

THE PHENOMENAL  
INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER



*A*  
BRIEF HISTORY  
*of*  
THOUGHT

*a  
philosophical  
guide to  
living*

LUC FERRY

“A VITAL BOOK.”

—Matthew B. Crawford, author of *Shop Class as Soulcraft*

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**A**  
**BRIEF HISTORY**  
**OF**  
**THOUGHT**

A PHILOSOPHICAL GUIDE TO LIVING

Luc Ferry  
Translated by Theo Cuffe

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# Dedication

*For Gabrielle, Louise and Clara*

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# Introduction

While chatting over supper on holiday, some friends asked me to improvise a philosophy course for adults and children alike. I decided to accept the challenge and came to relish it. The exercise forced me to stick to essentials – no complicated words, no learned quotations and no references to obscure theories. As I worked through my account of the history of ideas, without access to a library, it occurred to me that there is nothing comparable in print. There are many histories of philosophy, of course; some are excellent, but even the best ones are a little dry for someone who has left university behind, and certainly for those yet to enter a university. And the rest of us are not particularly concerned.

This book is the direct result of those evenings amongst friends, so I have tried to preserve the original impromptu style. Its objective is both modest and ambitious: modest, because it is addressed to a nonacademic audience; ambitious, because I have not permitted myself any concession to simplification where it would involve distortion of the philosophical ideas at its heart. I feel too much respect for the masterpieces of philosophy to caricature them. Clarity should be the primary responsibility of a work addressed to beginners, but it must be achieved without compromising the truth of its subject; otherwise it is worthless.

With that in mind, I have tried to offer a rite of passage, which aims to be as straightforward as possible, without bypassing the richness and profundity of philosophical ideas. My aim is not merely to give a taste, a superficial gloss, or a survey influenced by popular trends; on the contrary I want to lay bare these ideas in their integrity, in order to satisfy two needs: that of an adult who wants to know what philosophy is about, but does not necessarily intend to proceed any further; and that of a young person who hopes eventually to further their study, but does not as yet have the necessary bearings to be able to read these challenging authors for herself or himself.

I have attempted to give an account of everything that I consider to be truly indispensable in the history of thought – all that I would like to pass on to family and those whom I regard as friends.

But why undertake this endeavour? First, because even the most sublime spectacle begins to pall if one lacks a companion with whom to share it. I am increasingly aware that philosophy no longer counts as what is ordinarily thought of as ‘general knowledge’. An educated person is supposed to know his or her national history, a few standard literary and artistic references, even a few odds and ends of biology or physics, yet they most likely have no inkling of Epictetus, Spinoza or Kant. I am convinced that everyone should study just a little philosophy, if only for two simple reasons.

First of all, without it we can make no sense of the world in which we live. Philosophy is the best training for living, better even than history and the human sciences. Why? Quite simply because virtually all of our thoughts, convictions and values exist and have meaning – whether or not we are conscious of it – within models of the world that have been developed over the course of intellectual history. We must understand these models in order to grasp their reach, their logic and their consequences.

Many individuals spend a considerable part of their lives anticipating misfortune and preparing for catastrophe – loss of work, accident, illness, death of loved ones, and so on. Others, on the contrary, appear to live in a state of utter indifference, regarding such fears as morbid and having no place in everyday life. Do they realise, both of these character-types, that their attitudes have already been pondered with matchless profundity by the philosophers of ancient Greece?

The choice of an egalitarian rather than an aristocratic ethos, of a romantic aesthetic rather than a classical one, of an attitude of attachment or non-attachment to things and to beings in the face of death; the adoption of authoritarian or liberal political attitudes; the preference for animals and nature over mankind, for the call of the wild over the cities of man – all of these choices and many more were considered long before they became opinions available, as in a marketplace, to the citizen. The divisions, conflicts and issues continue to determine our thoughts and our words, whether we are aware of them or not. To study them in their pure form, to grasp their deepest origins, is to arm oneself with not only the means of becoming more intelligent, but also more independent. Why would one deprive oneself of such tools?

Second, beyond coming to an understanding of oneself and others through acquaintance with the key texts of philosophy, we come to realise that these texts are able, quite simply, to help us live in a better and freer way. As several contemporary thinkers note: one does not philosophise to amuse oneself, nor even to better understand the world and one's own place in it, but sometimes literally 'save one's skin'. There is in philosophy the wherewithal to conquer the fears which can paralyse us in life, and it is an error to believe that modern psychology, for example, can substitute for this.

Learning to live; learning to fear no longer the various faces of death; or, more simply, learning to conquer the banality of everyday life – boredom, the sense of time slipping by: these were already the primary motivations of the schools of ancient Greece. Their message deserves to be heard, because contrary to what happens in history and in the human sciences, the philosophers of time past speak to us in the present tense. And this is worth contemplating.

When a scientific theory is revealed to be false, when it is refuted by another manifestly true theory, it becomes obsolete and is of no further interest except to a handful of scientists and historians. However, the great philosophical questions about how to live life remain relevant to this day. In this sense, we can compare the history of philosophy to that of art, rather than of the sciences, in the same way that paintings by Braque or Kandinsky are not 'less beautiful' than those by Vermeer or Manet, so too the reflections of Kant or Nietzsche on the sense or non-sense of life are not inferior – or superior – to those of Epictetus, Epicurus or the Buddha. They all furnish propositions about life and attitudes in the face of existence, that continue to address us across the centuries. Whereas the scientific theories of Ptolemy or Descartes may be regarded as 'quaint' and have no further interest other than the historical, we can still draw upon the collective wisdom of the ancients as we can admire a Greek temple or a Chinese scroll – with both feet planted firmly in the twenty-first century.

Following the lead of the earliest manual of philosophy ever written, *The Discourses* of Epictetus from c. 100 AD, this little book will address its readers directly. I hope the reader may take my tone as a sign of complicity rather than familiarity.

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# Chapter 1

## What is Philosophy?

I am going to tell you the story as well as the history of philosophy. Not all of it, of course, but its five great moments. In each case, I will give you an example of one or two transforming visions of the world or, as we say sometimes, one or two great ‘systems of thought’. I promise that, if you take the trouble to follow me, you will come to understand this thing called philosophy and you will have the means to investigate it further – for example, by reading in detail some of the great thinkers of whom I shall be speaking.

The question ‘What is philosophy?’ is unfortunately one of the most controversial (although in this sense that is a good thing, because we are forced to exercise our ability to reason) and one which the majority of philosophers still debate today, without finding common ground.

When I was in my final year at school, my teacher assured me that it referred ‘quite simply’ to the ‘formation of a critical and independent spirit’, to a ‘method of rigorous thought’, to an ‘art of reflection’, rooted in an attitude of ‘astonishment’ and ‘enquiry’ ... These are the definitions which you still find today in most introductory works. However, in spite of the respect I have for my teacher, I must tell you from the start that, in my view, such definitions have nothing to do with the question.

It is certainly preferable to approach philosophy in a reflective spirit; that much is true. And that one should do so with rigour and even in a critical and interrogatory mood – that is also true. But all these definitions are entirely non-specific. I’m sure that you can think of an infinite number of other human activities about which we should also ask questions and strive to argue our way as best we can without their being in the slightest sense philosophical.

