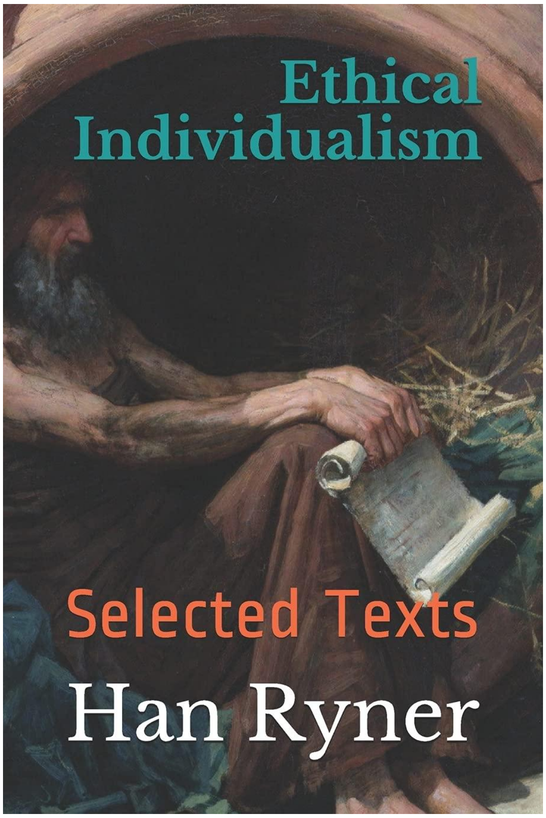
Ethical Individualism

Selected Texts

Han Ryner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Translator's Introduction

At the dawn of the 20th century, Europe hosted a brief blossoming of individualistic thought. Inspired by the great thinkers of the preceding century such as Stirner, Ibsen, Nietzsche, and Spencer, they offered a free-thinking, non-dogmatic alternative to the increasingly powerful Marxists and syndicalists of the left, and the economists and theologians of the right. Importantly, this generation of thinkers developed the critique of the State into a critique of society as a whole, which immunized them from recruitment by the anarchist movement. As Ryner says in the Handbook, the anarchists are naive: victory by the anarchists would be too little: "We do not destroy a tree by cutting off one of its branches." Whereas, society cannot be got rid of, it is "as inevitable as death."

Their worldview was a tragic one, with fatalistic consequences: ultimately, the individual can only acquiesce to fate, withdrawing as much as possible from the more nefarious social activity, and find and pursue a personal form of wisdom. Ryner's particular contribution to individualism was to make of a perennial, secular, private faith of it, and to identify it with the teachings of the sages from Socrates and Jesus to Tolstoy, and to trace its development from the Sophists and Socrates through all of Greek philosophy, including the hedonists, Cynics, and Stoics.

A Handbook for Individualists

1903

Authors Note

I have adopted the form of a Q & A, which is helpful in teaching quickly. I have no doctrinal pretensions; this is not a teacher interrogating a pupil, but an individualist asking himself questions. From line 1 I indicate that it's an internal dialogue. Where the catechism asks "Are you a Christian?" I say "Am I an individualist?" When carried on at length, monologues run into difficulties and, once I my intention was noted, I remembered that soliloquies often employ the second person.

You will find pell-mell in this little book some truths which are certain — although certainty can only be found within yourself — and opinions which are likely. There are problems which allow for many responses, moreover — aside from the heroic solution, which can only be advised since all else is criminal — have no fully satisfactory solution and the nearly-so ones I offer aren't nearly superior to others. I won't dwell on this point. Readers who find themselves unable to make this distinction and, acquiescent to the truth, find probabilities analogous to my probabilities which may be even more resonant for them, would be unworthy of the title of Individualist.

For a lack of development or for other reasons, I will often leave even the most fraternal mind unsatisfied. I can only recommend that men of good will, will assiduously read the Handbook of Epictetus. There, better than anywhere else, are the responses to our anxieties and doubts. There, better than anywhere else, he who is capable of true courage will find courage.

I have borrowed some phrases from Epictetus and others, thinking it not always necessary to attribute them to their authors. In a book like this, ideas are what count, not their originators; when we buy an apple we don't first ask the seller what the river or stream watering his orchard is called.

I. Individualism and Several Individualists

Am I an individualist?

I am an individualist.

What do I understand by "individualism"?

I understand by individualism the moral doctrine which, based on no dogma, tradition, or external will, appeals only to the individual mind.

Has the word "individualism" always designated only this doctrine?

Often, the word individualism has been evoked at the sight of doctrines aiming to cover a belligerent, aggressive egoism with the mask of philosophy.

Name a cowardly egoist who is often called an individualist.

Montaigne.

Do you know of any belligerent and aggressive egoists who call themselves individualists?

All those who extend the brutal law of the Struggle for Life to human relations.

Give me some names.

Stendhal and Nietzsche.

So name some true individualists.

Socrates, Epicurus, Jesus, and Epictetus.

Why do you like Socrates?

He taught no truths that were outside of those who listened to him, but he taught them to find the truth inside themselves.

How did Socrates die?

He died condemned by laws and judges, murdered by the State: a martyr for individualism.

What was he accused of?

Failing to honor the Gods worshiped by the City, and corrupting the youth.

What does the second accusation mean?

It means that Socrates professed opinions disagreeable to the existing powers.

What do you have to say for Epicurus?

Beneath his nonchalant elegance, he was a hero.

What was that clever saying of Seneca's about Epicurus?

He called Epicurus a "hero disguised as a woman".

What brave deed did he do?

He delivered his disciples from the fear of the gods or God, which fear is the beginning of madness.

What was the great virtue of Epicurus?

Temperance. He made a distinction between our natural and imaginary needs. He showed that very little is required to meet our needs for hunger and thirst, and to protect against heat and cold. And he liberated himself from all other needs, that is, nearly all the desires and fears which enslave humanity.

How did he die?

He died from a drawn-out and painful illness, all the while boasting of his perfect contentment.

Is the true Epicurus generally known?

No. Some unfaithful disciples covered their own vices with his doctrine, the way people hide a sore under a handkerchief.

Does Epicurus bear any guilt for what these false disciples made him say?

We are never guilty of the stupidity or the perfidy of others.

Is this perversion of Epicurus's doctrine an exceptional phenomenon?

Every word of truth, when heard by many people, will be transformed into a lie by the superficial, the clever, and the charlatans.

Why do you like Jesus?

He lived free and wandered, beyond all social obligations. He was the enemy of the priests, organized religion and all organizations generally speaking.

How did he die?

Persecuted by the priests, abandoned by the judicial authorities, he died, nailed to a cross by soldiers. Along with Socrates, he is the most famous of Religion's victims, the most illustrious martyr for individualism.

Is the true Jesus generally known?

No. The priests crucified his doctrine along with his body. They transformed a life-giving beverage into poison. After falsifying the words of this enemy of organizations and organized religion, on this foundation they built the most highly organized and most pompously vain of all religions.

Is Jesus guilty of what the disciples and priests made of his doctrine?

We are never guilty of the stupidity or perfidy of others.

Why do you like Epictetus?

The Stoic Epictetus faced poverty and slavery courageously. He thrived in situations which are the least pleasant of all for ordinary people.

How did we find out about the doctrine of Epictetus?

His disciple Arrian gathered some of his words into a small book entitled the Handbook.

What do you think of this Handbook?

Its precise and flawless nobility, its simplicity free from all charlatanism, make it much more precious to me than the Gospels are. The Handbook of Epictetus is the best and most liberating of all books.

Are there no other famous individualists in history?

There are others. But those I have already named are the purest and easiest to understand.

Why don't you mention any Cynics, like Antisthenes and Diogenes?

Because the Cynical doctrine is only a preliminary form of the Stoic doctrine.

Why not Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism?

His life was admirable and, according to ancient testimony, never varied from his philosophy. But today he is less well-known than those named above.

Why not the Stoic Marcus Aurelius?

Because he was an Emperor.

Why not Descartes?

Descartes was an intellectual individualist. He was not clear enough as a moral individualist. His true morality seems to have been Stoic, but he did not dare to make it public. He only gave the public a "provisional morality" in which he recommended obedience to the laws and customs of the country, which is the opposite of individualism. What is more, he seems to have lacked philosophical courage on other matters.

Why not Spinoza?

Spinoza's biography deserves admiration. He lived soberly, on a few grains of gruel and a little soup of milk. Refusing the academic chairs that were offered to him, he always made his living from manual labor. His moral doctrine is a Stoic mysticism. But he is too exclusively intellectual, he professed a strange absolutist politics and only allowed citizens their freedom of thought. Moreover, his name summons up great metaphysical power, rather than any great moral beauty.

II. Preparation for Practical Individualism

Is it enough for us to proclaim ourselves individualists?

No. A religion can content itself with verbal profession of beliefs and certain gestures of adoration. But a practical philosophy that goes unpracticed is nothing at all.

But why can religions be more indulgent than moral doctrines?

The Gods of the religions are powerful monarchs. They save the faithful by grace and miracles. They offer salvation in exchange for obedience to their laws: pronouncing certain ritual words and gestures. They can even have these gestures and words performed on my behalf by mercenaries.

What should I do to truly deserve the title of an individualist?

I should get all my actions to agree with my thoughts.

Is this harmony not hard to achieve?

It's not as hard as you think.

Why?

The beginning individualist is held back by false goods and bad habits. He can't get free without tearing something. But he finds the discord between his acts and thoughts more painful than all these renunciations. It pains him like dissonance pains a musician. A musician refuses, for any reason, to spend his whole life hearing noise. Likewise this disharmony is the most painful thing for me.

What do you call this effort to make your life agree with your thoughts?

It's called virtue.

Does virtue bring some reward?

Virtue is its own reward.

What do these words mean?

Two things:

1. If I imagine some reward is in store, I am not virtuous. Virtue has disinterestedness as its principal trait.

2. Disinterested virtue creates happiness.

What is happiness?

Happiness is the state of mind which feels perfectly free from all external servitude and in perfect internal harmony.

Are we not happy when we cease to feel the need to make any effort, and does happiness follow virtue?

The wise man always requires both effort and virtue. He is always under assault from without. But happiness, indeed, only exists in the soul where there is no longer any internal struggle.

Are we unhappy in the pursuit of wisdom?

No. Each victory along the route toward happiness brings joy.

What is joy?

Joy is the feeling of passing from a lesser to a greater perfection. Joy is the feeling of advancing towards happiness.

Distinguish them for me by comparing joy with happiness.

A peaceable being, forced into combat, carries a victory which brings him closer to peace: he experiences joy. Finally, he comes to a peace beyond trouble: he is happy.

Must we try to obtain happiness and perfection from the moment we understand what they are?

It is rare for anyone, without imprudence, to try and perfect themselves immediately.

What risks do the impatient run?

The danger of drawing back and being discouraged.

How can we best prepare for perfection?

It is best to reach Epictetus via Epicurus.

What does that mean?

First we must put ourselves in the perspective of Epicurus and distinguish between natural and imaginary needs. Once we are able to despise virtually all that is unnecessary for life; once we disdain indulgence and comfort; once we relish the physical pleasures of simple food and drink; when our bodies, like our souls, know the goodness of bread and water: then we can advance from this point.

Which step will remain after that?

We will need to feel that, even when deprived of bread and water, we might still be happy; that, in the most painful situations, stripped of all comfort, we might be happy; that, even while dying under torture, amid the insults of all, we might be happy.

Can this summit of wisdom be reached by all?

This summit can be reached by every man of good will who feels a natural inclination towards individualism.

What is the intellectual path leading to this summit?

It is the Stoic doctrine of true goods and true evils.

What is this doctrine also called?

It is also called the doctrine of things that depend on us and that do not depend on us.

What are the things which depend on us?

Our opinions, desires, inclinations, aversions: in short, all our internal actions.

What are the things which do not depend on us?

Our bodies, wealth, reputation, and dignity: in short, all that's not one of our internal actions.

What are the marks of the things which depend on us?

They are free by nature; nothing can stop them or get in their way.

What are the marks of the things that do not depend on us?

They are weak, slavish, subject to many obstacles and hindrances, and entirely foreign to mankind.

Is there another name for things which don't depend on us?

Things which don't depend on us are also called indifferent things.

Why?

Because none of them are true goods or true evils.

What happens to those who take indifferent things for goods or evils?

They meet obstacles everywhere; they are afflicted and troubled; they complain about things and people.

Do they experience anything worse than that?

Yes: they are enslaved to desire and fear.

What is the state of he who knows practically that things which do not depend on us are indifferent?

He is free. Nobody can force him to do what he doesn't want to do or keep him from doing as he pleases. He will complain neither of things nor people.

Don't illness, prison, and poverty, for example, diminish my liberty?

External things can diminish the liberty of my body and my movement. They are not impediments to my will, if I lack the folly of hoping for things which do not depend on me.

Is the doctrine of Epicurus not sufficient in daily life?

The doctrine of Epicurus is sufficient if I have all things necessary to life and if I'm feeling well. It makes me equal in joy with the animals, who invent for themselves no artificial concerns or imaginary evils. But, in sickness and hunger, it is insufficient.

Is it sufficient in social relations?

In normal social relations, it can be sufficient. It frees me from all the tyrants who only have power over my excess.

Are there any social circumstances in which it is no longer sufficient?

It is no longer sufficient if the tyrant can deprive me of my bread; if he can put me to death or hurt my body.

Whom do you call a tyrant?

I call a tyrant anyone who, acting on indifferent things such as my wealth or my body, claims to act on my will. I call a tyrant anyone who tries to modify my mental state by any means other than rational persuasion.

Aren't there any individualists for whom Epicureanism will be sufficient alone?

Whatever my present may be, I know nothing of the future. I don't know whether the major blow, in which Epicureanism will no longer suffice, is waiting for me somewhere. When I attain Epicurean wisdom, I must then work to strengthen myself even more, up to Stoic invulnerability.

How might I live in tranquility?

In tranquility, I am able to live gently and soberly like Epicurus, but with a mind like that of Epictetus.

Is it useful for perfection to take as a model someone like Socrates, Jesus or Epictetus?

This is a bad method.

Why?

Because I must realize my own harmony, and not that of another.

How many different kinds of duties are there?

There are two kinds of duties: universal and personal.

What do you call universal duties?

I call universal duties all those that are incumbent on every wise man.

What do you call personal duties?

I call personal duties all those that are incumbent on me, in particular.

Do personal duties exist?

Personal duties do exist. I am a particular being who finds himself in particular situations. I have a certain degree of physical and intellectual power and I possess some degree of wealth. I have a past which must be carried forward. I must struggle against a hostile destiny, or collaborate with a friendly destiny.

Distinguish for me, by a simple token, between personal and universal duties.

Without exception, universal duties are duties of abstention. Almost all the duties to action are personal duties. Even in those rare circumstances where action is incumbent on everyone, the details of the action will bear the marks of the agent, will be as it were the signature of the moral artist.

Can personal duty contravene universal duty?

No. It's like a flower, which knows nothing but how to push against the plant.

Are my personal duties the same as for Socrates, Jesus, or Epictetus?

They are in no way like them, if I'm not leading the life of an Apostle.

Who will teach me my personal duties and my universal duties?

My conscience.

How will it teach me my universal duties?

By telling me what I should expect from every sage.

How will it teach me my personal duties?

By telling me what I should require of myself.

Are there any difficult duties?

No duty is too hard for a wise man.

Before I achieve wisdom, will the thoughts of Socrates, Jesus, and Epictetus not be useful in difficulty?

They may be useful. But I would never think of these great individualists as models for behavior.

How then should I think of them?

I should think of them as witnesses. And I would hope that they would not find fault with my actions.

Are there serious and lesser mistake?

Every mistake which is recognized as such prior to the act is serious.

Theoretically, to judge my situation or that of another in the path of wisdom, can I not distinguish between serious and lesser mistakes?

