The simplest way to define Ancient philosophy is probably to describe it as a search for happiness through the cultivation of wisdom. Different philosophical schools, however, had different views on the nature of happiness and offered different paths towards wisdom. In this series of lectures, we will explore six such paths opened and followed by philosophers from the time of inspired Presocratics sages, in Archaic Greece, to the austere Stoics of Imperial Rome. We will see how, for disciples of Ancient philosophy, becoming Sceptic, Cynic or Epicurean, for instance, implied a commitment to a way of life shaped by a specific conception of the world and of the self. While exploring these existential options, we will assess the degree to which ancient philosophy still has valuable lessons to teach us today as a quest for happiness.

Lecture 1: Pre-Socratic wisdom

After a general introduction to ancient philosophy, in this first lecture, we will explore the contrasting philosophical intuitions of Heraclitus, who urges us to cultivate an awareness of the radical impermanence of everything, and of Parmenides, who invites us to understand that ‘being’ is one, eternal, and immobile.

Lecture 2: Socratic wisdom: the value of questioning

Socrates famously declared that a “life unexamined is not worth living for a human being”. With Socrates, we will attempt to appreciate the value of a questioning life dedicated to virtue, or moral excellence—a search that Socrates regarded as more essential than life itself.

Lecture 3: Wisdom as theoretical contemplation

In their own ways, Plato and his disciple Aristotle defined philosophy as we now understand it, namely, as a disinterested quest for truth that takes the shape of a life dedicated to theoretical ‘contemplation’. How can contemplation provide happiness? And what is the proper object of philosophical contemplation? As we will see, the disciple did not fully agree with the master.

Lecture 4: Cynic wisdom and Sceptic wisdom

With the Cynics and the Sceptics, we are faced with paradoxical forms of wisdom: wisdom that involves a rejection of theory and a total focus on practice on the one hand, and a spiritual path that consists in a rejection of the quest for knowledge, on the other. Could it be the case that the search for knowledge is the source, not the solution to, human unhappiness?

Lecture 5: Stoic wisdom

Stoic wisdom promises tranquility of mind through absolute invulnerability. Each of us, Stoics claim, is an inner citadel: absolutely free, absolutely unassailable, absolutely safe. All we need to do to reach that refuge is become aware of our true nature. We will explore Stoic wisdom with the guidance of a slave, Epictetus, and of a Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius.

Lecture 6: Epicurean wisdom

With Epicurus, we enter the serene sphere of the Garden. Here, wisdom is a matter of relaxation, of tranquility, of pleasure. But what pleasures are worth aiming for? And how can philosophy help us to defeat anxiety?