but also a range of other writings since judged to be spurious, as well as the rhetorical works now credited to his father. Manetti drew on a wide range of pagan and Christian authors for his biography, from Plutarch and Tacitus to Lactantius, Jerome, and Augustine. He explicitly presents Seneca as a Stoic, whose views he champions over those of the other philosophical schools, and he even suggests that Seneca was the master and leader (*magister et princeps*) of the Stoics.³² Manetti also defended Seneca against charges of hypocrisy by arguing that his great wealth was not at odds with Stoic doctrine. For the Stoics, money was a mere "indifferent", not inherently good in itself, and not necessary for someone to live a good life. But, as something merely "indifferent", it was not something to be shunned either. On the contrary, it is perfectly natural, the Stoics argued, to pursue those things that contribute to one's self-preservation.³³ This focus on the practical value of Seneca's philosophy alongside sustained defences of his actions by Barzizza, Manetti, and others highlight the way in which many of those drawn to Stoicism in this period approached it, not as an abstract theoretical system, but rather as a philosophical way of life.

²⁷ See Barzizza, *Comentarii in Epistolas Senece: Prohemium*, in *ibid.*, 352.

²⁸ See *ibid.*, 352–3.

²⁹ See Barzizza, *Commentaria super Epistolas Senece: Vita Senecae*, in *ibid.*, 349.

³⁰ See Gianozzo Manetti, *Biographical Writings*, ed. and trans. Stefano U. Baldassarri and Rolf Bagemihl (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), with the reference to imitating Plutarch at 166–7. For discussion of Manetti's biographies see e.g. Manuela Kahle, "Spoliating Diogenes Laertius: Gianozzo Manetti's Use(s) on the *Lives of the Philosophers*," in *Biography, Historiography, and Modes of Philosophizing: The Traditions of Collective Biography in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Patrick Baker (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 39–57, with further references, although this focuses more on the biography of Socrates than Seneca.

³¹ See Manetti, *Biographical Writings*, 164–5 and 244–5 respectively.

³² See *ibid.*, 266–7.

³³ See *ibid.*, 270–1.

4. The Rediscovery of Diogenes Laertius

The recovery of Tacitus was evidently an important moment for the study of Seneca, but the real revolution for the study of ancient philosophical lives surely came with the rediscovery, and eventual translation into Latin, of Diogenes Laertius. The key player in this was of course Ambrogio Traversari.³⁴ He was encouraged to translate Diogenes's *Lives and Opinions of the Philosophers* by Antonio da Massa, the General of the Franciscans, who had acquired a manuscript of Diogenes during a trip to Constantinople in 1422–23, and visited Traversari with the text in 1424.³⁵ Traversari also had access to another manuscript of the text, from the library of Guarino of Verona (to whom we shall return later), and he later tracked down a third. He seems to have made quick progress, having completed his translation of the first nine books, by 1425, leaving just the Epicurean Book 10 to do. The final completed version was presented to Cosimo de Medici in 1433.³⁶

Traversari was a monk, with limited interest in pagan philosophy. In his dedicatory letter to Cosimo, he justified his work on the translation as an act of charity towards his friends who wanted to be able to read Diogenes in Latin.³⁷ However, his comments in the dedicatory letter that he sent to Niccolò Niccoli are, in the present context, more interesting. There he wrote the following about the lives of the ancient philosophers:

You come across in them much said with gravity and done with constancy, so that not just from their books does the inviolable truth derive confirmation, but the examples of their lives also add on incitement for virtue to our own religion.³⁸

³⁴ On Traversari, see among others Charles L. Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers: Ambrogio Traversari (1386-1439) and Christian Antiquity in the Italian Renaissance* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), esp. 70–7. On his work on Diogenes Laertius, see Dorandi, *Laertiana*, 222–8, and his “Diogenes Laertius in Latin,” in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, ed. James Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 585–8, esp. 586–7.

³⁵ See Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers*, 71.