Yes, I can.

What would I call these lesser mistakes?

I would normally a lesser mistake something that Epictetus would criticize, but Epicurus wouldn't criticize.

What would I call the serious mistakes?

I would call a serious mistake, that which even Epicurean indulgence would criticize.

III. Relationship Between Individuals

Tell me the formula for my duties to others.

Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself and thy God above all things.

Who is my neighbor?

Other people.

Why call other people your neighbors?

Since they are endowed with reason and will, they are nearer to me than animals.

What do animals have in common with me?

Life, sensation, and intelligence.

Do these common traits create any duties toward animals?

These common traits create the duty not to make animals suffer, to get rid of their vain suffering, and not to kill them without need.

What do the absence of reason and will in animals give me by way of rights?

Since animals are not persons, I have the right to make them serve me as they are able, and to make instruments of them.

Do I have the same rights over certain people?

I never have a right to consider a person as a means. Every person is a goal, an end. I can only ask people for services which they may give me freely, by goodwill or in exchange for other services.

Aren't there inferior races?

There are no inferior races. The noble individual can flourish in any race.

Aren't there inferior individuals who are incapable of reason and will?

Except for the mentally ill, every man is capable of reason and will. But many only listen to their passions and only follow their whims. Among such people we find those who claim to command the rest of us.

Can't I use these incomplete individuals as instruments?

No. I should consider them as children arrested in their development, but in whom adults may one day awaken.

What should I think of the orders that come from those who claim to command us?

An order can only be the whim of a child or the fantasy of a madman.

How should I love my neighbor?

As yourself.

What do these words mean?

They mean: in the same way I should love myself.

Who will teach me how I should love myself?

The second half of the formula teaches me how I should love myself.

Repeat this second half.

Thou shalt love thy God above all things.

What is this God?

God has many meanings: it has a different meaning in every religion or metaphysical system, and it has a moral meaning.

What is the moral meaning of the word God?

God is the name of moral perfection.

In the formula of love, what does the possessive THY mean: “Thou shalt love THY God?”

My God is my moral perfection.

What should I love above all else?

My reason, my liberty, my internal harmony, my happiness; for those are the other names of my God.

Does my God require sacrifices?

My God asks that I sacrifice my desires and fears to Him; he asks that I despise false goods and that I be “poor in spirit.”

Does He require anything else?

He also requires that I be ready to sacrifice my sensibility and, if necessary, my life.

What should I love, then, in my neighbor?

I should love the God of my neighbor, that is to say, his reason, his internal harmony, his happiness.

Do I not have duties towards my neighbor’s sensibility?

I have the same duties toward my neighbor’s sensibility as I have towards all animals or towards my own.

Explain further.

I will not create, either for my neighbor or for myself, any useless suffering.

Can I create useful suffering?

I cannot actively create any useful suffering. But certain necessary abstentions will lead to suffering by others or myself. I should no more sacrifice my God to the sensibility of another than to my own sensibility.

What are my duties towards the lives of others?

I must neither kill nor wound my neighbor.

Are there no cases in which you have the right to kill?

In the case of legitimate defense, it seems that necessity creates the right to kill. But in nearly every case, if I am brave enough, I will be able to keep my nerve, which will let me save myself without killing.

Is it not better to suffer an attack without defending yourself?

Abstaining is indeed the sign of superior virtue here: the truly heroic solution.

Faced with the suffering of others, aren’t certain unjustifiable abstentions the exact equivalent to evil deeds?

Yes, there are. If I let someone die whom I could save without committing a crime, I am a true assassin.

Cite something from Bossuet to that effect.

“This inhuman rich man stripped the poor man because he didn’t dress him; he cruelly cut his throat, because he didn’t feed him.”

What do you think about sincerity?

Sincerity is my first duty to others and to myself, the testimony required by my God as a continual sacrifice, like a flame which I should never allow to go out.

What is the most necessary sincerity?

The proclamation of my moral certainties.

Which sincerity would you place in second rank?

Sincerity in expressing how I feel.

Is exactness in the expression of external facts of no importance then?

It is much less important than the two great philosophical and sentimental sincerities. However, the sage will observe it too.

How many lies are there?

There are three sorts of lies: malicious lies, informal lies, and joyous lies.

What is a malicious lie?

A malicious lie is one that aims to hurt someone.

What do you think of malicious lies?

Malicious lies are criminal and cowardly.

What is an informal lie?

An informal lie is one that aims at my benefit or that of another.

What do you think of informal lies?

When an informal lie contains no harmful elements, the sage won't criticize it; but he will avoid telling them himself.

Are there no cases where the informal lie is necessary, for example, when a lie can save someone's life?

In this case, the wise can tell a lie that only harms the facts. But nearly always, instead of lying, he will refuse to respond.

Is the joyous lie allowed?

The wise man will not allow himself any joyous lies.

Why?

A joyous lie sacrifices, for the sake of a game, the authority of words which, when preserved, can often benefit others.

Does the wise man avoid fiction?

The wise man disallows himself no openly recognized fiction, and he will tell parables, fables, symbols, and myths.

What should the relations between men and women be like?

Relations between men and women, like all interpersonal relations, should be absolutely free in both cases.

Is there another rule to observe in these relations?

They should express mutual sincerity.

What do you think about love?

Mutual love is the best of the indifferent things, and the nearest to a virtue. It ennobles lovemaking.

Is lovemaking without love wrong?

If lovemaking without love is an encounter between two desires and two pleasures, it does not constitute an error.

IV. Society

Must I only have dealings with isolated individuals?

I have relations not only with isolated individuals, but also with diverse social groups and, in a general way, with society.

What is society?

It is the meeting of individuals for a common task.

Can this common task be a good one?

A common task can be good, under certain conditions.

What are these conditions?

The common task will be good if, through mutual love or love of the task, the workers all act freely, and if their efforts are grouped and kept up in harmonious coordination.

In reality, does the social task have this trait of liberty?

In reality, the social task has no traits of liberty. Workers are subordinated to each other. Their efforts are not the spontaneous and harmonious doings of love, but the grinding deeds of compulsion.

What do you conclude from this trait about the social task?

I conclude that the social task is a bad one.

How does the sage see society?

The sage considers society as a limitation. He feels he is social just as he feels he is mortal.

What is the attitude of the sage, facing such limitations?

The sage sees limitations as the necessities of matter and he endures them physically with indifference.

What are limitations for he who is on the path to wisdom?

For he who is on the path to wisdom, limitations constitute dangers.

Why?

He who does not yet distinguish practically, with steady certainty, that which depends on him and that which is indifferent, risks translating material constraints into moral constraints.

What should the imperfect individualist do when facing social constraint?

He should protect his reason and will against it. He will reject the prejudices that it imposes on other men, he will resist loving or hating; he will progressively deliver himself from all fear and desire in this regard; he will direct himself towards perfect indifference, which is wisdom when facing things that do not depend on him.

Does the wise man hope for a better society?

The wise man refrains from all hope.

Does the sage believe in progress?

He notes that sages are rare in every age and that there is no moral progress.

Does the sage rejoice over material progress?

The sage notes that material progress has the objective of increasing the artificial needs of some and the labor of others. Material progress looks to him like a growing weight that pulls humanity further and further in the mud, and in suffering.

Won't the invention of perfected machines diminish human labor?

The invention of machines has always worsened labor. It has made it more painful and less harmonious. It has replaced free and intelligent initiative with servile and fearful precision. It has made the laborer, once the happy master of his tools, into the trembling slave of the machine.

How does the machine, which multiplies the products, not diminish the quantity of labor to be provided by men?

Man is greedy, and the folly of imaginary needs expands while they are satisfied. The more superfluous things the insane man has, the more he wants.

Does the sage engage in social activism?

The sage notes that, to carry out social activism, we must act upon the crowd, and crowds are not influenced by reasons, but by passions. He does not believe he has any right to excite the passions of mankind. Social action seems like tyranny to him, and he refrains from participating.

Is the sage not selfish to forget the happiness of the people?

The sage knows that the words "the happiness of the people" are meaningless. Happiness is an internal and individual phenomenon; it can only be produced inside oneself.

So the sage has no pity for the oppressed?

The sage knows that the oppressed who complains aspires to become the oppressor. He unburdens him as far as he can, but he does not believe in salvation through common action.

So the sage doesn't believe in reform?

He notes that reforms change the names of things only, not things themselves. The slave becomes the serf, then the wage earner. We have only ever reformed our language. The sage remains indifferent to these philological matters.

Is the sage a revolutionary?

Experience proves for the sage that revolutions never leave lasting results. Reason tells him that lies are not refutable by other lies and that violence is not overcome by violence.

What does the sage think of anarchy?

The sage regards anarchy as naivety.

Why?

The anarchist believes that the government is a limitation on liberty. He hopes, by destroying the government, to enlarge liberty.

Is he wrong then?

The true limitation is not the government but society itself. The government is a social product like any other. We do not destroy a tree by cutting off one of its branches.

Why does the sage not work for the destruction of society?

Society is as inevitable as death. In the material sphere, our power is weak against such limitations. But the sage destroys in himself all respect and fear of society, as he destroys in himself all fear of death. He is indifferent to the political and social form in the midst of which he lives, just as he is indifferent to the sort of death that awaits him.

Does the sage therefore not act upon society?

The sage knows that social injustice is not destroyed, any more than the water in the ocean. But he strives to save an oppressed person from a particular injustice, like he throws himself into the water to save a drowning man.

V. Social Relations

Is labor a social law or a natural law?

Labor is a natural law, aggravated by society.

How does society aggravate the natural law of labor?

In three ways:

1. It arbitrarily relieves a certain number of men from all labor and sets their share of the burden on others;

2. It employs plenty of men in useless labor, in social functions;

3. It multiplies with all, and especially with the rich, imaginary needs and it imposes on the poor the odious labor necessary for the satisfaction of these needs.

Why do you find the law of labor to be natural?

Because my body has natural needs that only the products of labor can satisfy.

You do not then consider as labor anything but manual labor?

Without doubt.

Does the mind then not have natural needs?

The only natural need for our intellectual faculties is exercise. The mind is always a happy child needing movement and play.

Is there no need for special laborers to give the mind occasions for play?

The spectacle of nature, the observation of human passions, and the pleasures of conversation are enough for the mind's natural needs.

So you condemn art, science, and philosophy?

I do not condemn these pleasures. Like love, they are noble insofar as they remain disinterested. In art, science, philosophy, and love, the pleasure I feel in giving should not be paid for by that of whoever enjoys the pleasure of receiving.

But what about the artists who create at great personal cost and the scholars who wear themselves out in their researches?

If such things are more trouble than they're worth, I don't understand why these poor souls don't just leave them alone.

So you would demand manual labor of the artist and scholar?

Nature demands manual labor from the scholar and the artist, along with every lover, since it imposes material needs on them, just like anyone else.

The disabled have no fewer material needs: surely you will not be so cruel as to impose an impossible task on him?

Certainly, but I don't consider physical beauty or mental acuity as handicaps.

Will the individualist labor with his hands, then?

Yes, as much as possible.

Why do you say, "as much as possible"?

Because society made it hard to obey the natural law. There is no remunerative manual labor available to all. Most people awaken to individualism too late to take up the apprenticeship necessary for a natural vocation. Society has stolen from all, to give to a few, the great instrument of natural labor, the Earth.

So the individualist can, in the present state of affairs, make his living from a job that he does not consider a true kind of work?

Yes, he can.

Can the individualist work for the government?

Yes. But he must not consent to every kind of government duty.

What are the duties from which the individualist will abstain?

The individualist will abstain from every administrative, judicial, and military duty. He will not be a prefect or a policeman, an officer, a judge, or executioner.

Why?

Because the individualist cannot be numbered among the social tyrants.

What duties can he accept?

The duties which harm nobody.

Outside the paid duties of the government, are there any harmful careers from which the individualist will abstain?

There are.

Name a few.

Burglary, banking, pimping, and exploitation of workers.

What are the relations of the individualist with his social inferiors?

He will respect their personality and liberty. He will never forget that professional duty is a fiction, and human duty is the only moral reality. He will never forget that hierarchies are follies, and he will act naturally, not socially, with the men deemed inferior by the social lie, but whom nature has made his equals.

Will the individualist have many external relations with his social inferiors?

He will avoid the abstentions that might offend them. But he won't see them much, for fear of finding them social and not natural; that is, for fear of finding them servile, troubled, or hostile.

What will be the nature of the relations between the individualist and his colleagues or comrades?

He will be polite and obliging with them. But, insofar as he can do so without hurting them, he will avoid their conversation.

Why?

To avoid two subtle poisons: the "esprit de corps" and professional dumbing-down.

How will the individualist behave with his social superiors?

The individualist will not forget that everything his social superiors say will nearly always have to do with indifferent things. He will listen with indifference and will respond as little as possible. He will raise no objections. He won't point out the methods that might seem better to him. He will avoid all useless talk.

Why?

Because the social superior is normally a vain and irritable child.

If the social superior gives an order, no longer an indifferent thing, but an injustice or a cruelty, what will the individualist do?

He will refuse to obey.

Won't disobedience entail certain risks?

No. Becoming the instrument of injustice or evil is the death of reason and liberty. But disobedience to an unjust order only endangers the body and material resources, which are numbered among the indifferent things.

What will the individualist think about these orders?

The individualist will say in his mind to the unjust leader: "You are one of the modern incarnations of the tyrant. But the tyrant can do no harm to the sage".

Will the individualist explain his refusal to obey?

Yes, if he believes his social head is capable of understanding and repenting of his error.

The social leader is nearly always incapable of understanding. What will the individualist do then?

Faced with an unjust order, the refusal to obey is the only universal duty. The form of the refusal depends on one's own personality.

How will the individualist regard the crowd?

The individualist considers the crowd one of the most brutal of all natural forces.

How will he behave in a crowd that is doing no wrong?

He will strive not to feel in conformity with the crowd and not to let his personality be engulfed, even for an instant.

Why?

To remain a free man. Because at a later point an unexpected jolt might bring the cruelty of the crowd to the surface, and he who has begun to feel like he's part of them, which makes him truly part of the crowd, will find it very hard to disengage from it at the moment of moral excitement.

What will the sage do if his crowd tries to carry out an injustice or a cruelty?

The wise man will oppose, by all noble or indifferent means, said injustice or cruelty.

Which means which the sage refuse, even in these circumstances?

The sage will not stoop to lying, prayer, or flattery.

Flattering the crowd is a powerful oratorical tool. Will the sage utterly refuse to use it?

The sage might address the crowd, praising like one would a group of children, these praises which are the ironically pleasant envelope of advice. But he'll be aware that the limits are uncertain and that the adventure is perilous. He will only take the risk if he's quite sure, not only of the firmness of his soul, but also of the precise suppleness of what he says.

Will the sage report anyone to the authorities?

The sage will never report anyone to the authorities.

Why?

To report anyone to the authorities, is, as far as material and indifferent interests are concerned, worship of the idol of society and recognizing tyranny. Besides, it's cowardly to appeal for help to the power of all.

What will the sage do when he is accused?

He may, according to his character, tell the truth or oppose social tyranny with his contempt and silence.

If the individualist recognizes his own guilt, what will he say?

He will talk about his real and natural failing, and clearly distinguish it from the apparent and social fault for which he is being prosecuted. He will add that his conscience inflicts the true punishment for his true error. But society, which only acts on indifferent things, will inflict on him, for his apparent fault, an apparent punishment.

If the accused sage is innocent in conscience but guilty with respect to the laws, what will he say?

He will explain how his legal crime is a natural innocence. He will speak of his contempt for the law, this organized injustice and this impotence which can do nothing to us, but only our body and our wealth, which are indifferent things.

If the accused sage is innocent in his conscience and before the law, what will he say?

He might only talk about his true innocence. If he condescends to explain his dual innocence, he will state that only the first one matters to him.

