



LEONARD COHEN

AND PHILOSOPHY
**VARIOUS
POSITIONS**

Edited by Jason Holt

Praise for *Leonard Cohen and Philosophy*

“Leonard Cohen and Philosophy? *‘Everybody knows’ there’s a connection: not only through his Judaism cut with classicomedievalist Québécois Catholicism and then further cut with Zen Buddhism, but also via his tutoring in the “School of Hard Knocks” that is the pop-rock balladeer scene, from coffeehouse to sports arena, from album liner-notes to concert reviews. Editor Jason Holt, himself a fine absurdist experimental poet and a professor of philosophy, draws us into examining the kōan of Cohen, so to speak, by postulating the first immediate paradox of the artist: an essential, post-modern poet, respected by ye Literature professors, and a bluesy cantor / singer, whose smoky vocals coax matrons and teens alike to toss their panties on stage. Is Cohen really both pop star and poet, and, if so, might one add the label, ‘philosopher,’ too? Holt assembles twenty scholars to ponder the ideational links between Cohen as writer / songwriter and a cosmopolitan who’s who of philosophers: Adorno, Beauvoir, Camus, Derrida, etc. Reading these superb assessments of Cohen’s (sung) words bids us read and / or hear the bard ever more intensively, to recognize in him the extension of a troubadour tradition, ex the Holy Land and Provence, marrying Judeo-Christian and ‘Pagan’ deathless notions of love, sex, ritual, and romance, blending David and Dante, Peter and Petrarch, the Song of Songs and Sade.”*

—GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE, William Lyon Mackenzie King
Professor of Canadian Studies, Harvard University (2013-14)
& Poet Laureate of Toronto (2012-15)

“Cohen famously said that there is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in. This book takes the brilliant light of Cohen’s words and shines it into Plato’s cave with such strength the prisoners are not only free but see the sun.”

—KIMBERLY BALTZER-JARAY, author of *Doorway to the World of Essences*

“Leonard Cohen and Philosophy deals with a wide range of issues, including the metaphysical world created in ‘Suzanne,’ . . . the poetics of relationships , . . . and the phenomenology of time. . . . This volume presents perspectives not to be found elsewhere and offers readers a fuller resonance with Cohen’s work.”

—DrHGuy on Heck Of A Guy: The Other Leonard Cohen Site

“Anyone interested in Leonard Cohen—whether a newcomer to his work or a longtime fan—will find much to reflect upon and savor here. Exploring Cohen’s songs, albums, poems, and novels through the prism of philosophical and religious ideas, this volume covers diverse ground—from Hellenistic philosophy to existentialism, from Stoicism to phenomenology, from literary theory to gender studies, from Judeo-Christian concepts such as katechon to Buddhist concepts such as nirvana. In the process, certain themes receive special focus, such as romantic love, authenticity, irony, perceptions of time, embodied consciousness, the Holocaust and the banality of evil, and the process of redemption. As these essays make manifestly clear, Cohen’s work brings light to many philosophical and religious concepts, even as those concepts in turn help to illuminate and complement the depth of thought and feeling in Cohen’s rich and varied lyrical, poetical work.”

—KATHLEEN LEAGUE, author of *Adorno, Radical Negativity, and Cultural Critique*

“It is rare for a promising young literary figure to become an influential pop music star, but that is exactly what Leonard Cohen has accomplished. The various works of the Canadian singer-songwriter-poet-novelist frequently bridge such issues as personal identity, skepticism, inter-personal relationships, and inter-cultural spiritual influences. The chapters in this book run the gamut from classical and modern philosophical contexts to Cohen’s varied masculinities and prophetic tone to his unusual singing voice and concepts of beauty, authenticity, irony, love, evil, and transcendence.”

—DURRELL BOWMAN, author of *Experiencing Rush: A Listener’s Companion* and co-editor of *Rush and Philosophy: Heart and Mind United*

“Leonard Cohen, a Canadian literary and music icon, has provoked excitement, disgust, bewilderment and uncertainty among his fans and critics alike. Leonard Cohen and Philosophy wonderfully captures and examines all of those sentiments and more. It provides a delightful and engrossing philosophical journey through the life and art of Leonard Cohen. Jason Holt and his roster of engaging contributors make you want to travel with them—and you’ll be glad you did.”