Biologists and artists, doctors and novelists, mathematicians and theologians, journalists and even politicians all reflect and ask themselves questions – none of which makes them, for my money, philosophers. One of the principal errors of the contemporary world is to reduce philosophy to the straightforward matter of ‘critical reflection’. Reflection and argument are worthy activities; they are indispensable to the formation of good citizens and allow us to participate in civic life with an independent spirit. But these are merely the means to an end – and philosophy is no more an instrument of politics than it is a prop for morality.

I suggest that we accept a different approach to the question ‘What is philosophy?’ and start from a very simple proposition, one that contains the central question of all philosophy: that the human being, as distinct from God, is mortal or, to speak like the philosophers, is a ‘finite being’, limited in space and time. As distinct from animals, moreover, a human being is the only creature who is aware of his limits. He knows that he will die, and that his near ones, those he loves, will also die. Consequently he cannot prevent himself from thinking about this state of affairs, which is disturbing and absurd, almost unimaginable. And, naturally enough, he is inclined to turn first of all to those religions which promise ‘salvation’.

Think about this word – ‘salvation’. I will show how religions have attempted to take charge of the questions it raises. Because the simplest way of starting to define philosophy is always by putting it in relation to religion.

Open any dictionary and you will see that ‘salvation’ is defined first and foremost as ‘the condition of being saved, of escaping a great danger or misfortune’. But from what ‘great danger’, from what ‘misfortune’ do religions claim to deliver us? You already know the answer: from the peril of death. Which is why all religions strive, in different ways, to promise us eternal life; to reassure us that one day we will be reunited with our loved ones – parents and friends, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, children and grandchildren – from whom life on earth must eventually separate us.

In the Gospel According to St John, Jesus experiences the death of a dear friend, Lazarus. Like every other human being since the dawn of time, he weeps. He experiences, like you or I, the grief of separation. But unlike you or I, simple mortals, it is in Jesus’s power to raise his friend from the dead. And he does this in order to prove that, as he puts it, ‘love is stronger than death’. This fundamental message constitutes the essence of the Christian doctrine of redemption: death, for those who love and have faith in the word of Christ, is but an appearance, a rite of passage. Through love and through faith, we shall gain immortality.

Which is fortunate for us, for what do we truly desire, above all else? To be understood, to be loved, not to be alone, not to be separated from our loved ones – in short, not to die and not to have them die on us. But daily life will sooner or later disappoint every one of these desires, and, so it is, that by trusting in a God some of us seek salvation, and religion assures us that those who do so will be rewarded. And why not, for those who believe and have faith?

But for those who are not convinced, and who doubt the truth of these promises of immortality, the problem of death remains unresolved. Which is where philosophy comes in. Death is not as simple an event as it is ordinarily credited with being. It cannot merely be written off as ‘the end of life’, as the straightforward termination of our existence. To reassure themselves, certain wise men of antiquity (Epicurus for one) maintained that we must not think about death, because there are only two alternatives: either I am alive, in which case death is by definition elsewhere; or death is here and I am likewise by definition, I am not here to worry about it! Why, under these conditions, would you bother yourself with such a pointless problem?

This line of reasoning, in my view, is a little too brutal to be honest. On the contrary, death has many different faces. And it is this which torments man: for only man is aware that his days are numbered, that the inevitable is not an illusion and that he must consider what to do with his brief existence. Edgar Allan Poe, in one of his most famous poems, ‘The Raven’, conveys this idea of life and irreversibility in a sinister raven perched on a window ledge, capable only of repeating ‘Nevermore’ over and over again.

Poe is suggesting that death means *everything that is unrepeatable*. Death is, *in the midst of life*, that which will not return; that which belongs irreversibly to time past, which we have no hope of ever recovering. It can mean childhood holidays with friends, the divorce of parents, or the houses and schools we have to leave, or a thousand other examples: even if it does not always mean the disappearance of a loved one, everything that comes under the heading of ‘Nevermore’ belongs to death’s ledger.

In this sense, you can see how far death is from a mere biological ending. We encounter an infinite number of its variations, in the midst of life, and these many faces of death trouble us, even if we are



not always aware of them. To live well, therefore, to live freely, capable of joy, generosity and love, we must first and foremost conquer our fear – or, more accurately, our fears of the irreversible. But here, precisely, is where religion and philosophy pull apart.

## *Philosophy versus Religion*

Faced with the supreme threat to existence – death – how does religion work? Essentially, through faith. By insisting that it is faith, and faith alone, which can direct the grace of God towards us. If you believe in Him, God will save you. The religions demand *humility*, above and beyond all other virtues, since humility is in their eyes the opposite – as the greatest Christian thinkers, from Saint Augustine to Pascal, never stop telling us – of the arrogance and the vanity of philosophy. Why is this accusation levelled against free thinking? In a nutshell, because philosophy *also* claims to save us – if not from death itself, then from the anxiety it causes, and to do so *by the exercise of our own resources and our innate faculty of reason*. Which, from a religious perspective, sums up philosophical pride: the effrontery evident already in the earliest philosophers, from Greek antiquity, several centuries before Christ.

Unable to bring himself to believe in a God who offers salvation, the philosopher is above all one who believes that by understanding the world, by understanding ourselves and others as far as intelligence permits, we shall succeed in overcoming fear, through clear-sightedness rather than blind faith.

In other words, if religions can be defined as ‘doctrines of salvation’, the great philosophies can also be defined as doctrines of salvation (but without the help of a God). Epicurus, for example, defined philosophy as ‘medicine for the soul’, whose ultimate aim is to make us understand that ‘death is not to be feared’. He proposes four principles to remedy all those ills related to the fact that we are mortal: ‘The gods are not to be feared; death cannot be felt; the good can be won; what we dread can be conquered.’ This wisdom was interpreted by his most eminent disciple, Lucretius, in his poem *De rerum natura* (‘On the Nature of Things’):

The fear of Acheron [the river of the Underworld] must first and foremost be dismantled; this fear muddies the life of man to its deepest depths, stains everything with the blackness of death, leaves no pleasure pure and clear.

And Epictetus, one of the greatest representatives of another of the ancient Greek philosophical schools – Stoicism – went so far as to reduce *all* philosophical questions to a single issue: the fear of death. Listen for a moment to him addressing his disciple in the course of his dialogues or *Discourses*:

Keep well in mind, then, that this epitome of all human evils, of mean-spiritedness and cowardice, is not death as such, but rather the fear of death. Discipline yourself, therefore, against this. To which purpose let all your reasonings, your readings, all your exercises tend, and you will know that only in this way are human beings set free. (*Discourses*, III, 26, 38–9)

The same theme is encountered in Montaigne’s famous adage – ‘to philosophise is to learn how to die’; and in Spinoza’s reflection about the wise man who ‘dies less than the fool’; and in Kant’s question, ‘What are we permitted to hope for?’ These references may mean little to you, because you

are only starting out, but we shall come back to each of them in turn. Bear them in mind. All that matters, now, is that we understand why, in the eyes of every philosopher, fear of death prevents us from living – and not only because it generates anxiety. Most of the time, of course, we do not meditate on human mortality. But at a deeper level the irreversibility of things is a kind of death at the heart of life and threatens constantly to steer us into *time past* – the home of nostalgia, guilt, regret and remorse, those great spoilers of happiness.