Will the sage testify before the civil tribunals?

The sage will not refuse his testimony on behalf of a weak, oppressed person.

Will the sage testify in the magistrate's court and before the assizes?

Yes, if he knows a truth that might help the accused.

If the sage knows a truth that might harm the accused, what will he do?

He will keep silent.

Why?

Because a judgment is always an injustice and the sage does not make himself complicit in any injustice.

Why do you say that judgment is always an injustice?

Because no man has the right to inflict death on another man or to enclose him in prison.

Doesn't society have any rights other than those of the individual?

Society, a meeting of individuals, cannot have any right which is not also found in any particular individual. No matter how many zeroes you may add, they will only add zero to the total.

Is not society right to defend itself against certain malefactors?

The legitimate right of defense does not last after the attack itself.

Will the sage sit in a jury?

If the sage is called as a juror, he may either refuse to sit or he may consent to it.

What will the wise man do, when he has consented to be a juror?

He will always respond No to the first question: Is the accused guilty?

Will this response not sometimes be a lie?

This response will never be a lie.

Why?

The president's question should be translated like this: "Do you want us to inflict punishment on the accused?" And I am obliged to respond: "No." For I have no right to inflict punishment on anyone.

What do you think of dueling?

Every appeal to violence is wrong. However, dueling is a lesser evil than an appeal to justice.

Why?

It is not cowardly, it does not cry out for help and does not bring the power of all against a single person.

VI. Sacrificing to Idols

Can I sacrifice to the idols of my time and my country?

I can indifferently let the idols take any indifferent thing.

But I should keep what depends on me and belongs to my God. How should I distinguish my own God from these idols?

My God is proclaimed by my conscience when it is truly my own voice and not an echo. But the idols are the handiwork of society.

By what other signs can idols be recognized?

My God only requires the sacrifice of indifferent things. Idols require the sacrifice of the self.

Please explain?

Idols proclaim as virtues the most servile meanness: discipline and passive obedience. They demand the sacrifice of my reason and my will.

Do idols commit any other injustices?

Not content wanting to destroy what's superior to them, and what I've never had the right to abandon, they want me to sacrifice to them that which in no way belongs to me: my neighbor's life.

Do you know any other characteristics of idols?

The true God is eternal and immense. I must obey my reason always and everywhere. But idols change according to times and countries.

Show me how the idols change with the times.

Once, I was asked to suppress my reason and kill my neighbor for the glory of whatever God who was foreign and outside myself, or for the glory of the King. Today, I am asked the same abominable sacrifices for the honor of the Country. Tomorrow, they may be required for the honor of a Race, a Color, or a Part of the World.

Does the idol change only when its name changes?

The idol avoids changing its name when it can. But it does change often.

Name some changes in the idol which do not accompany a change in the name.

In a nearby country, the idol called My Country was named Prussia; today, under the same name, we call it Germany. It required the Prussian to kill Bavarians. Later, it required Prussians and Bavarians to kill the French. Those from Savoy and Nice risked in 1859 having to bow to a boot-shaped country; the fate of diplomacy has them worshipping a hexagonal country. The Poles hesitate between dead and living idols; the Alsacians between two living idols, which claim the same name, My Country.

What are the principal idols of our own time?

In certain countries, the King or Emperor; in others, some fraud or other called the Will of the People. Everywhere Order, the political Party, Religion, Country, Race, and Color. We must not forget that public opinion with its thousand names, from the most emphatic, Honor, to the most trivially low one, that is, gossip.

Is skin color a dangerous idol?

The white color, above all. It got the idea of uniting into a single faith the French, the Germans, the Russians, and the Italians, and obtaining from all these noble priests the bloody sacrifice of a great number of Chinese.

Do you know any other crimes by the White Color?

Yes, it has made a hell of the African continent. It has destroyed the American Indians and got the Negroes lynched.

Do the worshipers of the White Color offer only blood to their idol?

They offer it praise as well.

Cite these praises.

The litany would take too long. But, when the White Color requires a crime, the liturgy calls this crime a necessity for Civilization and Progress.

Is Race a dangerous idol?

Yes, and worst of all when allied with Religion.

Name a few of these allies' crimes?

The Persian wars, the conquests of the Saracens, the Crusades, the massacre of the Armenians, and antisemitism.

What is today the most demanding idol and the most universally respected one?

The Country.

Tell me the particular demands of the Country.

Military service and war.

Can the individualist be a soldier in peacetime?

Yes, insofar as he is not ordered to commit any crime.

What does the sage do in wartime?

The sage never forgets the orders of the true God, Reason: “Thou shalt not kill.” And he would obey God rather than men.

What acts will his conscience dictate?

Universal conscience rarely ordains any particular actions. For the most part it only issues prohibitions. It forbids us to kill or hurt our neighbor, and on this point it says nothing further. The methods are indifferent, or they constitute personal duties.

Can the sage remain a soldier in times of war?

The sage can remain a soldier in times of war, if he is quite sure he will not let himself be led either to kill or wound anyone.

Can a formal and resounding refusal to obey bloodthirsty orders become a strict duty?

Yes, if the sage, because of his past or for other reasons, finds himself in one of these situations which draw people’s attention. Yes, if his attitude risks either scandalizing or edifying, if it can draw others for better or worse.

Will the sage shoot the officer who gives him a bloodthirsty order?

The sage will not kill anyone. He knows that tyrannicide is a crime just like any other intentional murder.

VII. The Relationship Between Morality and Metaphysics

In how many ways can the relations between morality and metaphysics be thought of?

In three ways:

1. Morality is a consequence of metaphysics, a concretized metaphysics;
2. Metaphysics is a need and a postulate of morality;
3. Morality and metaphysics are mutually independent.

What do you think of the doctrine which makes morality dependent on metaphysics?

This doctrine is dangerous. It bases the necessary on the superfluous, the certain on the uncertain, practice on dreams. It transforms the moral life into somnambulism, all trembling with fear and hope.

What do you think of the doctrine which bases metaphysics on moral truth?

It seems initially to hand everything over to morality. In reality, if it presents itself as anything more than a way of dreaming, if it claims to lead to certainty, it is a lie and an intellectual immorality, since it claims reality for that which can only be desires and hopes.

What do you think of the conception in which morality and metaphysics are mutually independent?

It is the only sustainable one from a moral perspective. In practice, this is what we must stick with.

Theoretically, do the first two conceptions not contain any truth at all?

While morally false, they express a probable metaphysical opinion. They mean that all realities hold together, and that there is a close relationship between man and the universe.

Does individualism imply a particular metaphysics?

Individualism seems able to coexist with the most varied metaphysical systems. It seems that Socrates and the Cynics had a certain disdain for metaphysics. The Epicureans are materialists. The Stoics are pantheists.

What do you think of metaphysical doctrines in general?

I regard them as poems and I love them for whatever beauty they contain.

What constitutes the beauty of metaphysical poems?

A metaphysical system is beautiful under two conditions:

1. It should be seen as a possible and hypothetical explanation, not as a system of certainties, and it must not deny other, similar poems;
2. It should explain everything by a harmonious reduction to unity.

What should we do when faced with affirmative metaphysical systems?

We should generously scrub out their ugliness and the burdens of affirmation, in order to consider them as poems and dream-systems.

What do you think of the dualist metaphysical systems?

They are provisional explanations, semi-metaphysics. There is no single true metaphysics; but the only true metaphysical systems are those which lead to a monism.

Is individualism the moral absolute?

Individualism is not morality. It is only the strongest moral methodology that we know of, the most impregnable citadel of virtue and happiness.

Is individualism the right path for everyone?

There are people for whom individualism's apparent harshness is utterly repellent. Such people should choose another moral methodology.

How can I know if individualism isn't suited to my nature?

If, after a true effort at individualism, I feel unhappy; if I don't feel like I'm in the true harbor; if I'm troubled by pity about myself and others, I should flee individualism.

Why?

Because this method, too strong for my weakness, will lead me to selfishness or discouragement.

By which method should I create a moral life for myself, if I am too weak for the individualist method?

By altruism, love, and pity.

Will this moral method lead me to different behavior from that of an individualist?

Truly moral beings do all the same things, and above all, they all avoid the same things. Every moral being respects the lives of others; no moral being gets preoccupied with gaining useless wealth, etc.

What will the altruist tell himself, who fruitlessly tried the individualistic method?

He will tell himself: "I must walk the same path. I have only set aside armor which was too heavy for me, and which attracted too-violent blows from fate and men. And I've taken up the pilgrim's walking stick. But I must always remember that I hold this stick to keep myself upright, not to hit someone else with it."

On the Various Kinds of Individualism

Conference given on 10 December 1921, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of l'Idee Libre.

MY COMRADES,

Are there many — I mean, outside this hall — who can proudly recall their pre-war memories, who justly testify that they are the same in 1921 as in 1913, the same as in 1915 or in 1917?

We've remained faithful to ourselves and yet we do not accept without amendment the slogan which every weather-vane creaks against those who move less. Yes, we are those who have forgotten nothing. Are we those who have learned nothing? Oh! What abundant and lamentable details have enriched our experience! But since the frames of our thought were large and strong enough to receive the terrible new contribution without breaking or bending. To say it all with one word and one example, the horrors of the war have neither come as a surprise, diminished, nor even truly added to our hatred of war.

Enriched and strengthened, we remain, essentially, so much the same that, if our friend André Lorulot, much better organized and much more of an archivist than I am, hadn't kindly reminded me that, by giving you a conference to celebrate the birth of l'Idée Libre, I ran the risk, on this tenth anniversary of the valiant review, of repeating the same subject with the same title, expressing the same thoughts in nearly the same order, while perhaps clarifying them with a few recent examples.

Whoa! Although forewarned, I am in no way certain that today I won't follow a path I traced already, ten years ago.

The first talk was called, it would seem, "À la recherche du bonheur". By studying the various kinds of individualism, will I not in some way have to sketch out the different routes of human life which lead to happiness? It may be that, more than once, what I now say will precisely retrace, repeat identically, what I said before. It may be that, from the start, I will stop at an obstacle which, ten years ago, stopped me from the beginning. I suspect I spoke to you about happiness without having tried to define it or having succeeded. And now I'll classify the kinds of individualism without having tried to define what individualism is.

For, definitions seem truly anti-individualistic to me. The individualist is a man who has a sense of the reality of the individual and the unreality of all that is not individual and singular. And yet, every logician declares that the individual is not definable; his complex richness cannot be contained by any formulation; only general terms can be defined. Since, then, the individualist believes only in individual realities, for him, defining would be saying not what is, but what is not. Since only general ideas can be defined, Plato said before: "There is only a science of what is general", which has often been repeated through the centuries and which will still be repeated.

Today I will not examine — it would take me too far from my subject — the value of science. But defining the individual, the only real thing, is declared impossible by every logician; defining what is not individual and real, defining what is general, would not appear to be of interest for the individualist. I'm not the first individualist to have this impression; Nietzsche often wrote against definitions. And the most ancient individualists we know of, the Cynics, were already hostile to all definitions.

We only know the Cynics' critique of definitions through the hostile writings of Plato and Aristotle, who were eager to define everything. However, through these indictments which are balanced by no pleas (since all Cynic texts have been lost), it seems that the critique of definitions given by the Cynics must certainly have embarrassed the proponents of definition of their times. To try and reconstitute it, it might seem — as un-individualistic as this word may be — definitive for some.

I do not try to reconstitute it historically. I translate it into completely modern terms. Perhaps I will mingle some of my own thoughts with an old, misunderstood line of thought, known to us only through its enemies' books.

Since the individual alone is real, and he is indefinable, what might we be able to define? What do general terms express? When I say "man", what am I saying?

I sum up a certain series of experiences; I sum up every encounter to which I've applied the term: "man". But, my set of experiences will not correspond with any of yours; none of you has met exactly and only the same men, in the same circumstances, in the same order, in the same frame of mind. Therefore, when I say "man", I am stating my series of experiences and you are hearing something else: your own series of experiences. My idea of man does not coincide with any of your ideas of man. Worse still, when I say "man" today, I do not say the same thing as when I said "man" yesterday and when I will say "man" tomorrow. My series of experiences will be enriched and modified every day.

Not only does a general term express a series of experiences which varies with each of us over time and which varies between us all the more, but the same word even serves, in the same mouth, to express different series of experiences; we are constantly equivocal when we talk; that is, when those who are honest talk.

If I affirm, for example, that "Socrates and Diogenes are men," and if, referring to the latest dirty tricks of Poincaré and Clemenceau, I say: "This is really quite human," I sum up two different series of experiences, and I use the words man or human in two senses which are not at all alike.

General terms are therefore meaningful for us, only on condition that they contain a series of experiences which is different for each of us, and which, with a given person, is different from moment to moment; at one time, one set of experiences rules my thoughts and at other times, other encounters are more important. At certain times, when I say "man", I have my great historical friends in mind: Socrates, Diogenes, Epicurus, Epictetus, Jesus, Spinoza; at other times I say "man" like I'm throwing up or when I think of whatever numb-skull has outraged me today.

Thus, I can venture no definitions, even for myself. Definitions, say the logicians, should be sufficient, should apply exactly to what is defined, and only to what is defined. It's impossible for me to find an adequate definition, even for myself; a definition which says precisely what I think when I say the word "man". All the more reason, then, for my inability to find a definition that's adequate for other people.

Meanwhile, dogmatic thinkers always being their presentations with definitions; in these definitions, which they think adequate or which they demand we accept, they ground precise discussions and supposedly exact demonstrations.

It is prudent to refrain from offering definitions at the beginning of a presentation, whether to avoid showing that one is not naive enough to believe, or dishonest enough to claim, that one has demonstrated something.

But where does this habit, of offering definitions and basing supposedly definitive arguments in definitions, come from? It comes from the fact that the first constituted science was based on definitions, and these definitions are adequate; and the demonstrations based on them are exact. I'm talking about mathematics.

What might confer such a privilege on mathematics, mathematical demonstration, and mathematical definitions? It's simple. When I try to define man, individualism, or any other concrete reality, I am seeking to contain a series of experiences in a formula. In mathematics, I venture no such thing. In mathematics, experiences play no role.

When I define line by the absence of length and thickness, when I define surface by the absence of thickness, I know that, in reality, the complete removal of one of these three dimensions would also remove the two others, along with the object itself. A surface which really has no thickness couldn't exist, and would vanish. When I define circumference as a line whose points are at equal distance from an inner point called the center, having already defined a point by the absence of extension, and that nothing can exist without extension, I know quite rightly that my definition doesn't correspond to anything real; I know full well that it doesn't exist in nature, and that art cannot produce perfect circles; however, an imperfect circle is not a circle.

In mathematics, my definition doesn't try to say what exists, instead it creates its object. There are no circles before someone defines circles; there are no lines before someone defines what lines are; there is no surface before you've defined surface. It's us, our very definitions, which create the surface, the line, the point, and the circle.

Since they create, since instead of trying to precisely match something that's real, something anterior to them, they produce something ideal, this something which matches them exactly. Since mathematical definitions create their object rather than trying to say what is, they're precise, adequate, and applicable to all that is defined and only to what is defined.

Because they're adequate, they allow exact demonstrations. Because the circle contains only what I put there, I discover in this definition all the properties of the circle; all the theorems concerning circles come from the definition of circles, just as all the theorems on triangles come from the definition of triangles.

But this privilege is exclusive to mathematics. Unless we wish to proceed mathematically, that is, to concern ourselves not with what exists but instead to create the object of our meditations.

As soon as we try a little to see what exists, as soon as we try to grasp concrete reality somewhat, for reasons already explained, we're no more capable of defining it precisely. We know that, in matters of concrete reality, definitions, instead of being the starting-point of science, can only come at the end. They are a summing up instead of a point of departure. They are never fully adequate or completely exact, and it would be absurd to base demonstrations on it.