—SHAUN P. YOUNG, editor of *Jeopardy and Philosophy*

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Leonard Cohen and Philosophy

Various Positions

Edited by
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Chicago, Illinois

*Volume 84 in the series, Popular Culture and
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First printing 2014

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permission of the publisher, Open Court Publishing Company, A division of
Cricket Media, 70 East Lake Street, Suite 800, Chicago, Illinois 60601.

Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Leonard Cohen and philosophy / edited by Jason Holt.

pages cm. — (Popular culture and philosophy ; Volume 84)

Includes biographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8126-9856-5 (trade paper : alk. paper) 1. Cohen, Leonard,
1934—Criticism and interpretation. I. Holt, Jason, 1971-.

ML410.C734L46 2014

782.42164092—dc23

2014016534

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Thanks to Series Editor George Reisch, David Ramsay Steele, Kerri Mommer, and everyone at Open Court for their encouragement and support.

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The Pop Star–Poet Paradox

JASON HOLT

There seems to be a contradiction between Leonard Cohen the pop star and Leonard Cohen the poet. The pop star was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame; the poet refused Canada’s prestigious Governor General’s Literary Award. On some level, these two facets don’t seem to go together, as if Cohen has a split artistic personality. Think of his portrait on the *Recent Songs* album cover (1979): the two bilateral halves, put together, do look like him, although the face is noticeably asymmetrical. No stranger to tension and duality, “the stranger” appears particularly tailor-suited to such visual representation.

There’s nothing altogether unusual about starting out in one line and shifting later to another. From a certain point of view, that’s in fact what Cohen did. He started out as a poet, a worker in literature, and then became primarily a worker in song. Nor is there anything strange about a musician publishing poetry. Plenty of popular musicians have done so: Jim Morrison, Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan, Lou Reed, Tom Waits, Jewel, Tupac Shakur. Others, like Patti Smith and Jim Carroll, have achieved a notable presence as poets and even some critical cachet. It is, though, clear enough, if not entirely uncontroversial, that Leonard Cohen ranks supreme as the quintessential pop star–poet. We can leave aside the related issue of the poetics of popular song lyrics—

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the metrical appeal of Chuck Berry, for instance—or including spoken word pieces on albums à la Ani DiFranco.

Preeminence as a pop star–poet is only one of many things that make Leonard Cohen a paradoxical figure, one of the most enigmatic, mysterious, and compelling in all of pop music. He’s a *Canadian*, of all things, but with international appeal. Cohen is utterly depressing, but wickedly funny. He’s deadly serious, but somehow above it all, light-hearted; nostalgic and yet hopeful; hopeful but resigned; unremittingly cruel, yet undeniably gentle; unblinkingly realistic, yet almost blindly romantic; a Jew but seemingly Christian; Judeo-Christian but Buddhist. He speaks eloquently of silence, and his silence speaks volumes, illuminating darkness even as it swallows up the light. He shouldn’t be—but somehow is—so much fun.

These tensions, these dualities are paradoxes only in a mild sense. A more strict sense limits paradoxes to apparently inescapable, genuine contradictions—where it seems logically impossible to have both things at once, and yet it seems we do have them. To take a common example, if I write “This sentence is false,” that’s paradoxical because assuming it’s true (the world is as the sentence says), then it’s false, and if it’s false (the world isn’t so), then it’s true. It’s not just in the mild sense that Leonard Cohen is paradoxical. He’s also paradoxical in the stricter sense. The pop star–poet paradox isn’t that Cohen writes poetry and popular music, but rather that his songs count *both* as poetry *and* as popular music.

Why is this a paradox? There’s a presumed hard distinction between so-called high and popular art. Where poetry is a high art, folk or pop music is deemed a popular art, lower if not lowbrow. Actually, any art form will have highbrow and popular varieties. Music, for instance, has both highbrow varieties (classical, opera), and less “refined” popular types (country, rock). Poetry, too, may be seen as having comparatively popular varieties like rap alongside its more rarefied, and to popular tastes often less engaging, traditional examples: Drake and Blake. It’s not just philosophers, but most of us, who consider the distinction absolute in that any artwork

The Pop Star–Poet Paradox

will count *either* as high art *or* as popular entertainment—*but never both*.