Perhaps we should try not to think of these things, and try to confine ourselves to happy memories rather than reflecting on bad times. But paradoxically those happy memories can become transformed over time, into ‘lost paradises’, drawing us imperceptibly towards the past and preventing us from enjoying the present.

Greek philosophers looked upon the past and the future as the primary evils weighing upon human life, and as the source of all the anxieties which blight the present. The present moment is the only dimension of existence worth inhabiting, because it is the only one available to us. The past is no longer and the future has yet to come, they liked to remind us; yet we live virtually all of our lives somewhere between memories and aspirations, nostalgia and expectation. We imagine we would be much happier with new shoes, a faster computer, a bigger house, more exotic holidays, different friends ... But by regretting the past or guessing the future, we end up missing the only life worth living: the one which proceeds from the here and now and deserves to be savoured.

Faced with these mirages which distract us from life, what are the promises of religion? That we don't need to be afraid, because our hopes will be fulfilled. That it is possible to live in the present and expect a better future! That there exists an infinitely benign Being who loves us above all else and will therefore save us from the solitude of ourselves and from the loss of our loved ones, who after they die in this world, will await us in the next.

What must we do to be ‘saved’? Faced with a Supreme Being, we are invited to adopt an attitude framed entirely in two words: trust (Latin *fides*, which also means ‘faith’) and humility. In contrast to philosophy, by following a different path, verges on the *diabolical*. Christian theology developed a powerful concept of ‘the temptations of the devil’. Contrary to the popular imagery which frequently served the purposes of a Church in need of authority, the devil is not one who leads us away from the straight and narrow, morally speaking, by an appeal to the weaknesses of the flesh. The devil is rather one who, spiritually speaking, does everything in his power to separate us (*dia-bolos* in Greek meaning ‘the who who divides’) from the vertical link uniting true believers with God, and which alone saves them from solitude and death. The *diabolos* is not content with setting men against each other, provoking them to hatred and war, but much more ominously, he cuts man off from God and thus delivers him back into the anguish that faith had succeeded in healing.

For a dogmatic theologian, philosophy is the devil's own work, because by inciting man to turn aside from his faith, to exercise his reason and give rein to his enquiring spirit, philosophy draws him imperceptibly into the realm of *doubt*, which is the first step beyond divine supervision.

In the account of Genesis, with which the Bible opens, the serpent plays the role of Devil by encouraging Adam and Eve – the first human beings – to doubt God's word about the forbidden fruit. The serpent wants them to ask questions and try the apple, so that they will disobey God. By separating them from Him, the Devil can then inflict upon them – mere mortals – all the torments of earthly existence. The ‘Fall’ of Adam and Eve and their banishment from the first Paradise is the direct consequence of *doubting* divine edicts; thus, men became mortal.

All philosophies, however divergent they may sometimes be in the answers they bring, promise an escape from primitive fears. They possess in common with religions the conviction that anguish

prevents us from leading good lives: it stops us not only from being happy, but also from being free. This is an ever present theme amongst the earliest Greek philosophers: we can neither think nor act freely when we are paralysed by the anxiety provoked – even unconsciously – by fear of the irreversible. The question becomes one of how to persuade humans to ‘save’ themselves.

Salvation must proceed not from an Other – from some Being supposedly transcendent (meaning ‘exterior to and superior to’ ourselves) – but well and truly from within. Philosophy wants us to get ourselves out of trouble by utilising our own resources, by means of reason alone, with boldness and assurance. And this of course is what Montaigne meant when, characterising the wisdom of the ancient Greeks, he assured us that ‘to philosophise is to learn how to die’.

Is every philosophy linked therefore to atheism? Can there not be a Christian or a Jewish or a Muslim philosophy? And if so, in what sense? In other words, what are we to make of those philosophers, like Descartes or Kant, who believed in God? And you may ask why should we refuse the promise of religion? Why not submit with humility to the requirements of salvation ‘in God’?

For two crucial reasons, which lie at the heart of all philosophy. First and foremost, because the promise of religions – that we are immortal and will encounter our loved ones after our own biological demise – is too good to be true. Similarly hard to believe is the image of a God who acts as a father to his children. How can one reconcile this with the appalling massacres and misfortunes which overwhelm humanity: what father would abandon his children to the horror of Auschwitz, or Rwanda or Cambodia? A believer will doubtless respond that that is the price of freedom, that God created men as equals and evil must be laid at their door. But what about the innocent? What about the countless children martyred in the course of these crimes against humanity? A philosopher begins to doubt that the religious answers are adequate. (Undoubtedly this argument engages only with the popular image of religion, but this is nonetheless the most widespread and influential version available.) Almost invariably the philosopher comes to think that belief in God, which usually arises as an indirect consequence, in the guise of consolation, perhaps makes us lose in clarity what we gain in serenity. He respects all believers, it goes without saying. He does not claim that they are necessarily wrong, that their faith is absurd, or that the non-existence of God is a certainty. (How would one set about proving that God does not exist?) Simply, that in his case there is a failure of faith; therefore he must look elsewhere.

Wellbeing is not the only ideal in life. Freedom is another. And if religion calms anguish by making death into an illusion, it risks doing so at the price of freedom of thought. For it demands, more or less, that we abandon reason and the enquiring spirit in return for faith and serenity. It asks that we conduct ourselves, before God, like little children, not as curious adults.

Ultimately, to philosophise, rather than take on trust, is to prefer lucidity to comfort, freedom rather than faith. It also means, of course, ‘saving one’s skin’, but not at any price. You might ask, if philosophy is essentially a quest for a good life beyond the confines of religion – a search for salvation without God – why is it so frequently presented in books as the art of right-thinking, as the exercise of the critical faculty and freedom of conscience? Why, in civic life, on television and in the press, is philosophy so often reduced to moral engagement, casting the vote for justice and against injustice? The philosopher is portrayed as someone who understands things as they are, who questions the evils of the day. What are we to make of the intellectual and moral life, and how do we reconcile these imperatives with the definition of philosophy I have just outlined?

### *The Three Dimensions of Philosophy*

If the quest for a salvation without God is at the heart of every great philosophical system, and that its essential and ultimate objective, it cannot be accomplished without deep reflection upon reality, things as they are – what is ordinarily called ‘theory’ – and consideration of what must be or what ought to be – which is referred to as ‘morals’ or ‘ethics’.

(Note: ‘Morals’ and ‘ethics’: what difference is there between these terms? The simplest answer is none whatsoever. The term ‘morals’ derives from the Latin word for ‘manners, customs’, and ‘ethics’ derives from the Greek term for ‘manners, customs’. They are therefore perfectly synonymous. Having said this, some philosophers have assigned different meanings to the two terms. In Kant, for example, ‘morals’ designates the ensemble of first principles, and ‘ethics’ refers to their application. Other philosophers refer to ‘morals’ as the theory of duties towards others, and to ‘ethics’ as the doctrine of salvation and wisdom. Indeed, there is no reason why different meanings should not be assigned to these terms, but, unless I indicate otherwise, I shall use them synonymously in the following pages.)

If philosophy, like religion, has its deepest roots in human ‘finiteness’ – the fact that for us mortal time is limited, and that we are the only beings in this world to be fully aware of this fact – it goes without saying that the question of what to do with our time cannot be avoided. As distinct from trees, oysters and rabbits, we think constantly about our relationship to time: about how we are going to spend the next hour or this evening, or the coming year. And sooner or later we are confronted sometimes due to a sudden event that breaks our daily routine – with the question of what we are doing, what we should be doing, and what we must be doing with our lives – our time – as a whole.