³⁶ This is now Laur. LXV 21 and is dated 8 February 1433. See Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers*, 252–3; Dorandi, *Laertiana*, 222–3. The first printed edition appeared in Rome around 1472, by Georgius Lauer (ISTC id00219000), followed by an edition in Venice in 1475, by Nicolaus Jenson (ISTC id00220000).

³⁷ See Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers*, 74. This letter was intended to serve as a preface to the translation (so Dorandi, “Diogenes Laertius in Latin,” 587), although it was not always included: I have looked at the 1475 edition printed by Nicolaus Jenson (ISTC id00220000). There, the only opening letter is addressed to Oliverio, Cardinal of Naples.

³⁸ I quote the translation of this letter in Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers*, 75, who reproduces the Latin text at 253: *Multa in his et dicta graviter, et facta constanter invenias; ut non modo ex eorum libris fidem inviolabilis veritas capiat, verum exemplis quoque religionis nostrae incitamentum virtutis accedat.*

He goes on to contrast the perfection of virtue among the pagan philosophers with the behaviour of his contemporary Christians, adding that “it should make a Christian blush and feel greatly ashamed if the philosopher of Christ exhibits this less than the philosopher of the world”.³⁹ While admiring the lives of the pagan ancient philosophers, Traversari also counsels caution, lest someone might start to admire them “more strongly than is right”.⁴⁰

5. Bruni’s Aristotle

The rediscovery of Diogenes Laertius not only enabled people to read his important collection of ancient biographies, it also inspired some to write their own new accounts. One of these was Leonardo Bruni, who wrote his own biography of Aristotle, competing it by 1430.⁴¹ Bruni was certainly prompted by Traversari’s work, although there has been some debate about precisely how. Bruni certainly didn’t use Traversari’s translation, although one commentator has suggested that he may have used the Greek manuscript of Diogenes in Traversari’s possession.⁴² A more recent account presents things quite differently, stressing that Bruni and Traversari were far from being friends.⁴³ On this account, Bruni was negatively influenced by the prospect of Diogenes’s biography of Aristotle entering wider circulation once Traversari’s translation was complete, for Diogenes’ portrait was far from complimentary. In Diogenes’ account, Aristotle is presented as an ungrateful pupil of Plato, embroiled in sexual scandals, who fled Athens in disgrace, and then committed suicide.⁴⁴ Bruni, already a devotee of Aristotle since his

³⁹ Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers*, 75–6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Bruni’s *Vita Aristotelis* is printed in H. Baron, *Leonardo Bruni, Humanistisch-Philosophische Schriften* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1928), 41–9 (not in full), in Düring, *Aristotle in the Ancient Biographical Tradition*, 168–78, and Paolo Viti, *Opere letterarie e politiche di Leonardo Bruni* (Turin: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1996), 501–29 (with Italian translation). It is translated into English, with an introduction, in Gordon Griffiths *et al.*, *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni: Selected Texts* (Binghampton, NY: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1987), 283–92. For studies see Edmund Fryde, “The First Humanistic Life of Aristotle: The ‘Vita Aristotelis’ of Leonardo Bruni,” in *Florence and Italy: Renaissance Studies in Honour of Nicolai Rubinstein*, ed. Peter Denley and Caroline Elam (London: Westfield College, 1988), 285–96, Gary Ianziti, “Leonardo Bruni and Biography: The *Vita Aristotelis*,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 55 (2002): 805–32, and (a revised version of the last) Gary Ianziti, *Writing History in Renaissance Italy: Leonardo Bruni and the Uses of the Past* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 147–66. On the date of completion, see *Epistulae* 6.2 in Leonardo Bruni, *Epistolarum Libri VIII*, ed. L. Mehus, 2 vols (Florence: Bernardi Paperini, 1741), 2:40–41.

⁴² See Fryde, “The First Humanistic Life of Aristotle,” 286.

⁴³ See Ianziti, *Writing History in Renaissance Italy*, 152, who calls Traversari Bruni’s “nemesis”.