We can now see the potential paradox in the music of Leonard Cohen. It's not simply a matter of setting poetry to music, although that sometimes was the process, but the fact that the songs themselves count both as traditional poetry (high art) and folk or pop music (popular art). From a poetic perspective, Cohen's songs are unquestionably a cut above—too good, in a way, for popular music. Still, folk and pop, Cohen's musical genres, are *decidedly* popular. Cohen's songs appear to transcend and yet still remain within the genres they inhabit.

Film theorists sometimes appeal to something called “auteur theory” to explain how in some cases movies, a typically popular art form, can be transformed into high art when a great filmmaker expresses a singular vision. In the films of Alfred Hitchcock, for instance, we have popular movie genres—the thriller, the horror, the film noir—elevated beyond the confines of more generic examples. Similar to a literary author (*auteur*), the creative control and exacting standards of the genius filmmaker allow them to make high art out of what, in ordinary hands, would be merely popular art. In such cases, the label “popular art,” however popular the work itself may be, is effectively inapplicable.

We might think of resolving the pop star–poet paradox for Cohen by thinking that he's also an auteur—and not just because he's literally an author—that he transcends the limits of folk and pop music to create high art out of popular material (see Boucher's book, *Dylan and Cohen*, pp. 75–77), just as Hitchcock does with the thriller. That's one possibility. Here's another: though the poetry of Cohen's songs makes them high art, the musical profiles of these songs don't allow them any supra-popular transubstantiation. They're folk, or pop, glorious but not transcendent. Perhaps this is unlike Hitchcock, though perhaps here too the paradox that auteur theory seems to help resolve remains intact.

Either way, in Leonard Cohen's music we find a challenge to the distinction between high and popular art. Witness the

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fact that, on this distinction, the undeniable high art of the lyrics as poetry gets somehow “degraded” by *adding* to it aesthetically pleasing melody: a paradox of literary lyrics. We’d hardly agree with Louis Dudek, an early literary mentor of Cohen, who thought that his taking up the guitar was somehow throwing away his talent, a betrayal of poetry. The two are perfect complements, as everybody knows.

I

**Songs of
Existence**

1

Leonard Cohen as a Guide to Life

BRENDAN SHEA

To study philosophy is nothing but to prepare one's self to die.

—CICERO

When asked to describe what separates Leonard Cohen's songs from those of other singer-songwriters, many of his fans might be tempted to say "he's more philosophical." And this is surely right—after all, this is a book on Leonard Cohen and philosophy!

Cohen's songs resonate with so many of us because they focus on profoundly important human themes such as the nature of love, sex, death, and what makes for a meaningful life. An influential group of ancient Greek philosophers who lived during the period from 300 BCE to 200 CE sought to answer questions related to these same themes. The three major "schools" of Greek philosophy during this period, known as *Hellenistic* philosophy, included the Stoics, the Skeptics, and the Epicureans. The philosophers in these different schools don't always agree with each other (or with Cohen) on the nature of the problems or their solutions.

A Philosopher Must Die

For if you kill me you will not easily find a successor to me, who, if I may use such a ludicrous figure of speech, am a sort of gadfly,

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given to the state by God; and the state is a great and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and requires to be stirred into life. I am that gadfly which God has attached to the state, and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you.

—SOCRATES (*Apology*, section 30e)

In “A Singer Must Die,” Cohen writes from the perspective of a singer who has been accused of betraying with “the lie in his voice.” The singer offers a sarcastic apology, thanking his accusers for doing their duty as “keepers of truth” and “guardians of beauty.” He goes on to consider his own complex motivations for writing his songs, which are tightly tied up with his human desire for sex and love. He concludes with a more direct attack on the motives and methods of the government, which often tries to suppress this sort of art with a “knee in your balls” and “fist in your face.”

The conflict between the democratic state and the individual seeker of truth has a long history, and one of its earliest victims, Socrates, served as something like a secular “saint” to Hellenistic philosophers. Socrates (469 to 399 BCE) was a citizen of Athens, the birthplace of modern democracy. Most of what we know about Socrates is due to his equally famous student, the philosopher Plato (427 to 347 BCE). Socrates was by all accounts a loyal citizen, who served bravely in the military and devoted his life to determining how one could live a virtuous, happy life. He most commonly did this by approaching important Athenians and asking them to describe and defend their answers to “big questions” about subjects such as justice, religion, and love. Like Cohen’s character in “Chelsea Hotel #2,” Socrates was at once known as a sex object (the young men of Athens often made unsuccessful passes at him) and as a somewhat ugly man (Plato’s dialogues contain frequent jokes about the shape of Socrates’s nose).