This combination of the fact of mortality with our awareness of mortality contains all the questions of philosophy. The philosopher is principally not someone who believes that we are here as ‘tourists’ to amuse ourselves. Even if he does come to believe that amusement alone is worth experiencing, it will at least be the result of a process of thought, a reflection rather than a reflex. This thought process has three distinct stages: a *theoretical* stage, a *moral* or *ethical* stage, and a crowning conclusion as *salvation* or *wisdom*.

The first task of philosophy is that of *theory*, an attempt to gain a sense of the world in which we live. Is it hostile or friendly, dangerous or docile, ordered or chaotic, mysterious or intelligible, beautiful or ugly? Any philosophy therefore takes as its starting point the natural sciences which reveal the structure of the universe – physics, mathematics, biology, and so on – and the disciplines which enlighten us about the history of the planet as well as our own origins. ‘Let no one ignorant of geometry enter here,’ said Plato to his students, referring to his school, the Academy; and thereafter no philosophy has ever seriously proposed to ignore scientific knowledge. But philosophy goes further and examines the *means* by which we acquire such knowledge. Philosophy attempts to define the nature of knowledge and to understand its methods (for example, how do we establish the causes of a natural phenomenon?) and its limits (for example, can one prove, yes or no, the existence of God?).

These two questions – the nature of the world, and the instruments for understanding it at our disposal as humans – constitute the essentials of the *theoretical* aspect of philosophy.

Besides our knowledge of the world and of its history, we must also interest ourselves in other people – those with whom we are going to share this existence. For not only are we not alone, but we could not be born and survive without the help of others, starting with our parents. How do we co-exist with others, what rules of the game must we learn, and how should we conduct ourselves – to be helpful, dignified and ‘fair’ in our dealings with others? This question is addressed by the second part of philosophy; the part which is not theoretical but practical, and which broadly concerns *ethics*.

But why should we learn about the world and its history, why bother trying to live in harmony with

others? What is the point of all this effort? And does it have to make sense? These questions, and some others of a similar nature, bring us to the third dimension of philosophy, which touches upon the ultimate question of *salvation* or *wisdom*. If philosophy is the 'love' (*philo*) of 'wisdom' (*sophia*), it is at this point that it must make way for wisdom, which surpasses all philosophical understanding. To be a sage, by definition, is neither to aspire to wisdom or seek the condition of being a sage, but simply to live wisely, contentedly and as freely as possible, having finally overcome the fears sparked in us by our own finiteness.

I am aware this is becoming rather abstract, so I would like to offer some examples of the three aspects I have touched upon – theory, ethics and the quest for salvation or wisdom – in action.

The best course is therefore to plunge into the heart of the matter, to begin at the beginning; namely the philosophical schools which flourished in Greek antiquity. Let's consider the case of the first of the great philosophical movements, which passes through Plato and Aristotle to find its most perfected – or at least its most 'popular' – form in Stoicism. This is our way into our subject, after which we can explore the other major epochs in philosophy. We must also try to understand why and how men pass from one model of reality to another. Is it because the accepted version no longer satisfies, no longer convinces? After all, several versions of reality are inherently plausible.

You must understand that philosophy is an art not of questions but rather of answers. And as you are going to judge these things *for yourself* – this being another crucial promise of philosophy, because it is not religion, because it is not answerable to the truth of an Other – you will quickly see how profound these answers have been, how gripping, and how inspired.

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## Chapter 2

### ‘The Greek Miracle’

Most historians agree that philosophy first saw the light of day in Greece, some time around the sixth century BC. So sudden and so astonishing was its manifestation, it has become known as ‘the Greek miracle’. But what was available, philosophically speaking, before the sixth century and in other civilisations? Why this sudden breakthrough?

I believe that two straightforward answers can be offered. The first is that, as far as we know, in all civilisations prior to and other than Greek antiquity, religion was a substitute for philosophy. An almost infinite variety of cults bears witness to this monopoly of meaning. It was in the protection of the gods, not in the free play of reason, that men traditionally sought their salvation. It also seems likely that the partially democratic nature of the political organisation of the city-state played some role in ‘rational’ investigation becoming emancipated from religious belief. Among the Greek elite, unprecedented freedom and autonomy of thought were favoured, and in their assemblies, the citizen acquired the habit of uninterrupted public debate, deliberation and argument.

Thus, in Athens, as early as the fourth century BC, a number of competing philosophical schools came to exist. Usually they were referred to by the name of the place where they first established themselves: Zeno of Citium (c. 334–262 BC), the founding father of the Stoic school, held forth beneath colonnades covered with frescoes (the word ‘stoicism’ derives from the Greek word *stoa* meaning ‘porch’).

The lessons dispensed by Zeno beneath his famous ‘painted porch’ were open and free to all comers. They were so popular that, after his death, the teachings were continued and extended by his disciples. His first successor was Cleanthes of Assos (c. 331–230 BC) followed by Chrysippus of Soli (c. 280–208 BC). Zeno, Cleanthes and Chrysippus are the three great names of what is called ‘Early Greek Stoicism’. Aside from a short poem, the *Hymn to Zeus* by Cleanthes, almost nothing survives of the numerous works written by the first Stoics. Our knowledge of their philosophy comes by indirect means, through later writers (notably Cicero). Stoicism experienced a second flourishing, in Greece in the second century BC, and a third, much later, in Rome. The major works of this third Roman phase no longer come down by word of mouth from Athenian philosophers succeeding each other at the head of the school; rather they come from a member of the imperial Roman court, Seneca (c. 8 BC–AD 65) who was also a tutor and advisor to Nero; from Musonius Rufus (AD 25–80) who taught Stoicism in Rome and was persecuted by the same Nero; from Epictetus (c. AD 50–130), a freed slave whose teachings were faithfully transmitted to posterity by his disciples – notably by Arrian, author of two works which were to travel down the ages, the *Discourses* and the *Enchiridion* or *Manual of Epictetus* (the title was said to derive from the fact that the maxims of Epictetus should be at every moment ‘at hand’ for those wanting to learn how to live – ‘manual’ coming from the Latin *manualis*, ‘of belonging to the hand’); and lastly, this body of Stoic teaching was disseminated by the Emperor Marcus Aurelius himself (AD 121–180).

I would now like to show you how a particular philosophy – in this case Stoicism – can address the challenge of human salvation quite differently to religions; how it can try to explain the need for us to conquer the fears born of our mortality, by employing the tools of reason alone. I shall pursue the three main lines of enquiry – theory, ethics and wisdom – outlined earlier. I shall also make plenty of room for quotations from the writers in question; while quotations can slow one down a little, they are essential to enable you to exercise your critical spirit. You need to get used to verifying for yourself whether what you are told is true or not, and for that, you need to read the original texts as early on as possible.

### *Theory, or the Contemplation of a Cosmic Order*

To find one's place in the world, to learn how to live and act, we must first obtain knowledge of the world in which we find ourselves. This is the first task of a philosophical 'theory'.