⁴⁴ See Diogenes Laertius 5.1–35, esp. 5.2, 5.3–4, 5.5, and 5.6, with Ianziti, *Writing History in Renaissance Italy*, 153–4.

translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* from 1416,⁴⁵ wanted to counter this unflattering portrait by producing his own account of Aristotle's life and getting it into circulation before Traversari's Diogenes could do too much damage. At the same time he wanted to promote his own distinctively humanistic image of Aristotle both to re-appropriate him from the Scholastic tradition and to defend him against charges made by earlier humanists, such as Petrarch.⁴⁶ Bruni's life of Aristotle does indeed draw on Diogenes's account quite a lot, but, it has been argued, this is less a debt and more a point-by-point response.⁴⁷ While Diogenes's biography of Aristotle was an important point of reference for Bruni, it was by no means the only one, and it is striking how often Bruni draws on Cicero for his information. Another important influence was the arrival in Florence of Francesco Filelfo, who took up a professorship there in 1429 and brought with him a copy of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, which became another important point of reference for Bruni's distinctively humanistic portrait.⁴⁸

Bruni's Aristotle is quite different from the image we tend to have of him today and how he was seen by Bruni's scholastic contemporaries. Following Cicero, Bruni presents Aristotle as both a master of rhetoric and a model of eloquence.⁴⁹ Bruni's list of Aristotle's works at the end of the life focuses on Aristotle's works in ethics, politics, rhetoric, and poetics – all standard humanist interests – while barely mentioning works such as the *Metaphysics* that were central to the Scholastic Aristotelian tradition.⁵⁰ Bruni's reliance on Cicero also led to doctrinal shifts, it has been claimed, for, according to one commentator, he followed Cicero in ascribing to Aristotle belief in individual immortal souls, in contrast to the then prevalent Averroist interpretation of the *De Anima*.⁵¹ In both cases Bruni prioritized Cicero's reports of Aristotle's now lost published dialogues over the unpublished lecture notes via which readers have known Aristotle ever since Cicero's day. In Bruni's hands, then, Aristotle becomes a thoroughgoing humanist who can stand as a preeminent example of someone who combines mastery of both philosophy and rhetoric.

⁴⁵ The preface to this is printed in Baron, *Leonardo Bruni, Humanistisch-Philosophische Schriften*, 76–81, and it is translated in Griffiths *et al.*, *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni*, 213–17.

⁴⁶ In the *De ignorantia* (in Francesco Petrarca, *Invectives*, ed. and trans. David Marsh (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 264–5 and 314–15), for instance, Petrarch was dismissive of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

⁴⁷ See Ianziti, *Writing History in Renaissance Italy*, 159.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ See Viti, *Opere letterarie e politiche*, 522; Griffiths *et al.*, *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni*, 290.

⁵⁰ See Viti, *Opere letterarie e politiche*, 526–8; Griffiths *et al.*, *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni*, 291–2.

⁵¹ This is Fryde's suggestion ("The First Humanistic Life of Aristotle," 288–9), but it is not noted by Griffiths, Viti, or Ianziti. Bruni simply says (Viti, *Opere letterarie e politiche*, 518; Griffiths *et al.*, *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni*, 288) that Aristotle agreed with Plato on a range of topics, including the immortality of the soul.

Why did all this matter so much to Bruni? I think the answer is that he wanted to present Aristotle as a humanist role model, which is to say a guide to a certain way of life,⁵² and for Aristotle to be convincing in such a role he must be seen to have lived an exemplary life. While some commentators have suggested that Bruni's critique of certain aspects of Diogenes's life of Aristotle was an impressive example of source criticism, others have suggested that it was instead a simple act of hagiography, writing out the unhelpful gossip and highlighting the features that fitted Bruni's own ideal image of a humanist-cum-philosopher.⁵³