I will not define individualism for you. This is to avoid the temptation of starting from my definition, then demonstrating for you that one thing is individualistic while something else isn't.

However, to help you understand me, and to help me understand myself, I must indicate nearly, speaking among honest people and without bringing any malice in, what I mean by individualism. I already told you that the same word, at different moments, has different meanings. I gave the example of the word "man", to which I can attach an idea of admiration or an idea of contempt, according to how I pronounce it, to summarize this or that series of experiences.

It is the same with all words. Every word has multiple meanings for each of us. These meanings get jumbled, confused, covered like the circles produced by tossing a stone in water. And yet, to a certain extent we can, schematically and in a crude way, call them concentric. If we go to the limits like mathematicians, we give to each word such a wide meaning that it embraces all infinity, such a narrow meaning that it no longer applies to anything, as well as countless intermediary significations.

If you haven't yet, at some point you will hear some of your comrades arguing over individualism, and one of them taking the word in such a broad a sense that everyone would be an individualist. Indeed, there can be no individual without a certain degree of individualism; there can be no thought which doesn't contain a grain of individualism. If I take the word individualism in a loose and extensive way, it will apply to all thinkers. I can also take it in such a narrow, strict, and absolute sense that it no longer applies to anyone.

You either have or will attend discussions where one side will demonstrate for you that this word applies to everyone and everything, while the other proves to you that it applies to nobody and nothing. Words, all words, may at once be a point without extension or radiating and fleeting infinity.

A malicious comrade might demonstrate with like ease that I am not an individualist or that everyone is an individualist. You surely understand that polemics is like that. These are nothing but games. And often, he who plays games is the first to be tricked by them; he's not dishonest, he's naive.

Between the sense of the word which is so narrow and pure that there never was an individualist and in which Diogenes can even deny this word to his teacher Antisthenes, and the wide, immense, infinite sense in which Mr. Charles Maurras himself becomes an individualist since he expresses himself differently than his fellow Royalist neighbor, there are a certain number of intermediary senses, which are the only ones that interest me since only they tell me something. To say everything because this will confuse everything, is a way of saying nothing at all.

But these intermediary senses are multiple, and arbitrary. I can, in all honesty, take now one, then another. However, I must be aware of the risks; I must apply myself to avoiding them in the course of any given intellectual operation. Otherwise, my meditation will mean nothing of interest, since it would balance on an uncertainty and, thinking I'm considering one idea, I perceive another one.

Therefore I cannot define because I am an individualist. But I should indicate in what sense I now take the word individualism, in this way of thinking.

Determination occurs most of all by negation and exclusion. It occurred to Mr. Clemenceau, for example, to call himself an individualist. I will not take the word in the same sense as Mr. Clemenceau. I will not take it in the same sense as the bourgeois who boast of their individualism. Likewise, if some comrades — I know they exist — are mostly concerned with economic issues, I won't run into them. Because, generally speaking and tonight in particular, I don't care much about economic questions. I won't tell you why; I will only say that, for me, economic questions cannot be resolved directly but, rather, they will almost be resolved once we agree to stop worrying about them.

I might also take the word individualist in a metaphysical sense; I might seek the essence of the individual. Nor will I take that approach. That's too deep or it's too elevated. We'll lose ourselves in the dream. Yet, even though I don't want to demonstrate anything, I would still like to keep close to reality.

And so I will neglect bourgeois individualism, economic individualism, and metaphysical individualism. I will only examine the different sorts, or rather some different sorts — for I'm not sure I'll make a complete list — of ethical individualism.

I've used "ethical", an educated and obscure word, rather than "moral", which is the well-known, widely used word. Because I don't care for the latter term or what it seems to represent. I consider "ethics" as the name of a class in which I distinguish two species: the moralities and the wisdom traditions. And, in the name of the wisdom traditions, I condemn the moralities.

Plenty of individualists, moreover, are self-proclaimed immoralists. I sometimes call myself an immoralist too. But only on condition of it being fully understood that this does not refer to my renouncing having to make my behavior logical and regular. But I try to regulate my behavior according to wisdom, and not morality[1].

There are, then, a certain number of individualistic wisdom traditions that I will try to distinguish tonight.

The individualistic wisdom traditions, the ethical individualisms, are methods of self-realization. They give us a certain power over ourselves. But there is no power which does not rest on knowledge. And so, although they soon diverge, the individualistic wisdom traditions share a single point of departure. All ethical individualism begins with Socrates' phrase, "Know yourself".

But this precept, as individualistic as it is, has been taken in a very non-individualistic way by the greatest and least faithful of Socrates' disciples.

In one of Plato's most famous dialogues, the Meno, we see Socrates interrogating a young slave and, by uniquely dexterous questions, leading him to construct a double square from a given square. If Socrates had still been alive when Plato wrote the Meno, he would have echoed Lysis's words: "What things does this young man make me say, that I never dreamed of!" And he might have added, more severely: "What things does this young man make me say, which are totally against what I think!"

This way of finding in the slave things which were never in him: things which were invented, created, dreamed up, such as squares, their measurements, and diagonals, is not what Socrates had in mind when he said: "know yourself." Despite Aristophanes' slanders, Socrates carefully avoided all metaphysics, dreams, and clouds. If Plato gives the "know yourself", the meaning we find in Meno, it's because he has an odd metaphysical belief. He imagines that before this live we once lived a better, more conscious, more luminous life. Then, we all knew things and now we can recover some of what we knew before. For him, learning is remembering.

This beautiful and poetic way of understanding the "know yourself" is in no way ethical or individualistic in the sense in which, tonight, we are using this word. The individualist only seeks in himself for knowledge of himself, not knowledge of external things or Euclid's inventions.

When Socrates says: "Know yourself", he means that I should know myself, not metaphysically, not in my essence, not in my evasive parts, but in the knowable side of things; he wants me to know what I am, what I want, and what I'm capable of. The individualist's self-knowledge includes the dual critique of my will and my powers.

Today, it's above all by the way they direct the critique of will and the critique of desire that I will classify the various individualisms which interest me.

When I ask myself what I am, the responses I give will vary with the moment and my mood. Historically, I think I can discern four principal responses.

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[1] On the essential differences between what I call moral and what I designate as wisdom, either my Le Subjectivisme, or my Petite causerie sur la sagesse may be consulted.

I either support life, as Nietzsche says, or I support humanity. I can respond: “I’m a living being” or “I’m a human”. It’s easy to see that, depending on which response I give, my individualism will be quite different.

But, when I’ve responded “I’m a living being” or “I’m a man”, I’m not at the end of my hesitations. Those who respond “I’m a living being” are asking about the deepest part of the living being, the deepest tendency of life — for that’s what they want to realize. Those who respond “I’m a man” are asking about human characteristics, and the most particular, human, noble side of man — this is what they want to actualize. Schematically, we can also find, two different tendencies on both sides.

The individualists of life, of the will to life, the individualists of the most profound sort, along with the individualists of the will to humanity, the noblest of individualists, are split into two categories.

When I say “I’m a living being”, and when I ask myself what is the deepest part with the living if my name is Nietzsche or, twenty-four centuries earlier, if my name is Callicles, I will respond: “The most profound part of life is the will to power, the will to domination.”

“In every living thing,” says Nietzsche, “I find the will to power; and even in the will of he who obeys I find the will to be the master.” But, have all those who respond: “I am a living being”, all those who promote life and its profundity, given the same response as Callicles and Nietzsche? No.

Others have said: “The most profound part of living beings is their love of pleasure.” For the sake of simplicity, without worrying too much about details and trying to classify by epochs or stages, let us call Nietzscheanism — because Nietzsche is its most famous teacher — the individualism of the will to power; and Epicureanism — since Epicurus is the most famous man within this tendency — the individualism of the love of pleasure.

Those who have said “It’s a man I want to be” and who look for what’s most characteristic of men, what’s noblest in man, are also split into two tendencies. Some want reason to dominate in man, others want it to be the heart.

Here also, without looking at the epochs, for greater ease we will call Stoics those who think of guiding themselves by reason and Tolstoyans those who think of guiding themselves by the urges of their hearts.

Here, then, are four forms of ethical individualism which are quite different from each other, at least at first sight, between which we will find many intermediate forms. We may distinguish: will to power, will to pleasure, will to reason, and will to heart.

Shall either of these forms of individualism seem superior to the other? Will any seem fully complete to us? Does one of them correspond entirely to our wishes?

Nietzscheanism, i.e. the individualism of the will to power, at least in a crude understanding of it, is only individualistic at the outset. In past controversies, given the amount of dishonesty in discussions with honest men, I have refused to call the Nietzscheans “individualistic” because they refused the same title to me.

At bottom, there was a soul of truth in the need they felt to refuse me the qualification they gloried in, as well as in my own need to cast them outside the individualistic circle.

I told them: “He who fails to respect all individuals does not deserve to be called an individualist. And Nietzscheanism does not respect all individuals. Nietzscheanism, a master’s morality, necessarily requires slaves. Nietzsche himself insolently says: “For the reinforcement, for the elevation of the type called human, a new kind of enslavement is required.” And he asks many people: “Are you someone who has the right to escape a yoke? There are some who lose their last worth when they cast away their subjection.” Nietzscheanism crushes a certain number of individuals; it does not respect all individuals; in a certain sense, it renounces individualism.

But will the master of himself remain an individual? The master depends on the slave’s image of him; he is only the master on condition of striking either terror or love in the mind of the slave, and by deception. Doesn’t this necessity make him dependent and the slave of slaves?

In Alfred de Vigny’s famous Dialogue inconnue, Napoleon cries:

How tiresome! What pettiness! Posing! Always posing! Straight ahead for one, in profile for another, as they deem fitting. Appearing for them as they want you to be, and becoming nothing more than their imbecile dream… To be their universal master while not knowing what to do with them. And here’s the rub, by God! After so much, to be as bored as I am, is all too much.

Augustus, one of the most capable men in the morality of rulers, says on his deathbed: “Applaud, my friends, the show is over.”

Do you think that a man who plays on the stage his whole life long is a free man? Do you think he’s an individual? Nothing disproves our thought better than the lie in our thought. He who would explain himself precisely, he who tries to say what he thinks true, has a hard time avoiding the distortion of these thoughts. And shall we think that if it’s distorted in expression, it will be faithfully reproduced in reality? Are we to think that his lie will not devour his truth and that his mask won’t eat away at his face?

The individualist of the will to power, so long as he keeps to the abstract plane, I know not what will become of him, — Nietzsche never engaged in politics — but, if he gets involved in concrete reality, if he tries to live out his doctrine, he becomes the most servile of men, the slave of all slaves.

Nietzscheanism is no more satisfactory for me since it makes me less an individual than many doctrines which are not considered individualistic.

Therefore, shall I find salvation, or at least greater satisfaction, in Epicureanism, in the doctrine of the will to pleasure?

If it’s about pursuing pleasure wherever it appears, or every sweetness that comes my way, I’ll be even more enslaved. I’ll often leap on a charm that conceals a trap, which will spring and hurt me; I’ll spend my life in regret, anxiety, and distress.

But no individualist has ever interpreted the love of pleasure like this. Aristippus, the oldest in historical terms and the founder of the doctrine, already declared that the philosopher’s great virtue is self-mastery: “I possess Lais; she does not possess me.” Such self-mastery can create a certain liberty and a durable individualism.

Epicurus goes much further. His analysis of desire is one of the masterpieces of philosophy. Epicurus distinguishes three kinds of desires in us. Some are natural and necessary, like thirst or the need for food. Others are natural without being necessary, like the desire for different foods. Others, finally, are neither natural nor necessary, like the desire to wear a ribbon in one’s buttonhole or to sit one’s ass on a seat at the Academy.

Epicurus tell us:

The natural and necessary desires must be satisfied. By satisfying them we obtain absolute pleasures, pleasures to which nothing can be added. I am hungry and I eat according to my hunger; I am thirsty and I drink according to my thirst: these are the inaugmentable pleasures. But if we restrict ourselves to the natural and necessary desires, very little is required for happiness.

The desires which are natural but not necessary, including love and changes in food and drink, do not give us real pleasures; they bring variety to pleasure, but do not create new pleasures. They should be satisfied when the occasion easily grants us their object; we should turn away from them when they would subject us to new encumbrances and difficulties.

The desires which are neither natural nor necessary are our enemies. These must be got rid of. Without these we can hope for neither happiness nor liberty. The desire for honors can never be satisfied. When I'm a Chevalier of the Légion d'honneur, I want to be an Officier: when I'm an Officier, I want to be a Commander; when I'm a Commander, I need a plaque — I think they call it a plaque — of the Grand-Officier. The more money I have the more I want. When Mr. Loucheur made his first million, he was tormented by the need for his second million far more than I can ever be tormented by the search for a few needed francs. These foul itches only get worse when you scratch them.

Therefore, says Epicurus, let's satisfy the natural and necessary desires, when occasion permits. Let's completely get rid of the desires which are neither natural nor necessary. This method will make us as happy as our imaginary gods could ever be. When I am not hungry and have no indigestion, when I've eaten to contentment and no longer feel hungry, when I'm not thirsty, when I no longer suffer from anything, when I'm neither too cold nor too hot, I'm a perfectly happy being.

Why perfectly happy? Because happiness is the natural activity of our whole being; it's the natural and easy activity of all our organs, first the physical organs, then the more inward organs.

According to Epicurus, the pleasures of the body come first. The intellectual joys can only come later; their necessary foundation, as it were, is formed by the pleasures of the body. Our mind only enjoys beautiful, joyous activity if our body has received the simple satisfactions it requires.

However, these pleasures of the mind, as the children of bodily pleasure, are like children who eclipse their parents.

And here is how, thanks to the doctrine of what he calls "constitutive pleasure", Epicurus manages to get rid of pain completely.

Pain is first eradicated by satisfying the natural and necessary desires. But if, by chance, they cannot be satisfied, if we haven't raised ourselves to Epicurus's heights, we still remain happy. If I feel a pain in a part of my body, that doesn't keep me from having other organs which act freely, from which I can still gain enjoyments. I pay attention to the organs which act freely instead of stupidly focusing on the organ that's suffering.

A friend of mine has told me that once, on a train, he was clumsy enough to put his hand in the wrong place and had two fingers crushed as the car door slammed on them. This occurred during the prettiest month or season, around the time of Pentecost, in Normandy; he was returning to Paris; he wrapped a handkerchief around his bloody fingers, saying: "You won't keep me from seeing the beauty of the flowers and trees." For the remainder of the journey, instead of being the clumsy man suffering for his fingers, he was the apt man, the Epicurean enjoying with his two eyes.

Let us not enlarge our inevitable misfortunes. No suggested and artificial unhappiness. There are always multiple joys in us and we must devote ourselves to these joys, not to our pains. Complex beings, let's bend to gather them, towards the wealth of our joys and let's leave to wither, neglected, the poverty of our pains.

When Epicurus was, as it seemed, dying of an illness, and suffering atrociously from a kidney stone, he wrote to his friend Idomeneus:

I write you on the last and consequently happiest day of my life. I suffer pains of the bladder and internal organs such that I don't think anything could feel worse. But the memory of my dogmas, my discoveries, and my friendships fills me with a higher joy, in which all the troubles of my body are swallowed up.

The Epicurean accumulates his pleasures, focusing his whole attention on joys, to enjoy yesterday's good times, along with those of today and of tomorrow. Beneath this immensity of happiness he hides the small pains that he cannot avoid, or rather he transforms them into additional joys. In this ocean of joy, a drop of bitterness can only increase happiness by adding contrast to the flavor.

Thus, Epicureanism properly understood, raised to Epicurus's level, is essentially continual happiness, continual mental liberty, and unfailing individualism.

Have all Epicureans reached the same level as Epicurus? Allow me to hold my tongue on this point. Certain Romans called themselves Epicureans. The Roman, whether he has emperors or popes, whether it be brute violence or sly and religious stupidity, always ruined whatever he touched.