In Greek, this activity calls itself *theoria*, and the origins of the word deserve our attention: *theion* or *ta theia orao* means 'I see (*orao*) the divine (*theion*)' or 'divine things' (*theia*). And for the Stoics, *the-oria* is indeed a striving to contemplate that which is 'divine' in the reality surrounding us. In other words, the primary task of philosophy is to perceive what is *intrinsic* about the world: what is most real, most important and most meaningful. Now, in the tradition of Stoicism, the innermost essence of the world is *harmony, order* – both true and beautiful – which the Greeks referred to by the term *kosmos*.

If we want to form a simple idea of what was meant by *kosmos*, we must imagine the whole of the universe as if it were both ordered and animate. For the Stoics, the structure of the world – the cosmic order – is not merely magnificent, it is also comparable to a living being. The material world, the entire universe, fundamentally resembles a gigantic animal, of which each element – each organ – is conceived and adapted to the harmonious functioning of the whole. Each part, each member of the immense body, is perfectly in place and functions impeccably (although disasters *do* occur, they do not last for long, and order is soon restored) in the most literal sense: without fault, and in harmony with the other parts. And it is this that *theoria* helps us to unravel and understand.

In English, the term *cosmos* has resulted in, among other words, 'cosmetic'. Originally, this science of the body beautiful related to justness of proportions, then to the art of make-up, which sets off that which is 'well-made' and, if necessary, conceals that which is less so. It is this order, or *cosmos*, the ordained structure of the universe in its entirety that the Greeks named 'divine' (*theion*), and not – with the Jews and Christians – a Being apart from or external to the universe, existing prior to and responsible for the act of its creation.

It is this *divinity*, therefore (nothing to do with a personal Godhead), inextricably caught up with the natural order of things, that the Stoics invite us to contemplate (*theorein*), for example, by the study of sciences such as physics, astronomy or biology, which show the universe *in its entirety* to be 'well-made': from the regular movement of the planets down to the tiniest organisms. We can therefore say that the structure of the universe is not merely 'divine' and perfect of itself, but also 'rational' consonant with what the Greeks termed the *Logos* (from which we derive 'logic' and 'logical'), which exactly describes this admirable order of things. Which is why our human reason is capable of understanding and fathoming reality, through the exercise of *theoria*, as a biologist comes to comprehend the function of the organs of a living creature he dissects.

For the Stoics, opening one's eyes to the world was akin to the biologist examining the body of

mouse or a rabbit to find that everything therein is perfectly ‘well-made’: the eye admirably adapted for ‘seeing well’, the heart and the arteries for pumping blood through the entire body to keep life going; the stomach for digesting food, the lungs for oxygenating the muscles, and so on. All of which, in the eyes of the Stoic, is both ‘logical’ and ‘divine’. Why divine? Not because a personal God is responsible for these marvels, but because these marvels are ready-made. Nor are we humans in any sense the inventors of this reality. On the contrary, we merely discover it.

It is here that Cicero, one of our principal sources for understanding the thought of the early Stoics, intervenes, in his *On the Nature of the Gods*. He scorns those thinkers, notably Epicurus, who think that the world is not a *cosmos*, an order, but on the contrary a chaos. To which Cicero retorts:

Let Epicurus mock as much as he likes ... It remains no less true that nothing is more perfect than this world, which is an animate being, endowed with awareness, intelligence and reason.

This little excerpt gives us a sense of just how remote this way of thinking is from our own. If anyone claimed today that the world is alive, animate – that it possesses a soul and is endowed with reason – he would be considered crazy. But if we understand the Ancients correctly, what they are trying to say is by no means absurd: they were convinced that a ‘logical’ order was at work behind the apparent chaos of things and that human reason was able to discern the divine character of the universe.

It was this same idea, that the world possesses a soul of sorts, like a living being, which would later be termed ‘animism’ (Latin *anima*, meaning *soul*). This ‘cosmology’ (or conception of the *cosmos*) was also described as ‘hylozoism’, literally meaning that matter (*hyle*) is analogous to what is animate (*zoon*): that it is alive, in other words. The same doctrine would also be described by the term ‘pantheism’ (the doctrine that nature and the physical universe are constituents of the essence of God, from Greek *pan*, ‘all’, and *theos*, meaning ‘God’): that all is God, since it is the totality of the universe that is divine, rather than there being a God beyond the world, creating it by remote control, so to speak. If I dwell on this vocabulary it is not out of a fondness for philosophical jargon (which often impresses more than it enlightens), but rather to enable you to approach these great philosophical texts for yourself, without grinding to a halt whenever you encounter these supposedly ‘technical’ terms.

From the point of view of Stoic *theoria*, then – and ignoring those temporary manifestations known as catastrophes – the *cosmos* is essentially *harmonious*. And, as we shall see, this would have important consequences for the ‘practical’ sphere (moral, legal and political). For if nature as a whole is harmonious, then it can serve as a model for *human* conduct, and the order of things *must* be just and good, as Marcus Aurelius insists in his *Meditations*:

‘All that comes to pass comes to pass with justice.’ You will find this to be so if you watch carefully. I do not mean only in accordance with the ordered nature of events, but in accordance with justice and as it were by someone who assigns to each thing its value. (IV.10)

What Marcus Aurelius suggests amounts to the idea that nature – when it functions normally and aside from the occasional accidents and catastrophes that occur – renders justice finally to each of us. Nature supplies to each of us our essential needs as individuals: a body which enables us to move about the world, an intelligence which permits us to adapt to the world, and natural resources which enable us to survive in the world. So that, in this great cosmic sharing out of goods, each receives his due.

This theory of justice ushers in what served as a first principle of all Roman law: ‘to render to each what is his due’ and to assign each to his proper place (which assumes, of course, that for each person



and thing there is such a thing) – what the Greeks thought of as a ‘natural place’ in the *cosmos*, and that this *cosmos* was itself just and good.

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You can see how, in this perspective, one of the ultimate aims of a human life is to find its rightful place within the cosmic order. For the majority of Greek thinkers – with the exception of the Epicureans whom we shall discuss later – it was through the pursuit of this quest, or, better, its accomplishment, that we attain happiness and the good life. From a similar perspective, the *theoria* itself implicitly possesses an aesthetic dimension, since the harmony of the universe which it reveals to us becomes for humans a model of beauty. Of course, just as there are natural catastrophes which seem to invalidate the idea of a good and just *cosmos* – although we are told that these are never more than temporary aberrations – so too there exist within nature things that are at first sight ugly, or even hideous. In their case, we must learn how to go beyond first impressions, the Stoics maintain, rather than remain content with appearances. Marcus Aurelius makes the point forcefully in his *Meditations*.

The lion’s wrinkled brow, the foam flowing from the boar’s mouth, and many other phenomena that are far from beautiful if we look at them in isolation, do nevertheless because they follow from Nature’s processes lend those a further ornament and fascination. And so, if a man has a feeling for, and a deeper insight into the processes of the Universe, there is hardly any of these but will somehow appear to present itself pleasantly to him ... Even an old man or old woman will be seen to possess a certain perfection, a bloom, in the eyes of the sage, who will look upon the charms of his own boy slaves with sober eyes. (III, 2)

This is the same idea already expressed by one of the greatest Greek philosophers and model for the Stoics, Aristotle, when he denounced those who judge the world to be evil, ugly or disjointed: because they are looking only at a detail, without an adequate intelligence of the whole. If ordinary people think, in effect, that the world is imperfect, it is because, according to Aristotle, they commit the error ‘of extending to the universe as a whole observations which bear only upon physical phenomena, and then only upon a small proportion of these. In fact, the physical world that surrounds us is the only one dominated by generation and corruption, but this world does not, one might say, constitute even a small part of the whole: so that it would be fairer to absolve the physical world in favour of the celestial world, than to condemn the latter on account of the former.’ Naturally, if we restrict ourselves to examining our little corner of the *cosmos*, we shall not perceive the beauty of the whole, whereas the philosopher who contemplates, for example, the admirably regular movement of the planets will be able to raise himself to a higher plane through an understanding of the perfection of the whole, of which we are but an infinitesimal fragment.