6. Lives of Plato

Bruni was not the only person to become inspired by the recovery of Diogenes Laertius. Around the same time, Guarino of Verona composed a biography of Plato.⁵⁴ Guarino was a contemporary of Bruni's and, like him, a pupil of Manuel Chrysoloras.⁵⁵ His biography of Plato also dates from around 1430. While Bruni's life of Aristotle has been described as "a remarkable achievement",⁵⁶ one commentator has called Guarino's life of Plato simply "mediocre".⁵⁷ Even so, it stands as the first modern biography of Plato based on Greek sources. It was quickly followed by others, one by Giovanni Tortelli, and, unsurprisingly, one by Marsilio Ficino.⁵⁸

Ficino's *Life of Plato* also drew heavily on Diogenes Laertius, supplemented with information from Cicero, Augustine, and Plato's own dialogues.⁵⁹ A first version was composed by 1474; it has been claimed that it opened his commentary on the *Philebus*.⁶⁰

⁵² As Ianziti, *Writing History in Renaissance Italy*, 166, puts it, "as the teacher of the good life on this earth". Bruni describes Aristotle's aim as "to guide and direct our entire life" (*Viti, Opere letterarie e politiche*, 520; Griffiths *et al.*, *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni*, 289).

⁵³ See the discussion in Ianziti, *Writing History in Renaissance Italy*, 154.

⁵⁴ On this see Edmund Fryde, *Humanism and Renaissance Historiography* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1983), 62–9.

⁵⁵ On Chrysoloras, and Bruni and Guarino as his pupils, see N. G. Wilson, *From Byzantium to Italy: Greek Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, Second Edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 9–14, 15–25, and 49–54 respectively.

⁵⁶ Düring, *Aristotle in the Ancient Biographical Tradition*, 178.

⁵⁷ See Fryde, "The First Humanistic Life of Aristotle," 286. Ianziti, *Writing History in Renaissance Italy*, 162, offers a slightly more positive assessment of Guarino's effort, describing it as respecting the tradition in which Diogenes's lives were written.

⁵⁸ Guarino's biography of Plato has been described as "more sober and factual" than Ficino's; see Fryde *Humanism and Renaissance Historiography*, 64.

⁵⁹ It is printed as *Epistulae* 4.19 in Marsilio Ficino, *Opera*, 2 vols (Basil: Adamus Henricus Petrus, 1561), 1:763–70, and translated in *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino, Volume 3* (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1981), 32–48.

⁶⁰ See *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino, Volume 3*, 89. However, it is not included in the edition of the *Philebus* commentary in Michael, J. B. Allen, *Marsilio Ficino: The Philebus Commentary* (Berkeley:

A later, final version was completed in 1477, to function as an introduction to his translation of Plato's dialogues into Latin. It is also included in Book 4 of Ficino's *Letters*. In both cases the study of the biography of the philosopher is presented as an important preparation for the study of their doctrines. In his preface, addressed to Francesco Bandini, Ficino described his biography as an attempt "to paint the ideal form of a philosopher", adding that through it one "may see equally philosopher and philosophy".⁶¹ Echoing a common theme in antiquity, he adds that this image of a philosophical life is naturally second best when compared to a living example of a philosopher.⁶² There are two key points to draw from Ficino's brief opening remarks. First, the person of the philosopher and the subject of philosophy are more or less identified as one and the same thing. Second, the best way to comprehend philosophy is via an encounter with a philosopher, who lives a philosophical life; if that is not possible then the next best thing is to study the lives of philosophers via their biographies. Although Ficino does not explicitly connect his own biography of Plato with the ancient Neoplatonic tradition of prefacing the study of the dialogues with the study of Plato's life, the resonances are fairly clear. Ficino takes from that tradition the Socratic conception of philosophy as care of the soul that results in a transformation of one's way of life. In that tradition, the goal is not to learn philosophy, it is to become a philosopher, and, as Ficino would have it, an idealized image of Plato is itself the ideal form of what a philosopher is. Put in those terms, it would be absurd to embark on the project of becoming a philosopher without first studying an image of what one hopes to become.