Socrates’s habit of acting like a “gadfly” who annoyed the rich and powerful earned him enemies, however, and he soon

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found himself in the same situation as Cohen's singer. Socrates was accused of corrupting the youth and denying the gods of the state. His (often sarcastic) defense was in many ways similar to the one described by Cohen. He argued that he was driven to seek the truth (though he claimed to never have found it) by an inner "daemon" he could not and would not control, and said that his accusers ought to thank him for his service to the city. Socrates argued that it would be better to die than to do what he thought wrong, since only the latter harms the soul. In a famous miscarriage of justice, the jury voted to convict Socrates and sentenced him to death.

In his final statement to the members of the jury, Socrates offered a warning that echoes Cohen's threat of first taking Manhattan, then Berlin, and told the jurors that their problems would only be made worse by killing him. His death would, he predicted, increase both the number of future critics and their radicalism. If democracy is to survive, he suggested, citizens must learn how to deal rationally with their problems, and to deal productively with the criticisms raised by poets and philosophers. If not, democracy can easily turn into tyranny, as both the fearful majority and the increasingly desperate minority seek to protect their own places in society.

Like Cohen, Socrates was a person who combined considerable empathy for individual human beings with a realistic and somewhat cynical view about the horrible ways that they usually behaved. Similarly, while he was fiercely loyal to Athens, and even risked death by defying a group of tyrants who briefly overthrew the democracy, he was deeply pessimistic about the ability of the majority to craft a just, rational society. Cohen songs such as "Everybody Knows" and "Democracy" exhibit something close to a Socratic attitude toward modern society. In the former song, Cohen emphasizes that people will behave in predictably bad ways; in the latter, he identifies both the shortcomings and the potential of American democracy.

Hey, That's the Way Stoics Say Goodbye

Never say about anything "I have lost it" but say "I have restored it." Is your child dead? It has been restored. Is your wife dead? She has been restored. . . . So long as he may allow you, take care of it as a thing which belongs to another, as travelers do with their inn.

—EPICTETUS (section 11)

Immediately after Socrates's death, philosophy in Athens was dominated first by Plato and then by Aristotle (384 to 322 BCE), who helped launch research into areas such as physics, biology, logic, metaphysics, and political science. The Hellenistic period of philosophy officially "starts" with the death of Alexander the Great and the subsequent exile of Aristotle from Athens in 323 BCE. Like their hero Socrates, the Hellenistic philosophers were less concerned with the "academic" pursuits of Plato and Aristotle than with what they saw as a more fundamental question: "How should I live?"

The Stoic school of philosophy was founded in Athens by Zeno of Citium (334 to 264 BCE), and included thinkers such as Epictetus (55 to 135 CE) and the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121 to 180 CE). The Stoics were especially worried about how we can learn to live with tragedy, suffering, or loss. This same problem is addressed in many of Cohen's songs, including "Hallelujah," which (at least in parts) celebrates a painful relationship, and "If It Be Your Will," a prayer-like song that emphasizes the essential powerlessness of humans to control the world around us. Stoic themes are especially prominent in Cohen's parting words to a lover in "Hey, That's No Way to Say Goodbye." Like Cohen, the Stoics emphasize the importance of appropriately valuing the relationship that you are currently in, while giving up on future-oriented talk of "love or chains and things we can't untie." The Stoics would agree with Cohen's focus on the present, shown both by his refusal to think of new lovers and

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calm acceptance that his current relationship was ending. They would also concur with his plea to avoid the sort of extreme sadness that often marks the end of relationships. While the Stoics were not “anti-emotion” (as the modern word “stoic” sometimes suggests) they did consider the extremes of sadness, anger, and lust among the biggest obstacles to leading a good life. These sorts of self-centered emotions make it more difficult for us to be happy and to treat others (such as romantic partners) the way they deserve.