Thus, the divine nature of the world is both *immanent and transcendent*. Again, I have used these philosophical terms because they will be useful to us later. Something that is *immanent* can be found nowhere else other than in this world. We say it is *transcendent* when the contrary applies. In this sense, the Christian God is transcendent in relation to the world, whereas the divine according to the Stoics, which is not to be located in some ‘beyond’ – being none other than the harmonious structure of the *cosmos* or cosmic or cosmetic, of the world as it is – is wholly immanent. Which does not prevent Stoic divinity from being defined equally as ‘transcendent’: not in relation to the world, of course, but in relation to man, given that it is *radically superior and exterior to him*. Men may discover it – with amazement – but in no sense do they invent it or produce it.

Chrysippus, the student of Zeno who succeeded Cleanthes as the third head of the Stoic school, notes: ‘Celestial things and those whose order is unchanging cannot be made by men.’ These words

are reported by Cicero, who adds in his commentary on the thought of the early Stoics:

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Wherefore the universe must be wise, and nature which holds all things in its embrace must excel the perfection of reason [*Logos*]; and therefore the universe must be a God, and all the force of the universe must be held together by nature, which is divine. (*On the Nature of the Gods*, II, 11, 29–30)

We can therefore say of the divine, according to the Stoics, that it represents ‘transcendence with immanence’; we can grasp the sense in which *theoria* is the contemplation of ‘divine things’ which for all that they do not exist elsewhere than in the dimension of the real, are nonetheless entirely foreign to human activity.

I would like you to note again a difficult idea, to which we shall return in more detail: the *theoria* the Stoics reveals that which is most perfect and most ‘real’ – most ‘divine’, in the Greek sense – the universe. In effect, what is most real, most essential, in their account of the cosmos, is its ordonnance, its harmony – and not, for example, the fact that at certain moments it has its defects such as monsters or natural disasters. In this respect, *theoria*, which shows us all of this and gives us the means to understand it, is at once an ‘ontology’ (a doctrine which defines the innermost structure or ‘essence’ of being), and also a theory of knowledge (the study of the intellectual means by which we arrive at this understanding of the world).

What is worth trying to understand, here, is that philosophical *theoria* cannot be reduced to any specific science such as biology, astronomy, physics or chemistry. For, although it has constantly recourse to these sciences, it is neither experimental, nor limited to a particular branch or object of study. For example, it is not interested solely in what is alive (like biology), or in the heavenly bodies (like astronomy), nor is it solely interested in inanimate matter (like physics); on the other hand it tries to seize the essence or inner structure of the world as a totality. This is ambitious, no doubt, but philosophy is not a science among other sciences, and even if it does take account of scientific findings, its fundamental intent is *not of a scientific order*. What it searches for is a meaning in the world and a means of relating our existence to what surrounds us, rather than a solely objective (scientific) understanding.

However, let us leave this aspect of things to one side for the time being. We shall return to it later when we need to define more closely the difference between philosophy and the exact sciences. I hope that you will sense already that this *theoria* – so different to our modern sciences and their supposedly ‘neutral’ principles, in that they describe what is and not what ought to be – must have practical implications in terms of morality, legality and politics. How could this description of the *cosmos* not have had implications for men who were asking themselves questions as to the best way of leading their lives?

### *Ethics: a System of Justice Based on Cosmic Order*

What kind of ethics corresponds to the *theoria* that we have sketched so far? The answer is clear: one which encourages us to adjust and orientate ourselves to the *cosmos*, which for the Stoics was the watchword of all just actions, the very basis of all morals and all politics. For justice was, above all, *adjustment* – as a cabinetmaker shapes a piece of wood within a larger structure, such as a table – so our best efforts should be spent in striving to adjust ourselves to the harmonious and just natural order of things revealed to us by *theoria*. Knowledge is not entirely disinterested, as you see, because

opens directly onto ethics. Which is why the philosophical schools of antiquity, contrary to what happens today in schools and universities, placed less emphasis on speech than on actions, less on concepts than on the *exercise of wisdom*.

I will relate a brief anecdote so that you might fully understand the implications. Before Zeno founded the Stoic school, there was another school in Athens, from which the Stoics drew a great deal of their inspiration: that of the Cynics. Today the word ‘cynic’ implies something negative. To say that someone is ‘cynical’ is to say that he believes in nothing, acts without principles, doesn’t care about values, has no respect for others, and so on. In antiquity, in the third century before Christ, it was a very different business, and the Cynics were, in fact, the most exacting of moralists.

The word has an interesting origin, deriving directly from the Greek word for ‘dog’. What connection can there be between dogs and a school of philosophical wisdom? Here is the connection: the Cynics had a fundamental code of behaviour and strived to live according to nature, rather than according to artificial social conventions which they never stopped mocking. One of their favourite activities was needling the good citizens of Athens, in the streets and market squares, deriding their attitudes and beliefs – playing shock-the-bourgeois, as we might say today. Because of this behaviour they were frequently compared to those nasty little dogs who nip your ankles or start barking around your feet as if to deliberately annoy you.

It is also said that the Cynics – one of the most eminent of whom, Crates of Thebes, was Zeno’s teacher – forced their students to perform practical exercises, encouraging them to discount the opinions of others in order to focus on the essential business of living in harmony with the cosmic order. They were told, for example, to drag a dead fish attached to a piece of string across the town square. You can imagine how the unhappy man forced to carry out this prank immediately found himself the target of mockery and abuse. But it taught him a lesson or two! First, not to care for the opinions of others, or be deflected from pursuing what Cynic believers described as ‘conversion’: not conversion to a god, but to the cosmic reality from which human folly should never deflect us.

And, another more outrageous example: Crates occasionally made love in public with his wife Hipparchia. At the time, such behaviour was profoundly shocking, as it would be today. But he was acting in accordance with what might be termed ‘cosmic ethics’: the idea that morality and the art of living should borrow their principles from the harmonic law which regulates the entire *cosmos*. This rather extreme example suggests how *theoria* was for the Stoics a discipline to acquire, given that its practical consequences could be quite risky!

Cicero explains this cast of mind lucidly when summarising Stoic thought in another of his works, *On Moral Ends*:

The starting-point for anyone who is to live in accordance with nature is the universe as a whole and its governance. Moreover, one cannot make correct judgements about good and evil unless one understands the whole system of nature, and even of the life of the gods, not know whether or not human nature is in harmony with that of the universe. Similarly, those ancient precepts of the wise that bid us to ‘respect the right moment’, to ‘follow God’, to ‘know thyself’, and ‘do nothing to excess’ cannot be grasped in their full force (which is immense) without a knowledge of physics. This science alone can reveal to us the power of nature to foster justice, and preserve friendship and other bonds of affection. (III, 73)

In which respect, according to Cicero, nature is ‘the best of all governments’. You may consider how very different this antique vision of morality and politics is to what we believe today in our

democracies, in which it is the will of men and not the natural order that must prevail. Thus we have adopted the principle of the majority to elect our representatives or make our laws. Conversely, we often doubt whether nature is even intrinsically 'good': when she is not confirming our worst suspicions with a hurricane or a tsunami, nature has become for us a neutral substance, morally indifferent, neither good nor bad.