7. The Aldine Aristotle

Towards the end of the fifteenth century we also see a revival of interest in the ancient Greek commentators on Aristotle. This brought with it renewed attention to his ancient biographies. A key force here was the humanist and printer Aldus Manutius, who, in the preface to the first volume of his edition of the works of Aristotle printed in 1495, proclaimed his intention to print all the Greek commentaries on Aristotle that he could find.⁶³ In the second volume of his edition, Aldus opened with two biographies of

University of California Press, 1975), and Allen makes no mention of it in his detailed account of the history of the text.

⁶¹ See Ficino, *Opera*, 1:763; *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino, Volume 3*, 32. These remarks are in the opening paragraph of *Epistulae* 4.19 but are omitted in the version appended to Plato's works, in for example Plato, *Omnia Divini Platonis Opera Tralatione Marsilii Ficini* (Lyon: Antonius Vincentius, 1548), ff. a3r–a4v.

⁶² Compare this with a similar thought in Seneca, *Epistulae* 6.6, briefly discussed in Sellars, *The Art of Living*, 31.

⁶³ See the preface in Aldus Manutius's edition of Aristotle's *Organon* (Venice, 1495), ISTC ia00959000; the relevant passage is reprinted and translated in N. G. Wilson, *Aldus Manutius, The Greek Classics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 16–17. Note also Aldus's preface to his edition

Aristotle, the first taken from Diogenes Laertius and the second attributed to the Aristotelian commentator John Philoponus.⁶⁴ It was presumably found in a manuscript prefacing a commentary by Philoponus and thought to be by the commentator himself. A couple of years later, in 1503, more or less the same biography was printed (there is some variation in the last few lines) without explicit attribution, this time prefacing a commentary on the *Categories* by Philoponus's teacher, Ammonius.⁶⁵ Given the slight variation between the two texts, one might assume that the two versions came from different manuscripts, one containing a commentary by Philoponus and one with a commentary by Ammonius. That is certainly possible, given that the biography itself was a standard text, now usually referred to as the *Vita Aristotelis Vulgata*.⁶⁶

This brings us back to the late ancient practice of prefacing the study of the works of a philosopher by reading their biography. As we have just seen, Aldus's edition of Aristotle was prefaced by a biography, and printed editions of Ficino's translation of Plato were prefaced by his biography too.⁶⁷ It quickly became standard practice to preface a printed edition of the works of an ancient philosopher with a life. Alongside Plato, Aristotle, and Seneca, one might add Lucretius, who was the subject of eight biographies during the Renaissance.⁶⁸ Most of these were produced in the sixteenth century to accompany printed editions of his *De Rerum Natura*, culminating in Lambin's of 1570.⁶⁹

of Ammonius's commentary on the *De Interpretatione* (*Ammonii Hermei commentaria in librum Peri Hermenias* (Venice, 1503); also in Wilson, *Aldus Manutius, The Greek Classics*, 114–15).

⁶⁴ See *Aristotelis de physico auditu. Libri octo* (Venice: Aldus Manutius, 1497), f. *r. The opening table of contents lists "Aristotelis uita ex laertio" followed by "Eiusdem uita per ioannem philoponum". There is also a biography of Theophrastus, "ex laertio", because this volume also contains a number of his works. Aldus commented on including these biographies in his preface to the volume, reprinted and translated in Wilson, *Aldus Manutius, The Greek Classics*, 36–45.