Whether because certain Epicureans debased the doctrine of Epicurus, or because there was something ambivalent in the words used by the master himself, other individualists have fought against this doctrine. The Stoics always resisted the Epicureans.

The Stoics want us to obey reason and not pleasure. Note that obedience to pleasure, according to Epicurus's analysis of desire, is no less submission to reason. Stoicism and Epicureanism vary in their words more than in the facts.

This is what Seneca expressed by calling Epicurus a hero dressed as a woman.

The Stoics want me to obey my reason. Likewise, the search for direct pleasure and a certain narrowly understood Epicureanism would leave me no liberty; likewise Stoicism, narrowly understood, would leave me neither any great liberty nor much by way of individualism. But the great Stoics, Zeno, Cleanthes, Epictetus, also failed to understand it like that. Even though they highlighted obedience to reason, they were complete beings, they were men. When reason raises no barriers, which should regulate everything, they encourage us to obey our instincts and heart as well.

What does reason command according to the Stoics? To be harmonious is to follow nature. But human nature is a complex thing, and reason itself hinders us from suppressing our riches.

The Stoics said: Man is naturally the friend of man. What is this understanding of nature except obedience to the heart?

The Stoics said that we should be harmonies. A harmony is not a single note, a single tendency; we must reconcile multiple tendencies in ourselves. But the Stoics want us to establish a strong internal hierarchy and for us to give rationality the highest rank in it. For example, the same Stoics who were accused of having no heart were the first to invent the word charity, this word which has become rather dingy; which, through Christian decadence, has become synonymous with alms, which are demeaning for both parties. But originally charity meant grace, expressed love with its wealth of spontaneity and pleasantness. The Stoics were the first, — I translate word for word what Cicero said — to invent "the vast charity of human beings", that is, love for all mankind.

Epicurus gave an important place to the heart. The Epicureans are famous for their friendships. When the sculptors represented Epicurus, they always sculpted the face of Metrodorus behind him. You will never find a bust of Epicurus alone; it's always twinned busts uniting, by the immortality of art, these two friends.

But the Epicurean loves his friends alone, whereas the Stoic spreads his love to all men with his generous heart.

You see how close the Stoics are to those I have called the Tolstoyans, who seek the warmth of truth in their hearts.

A narrow understanding of Epicureanism would suppress the heart and rationality. A narrow understanding of Stoicism would suppress the heart and instinct. A narrow understanding of Tolstoyanism would suppress instinct and rationality. But nobody, except naive and strict disciples or biased opponents, has ever understood a great doctrine in this way.

Tolstoy, while appealing to the heart, grants plenty of leeway to reason, criticism, and intelligence. In human beings there is no true warmth without intelligence, nor any true intelligence without warmth. We cannot allow any one of these doctrines to be understood in a narrow and exclusive sense. But it doesn't matter which, if we allow it to smile, if we give it the breadth and balance which its best partisans have given it, it will lead us to individual truth.

The approach of doctrinaires is certainly in words rather than facts. They argue because some place the accent here and others place it there. What does it matter, if they both come to the total truth?

What do I care if someone says to me: "You are alive, side with life", or "You are a man, side with humanity"? For me to be a man, I must be a living being, and, if I am not a man, why should I care if I'm a living being?

The ancients discussed ingenious, amusing, and even ridiculous problems. Carneades asked Chrysippus: "Would you rather be a human reason in the body of an ass or an ass's intelligence in a human body?" Chrysippus' response has not come down to us. Let's respond for him: "I want to be neither of the two. I want to be a whole human. I want to be, in a human body, a true man, a human light and a warmth, a human heart and reason."

We must achieve harmonization. We must achieve the point where we find everything within and respect all of it. This is very much what the first Stoics had in mind when they advised us to "live harmoniously".

The form of individualism from which I set out matters little if I arrive at the summit from which I can see the whole horizon. While climbing, I'm on one side or the other; a part of the summit remains hidden from me. But, by the different paths on both sides, we reach the high ridge from which the whole horizon and the whole, vast truth is revealed.

Even Nietzscheanism, which I seem to have rejected outright, might then be defensible. I have rejected it because historically, while Epicureanism arrived at complete individualism, while the great Stoics and the great hearts arrived at complete individualism, Nietzsche halted mid-way. What's stopping us from finishing the neglected path? If he had not gone insane, for organic reasons, would he not have pursued it himself? Would he not have made it to the summit where Epicurus and Epictetus dwell? Perhaps, if Epicurus had gone insane at 35, he would also have fallen short of the total truth, he would have remained stuck in swamps and lower-order pleasures. If Epictetus had died young or gone insane, would he have come via reason to the truths of the heart? If Tolstoy had died or gone insane quite young, he would not have arrived via the heart at the truth of reason.

And so, since Nietzsche himself was unable to finish this path, let those who feel drawn to Nietzsche's way, finish it. There is a possible interpretation of the will to power which is quite beautiful; in fact, there are many fine and complete ways to interpret it. The will to power, which is an error if it must be exercised brutally over other men, becomes a truth if this imperialism is wholly internal to oneself, if it's one's own self that should be dominated, created. It also becomes a truth if I want to exercise this domination over the nature of things rather than my fellow men. Here are two ways to continue Nietzsche's work, to complete it, to make him as good an individualist as Epicurus or the great Stoics and the great hearts ever were.

Let each of us take, according to his temperament and the dominant impulses of his youth, the path best suited for him. Provided that his valor lasts and he doesn't fall at the first stages, he will reach the summit, he will reach the total truth, the cadenced liberty of his heart and his reason. He will reach the complete harmony of the complete individualist.

What the Individual Is

La Mêlée n°29, 1 August 1919

The individual is a complex, indefinable being. Yet, only the individual possesses something which might be called, without much lying, existence. Therefore, as the Cynic philosophers already know, nothing real, nothing concrete is definable.

The necessities of thought, speech, science, and action lead us to act as if things really were definable. Let us consent, with a smile, to the inevitable.

But let's never forget that no language can ever tell us what is at the core of a being, even my own core, and that no thought, no matter what good will and sympathy might animate them, will ever penetrate to the core of another being. Our most beautiful, strongest, and most penetrating truths can take pride in being, at most, lesser lies.

The more I try to grasp concrete reality, the more complex and hesitant my formulations become, the more irritated I become at not being able to render them sufficiently supple and mobile. When I pronounce absolute words, I know that I am speaking in the abstract and into the void.

Individualism in the Ancient World

1924

A Preliminary Note

I have spoken on two occasions entirely before an open public about this history of ancient individualism.

On the second occasion, my talk should have been stenographed. Since circumstances didn't favor this aim, the first chance I got, I wrote down the following pages. In the solitary silence of my study, I haven't tried to recreate the oratorical tone or the emphases of the original discussion. It may be, though, that some old or more recent recollections have sometimes led me down a slope I'd already walked; and the flat emphasis will seem inadequate here. I would be happy if readers gain the impression that what's spoken and written meld together, or nearly so, in pleasantness and familiarity rather than in emphasis and declamation.

A brief history of ancient individualism forms a chapter in a rather long future book, La Sagesse qui rit. But a chapter is not written for itself and it seems to me that my two essays won't always find a dual use. In La Sagesse qui rit, history is studied only to draw out practical and contemporary teachings from it. In this pamphlet, I am a little more disinterested, a little more curious, a little more of a historian.

Today I've also been able to grant myself the details of explanations and developments which, in a long book discussing other matters, would have made it much longer.

Introduction

Nothing is harder than discovering historical truth. I know of nothing besides the Peloponnesian war which might — thanks to the, perhaps, unique knowledge of Thucydides — be relied on with any confidence. Contemporary documents are rarely disinterested. Even when the author is not blind and isn't consciously lying, even when he says what he believes: what he believes is reality distorted by his prejudices, his religion, his country, his party, his friends, and his antipathies.

The history of a doctrine is easier than other histories when we possess the works of the doctor. Here we become almost dispassionate, almost contemporary with events. Nearly, nothing more. We must remain aware of the changing lives of words; we must guess at the allusions which once enlightened and helped the reader, but which today only annoy and upset us. Never mind. I can forget Malebranche's great rage against Spinoza, the nonsense written by a hundred university men about Spinoza; I read the Ethics and the Theologico-Political Treatise, and I know the thoughts of Spinoza to the extent that I am able to penetrate into anyone else's thoughts.

For the ancient individualists, I do not always have the essential resource which is available when studying Spinoza or Kant. Many, and even some of the best, wrote nothing at all. With others, the texts are often lost. The rare fragments which have come down to us were most often selected by their enemies, with polemical intentions. In all spheres, ancient writings have vanished to a frightful extent. Works of an individualistic stamp have been particularly ill-treated. Were they intentionally destroyed? More likely and more simply, the less interesting they are to those with money and who buy books, the less often they are reproduced and the less of a chance they had to come down to us.

We only know the thoughts of most of the ancient individualists from the expositions of outsiders. It's well known, generally, how even the best of intentions for faithfulness leaves such expositions unfaithful. When, with all the respect we are capable of, we have tried to reproduce the thoughts of our neighbor, the neighbor nearly always accuses us of having betrayed him. The individualistic lines of thought, transmitted by social writers, must have suffered enormous deformation. The social writer hasn't always understood his subject. Often he tries less to present a portrait than a caricature. It is rare for a conformist to explain a non-conformist's thoughts without laughing. And yet some of our individualists have found a way to be loved. Often, too, a pathetic death has projected light and glory onto their words. If the semi-disciples who loved them continued to love the City, what strange modifications were caused by their efforts to harmonize these contradictory loves of theirs! In this way they ended by socializing even the most antisocial of all things…

But are the men I will study truly individualists?

Towards the opening of this century, I gave an exposition of the thoughts of the more famous among them in the most diverse places. Nearly always, a Nietzschean declared to me that I had not been talking about individualists. Fashions made the case for my opponent. When Brunetière or Faguet fancied they had refuted Nietzsche, they boasted of having demolished individualism. For the enemies of Nietzsche as well as his friends, there is no individualism outside of Nietzscheanism.

But I've never cared about fashions. I continued, despite all the objections, to call Socrates, Epicurus, Epictetus, and a few others individualists. And I proclaimed myself an individualist like them.

As for the Nietzschean objection, based on my mood, and according to the merit and courtesy of whoever was raising the objection, I've responded in various ways. At certain nonchalant hours, I contented myself to recall that definitions are free. I nearly always added that it is more individualistic to avoid definitions. The Cynics[1] and Nietzsche also avoid definitions and both know why: the individual is recognized as indefinable even by the most dogmatic and definition-prone logicians. But, for us individualists, nothing exists besides individuals, particular things, unique events, and it's the entire real world that we should declare indefinable. General terms — the word "individualist" included — refer to nothing that's external to our minds. Not only are my conceptions likely to differ from yours; but, if we're not content, at least from one angle, to only talk in vain language, there truly are, here and there, a conception that cannot avoid being different. As Antisthenes points out, with a single word we often express two series of experiences. You are not me, I am not you, and we have not met the same objects in the same sequence. Is the individualist not the man who best understands the need for differences and who joyously consents to it? … If I would be more of an individualist than you precisely because I agree with you that, by my rejecting your way of understanding individualism, while you, like our common enemies, want to impose on me, as a unique entity, a certain type of individualism, an orthodoxy for individualists… are you kidding, my orthodox friend?

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[1] I have tried, in the second chapter of the Véritables Entretiens de Socrate, to reconstitute the Cynics' critique of definitions.

Sometimes, when my questioner has been aggressive, I've feigned aggression as well. I added that the liberty of defining, or rather of denominating, has rational limits. It would be absurd to take words too far from their natural senses; and "individualist" does not come from "ego". Then I would refuse the title "individualist" to anyone who did not respect all individuals. But, when I fought by this method and met intolerance with intolerance, it was not without laughing, both at my opponent and myself.

I nearly always prefer to give to the word a wide and relative meaning. Not only with every thinker but with the most ignorant of men, I find both individualistic and conformistic elements entwined. I call "individualists" those in whom the former are dominant, those who most often keep the herd at a distance. When the only thing at stake is the general, vague term, it hardly matters if one veers right or left. I salute as an individualist anyone in a religious age who is outwardly impious, anyone who in an orthodox environment is outwardly heretical; anyone who, in a period of civic pride, is able to laugh at the city or curse the crimes of his country.

Outside of mathematics, the individualist only ventures offhand definitions of words on which he would find it dangerous to support the crushing weight of a demonstration. Nor does he confine things within rigid, definitive classifications. His classifications are always provisional, and he tries them only to momentarily clarify this or that aspect of this or that concrete fact. My classifications of the diverse forms of individualism might then vary without any embarrassment. I hurry, though, to distinguish my tendencies from the Nietzschean tendencies. For the past twenty years or so, I have been accustomed to call the doctrine of Nietzsche, following one of the most famous titles of great poetry, the individualism of the will to power. And, in the name of Socrates, Epicurus, Epictetus, and my own humble name, I oppose it with the individualism of the will to harmony[2].

Chapter I: The Sophists

Historically, the first philosophers with whom individualistic thought became self-aware are those to whom the glorious name of Sages or Sophists is given.

We really know little about them. None of their works is extant. We have to try and make out what they really were through attacks and refutations. Most historians naively think they can judge these men by coordinating the unanswered accusations which have come down to us. And so, the words of their enemies Plato and Xenophon are repeated with amusing confidence. Fearsome Plato, the great admirer of Aristophanes, is more a comic genius than a dialectical genius, which is only outdone by his gift for metaphysics. He sketched numerous caricatures which modern writers, which are too malicious or free from malice for us to go on regarding them as true portraits. Even the most naive university student, even the most respectable texts reject what The Clouds says about the true Socrates. But they accept word for word what a Platonic pamphlet says, when looking for information about the true Gorgias.

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[2] This conception was, as they say, in the air. In 1913 Mr. H. L. Follin, who was certainly unaware of my talks in the people's forums, wrote a whole book called La Volonté d'harmonie. In it he expresses an individualism which is quite different from mine, in which economics is not, as with me, set aside. — Mr. Louis Prat, who was also unaware of my efforts, in 1923 published a profound and balanced book, La Religion de l'harmonie, where his ideas are quite close to mine.

Plato's comic powers made the Sophists extremely vivid, and consequently extremely distinct. Suppose that a great comic poet of the clerical party had portrayed the Encyclopedists on the stage: he would have exaggerated the differences between their doctrines; he would have found contradictions in the least originality in their expressions and the least differences in their temperaments. He would have presented us with a dust-cloud of opinions, and for him, those who taught them would have only one point in common: dishonesty. This is how Plato set out to portray the Sophists for us. His bitterly unjust genius and collaborated with the stupidity of the ordinary man to great effect: the name, which was the name of Wisdom, was changed into a cruel insult.

Made up of highly original personalities in their talents and the details of their thought, the generation of Sophists nevertheless offers its own mark and moves in a clearly indicated direction. It begins the great critical and subjectivist movement which would render Greek ethics passionately interesting and perpetually useful. The Sophists bring the attention of philosophy back from the object to the subject, from the world to human intelligence. To all of them we must apply the magnificent words which Cicero applies to the greatest of their number, Socrates. They worked to "bring philosophy down from heaven to Earth." Like Protagoras, everyone knows that "man is the measure of all things" and that he must look within for the truth instead of accepting it on external authority.

This doctrine, which we know only through its detractors, is presented to us in a grotesque exaggeration and enlargement. Protagoras did not even profess pure skepticism, — which, though, would be no more ridiculous than many gratuitous dogmatisms and certain Platonic illusions. Protagoras taught virtue and active energy. The famous slogan: "Man is the measure of all things" has one or many meanings which are true everywhere and always. Everyone forms his own private science and what is respectfully called Science can only be made up of personal efforts and individual discoveries put together. None of these works or any of these discoveries can escape the necessities of our nature and what Kant would later call our "forms". Individualism, which thus has its place everywhere, is the single factor in the only science which interests most of the Sophists, that of human nature[3]. I might arrive at some conclusions which are valuable for all mankind, but I can only discover it in myself and each of us can only discover them in themselves. In myself, I will find my human nature as well as my individual nature, my resemblance with other men along with our differences.