For the Ancients, not only was nature before all else good, but in no sense was a majority of humans called upon to decide between good and evil, between just and unjust, because the criteria which enabled those distinctions all stemmed from the natural order, which was both external to and superior to men. Broadly speaking, the good was what was in accord with the cosmic order, *whether one wills it or not*, and what was bad was what ran contrary to this order, *whether one liked it or not*. The essential thing was to act, situation-by-situation, moment-by-moment, in accordance with the harmonious order of things, so as to find our proper place, which each of us was assigned within the Universal.

If you want to compare this conception of morality to something familiar and current in our society, think of ecology. For ecologists – and in this sense their ideas are akin to aspects of ancient Greek thought, without their necessarily realising it – nature forms a harmonious totality which it is in our interest to respect and even to imitate. In this sense the ecologists' conception of the 'biosphere', or of 'ecosystems', is close in spirit to that of the *cosmos*. In the words of the German philosopher Hans Jonas, a great theorist of contemporary ecology, 'the ends of man are at home in nature'. In other words, the objectives to which we ought to subscribe on the ethical plane are already inscribed, as the Stoics believed, in the natural order itself, so that our duty – the moral imperative – is not cut off from being, from nature as such.

As Chrysippus said, more than two thousand years before Hans Jonas, 'there is no other or more appropriate means of arriving at a definition of good or evil things, virtue or happiness, than to take our bearings from common nature and the governance of the universe', a proposition which Cicero later turned related in these terms: 'As for man, he was born to contemplate [*theorein*] and imitate the divine world ... The world has virtue, and is also wise, and is consequently a Deity.' (*On the Nature of the Gods* II, 14).

Is this, then, the last word of philosophy? Does it reach its limits, in the realm of theory, by offering 'a vision of the world', from which moral principles are then deduced and in agreement with which humans should act? Not in the slightest! For we are still only on the threshold of the quest for salvation, of that attempt to raise ourselves to the level of true wisdom by abolishing all fears originating in human mortality, in time's passage, in death itself. It is only now, therefore, on the basis of a theory and a *praxis* (the translation of an idea into action; the practical side of an art or science, as distinct from its theoretical side) that we have just outlined, that Stoic philosophy approaches its true destination.

### *From Love of Wisdom to the Practice of Wisdom*

Why bother with a *theoria*, or even an ethics? What is the point, after all, in taking all this trouble to contemplate the order of the universe, to grasp the innermost essence of being? Why try so doggedly to adjust ourselves to the world? No one is obliged to be a philosopher ... And yet it is here that we touch on the deepest question of all, the ultimate end of all philosophy: the question of salvation.

As with all philosophies, there is for the Stoics a realm 'beyond' morality. To use philosopher

jargon, this is what is termed 'soteriology', from the Greek *soterios* which means, quite simply 'salvation'. As I have already suggested, this presents itself in relation to the fact of death, which leads us, sooner or later, to wonder about the irreversible nature of time and, consequently, about the best use we can make of it. Even if all humans do not become philosophers, all of us are one day another affected by philosophical questions. As I have suggested, philosophy, unlike the great religions, promises to help us to 'save' ourselves, to conquer our fears, not through an Other, a God, but through our own strength and the use of our reason.

As the philosopher Hannah Arendt noted in *Between Past and Future* (1961), the Ancients, even before the birth of philosophy, traditionally found two ways of taking up the challenge of the inescapable fact of human mortality; two strategies, if you like, of attempting to outflank death, or at least, of outflanking the fear of death.

The first, quite naturally, resides in the simple fact of procreation: by having children, humans assure their 'continuity': becoming in a sense a part of the eternal cycle of nature, of a universe of things that can never die. The proof lies in the fact that our children resemble us physically as well as mentally. They carry forwards, through time, something of us. The drawback, of course, is that this way of accessing eternity really only benefits the species: if the latter appears to be potentially immortal as a result, the individual on the other hand is born, matures and dies. So, by aiming at self-perpetuation through the means of reproduction, not only does the individual human fall short, he fails to rise above the condition of the rest of brute creation. To put it plainly: however many children I have, it will not prevent me from dying, nor, worse still, from seeing them die before me. Admittedly, I will do my bit to ensure the survival of the species, but in no sense will I save the individual, the person. There is therefore no true salvation by means of procreation.

The second strategy was rather more elaborate: it consisted of performing heroic and glorious deeds to become the subject of an epic narrative, the *written trace* having as its principal virtue the conquest of transitory time. One might say that works of history – and in ancient Greece there already flourished some of the greatest historians, such as Thucydides and Herodotus – by recording the exceptional deeds accomplished by certain men, saved them from the oblivion which threatens everything that does not belong to the realm of nature.

Natural phenomena are cyclical. They repeat themselves indefinitely: night follows day; winter follows autumn; a clear day follows a storm. And this repetition guarantees that they cannot be forgotten: the natural world, in a peculiar but comprehensible way, effortlessly achieves a kind of 'immortality', whereas 'all things that owe their existence to men, such as works, deeds and words are perishable, infected as it were, by the mortality of their authors' (Arendt). It is precisely the empire of the perishable, which glorious deeds, at least in theory, allowed the hero to combat. Thus according to Hannah Arendt, the ultimate purpose of works of history in antiquity was to report 'heroic' deeds, such as the behaviour of Achilles during the Trojan war, in an attempt to rescue them from the world of oblivion and align them to events within the natural order:

If mortals succeeded in endowing their works, deeds and words with some permanence and in arresting their perishability, then these things would, to a degree at least, enter and be at home in the world of everlastingness, and mortals themselves would find their place in the cosmos, where everything is immortal except men. ('The Concept of History, Ancient and Modern', in *Between Past and Future*, 1961)

This is true. In certain respects – thanks to writing, which is more stable and permanent than speech

the Greek heroes are not wholly dead, since we continue today to read accounts of their exploits. Glory can thus seem to be a form of personal immortality, which is no doubt why it was, and continues to be coveted by so many. Although one must add that, for many others, it will never be more than a minor consolation, if not a form of vanity.

With the coming of philosophy, a third way of confronting the challenge of human mortality declared itself. I have already remarked how fear of death was, according to Epictetus – and all the great cosmologists – the ultimate motive for seeking philosophical wisdom. According to the Stoics the sage is one who, thanks to a just exercise of thought and action, is able to attain a human version of immortality – then at least of eternity. Admittedly, he is going to die, but death will not be for him the absolute end of everything. Rather it will be a transformation, a ‘rite of passage’, if you like, from one state to another, within a universal order whose perfection possesses complete stability, and by the same token possesses divinity.