⁶⁵ See *Ammonii Hermei commentaria in librum Peri Hermenias* (Venice: Aldus Manutius, 1503). This volume contains commentaries by Ammonius and Leo Magentinus on *De Interpretatione*, announced on the title page, followed by Michael Psellus, also on *De Interpretatione*, and then Ammonius on the *Categories*, both of which the title page does not mention. The biography of Aristotle is printed as a preface to Ammonius's *Categories* commentary. Aldus's preface to the volume is reprinted and translated in Wilson, *Aldus Manutius, The Greek Classics*, 114–17. This was his first publication of one of the Greek commentaries on Aristotle; as noted above, he planned to publish them all but only managed three volumes in his lifetime. However, his successors continued the project issuing the first editions of a good majority of the surviving texts, on which see the Appendix in John Sellars, "The Aristotelian Commentators: A Bibliographical Guide," in *Philosophy, Science, and Exegesis in Greek, Arabic, and Latin Commentaries*, ed. Peter Adamson, Han Baltussen, and Martin Stone, 2 vols (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 2004), 1:239–68, esp. 263–8.

⁶⁶ For the text and discussion see Düring, *Aristotle in the Ancient Biographical Tradition*, 120–39.

⁶⁷ See for example the 1548 edition of Ficino's translation of Plato noted above, ff. a3^r–a4^v.

⁶⁸ See the thorough discussion in Ada Palmer, *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 140–91.

⁶⁹ See D. Lambin, *T. Lucretii Cari De Rerum Natura Libri VI* (Paris: Apud Ioannem Bene natum, 1570), ff. d1^r–e1^v.

Sometimes these biographies of ancient philosophers were new works of scholarship, sometimes they were ancient biographies, and sometimes they were probably whatever the editor could get their hands on. In the case of Lucretius, where there was minimal ancient biographical information available, these biographies were more or less pure fabrication. Often they were printed without attribution. Barzizza's biography of Seneca, with which we began, was recycled numerous times, printed anonymously in many early editions, such as those issued in 1490, 1493, and 1503, and then in Erasmus's two editions of Seneca, printed in 1515 and 1529.⁷⁰ At the same time, Traversari's Latin version of Diogenes Laertius's history of ancient philosophy presented as a series of lives circulated widely in small, pocket editions throughout the sixteenth century.⁷¹

In the seventeenth century this tradition continued in, for example, the history of philosophy composed by Thomas Stanley, which was the first history of philosophy written in English.⁷² This was in large part a massively expanded and annotated translation of Diogenes Laertius, retaining the structure of organization around a series of lives.⁷³ It has been argued that the real shift away from this way of thinking about the history of philosophy as a series of lives started in the mid eighteenth century and, in particular, with the publication of Jacob Brucker's history of philosophy in the 1740s.⁷⁴ While Brucker inevitably still talked about individual philosophers in chronological order, and many biographical details remain, we see the beginnings of a shift to the idea that each philosophy is a distinctive philosophical system, a body of thought rather than a way of life. Brucker defines philosophy in his opening dissertation as a love of wisdom that incites people to pursue important and useful knowledge.⁷⁵ He goes on to define what he takes the history of philosophy to be: it can be either a history of doctrines or one of

⁷⁰ See Panizza, "Gasparino Barzizza's Commentaries," 336–7.

⁷¹ One such example is *Diogenis Laertii De Vita et Moribus Philosophorum Libri X* (Lyon: Apud Antonium Gryphium, 1592).

⁷² See Thomas Stanley, *The History of Philosophy: Containing the Lives, Opinions, Actions, and Discourses of the Philosophers of Every Sect*, The Third Edition (London: Battersby, 1701). I have consulted this, the third edition; it was first published in three volumes between 1655 and 1660.

⁷³ See Anthony Grafton, "Diogenes Laertius: From Inspiration to Annoyance (and Back)," in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, ed. James Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 546–54, at 552, discussing the ways in which Stanley follows Diogenes in some ways, but tries to depart from him in others.