Gorgias, the disciple of the Eleatics, professed, under a different form, the same profound truths as Protagoras. Reality could not be known in an absolute manner; and the relative kinds of knowledge we gain are incommunicable. Nobody should rely on the teachings of another: only our personal efforts will lead to any possible science. It's the same with virtue as with science: it can neither be taught nor transmitted, it is incommunicable and recognizes neither teachers nor disciples.

Plato's unfairness and that of posterity have perverted Gorgias's thoughts on rhetoric as well as his philosophical ideas. He had said that the oratorical art is, of itself, indifferent to true and false: the same arguments and same forms of language can serve to defend a good or a bad cause and the capable man, by employing them, can make a naturally bad cause prevail. He has been insulted for expressing these incontestable facts, whose formulation in the theory of enthymeme was later to Aristotle's glory.

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[3] Mr. Eugène Dupréel (La légende socratique) has shown that we must make an exception at least for Hippias, an encyclopedic genius and precursor of Aristotle.

But the center of Sophistics is the great ethical advice to obey one's nature, not law and custom. Callicles affirms in the Gorgias: "For most things, nature and law are opposite to each other." Also, Thrasymachus, in the first book of the Republic, says: "The rulers establish laws which are for their benefit. The law is nothing but the advantage of the strongest. It's only madmen and the weak who believe they are bound by the laws: the enlightened man knows how little they're worth." Hippias, in Xenophon's writings, contends that the laws, which change so often, are no more respectable while the city is trying to impose them than before, when they look useful to the lawgivers, or after acceptance, when they're recognized as harmful. He reserves the title of natural laws for those which are everywhere and always accepted. But how many positive laws have this universal trait? Aren't nearly all of them local and temporary only? Why, for example, worry about a prohibition on incest which seems inexplicably necessary for one people, and so ridiculous for another, which, at Athens, condemned the act of marrying one's mother's sister, but not one's father's sister? In Plato's Protagoras, this same Hippias notes that the law constrains men like a despot, and is against nature in many ways[4]. And, in the name of nature, the Sophists multiply their precise critiques against particular laws. Alcidamas rejects the legal difference between slave and freeman. In addition, Aristotle says that many Sophists condemned slavery as an offense against human nature. Lycophron declares nobility to be an imaginary advantage.

In sum, these are all the practical problems which the Sophists solved by distinguishing nature from law. Of the Cynics who carried this criticism of theirs forward, Zeller naively states that they "discovered the most vulnerable point of ancient society." Zeller must then think that modern laws are closer to nature.

Thus, the Sophists certainly have a common doctrine, which is an individualistic one. But these individualists are individuals. Once liberated from the ambient prejudices, they are, as may be expected, infinitely diverse. All are enemies of the law, from their love of nature. But isn't nature rich or complex? They see various powers in it. Some see one power as preeminent, while others take a different view.

There is almost always a necessary bias, conscious or not, in the way we understand and love nature. Is it biological nature, or is it purely human nature that I should obey? Both of these are entwined in me, often for love, often for combat. Therefore, when they are at war, shall my efforts make an ally of me? For Callicles, I should lend my ear to what is deepest and most universal in life. For Sophists like Prodicus and Socrates, I should obey my most noble and human parts. Both tendencies reappear across the duration of the history of individualism. An individualism of sensibility and an individualism of reason are always discovered.

The individualism in sensibility already has, in Callicles, the same general features as in Nietzsche. In both cases, what forms the core of the living being is the tendency to domination, the will to power. For Prodicus and for Socrates, the most precious part of me is my reason, the creator of harmony. An individualism of sensibility can, as we will see, also be a doctrine of the will to harmony. But no Sophist seemed to foresee or sketch out the delicate masterpiece which would later appear in the form of Epicureanism.

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[4] Concerned only from the ethical point of view, I neglect in Hippias the synthetic and encyclopedic power which has been highlighted so well by Mr. Dupréel, op. cit.

Do we know Socrates any better than the other Sophists? Worse, perhaps. With him we are less cautious about the warped mirrors in which we see him.

We don't know him through his opponents, since nobody takes The Clouds seriously. We know him via two affectionate and unfaithful disciples who would make him sympathetic to those who are necessarily his enemies, and who use him for aims contrary to his own.

The historian can only have moderate confidence in Xenophon or Plato. Xenophon, as we know only too well, was capable of reticence, errors, and even outright lies. Before presenting himself at the court of Cyrus as a young man, he had promised to a disapproving Socrates, that he would consult the Delphic oracle: and so he asked the oracle, not if he should go, but what sacrifice he should offer before leaving. In the Anabasis, — which he published under the name of Themistogenes of Syracuse — he attributes himself an important role which his contemporary, the more serious Ephorus, was entirely unaware of. Without the discreet grace of his style, one might be tempted to call him the braggart-soldier. This supple, pleasant, insinuating writer, who lacks any sincerity, was — if we dare use this anachronistic word, — an imperialist: he dreamed of a powerful leader who would lead the Greeks to the conquest of Asia. This soldier, who has all the elegance of style that's compatible with limited intelligence, this Athenian who was, by his taste for strict discipline, a Spartan, this manner of an Alexandrian prophet, was never fit to understand individualistic thought.

Plato was better able to understand it. But his concerns were not those of a conscientious interpreter. "How many things does this young man make me say, which I would never dreamed of!" cried Socrates. How much more freely did Plato pervert him after his death; how Platonic he made him! In the case of the theory of Ideas, for example, which he has Socrates maintain in so many ways, Aristotle shows us that it was completely foreign to Socrates. Not content to make a metaphysician of an anti-metaphysical sage, he also gives him a more Platonic than Socratic ethics. Plato boasts, in the Republic, of what he calls the "salutary lie". Basing non-Socratic, or often anti-Socratic ideas on Socrates's authority, how many lies has he shared, which to him seemed salutary?

If Socrates had died of natural causes, I think he would have been presented to us as a grotesque figure, rather like the Diogenes of legend. It would not be hard to discover in the texts the beginnings of the work whereby the objects of mockery tend to transform the great mocker into the object of ridicule. Traces of this are even found in Plato. The pathetic death of the greatest of the Sophists strays from the legend: instead of ridiculing Socrates, he is utilized and socialized. False disciples who loved his personality and his emphasis more than what he thought, and whose love only grew under his "passion" and his pleasant heroism, added their affection to their deepest convictions and gave Socrates the precious gift, as they thought it, of a way of thinking that would be acceptable under contemporary public opinion. It is probable that this "idealization" had an unconscious origin for them. Was it not voluntarily completed by excellent advocates who had little respect for the truth?

It really was a question of the truth!

The Memorabilia don't correspond with the accusations which Melitus pronounced before the Heliastes. There, Xenophon refutes a work written several years later, in which a certain rhetorician, Polycrates, set the accusation in a literary form.

This Polycrates and his lost work are denied any importance at all. It's noted, with a smile, that this rhetorician is also the pleasant author of panegyrics on marmite, pebbles, and mice; the paradoxical apologist of Clytemnestra, Helen, Paris, and even Busiris, the man-eating tyrant killed by Hercules. His pamphlet against Socrates is brushed aside, along with his panegyrics, as mere rhetorical exercises.

I suspect that the work was far more odious than they think.

What the historians of ancient literature despise as school-work is a lot like the works which we currently salute as literary, disinterested works. Don't these panegyrics for Clytemnestra or Busiris, Helen or Paris, contain the seeds of the future Milesian fables? Don't they modify legends or history, and would it be an exaggeration to see in them already, under a then-fashionable oratorical form, the forms of short stories and novels?

Along with literary and fun books, the same person can compose works of immediate action and terrifying pamphlets. Because Fénelon wrote the Télémaque and a few nice fables, shall we expect that he didn't take the doctrine of pure love and his polemic against Bossuet seriously? Because Chateaubriand left us Les Martyrs, Atala, René, Le dernier des Abencérages and Les Natchez, shall we believe that they had nothing to do with the Spanish war? Paul-Louis Courier was not always busy with his Daphnis et Chloé. Lamartine and Victor Hugo got involved in political struggles. Do the terrible novels of Mr. Léon Daudet mean Mr. Léon Daudet has no blood on his hands?

No importance, Polycrates' pamphlet? …It seems that Xenophon felt otherwise, he who responded by four books of his Memorabilia. Plato's Apology and Crito might well have the same origin and have been intended for the same fight.

The Athenians, we're told, came to regret having murdered Socrates and condemned his accusers. Does a people repent unanimously, and are its conversions wholehearted and complete reversals, like that of Saul falling on the road to Damascus to rise up as Paul?…

If the Socratics fled to Megara, it was likely with good reason. Among the future travels of Plato, how sure are we that none of them was motivated, completely or partially, by persecution? Xenophon, forced to renounce his natural country, was sufficiently irritated and embittered to the point of becoming an enemy of Athens.

Around the corpse of Socrates, there no doubt began a long, determined, and perilous fight.

Returning to Athens, the Socratics expected to meet at any time, the "passion" of their teacher and the pathetic courage of his death. They ignited and fueled an emotion. They obtained the condemnation of the accusers.

Shall we believe that their success came without a fight, shall we imagine that the combat occurred behind closed doors without either party having any allies?…

Politics spares nothing. Even if no disciples had belonged to the great families and the aristocrats, they would have utilized Socrates and the emotions raised against the democratic clan which found itself, as luck would have it, guilty of his death. The condemnation of Anytus and Melitus was a victory for the aristocrats. Was there ever a party which failed to get intoxicated on the least success and to abuse its victory? The democrats, humiliated and threatened, must have turned against the Socratics. Polycrates' pamphlet was one of their weapons. A fearsome weapon, judging by Xenophon's emotion and his careful forging of a shield with his Memorabilia.

Polycrates' attack on Socrates was, no doubt, intended as an attack on the Socratics. In the attack and the defense, the Socratics and aristocrats now have common enemies; necessity forges an indissoluble alliance between them. The author of The Clouds, facing the same threats as them, becomes their sure friend. In The Symposium, Plato represents the truth of the moment, a truth which was subsequent to Socrates, by fraternizing his teacher with Aristophanes.

We may conjecture, not only human and political needs, but also a vast and lasting combat; amid forgetful history, some traces of this remain. When Plato presents himself to the tribunal to defend his friend Chabrias, Diogenes Laertius shows us an informer called Crobyle boldly addressing him: “Have you forgotten, you who come to the aid of another, that you are destined for the same fate as Socrates?”

Three choices presented themselves to the besieged Socratics. They could respond to Polycrates in the same way Socrates had responded to Anytus and, with their teacher’s courage, suffer their teacher’s fate. But it seems that none of them had the soul of a martyr. They could tell the truth and their love for Socrates didn’t keep them from thinking otherwise except on the question of the laws. Their sincerity might have been questionable and they would have been mocked as cowards. Since they were slothful enough to stay alive, since they could not follow Socrates’s path, since they did not want to dishonor themselves by publicly renouncing their teacher, the only possible course of action for them was to bring Socrates into conformity with them and their conformistic doctrine. This is what they did. They not only gave Socrates words which Socrates never said, which Socrates was incapable of saying, but they even gave him words he had refused to say. As for the argumentation, I suspect that Plato’s Apology contains an exact reproduction of the speech Lysias had offered to Socrates, and which Socrates had refused to pronounce. But Lysias only had talent. Plato had genius. Not only a philosophical genius, but a genius for drama and the power to represent living beings. He was able to capture the manners, gestures, smiles, looks, and voice of the real Socrates. He makes him say, albeit in a twisted, alien, and anodyne way, many of the most formidable words and phrases, which anyone could remember, to come from his lips. Thanks to the astonishing external veracity and the careful subtlety of the distortions, those who had known Socrates thought, by reading Plato, that they were seeing and hearing him again. Yes — so they thought — that’s just the way he talked; yes, that’s just what he said.

Plato and Xenophon won their cause. They were victorious and saved their comrades. We admire them for having got what they wanted. But we know what they wanted and how indifferent they were to historical truth. They fought for their lives and those of some others and were not sparing in what subtle Plato somewhere calls the “salutary lie”. They only spoke of Socrates, and only make him speak, with concerns that were alien and later than Socrates. And they had no intention of communicating information to us, but only of winning their cause. Let’s not be naive enough to mistake these advocates and unheroic plaintiffs for historians.

In Socrates, a Sophist and an enemy of the laws had been condemned. Those who wished neither to follow him in death nor appear to deny him were forced to make him into a friend of the laws and an enemy of the Sophists.

Certain circumstances massively eased the double transformation.

Between the condemnation, the contemptuous curiosity, the fear of incrimination, as well as the fear of being beaten and ridiculed by fearsome jousters, the Sophists — like our anarchists — argued mostly with each other. Socrates was the most capable, the one who nearly always won. The reasoner who had defeated so many Sophists was rather easily made into an enemy of the Sophists.

But, while he was yet alive, before the transformative work of Plato and Xenophon had occurred, everyone saw him as a Sophist. When Aristophanes wants to fight against Sophistics, he incarnates it in Socrates. — Even in Plato, Socrates calls himself a disciple of Prodicus and it’s no secret that he sent pupils to his former teacher. In the fourth book of the Memorabilia, Xenophon has him rashly pronounce a praise of Sophistics which he must, indeed, have repeated often. Later commentators, unable to reconcile these words with their preconceptions of Socrates and the Sophists, have found irony in them. The text seems to invincibly oppose this explanation. — In the Gorgias, Callicles tells Socrates that he knows the distinction between nature and the laws perfectly well, but that he applies it badly.

It is indeed hard not to see a form of the Sophists' doctrine in the famous distinction between "written laws" and "unwritten laws" and in the affirmation that it's the latter which should be obeyed. The other great distinguishing mark of the Sophist is also found in Socrates. Man is very much the measure of all things for he who had only this simple advice for everyone: "know yourself".

Despite Xenophon's and Plato's legalistic apologies, it's certain that Socrates despised the religious laws of his times. In the Euthyphro, which comes from Plato's younger years, and seems quite faithful to Socratic thought, a precise and cruel analysis reveals the absurdity in the concept of holiness, a mocking ray of sunlight shows the contradictions of religion, and Socrates concludes that one should seek advice from neither priests nor gods.

An enemy of all politics as well as all positive religion, in the Gorgias he condemns all statesmen, even the ones admired by ordinary people. Naturally, his criticism, like that of any individualist, is direct against the surrounding society. These can be used, either naively or dishonestly, to promote a different form of society. His critique of religion seemed to some Christians as a critique of paganism; his critique of politics is often reduced by aristocrats like Plato and Xenophon to a critique of democracy. But his grounds for condemnation are too deep; they destroy all politics and all constituted religion.

Aristophanes would inevitably have been the ally of the classical Socrates. In The Symposium, Plato indeed bends logic as far as to make these enemies into friends. But then who wrote The Clouds? Nor is it comprehensible why the aristocratic government of the Thirty should pursue this enemy of democracy with implacable hatred. A true abuse has been made of the chance circumstance that it was a popular government that killed Socrates. It's well known that the Thirty would have put him to death the moment he upset them. Between him and all government, the struggle was irremediable. He was the enemy of everything thirsty to command or obey, whether among the higher rabble or the lower rabble. His whole life long, he united all parties against him. If he irritates the demagogues by opposing them in the trial of the ten generals, he also refuses to hand over Leon of Salamis to the Thirty tyrants. He mocks the democrats' lottery of magistrates; but the Thirty seemed no better than the mob's electors: he compares them to cowherds who lead a less numerous and thinner herd back to the stable each night. He is the independent man who proclaims his conscience, not Right-wing or Left-wing conventionality.