While the Stoics did not believe in an afterlife, they did believe in a benevolent, eternally existing universe (the Stoic “God”) in which everything occurred as it was “fated to.” Many of them also believed that time was cyclical, and that each event we experience has happened (and will happen) an infinite number of times. For the Stoics, this might have served a therapeutic purpose, much like the song’s reminder that “many loved before us” and “we are not new.” The idea that we are *not* unique can, somewhat surprisingly, take some of the pressure off of us to “not screw things up” or to “fight against the inevitable.” Instead, we realize that we (just like everyone else) must learn to accept that there are many things that are beyond our control, and that it is useless to fight against them. This change of perspective reminds us of our relatively small, but nevertheless essential, place in the larger universe. From this perspective, we can see the foolishness of assuming that our present concerns are the “center of the universe”; however, it also reminds us that these concerns are *real*, and that we ought to respond to them appropriately.

The Stoics recommend that we focus on the present, and adopt an attitude of “resigned acceptance” toward whatever the future holds. This is not always easy, of course, as “Hey, That’s No Way to Say Goodbye” beautifully illustrates. As humans, we all want to “hold on” to things even after we realize that we cannot do so. The Stoics, and Cohen, remind us that our lives will be better if we learn to let go.

A Skeptical Story about Leonard's Raincoat

For he who is of the opinion that anything is either good or bad by nature is always troubled, and when he does not possess those things that seem to him good he thinks that he is tortured by the things which are by nature bad, and pursues those that he thinks to be good. Having acquired them, however, he falls into greater perturbation, because he is excited beyond reason and without measure from fear of a change, and he does everything in his power to retain the things that seem to him good.

—SEXTUS EMPIRICUS (book 1, section 12)

In “Famous Blue Raincoat” the narrator (apparently Cohen himself, if we are to believe the song’s final line) is writing a letter to a man who had an affair with the narrator’s wife Jane and then disappeared. Somewhat surprisingly, the narrator shows considerable compassion for the mysterious man, calling him his “brother,” and noting concern for the man’s apparent isolation. At the end of the song, the narrator says that “I guess that I miss you” and “I guess I forgive you” and thanks him for standing in his way. More specifically, the narrator suggests that having the affair helped Jane in ways that he himself couldn’t have done (apparently because he believed falsely that the “trouble in her eyes” could not be helped, and so he hadn’t tried to do anything).

One unifying theme of the song concerns the characters’ seeming *ignorance* of what the effects of their actions are, and what actions they could take to make their lives better. Most obviously, the narrator has slowly come to realize that the affair has, oddly, turned out for the best, at least in some respects. The letter’s recipient, by contrast, at one time believed that he needed to “go clear,” and change his life in some way, but it seems likely he has given up on this now, and perhaps wonders if he has done something unforgivable. We get the suggestion that Jane too is worried about questions that have no easy answers. Unlike ordinary ignorance, the sort of deep uncertainty experienced by these characters cannot be cured simply by reading a book, asking an expert,

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or doing an experiment. Instead, it concerns some of the deepest, most fundamental questions: What is it to love someone? How can I live an ethical, authentic life?

The Skeptical school of philosophy, apparently founded by the Greek philosopher Pyrrho (360 to 270 BCE) and later defended by the Roman physician Sextus Empiricus (160 to 210 CE), argued that achieving this state of complete, unresolvable ignorance was in fact the *goal* of philosophy. While this may seem strange, “Famous Blue Raincoat” provides a good starting point for understanding the Skeptics’ fundamental insight. Sextus Empiricus argues that people become skeptics by accident. They begin by seeking the answer to some particular “philosophical” question, perhaps in the hope that finding out the answer will give them “closure” or allow them to move forward with their lives. So, perhaps the narrator began with the question, “How did my wife’s affair change our relationship?” As the blossoming skeptic begins trying to answer the question, he notices that there is evidence in favor of multiple, mutually contradictory answers (“It has destroyed the relationship” versus “It has made us stronger”). He is left in a state of indecision, and is unable to decide what to believe.