⁷⁴ Brucker's *Historia Critica Philosophiae* was first published in 1742–44, and then revised and expanded in the 1760s; see Jacob Brucker, *Historia Critica Philosophiae*, Editio Secunda, 6 vols (Leipzig: Weidmann & Reich, 1767), which is the edition I have consulted. Note also the abridged English translation in William Enfield, *The History of Philosophy ... Drawn up from Brucker's Historia Critica Philosophiae*, 2 vols (London: William Baynes, 1819). For discussion see Leo Catana, *The Historiographical Concept 'System of Philosophy': Its Origin, Nature, Influence and Legitimacy* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

⁷⁵ See Brucker, *Historia Critica Philosophiae*, 1:5–6, with the English summary in Enfield, *The History of Philosophy*, 1:25.

individuals.⁷⁶ As a history of doctrines, it outlines the opinions expressed by different systems, and so therefore is a history of the human understanding. As a history of individuals, it relates incidents in the lives of philosophers, and in particular “remarks particularly those circumstances in their character and situation which may be supposed to have influenced their opinions”.⁷⁷ Although in one sense this still echoes the title of Diogenes Laertius’s work, *The Lives and Opinions of the Philosophers*, in Brucker the life is firmly second place to the doctrines, and only has value in so far as it might shed light on the formation of the doctrines. The idea that the life might in some way express or embody the philosopher’s doctrines has now gone.

A more emphatic shift can be seen at the very end of the eighteenth century in the work of the Kantian philosopher Karl Leonhard Reinhold.⁷⁸ His attempt to reform the writing of the history of philosophy along Kantian lines led him to reject all biographical material, even the sort held on to by Brucker. In no uncertain terms he insisted that:

The biography of philosophers does absolutely not belong in the history of philosophy, which troubles itself simply with the inner destiny of the science, but in no way with its caretaker and carrier.⁷⁹

The Kantian historian of philosophy Wilhelm Tennemann, whose popular *Grundriss de Geschichte der Philosophie* went through multiple editions and was translated into French, Italian, and English, put this new attitude into practice.⁸⁰ For Tennemann, philosophy was “a science of the ultimate principles” and so a history of philosophy ought to focus on the historical development of this science.⁸¹ With this in mind, he divided material relevant to the history of philosophy into two kinds: the internal, which deals with the development of rational understanding, and the external, which deals with contingent circumstances including the lives and characters of philosophers.⁸²

⁷⁶ Brucker, *Historia Critica Philosophiae*, 1:10: *Scilicet vel doctrinarum ea est, vel personarum*. See also the discussion by M. Longo in Gregorio Piaia and Giovanni Santinello, *Models of the History of Philosophy, Volume II: From the Cartesian Age to Brucker* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 484–8.

⁷⁷ Enfield, *The History of Philosophy*, 1:26.

⁷⁸ See Karl Leonhard Reinhold, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte der Philosophie,” *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie* 1 (1796): 3–36.

⁷⁹ Reinhold, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte der Philosophie,” 26–7. I take this translation from Peter K. J. Park, *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), 160. See also Park’s valuable discussion at 11–16.

⁸⁰ Tennemann’s *Grundriss de Geschichte der Philosophie* was first published in 1812, based upon his eleven-volume *Geschichte der Philosophie* published between 1798 and 1819.

⁸¹ I quote from Wilhelm Tennemann, *A Manual of the History of Philosophy*, trans. A. Johnson, rev. J. R. Morell (London: Bohn, 1852), p. 2.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

A similar attitude was to shape Hegel's account of the history of philosophy in which, as just one example, he dismissed the ancient Cynics precisely because their philosophy was recorded in a series of biographical anecdotes rather than an impersonal scientific system.⁸³ But as we have seen, in the Renaissance things were quite different. If one sees philosophy not as a body of doctrines, a theoretical system, or a technique of argument, but rather as a way of life, a guide to a good life, then reading a philosopher's biography before reading their work offers a concrete example of what it might mean to put that philosophy into practice in one's own life.⁸⁴

⁸³ See G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and F. H. Simson, 3 vols (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, [1892–6] 1963), 1:479 and 485. For his general approach, see 1:7–8.

⁸⁴ For a similar point see Patrick Baker, *Biography, Historiography, and Modes of Philosophizing: The Traditions of Collective Biography in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 15–16.