Nor did his daemon drive him away from all political activity. The just man who engages in State affairs loses himself there without benefit to anyone. His experience agrees with his daemon. Twice, — in the affair of the Arginuse islands and the affair of Leon of Salamis, — circumstances forced him to action in or abstention from the political order. Both times, his love of justice put him in peril of death without allowing him to save the innocents who displeased the democratic government, or the innocent who displeased the aristocratic government.

He is against all positive laws. But his terminology differs from that of the other Sophists. What they call nature, he prefers to call the "unwritten law". Plato will abuse this peculiarity.

"When order rests on constraint rather than persuasion, I call it tyranny instead of law." After having thus withdrawn the title of law from all that is based on artificial sanctions, he doubtless praised the law, that is, nature and conscience, poetically. Plato will note these magnificent panegyrics and, forgetting the Socratic definition of the law, will apply them immodestly to the positive laws, to the laws of Athens. This is the artifice on which the whole of Crito is constructed, this dialogue whose lies begin with its title. It wasn't Crito, Plato's old friend, who prepared Socrates's escape and tried to persuade him to take it, it was Aeschines, a friend of Aristippus', whom Plato hated for that reason. Plato never hesitates to falsify facts when he can satisfy his sympathies or antipathies. Without a thought, he steals a ray of glory from someone he dislikes to turn the spotlight on one of his favorites.

In practice as well as in theory, Socrates despises all positive laws. When Critias brings against freedom of speech a law which already has the ring of our "wicked laws", Socrates does nothing to dissuade him. Summoned before Critias, he responds to criticism and threats with careless jesting.

The Socratic method, as any textbook will explain, includes two parts: irony and maieutics. Irony, as a method of refutation, destroys dogmas and doesn't replace them with anything. It ends in the famous formulation: "All I know is that I know nothing." This singularly demonstrates that the dogmatic interlocutor is less wise than Socrates: the dogmatic speaker truly knows nothing more, he only thinks he knows.

Therefore Socrates does not teach, and the textbooks are wrong to call maieutics a teaching method. In the Apology, Socrates refers to his hearers as "those whom my slanderers call my disciples." He adds: "I've never been any man's teacher." After irony banishes external affirmations, maieutic interrogation doesn't lead directly to any doctrine, instead it gives Socrates's young friends practice finding all ethical truths within.

In Plato, Socrates seems to commit a pair of mistakes. He thinks that all knowledge is dormant in us, and that to learn anything is only to remember it; that we can reawaken memories older than our present lives, to gain knowledge of external things and ourselves. In the Meno, skillfully posed questions lead an ignorant person to discover the measure of the square constructed on a hypotenuse. But this is a clever fantasy of Plato's. The theory of recollection is a corollary of metaphysical doctrines which are totally foreign to Socrates. As he understood it, the "know yourself" condemned these dreams and at the same time despised everything relating to squares and hypotenuses. The "know yourself" in Socrates's mouth means: "Don't worry about external knowledge"; not, as in Plato's mouth: "Discover the universe within". What we should seek inwardly, according to Socrates, is only the knowledge of the "unwritten laws" and rules for behavior.

But here is where the real Socrates went wrong: his idea that knowing true laws necessarily brings about obedience to these laws. "Nobody is voluntarily wicked" and all faults are only mistakes. Socrates thinks that all it takes to gain the strength to walk, and to walk straight, is clear-sightedness. He is unaware of some human weaknesses. My knowledge of myself and my goods is one of the forces resident in me: but this liberatory light has to struggle against more than one force tending to servitude.

This error does nothing to keep Socrates from being one of the most admirable wise men ever to appear, the father, in the West, of the individualism of the will to harmony. His contemporaries were not mistaken on this point; they knew what they wanted to kill in him. They saw clearly that the wise man is the enemy of the citizen. They condemned he whom Timon called "a reasoner against the laws and a semi-Athenian." Not even a semi-Athenian: "I am a citizen of the world," he said, "and not of Athens."

But, — it will be objected, — he fulfilled his military duties, and his exploits at Delium and Potidaea are cited as evidence. Many ancients already had doubts about the campaigns of Socrates[5]. If he truly had fulfilled them, let us note, at least, that nobody has dared boast of any blows he gave to the enemy. In these battles he would have played the role of a rescuer, not a murderer: he would have saved the life of Alcibiades here; there, that of Xenophon. And he would have astonished, nearly irritated, his fellows-in-arms by his bizarre manners, his remoteness, his moments of ecstasy, and his standing, as we're told, twenty-four hours on a single foot. These bits of gossip seem to have more of a legendary than a historical character.

The great contribution of the other Sophists and of Socrates to the individualistic philosophy is the redirection of attention from the object to the subject. That is, the critical and practical attention. The Socratic "Know yourself" should not be understood in a metaphysical and Platonic sense. It only means: "know what you want and what you are capable of." It is the necessary beginning of all rational ethics. The successors of Socrates obeyed the great counsel: some, like Aristippus and Epicurus, will create the critique and discipline of the sensibility; others, such as the Cynics and Stoics, will establish the critique and discipline of the will[6].

Chapter II: Aristippus and the Cyrenaics

Aristippus of Cyrene is a direct disciple of Socrates, but he had previously listened to other Sophists, and Xenophon portrays him boldly arguing against his last teacher. In the dialogues where Xenophon brings these two together, all I see is a proof of the intellectual liberty of young Aristippus; but I think most of the details must be rejected as unlikely[7] .

Aristippus will retain more of a Socratic character until the end. Like Socrates, he despises the physical sciences. Only wisdom is worth seeking. And the spiritual Cyrenaic compares the savants who neglect philosophy to Penelope's suitors, who, wasting their time with the servant-girls, never got around to espousing the Queen.

Even though Xenophon has Socrates refute him on this point in a ridiculous way, Aristippus is also Socratic in his contempt for all politics, in his firm resolution never to consent either to the slavery of servitude, or to the slavery of power, but to follow a middle road "without commanding, without obeying, and always preserving liberty, which leads to happiness."

His contempt for country brings him even closer to Socrates. In Epictetus, Socrates declares himself indifferent to the "spot of earth where fate cast his body." Aristippus jokes about dying in one country or another: "The distance to Hades is the same everywhere". He is also Socratic by this persuasion that the sage is distinguished from other men by always acting in the same way, no matter what the positive laws may be.

But he belongs to another school of Sophistics by his affirmation that "nothing is by nature just, upright, or shameful" and that mere "custom and the laws have introduced such distinctions".

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[5] On the question of the campaigns of Socrates, read, in La Légende socratique, the preeminent criticism of Mr. Dupréel.

[6] In Les Véritables Entretiens de Socrate, I've tried to revive and portray a likely version of Socrates.

[7] In Les Véritables Entretiens de Socrate, I've reconstructed, according to probability, the most important of these two dialogues.

Although we must not see Socrates as an ascetic, Aristippus distances himself from him by his declared preference for pleasure. “You can only become the master of a horse,” he said spiritually, “by riding it.”

In obedience to the “know yourself”, he searched into what was deepest inside himself, a living being. He thought he had discovered it in the love of pleasure. Pleasure is the only goal which he can assign to life. And he tried to analyze pleasure.

Pleasure and pain are organic movements which are perceptible. When the movement is sweet, there is pleasure: when it’s violent and rough, there is pain. Pleasure and pain are two positive states, and it’s incorrect to call one of them the mere negation of the other. Between pleasure and pain exists a state of repose, which is indifferent.

“All pleasures are equal, none have anything more sensitive in them than the other.” But many are paid for with suffering. The sage calculates and selects. When a pleasure brings no threat of pain, all that remains is to liberate oneself from desire by means of enjoyment. When the pleasure threatens to cost more than it’s worth, the sage scornfully rejects it, through a certain degree of self-possession. Wisdom, therefore, includes two virtues: intelligence and self-mastery. Among the numerous anecdotes that Diogenes Laertius transmits about Aristippus, those which present a philosophical interest show us that pleasant self-mastery which is the great Cyrenaic merit and example. His saying about Lais is well known: “I possess her, I’m not possessed by her.” To the young men who were shocked to see him visiting a prostitute, he responded, in the same spirit: “The problem isn’t that one goes in this door; the problem is being unable to come back out[8].”

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The disciples of Aristippus, direct and distant, were especially noted for their free-thinking. One among them, Theodorus, was dubbed “the Atheist”. He openly repeated, after and before many other sages: “I’m a citizen of the world”. He also said: “Sacrificing yourself for your country is the same as renouncing wisdom to save madmen.” The works of Euhemerus, and their critical boldness, are well known. — The last famous Cyrenaic is Hegesias. He drew strangely pessimistic conclusions from Aristippus’ optimism. He stated that pleasure is an evasive and fleeting thing. Besides which, it quickly brings about satiety and disgust. Thus, inevitably, the only goal of life is a failure. Wisdom, therefore, is in renouncing life. With an eloquence that’s said to be effective, Hegesias preached suicide. The magistrates, alarmed at his growing success, had his school closed.

The conclusions that can be drawn from a doctrine (one may draw any conclusion from any doctrine) neither confirm nor weaken it, and Hegesias does not appear to be a refutation of Aristippus. The true refutation of an incomplete philosophy is a philosophy which fills in its gaps. The true refutation of Aristippus is Epicurus.

Chapter III: Epicurus

Did Epicurus suffer fewer insults than even the Sophists? Cicero, who thought he might as well give himself to philosophy when politics was done with him — and how Penelope despised this reject of the most repugnant of servants! — declares Epicureanism worthy to be prosecuted by judges rather than refuted by philosophers. One can guess how disfigured and misunderstood such a line of thought, under the scrutiny of such hostile views, must have ended up.

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[8] In Les Paraboles cyniques (Passim), I am harder on Aristippus: the necessities of the fable imposed the Cynic perspective on me.

And yet we know, from adequate texts, both the true Epicurus and true Epicureanism. Not only the poem of Lucretius — a quite faithful exposition as a plan, a quite unfaithful one as a color and emotion — is famous. But Diogenes Laertius, who, as an Epicurean himself, gave us a summary of the doctrine which is less unintelligent than his other expositions. Above all else we owe him great recognition for having preserved four short works from Epicurus himself: the letter to Herodotus on Canonics and physics, the letter to Phytocles on astronomy, the letter to Menoeceus on ethics. The latter is particularly precious. As precious, maybe more even, than the small collection of thoughts called the "Principal Doctrines".

It's often been pointed out that the Canonics (logic) of Epicurus, and his physics (the physics of the ancients is closer to what we call metaphysics than our physics) contain neither originality nor independence. They are all servants of ethics; they should heal us from religion by showing us that natural causes suffice to explain everything. Epicurus adds to this preliminary work the atomism of Leucippus and Democritus, without changing much of anything.

This classical thesis contains a great amount of truth. However, I would offer a few amendments to it, if I were not almost entirely interested in Epicurus's masterpiece and this perpetually useful work, his ethics. I would show how Epicurus forbids, against all determinism, contingency, and liberty, what Nietzsche will call "by chance, the most ancient nobility on Earth". I would focus especially on a feature of Epicurus which seems to have gone unnoticed: his Socratic indifference to science. While the modern freethinkers reject the servitude of dogmas to pay tribute to the "new idol" and sacrifice, to the latest boasts of science, all those which it didn't pronounce yesterday and which it will not pronounce tomorrow, Epicurus manifests a bilateral independence, so to speak, which is nearly equally scornful to right and left. Ousting the supernatural from our thoughts, since the supernatural is maleficent, is the only service he asks of science. It receives no slavery or even affection. In the presence of some phenomenon, he is content simply to affirm that it has a natural cause; he indicates, not without disinterest, the various explicative hypotheses that have been given before him or which he himself concocts; and he advises the disciple to make no choice between these hypotheses. For he might choose the wrong one, and some priest, gloating in this mistake, might affirm that this bankruptcy of science confirms the celebrated truths of religion. Everything has natural causes. As long as I'm persuaded of this, it's immaterial for my happiness to know all the details of these causes; in fact, it's wiser not to worry about them. This attitude, dictated by prudence and scorn, grants the letter to Herodotus, and especially the letter to Menoeceus, an original emphasis, which needs to be pointed out if we truly want to understand the smile of Epicurus.

A comparison of strikingly classical aspect can be found in Lucretius, which should be of use for a long time hereafter. I wouldn't be surprised if it was eventually discovered to date from Epicurus himself. He himself would have found its outlines in Gorgias. In the first form we know of, this similitude seems more Socratic than Platonic. Doubtless, Socrates went along repeating it in every intersection of Athens' roadways. And he must not have invented it; prior sages must have utilized the ethical parable of the myth of the barrel of the Danaids. In this comparison of the human heart with a vase, Epicureanism created one of the masterpieces of symbolism, one of the richest plenitudes known to philosophy and poetry. Such a rich image can suffice to explain all Epicurean wisdom.

For the common man, the vase has two flaws, it is dirty and it's broken. Wisdom consists in cleaning the vase and sealing the bottom.

Whatever enters the crude vase is corrupted by various fears. To clean the vase is to purge one's heart of its anxieties. Physics shows us that everything happens by natural causes; true theology teaches us that the gods have no interest in us: both of them deliver us from the first and the worst of all fears, the fear of the gods. There is no life other than life, and hell is a ridiculous invention, on which the cuisine of priests and sorcerers is based. (Epicurus was the son of a sorceress, a performer of lustrations: in his childhood, he had certainly witnessed jeering at religious stupidity and its dupes). — To be delivered from the fear of death, a very simple argument is adequate: death concerns neither the living nor the dead; as long as I am, it is not; when it is, I am no more. — The fear of pain is removed by seeing that, if it's severe, it won't last long; if it can be prolonged without killing me, that's because it's light.

This last fear, however, is the least absurd one.

An argument, no matter how clever it may be, is unlikely to be enough to get rid of it. To it alone, the purgation will risk inefficacy. The vase must be closed. The rare and inevitable pains will then be easily swallowed up by the abundance of pleasure. We will even succeed in transforming them into additional pleasures.

Indeed, the great evil of the ordinary man is that his heart is not only a poisoned vase, but a vase without a bottom. All pleasure passes rapidly and fruitlessly there. And the greed increases with the madman faster than the good man. How can this evil be fixed? How can the bottom of the vase be closed? By analyzing and criticizing desire.

There are three kinds of pleasures: some are natural and necessary, like hunger and thirst; — others are natural but not necessary, like the desire to eat different things; — others, finally, are neither natural nor necessary, like the desire for honors.

The natural and necessary desires should be satisfied: their satisfaction suppresses pain and disturbances. It gives supreme and non-augmentable pleasures. Besides, they require very little and only what's normally close to hand. When satisfied, the natural but unnecessary desires do not increase pleasure; they only vary it. — As for the desires which are neither natural nor necessary, they should be considered the greatest of evils. They have no limits; the more you indulge them, the more they demand. The sage destroys these desires in himself.

Aristippus is wrong to claim to find, between the realm of pleasure and the realm of pain, a neutral and indifferent domain. Aristippus ignores the greatest of pleasures: pleasure in repose, when the body feels no suffering, the mind no agitation. I can dispute about felicity with the gods. Indeed I am, in these hours of lasting completeness, a being who enjoys all of himself and his eurythmic activity, a being who enjoys constitutive pleasure perfectly.