This is where the skeptic comes in, and asks the person “How does this state of indecision make you feel?” According to Sextus Empiricus, the typical answer will be “calm” or “tranquil.” After all, the person has now gotten rid of the unfounded belief that certain things (like being cheated on) are inherently bad, while other things (being the one your spouse loves “best”) are inherently good. The skeptic does not conclude “Well, there is no right answer, so I might as well just give up on this whole philosophy thing” (after all, the claim that *there is no right answer* is far too dogmatic for a good skeptic). Instead they resolve to continue a calm, thorough, skeptical investigation into the philosophical questions at issue. The song illustrates this process, as well. The narrator continues to try and reach out to the letter’s recipient, and to think carefully about what has happened to him.

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While Sextus Empiricus emphasizes that a good skeptic will likely reject any “philosophical” claim about religion, love, death, or the like, he also warns against letting philosophical reflection dominate one’s life. In many areas of life, including drinking with friends, enjoying a nice meal, or flirting with someone, Sextus Empiricus thinks that philosophical beliefs can be (and ought to be) largely ignored. Instead, we should simply act as our emotions and habits direct us to. This conclusion also resonates with many of Cohen’s songs. In “Famous Blue Raincoat,” for example, the skeptic would say that it is good that the narrator has taken a moment to reflect on the past, although it would be a mistake to allow this sort of reflection to consume too much of his day-to-day life.

The End of All Winning Streaks

Therefore death to us / Is nothing, nor concerns us in the least, /
Since nature of mind is mortal evermore . . . / When comes that
sundering of our body and soul . . . / Verily naught to us, us then no
more / Can come to pass, naught move our senses then. . . .

—LUCRETIUS (book 3, lines 835–840)

In “A Thousand Kisses Deep,” the narrator reflects on youth, old age, and the slow approach of death. His younger years would be counted by many people as very successful ones, filled with beautiful women and beating the odds to achieve various successes. The narrator knows, however, that this “little winning streak” will eventually end and that the coming defeat is “invincible.” Through a variety of metaphors, he emphasizes both the “unreality” of the pleasures of youth, and of the ultimate need to come to grips with what will ultimately happen.

Determining the proper attitude toward death is a difficult philosophical problem, and it was addressed in different ways by many of the Hellenistic thinkers. This problem held a special significance, however, for the Atomist and Epi-

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curean philosophers, a group which included the Greek thinkers Democritus (460 to 370 BCE) and Epicurus (341 to 270 BCE) and the Roman thinker Lucretius (99 to 55 BCE). This school was distinguished by, among other things, the argument that reality consists of nothing but “atoms in the void” and by their contention that the only truly good thing in life is pleasure and the only truly bad thing pain. On the Epicurean view, humans came into existence by chance collisions of atoms, lived for a brief time, and then dissolved back into their constituent atoms.

The Epicurean solution to the problem of death closely resembles the stance taken in “A Thousand Kisses Deep.” The first step involves recognizing, as the song’s narrator does, that not all desires are equally “real” or “worthwhile.” Some desires, such as those for adequate food and sleep, as well as for companionship, are both *natural* and *necessary*, and it makes perfect sense for us to pursue these. Others, such as sexual desire or the desire for gourmet food and drink, are perfectly *natural*, but are unnecessary. Epicureans held that it was okay to enjoy these things when they were obtained from a pursuit of natural, necessary desires, but it would be a mistake to devote our lives to their pursuit, as they can never *truly* be satisfied, and chasing them can easily be a recipe for misery. This seems to have been one of the mistakes made by the narrator in “A Thousand Kisses Deep” in his youth.

Along with the two categories of natural desires, the Epicureans also recognized a category of *unnatural* or *empty* desires, which they argued had no place whatsoever in a happy human life. These include things like greed, reflected by things like betting on ponies, and the desire for immortality, reflected by a willingness to “ditch it all to stay alive.” These desires are dangerous precisely because they are *impossible* to satisfy—there is no amount of money that will satisfy the gambler, and there is no way of escaping death.

So, how can we learn to accept death, in the way that both the Epicureans and “A Thousand Kisses Deep” would counsel? Lucretius argues that the secret is to recognize that

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death is *nothing*; once we are dead, we have ceased to exist, and thus, nothing bad can come to pass. So while it makes sense for us to fear *painful* experiences such as being injured in a war, or having our hearts broken (since we can imagine what these things will feel like), it *doesn't* make sense for us to fear not existing. As Lucretius points out, we don't regret the experiences we missed out on *by not being born sooner* (that happened before we were born). He contends that it makes equally little sense for us to regret the things we will miss out on *by dying sooner than we wanted to*.