We are going to die: this is a fact. The ripened corn will be harvested; this is a fact. Must we therefore asks Epictetus, conceal the truth and refrain superstitiously from airing such thoughts because they are ‘ill omens’? No, because ‘ears of wheat may vanish, but the world remains’. The way in which this thought is expressed is worth our contemplation:

You might just as well say that the fall of leaves is illumined, or for a fresh fig to change into a dried one, and a bunch of grapes into raisins. For all these changes are from a preceding state into a new and different state; and thus not destruction, but an ordered management and governance of things. Travelling abroad is likewise, a small change; and so is death, a greater change, from what presently is – and here I should not say: a change into what is not, but rather: into what presently is not. – In which case, then, shall I cease to be? – Yes, you will cease to be what you are, but become something else of which the universe then has need. (Epictetus, *Discourses*, III, 24, 91–4)

Or, according to Marcus Aurelius: ‘You came into this world as a part: you will vanish into the whole which gave you birth, or rather you will be gathered up into its generative principle by the process of change.’ (*Meditations*, IV,14)

What do such texts mean? They mean simply this: that having reached a certain level of wisdom, theoretical and practical, the human individual understands that death does not really exist, that it is but a passage from one state to the next; not an annihilation but a different state of being. As members of a divine and stable *cosmos*, we too can participate in this stability and this divinity. As soon as we understand this, we will become aware simultaneously how unjustified is our fear of death, not merely subjectively but also – in a pantheistic sense – objectively. Because the universe is eternal, we will remain for ever a fragment – we too will never cease to exist!

To arrive at a proper sense of this transformation is, for Epictetus, the object of all philosophical activity. It will allow each of us to attain a good and happy existence, by teaching us (according to the beautiful Stoic formula), ‘to live and die like a God’ – that is, to live and die as one who, perceiving his privileged connection with all other beings inside the cosmic harmony, attains a serene consciousness of the fact that, mortal in one sense, he is no less immortal in another. This is why, as in the case of Cicero, the Stoic tradition tended to ‘deify’ certain illustrious men such as Hercules and Aesculapius: these men, because their souls ‘survived and enjoyed immortality, were rightly regarded as gods, for they were of the noblest nature and also immortal’.

These were the words of Cicero in *On the Nature of the Gods*. We might almost say that, according

to this ancient concept of salvation, there are degrees of death: as if one died more or less, depending on whether one displayed more or less wisdom or 'illumination'. From this perspective, the good life was one which, despite the disappointed acknowledgement of one's finiteness, maintained the most direct possible link with eternity; in other words, with the divine ordinance to which the sage acceded through *theoria* or *contemplation*.

But let us first listen to Plato, in this lengthy passage from the *Timaeus*, which evokes the sublime power of man's sovereign faculty, his intellect (*nous*):

God gave this sovereign faculty to be the divinity in each of us, being that part which, as we say, dwells at the top of the body, and inasmuch as we are a plant not of an earthly but of a heavenly growth, raises us from the earth to our kindred who are in heaven. For the divinity suspended the head and root of us from that place where the generation of the soul first began, and thus made the whole body upright. Now when a man gives himself over to the cravings of desire and ambition, and is eagerly striving to satisfy them, all his thoughts necessarily become mortal, and, as far as it is possible altogether to become such, he must become entirely mortal, because he has cherished his mortal part. But he who has been earnest in the love of knowledge and of true wisdom, and has exercised his intellect more than any other part of him, must have thoughts immortal and divine, if he attain truth, and in so far as human nature is capable of sharing in immortality, he must altogether be immortal. (90b–c)

And must also achieve a higher condition of happiness, adds Plato. To attain a successful life – one which is at once good and happy – we must remain faithful to the divine part of our nature, namely our intellect. For it is through the intellect that we attach ourselves, as by 'heavenly roots', to the divine and superior order of celestial harmony: 'Therefore must we attempt to flee this world as quickly as possible for the next; and such flight is to become like God, to the extent that we can. And becoming like God is becoming just and wholesome, by means of intellect.' (*Theaetetus*, 176a–b).

And we find a comparable statement in one of the most noted passages of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he too defines the good life, 'the contemplative life', the only life which can lead us to perfect happiness, as a life by which we escape, at least in part, the condition of mere mortality. Some will perhaps claim that

such a life is too rarefied for man's condition; for it is not in so far as he is man that he can live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him ... If reason is divine, then, in comparison with man, the life according to reason is divine in comparison with human life. So we must not follow those who advise us, being human, to think only of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things; but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with what is best in us.' (x, 7)

Of course, this objective is by no means easy, and if philosophy is to be more than mere aspiration to wisdom – a genuine conquering of our fears – then it must be embodied in practical exercises.

Even though I am not myself a Stoic by inclination and am not convinced by this way of philosophical thinking, I must acknowledge the grandeur of its project and the formidable set of answers which it tries to bring. I would like to look at these now, by evoking a few of the exercises of wisdom to which Stoicism opens the way. For philosophy, as the word itself indicates, is not quite wisdom but only the love (*philo*) of wisdom (*sophia*). And, according to the Stoics, it is through

practical exercise that one passes from one to the other. These exercises are intended to eradicate the anxiety associated with mortality – and in this respect they still retain, in my view, an inestimable value.

### *A Few Exercises in Wisdom*

These almost exclusively concern our relation to time, for it is in the folds of time that these anxieties establish themselves, generating remorse and nostalgia for the past, and false hopes for the future. The exercises are all the more interesting and significant in that we encounter them time and again throughout the history of philosophy, in the thought of philosophers who are in other respects quite distant from the Stoics – in Epicurus and Lucretius, but also, curiously, in Spinoza and Nietzsche, and even in traditions remote from Western philosophy, such as Tibetan Buddhism. I will restrict myself to four examples.

#### *The Burden of the Past and the Mirages of the Future*

Let us begin with the essentials: in the eyes of the Stoics, the two great ills which prevent us from achieving fulfilment are nostalgia and hope, specifically attachment to the past and anxiety about the future. These block our access to the present moment, and prevent us from living life to the full. It has been said that Stoicism here anticipated one of the most profound insights of psychoanalysis: that he who remains the prisoner of his past will always be incapable of ‘acting and enjoying’, as Freud said. The nostalgia for lost paradises, for the joys and sorrows of childhood, lays upon our lives a weight as heavy as it is unknown to us.

Marcus Aurelius expresses this conviction, perhaps better than anyone else, at the beginning of Book XII of his *Meditations*:

It is in your power to secure at once all the objects which you dream of reaching by a roundabout route, if you will be fair to yourself: if you will leave all the past behind, commit the future to Providence, and direct the present alone, towards piety and justice. To piety, so that you may be content with what has been assigned to you – for Nature designed it for you and you for it; to justice, that you may freely and without circumlocution speak the truth and do those things that are in accord with law and in accord with the worth of each. (XII.1)

To be saved, to attain the wisdom that surpasses all philosophy, we must school ourselves to live without vain fears or pointless nostalgias. Once and for all we must stop living in the dimensions of time past and time future, which do not exist in reality, and adhere as much as possible to the present.

Do not let your picture of the whole of your life confuse you, do not dwell upon all the manifold troubles which have come to pass and will come to pass; but ask yourself in regard to every passing moment: what is there here that cannot be borne and cannot be endured? Then remind yourself that it is not the future or the past that weighs heavy upon you, but always the present, and that this gradually grows less. (*Meditations*, VIII, 36)

Marcus Aurelius is quite insistent on this point: ‘Remember that each of us lives only in the present.’



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