Hypatia and Joan of Arc

Hypatia . . . who made such attainments in literature and science, as to far surpass all the philosophers of her own time . . . fell a victim to the political jealousy which at that time prevailed. Some . . . therefore, hurried away by a fierce and bigoted zeal . . . waylaid her returning home . . . completely stripped her, and then murdered her with tiles. After tearing her body in pieces, they took her mangled limbs to a place called Cinaron, and there burnt them.

—SOCRATES OF CONSTANTINOPE

As we've seen, the Hellenistic philosophers believed strongly that practicing philosophy was a key element in a happy, meaningful life. However, doing philosophy could also be dangerous, as Socrates (among others) painfully discovered. Cohen's song "Joan of Arc" illustrates a similar point: while many of us long for the clarity of "love and light," a life dedicated to the pursuit of such lofty goals can, at times, be both lonely and painful.

While there is no universally accepted "end point" of Hellenistic philosophy, the ideas of Greek philosophy were slowly supplanted by the emergence of Christianity as the dominant ideology in the late Roman Empire. One of the last remaining strongholds of Hellenistic thought was Alexandria, Egypt, which for hundreds of years was home to the largest library in the Western world, and which had been

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founded at the very beginning of the Hellenistic period. As the Hellenists' valuing of literature, science, and philosophy fell out of favor, the library was left to decay. Finally, in 391 CE, what remained of the library was destroyed by the order of the Christian bishops. Thousands of books, including many by notable Hellenistic philosophers, were lost forever—say goodbye to Alexandria lost.

In an ending that would seem to fit in a Leonard Cohen song, the Hellenistic era ended as it began: with a philosopher dying for unpopular beliefs. In this case, the victim was Hypatia of Alexandria, a famous mathematician, astronomer, and teacher of Hellenistic philosophy. All of her writings have been lost, and it seems that she fell victim to both political intrigue and religious persecution. In an event whose exact causes are still debated, she was brutally killed by a mob of local Christians in 405 CE, who may (or may not) have been acting with the complicity of the local bishops.

Her story bears close similarities to Catherine of Alexandria, the Catholic “patron saint of philosophy,” who Joan of Arc would later claim to see in visions, and it is at least possible that Catherine was in fact simply a fictionalized version of Hypatia herself. In any case, Cohen's description of the celibate, fiercely committed Joan of Arc resonates with what we know of Hypatia. For her, as for the Hellenistic philosophers that preceded her, philosophy was not simply a collection of theories and arguments learned in the classroom, or a hobby that could be picked up briefly and then forgotten. It was instead an all-consuming passion that demanded total commitment, and which in turn promised the reward of a meaningful, fulfilling life.

It is this basic idea—that leading a meaningful, examined life requires both reflection and effort—that links Cohen's songs so closely with the ideas of the philosophers discussed in this chapter. For many Cohen fans, this is among the many aspects of his music that make it worthwhile for us to return to it again and again. It illustrates beautifully both how *difficult* the examined life can be, and why it is so worthwhile to continue to strive after it.

2 The Existential Cohen

AGUST MAGNUSSON

They call him the “High Priest of Pathos,” “Grand Master of Melancholia,” and the amazingly awesome “Spin Doctor for the Apocalypse.” The stereotypical image of Leonard Cohen is that of a man primarily concerned with the darker aspects of the human condition. The enormous (and hilarious) array of aliases given to him by the press mostly label him as an artist whose stock-in-trade seemingly consists of little else than making people feel miserable.

This popular conception of Cohen as a peddler of doom has always bothered his devotees, and rightly so, for what is immediately apparent to anyone with ears to truly hear Cohen’s music and poetry is that there’s an immense amount of grace, beauty, and joy to be found in his songs. In fact, one might say that the darkness in his works (and there is, indeed, a great deal of darkness) throws into sharp relief the light that permeates human existence. This may be why it’s so common to hear people speak of Cohen’s music as a source of healing and comfort in times of suffering and despair, which is the exact opposite of the Cohen cliché perpetuated in popular culture which mostly evokes images of unhappy and angst-ridden depressives wallowing in their pain.

Even though Cohen has been famously hesitant to admit to any cohesive philosophy behind his artistic output he has, on more than one occasion, alluded to this fundamental ele-