In the beginning, there are no pleasures but the pleasures of the body. It's from these corporeal pleasures that the joys of the mind have issued; but these daughters are greater than their mothers. The body only feels the present instant; the mind can form a happiness for the present from the materials of past and future. When the vase is wisely patched up, it lets no happy memory escape, and I can usefully pour out a thousand joyous anticipations. The pleasures, which pass and vanish for the madman, survive in the mind of the sage. For him, the vase is always fullness. By memory and hope, he increases the present pleasure and erases its unevenness in a continual way. Everything that falls into such a vase takes on the savor and scent of happiness. Then if a drop of bitterness mixes with this immense sweetness, it only succeeds in heightening its savor and increasing its quantity. Having attained this point, the sage is freed from all pain: no particular suffering will disturb his vast, unanimous joy. Epicurus, dying from a kidney stone, writes to Idomeneus: "It's to the happiest and last day of my life that I write this letter to you. I feel bladder and gut pains so sharp that they couldn't be worse. But all of it is swallowed up in joy, which pours into my mind the memory of my dogmas and my discoveries."

Swallowed up like this in the memory of particular pleasures and the continuity of "constitutive pleasure", pain no longer exists for the sage. The letter to Idomeneus proves that Epicurus was not bragging when he said: "Even on a pyre, I would cry out: What a delight!"

To get past all the obstacles which are opposed to the purity, continuity, and fullness of pleasure, fearing neither death which annihilates all sensation, nor the divinity who is not at all concerned about us; despising pain, which is light when it is long-lasting, and brief and self-destructive when it is severe; not letting go of pleasures past, but holding onto them and feeding them with assiduous efforts at remembering; drowning in this vast ocean the absurd pettiness of the present when the present, on its own, would be misery: this is wisdom, this is the highest good, this is the subtle and delicate art of the Epicurean.

Let us never judge Greek nobility by its Roman corruption. A warrior, administrator, politician, and a builder both externally and internally, the Roman makes all the Greek arts cumbersome and stiff: those tending to the beauty of a work and those tending to the beauty of a life. Between Roman Epicureanism and Greek Epicureanism, the distance is the same as between a Senecan tragedy and a Sophoclean tragedy. The Roman, when he is no longer lowly, manifests some eloquence, declamation, and theatricality. From Epicurean grace he fashions a porcine vulgarity and a philosophy for bad places. Or, if there's any dignity in it, he makes it into a bitter, mighty pessimism. Neither talent nor genius keep him from either error. Horace, the worshipper of Augustus, of Falernian wine and fine slaves, would have disgusted Epicurus in multiple ways. All Lucretius's enthusiasm for the Liberator did nothing to deliver Lucretius from desperate feelings which the Liberator would be no less contemptible for the Liberator than religious despair.

Greek Epicureanism, the true Epicureanism, is an art of being happy, not an art of making oneself unhappy. It is essentially — advanced, successful, and definitive like a masterpiece — the same thing the Cyrenaics had begun, a critique and a discipline of the sensibility. It remains for us to study, with the Cynics and Stoics, the critique and discipline of the will.

Chapter IV: The Cynics

Like the Cyrenaics, the Cynics reacting against Platonic intellectualism and, carrying forward Socrates's legacy, they were concerned only with practical matters. Also like the Cyrenaics, they reacted against properly Socratic intellectualism and rejected the affirmation that all flaws are errors.

Cynicism is not and does not seek to be a morality. In metaphysics, it professes the most absolute agnosticism. But its Logic would be interesting to reconstitute. It is an individualistic protest against Plato's bold generalizations. For Antisthenes, a reality can only be individual in nature. General ideas express none of the essence of things, but only the thoughts of men about things.

Before following Socrates, Antisthenes was a follower of Gorgias. From Gorgias, who had been a pupil of Zeno of Elea, he was influenced by the Eleatics. He accepts their fundamental postulate, the incompatibility of the One and the Many. But, while the Eleatic school denies the reality of the Many and sees individual objects as appearances, Antisthenes denies the reality of the One and of universals.

It was in their arguments against Plato that Antisthenes and Diogenes came to express their ideas on Logic. And we know these due only to Plato's caricaturing of them in many dialogues, such as the Sophist, the Euthydemus, and the Theatetus. He could insult "Antisthenes and those of like ignorance", despise in his principal enemy "an old man who has begun studying too late in the day"; but the Cynics' objections to the theory of Ideas, quite embarrassing for Plato, are decisive for us. The object or individual fact, scorned by the Eleatics and relegated by the Academy to the domain of appearances, remains, as Antisthenes affirms, the only reality with which we have any contact. It is infinitely more real than the Platonic Idea, the incorporeal essence whose existence is attested by no sound proof, to be clearer, a dream and an illusion created by language. Plato takes names for things and, as beautiful and shiny as his edifice is, it's like a rainbow: composed entirely of reflections. Antisthenes is right to tell him: I know horses but not horse-ness; I know men, but outside of my mind, I don't know the idea of man; I've seen cups on tables, but I don't know what cup-ness and table-ness might be.

Antisthenes's critique goes further. Since general ideas have no objective reality and since, aside from judgments of identity, all judgment contains a general idea: the judgments of identity alone are correct. When I've affirmed that Socrates is Socrates, I've said of Socrates all that can be said in an absolute sense. To add that he's good, that he's just, that he's flat-nosed, is my right if I'm speaking without any pretense to absoluteness, if I'm not aiming at the precision which would allow me to ground a rigorous argument on the foundation of a sound and exact judgment. For Socrates does not exhaust the idea of goodness; the idea of goodness does not exhaust the concept of Socrates; and the goodness of Socrates is not that of someone else. And his nose is no different from other flat noses. And his justice is not Antisthenes's justice.

Demonstrations are based on definitions. And yet the individual, the only reality, cannot be defined. Therefore nothing concrete can be demonstrated. All discussion is vain and all contradiction is impossible. He who thinks he contradicts me uses the same words as me to designate something different. The words contain one series of personal experiences for me; for him, they hold a different series of experiences.

If the objection is made to Antisthenes that he renders impossible, not only Platonic dialectics and philosophical discussion, but language itself, he will respond that honest men can talk to each other. They know what they're talking about: their series of experiences won't completely coincide, but the names will awaken other series.

Besides, they can always distinguish between the basic elements of knowledge and the combinations of these elements. The basic elements are completely indefinable. It's the same with the elementary sounds of language, which can only be heard, but not analyzed. When it comes to the basic elements, I can only say the name of my experience, in hopes that it will evoke in the hearer a more or less analogous experience. If he hasn't had the necessary direct experience, I may still signal some resemblance between what he's ignorant of and something else that he has known. But I know how vague and disconnected what I'm saying is; how undulating and imprecise its meaning is. The combinations of knowledge are like syllables. I can say which letters make up the syllable. I can also talk about the elements of the combinations; if I manage to enumerate them all, I will, as far as possible, given a definition. But that's "a long speech." Such a long speech that all the definitions on which the dogmatics raise their constructs reveal, with close scrutiny, incomplete enumerations.

Now re-read in the clarity of these explanations the way Antisthenes and Diogenes of Sinope mock Plato in Diogenes Laertius. Many of their jokes which originally seemed puerile gain a true critical interest. Nevertheless, these subtle enemies of all subtlety are mostly interesting for their ethics.

Ethics is, according to them, a practical science or, as we would say, an art. All the arts can be taught; no art is taught orally. Only exercise makes the artist or artisan: one becomes a blacksmith by working as one; a sculptor, by sculpting; a wise man, by living wisely. All the arts have an intellectual side, with respect to which language can be useful. But nothing is simpler and briefer than this intellectual and expressible part. As for the ethical art, it is contained in the distinction between law and nature, and in the precept: "live in conformity with nature". Diogenes, a great violinist, sums up all his science and practice with this slogan: "I oppose courage to fortune; nature against the laws; reason against the passions." He who knows how to neglect the laws, despise external incidents, and master his passions, he who is the free being, the sage or, if you will, he is a man, and he it is whom Diogenes seeks in midday with his lit lantern.

So rare is this fully realized man that Diogenes does not even find him in his teacher, a "heroic trumpet but who fails to hear himself". Antisthenes seems, though, to have lived in a simple and philosophical way and nobody knows what weaknesses his great and strict disciple saw in him. Everywhere, we are made to understand that the doctrine of Antisthenes was sufficiently difficult for Diogenes, and that these blasts of the trumpet had seemed sufficiently "heroic" to him. Antisthenes said: "The sage does not regulate his conduct by the established laws, but by virtue." He despised the country and those who boasted of being the sons of their country; he declared that he also knew glorious snails and privileged grasshoppers who were born in Athenian territory. He mocked religion and, if some student boasted in his presence of the joys of the future life, he would ask, astonished: "So what's stopping you from dying?" He never showed any respect for the magistrates, whether those named by the people or appointed by other magistrates, and, to those who admired the power of the laws, he advised: "Decree, then, that asses should be horses." All his words are those of an individualist, a free man, and, to the criticism that his mother was a slave, he replied: "I am not the son of two wrestlers, but that doesn't stop me from knowing about wrestling[9]."

Diogenes of Sinope was an even better wrestler. He was not only the most famous of the Cynics, but he may have been the most well-known figure in the ancient world. He owes it especially to his picturesque way of representing the doctrine of Antisthenes: he illustrated it with his ways and his lived parables. We only have to remember the most famous of these anecdotes to recognize a true comic genius in him.

Crates of Thebes was the poet of the sect. His poem on Besace[10] is extant.

Lucian of Samosata made two other Cynics famous: Menippus the satirist and Peregrinus. The latter, half insane, half charlatan, lived in the second century of our era. He was converted for a while to the new religion and, as reported by Lucian, "collaborated on the Christian writings".

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[9] My Véritables entretiens de Socrate are presented as if translated from Antisthenes. I've tried, throughout the volume, to make the Cynics speak in the first person in their bold language and to preserve their confrontational manner.

[10] A translation of this can be found in my novel Le père Diogene .

Having returned to Cynicism, he burned himself with great pomp in the Olympian Games on the pretext of teaching contempt for death. After which he was long honored by the people and performed numerous miracles.

The sincere Cynics, men admirable for their courage and patience, were not exempt from certain systematic flaws. They pushed their love of nature far, even to the point of condemning all civilization. They wrote true pamphlets against Prometheus, the inventor of fire and, for that reason, of all of man's misfortunes. Some, like Diogenes, seem to have renounced all cooked food. Their criterion of what was natural was rather narrow, and they often asked overly direct lessons from animals.

Their condemnation of modesty, which they neglected to analyze and which they rejected entirely as an invention of the city, was often no less repugnant than the absurdity of a certain artificial modesty. The indiscretion of their propaganda was intended to drive away the delicate natures. It wasn't without ethical difficulties for the propagandist either. Diogenes said: "Like music teachers, I exaggerate the tone to help the students match it." Always exaggerating tone, the music-master risks becoming an insane and crass musician.

The Stoics will correct the Cynics' flaws. Perhaps their intellectualistic reaction will be excessive at first. With time, many of them will become, quite precisely, the noblest Cynics. More complete as well: to moral strength and independence in thought and behavior, they add a lively and profound feeling of human fraternity[11].

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[11] I've published two works of Cynic philosophy rather than on Cynic philosophy. The Psychodore of my Voyages de Psychodore and the Paraboles cyniques is not an orthodox Cynic. He represents one of the possible transitions from Cynicism to Stoicism. — in Père Diogenes the reader may find picturesque details on Cynic life,

Chapter V: The Stoics

Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, was born at Citium, on the island of Cyprus. The city, long Hellenized, was formerly a Phoenician colony. Zeno descended from the original settlers, and we continually see his enemies, and even his friends, clashing with the Semitic part of him, teasing him about his ancestry. The Peripatetics, who boasted of being the most amiable and the best trained of all philosophers, shouted at him when, in his youth, he came to hear their teachers discreetly: “You had better hide, we know that you’re only here to steal our dogmas, which you will then go and dress up in Phoenician clothes.”

But his upbringing had been entirely Hellenic. He had shown, from childhood, an immense appetite for speculative philosophy and Heraclitus’s poem had moved him.

Coming from a wealthy family, he personally owned more than three thousand talents, that is, he was a millionaire six times over. But his fortune was tied up in maritime commerce, and a single storm was all it took to ruin him.

Following the shipwreck of his merchandise, he went to Athens. He was no sooner in the city than, by chance, he sat next to a bookshop.

In those days, bookshops were outdoor stalls, holding volumes for sale. The merchant, seated on a raised stool, would dictate aloud. Squatting scribes would write it down, and each would produce a copy of the text. The literate poor would form a circle and listen to a reading which was not meant for their ears. Among these onlookers, the small Phoenician is the most attentive. For today’s dictation is the book in which Xenophon has gathered Socrates’ lovely words. The little Phoenician, drunk on enthusiasm, finally cried out: “Where can someone like this Socrates be found?” The merchant, maybe as a joke, pointed to a little hunchback who was then walking on the other side of the square. “All you have to do,” he said, “is follow this man.” And Zeno followed that man.

The little hunchback was Crates, the disciple of Diogenes and the most famous among the Cynics at that time.

By visiting this first teacher, Zeno must have enjoyed intense and profound joys. These, however, soon made him anxious, and ended by smashing all his previous deceptions.

Through Crates he loved the whole Socratic side of things, the Cynic’s proud contempt for “the generals of armies, who are just donkey-herders”; — the pride of his proclamation: “My contempt for glory and money is my only country”; the intelligent recognition that led him to say: “I am a citizen, not of Thebes, but of Diogenes”. He loved the loftiness with which this man had responded when Alexander asked him: “Do you want me to reconstruct your city?” — “Why? So that another Alexander can destroy it again?” In Crates he found and loved the strongly spontaneous willpower which led him to reject wealth as a hindrance. “A shipwreck,” Zeno often said, “led me to the port.” Crates was a better pilot: he himself had discovered the harbor and there he had landed in spite of the wind.

But alongside these motives of tender admiration, many details also shocked the delicate Phoenician. The Cynics’ theatrical and buffoonish attitude offended him, their continual need for spectators and hearers, their way of contorting themselves with the manic aim of educating others, the absurd sacrifice of all simplicity, and their consenting to be nothing more than an instrument of propaganda. As Diogenes said: “Like a music teacher, I exaggerate the tone to help the students match it”. Crates exaggerated the tone even more than Diogenes.

The hunchback Crates had a young, beautiful woman for his lover. To teach mankind that modesty is an artificial feeling created by the City, he possessed Hipparchia publicly.

One day, the little Phoenician attended the unpleasant spectacle despite himself. The numerous crowd pressed him right up beside the couple who, despite the jeers and laughter, coupled like two shepherds making an instructive display. Zeno, blushing, cast his mantle over the burlesque lovers and fled the scene.

At some time from then, Crates met the unfaithful disciple among those who accompanied Stilpo the Megarian or Polemon the Platonist. He tried to win him back. Following the annoying custom of the Cynics, he added gestures to words, seizing the young man by his clothing in an act of symbolic violence. Zeno freed himself with a firm gentleness and said high-mindedly: “Are you unaware, Crates, that philosophers are only to be seized by the ear?”

For twenty years he wandered from school to school. His anxieties found peace nowhere. It was only in himself that he finally discovered the principle of harmony. The materials, which he had borrowed here and there, became truly his own because of the happy and novel arrangement he gave to them.

The first striking point with him — the natural half, no doubt, the half created by reacting against all his teachers — a keen desire to flee the crowd. He chose, to host his school, the Poikile, the porch where fourteen hundred citizens had been put to death under the Thirty Tyrants, and which people tended to avoid ever since. There he strolled with a small group of disciples. He only gave himself to a few whom he could serve. A malicious comment was once thrown at him: that Theophrastus was always surrounded by a multitude of hearers. “Yes,” replied Zeno with disdain, “Theophrastus led a larger choir, but mine agrees better.” The words agreement, harmony, resurfaced in all his speeches. Agreement with oneself, his great teaching, both to himself and others, is contained in this advice:

> “Live harmoniously.”

This slogan is the finest and most individualistic one I know of. But, like all strong and dense statements, it remains obscure for those who don’t want to understand it, misunderstood by those who always want to understand something other than what’s said. Cleanthes will make the mistake of recoiling in the face of the challenges raised by the Peripatetics, and to go back to the Cynics’ slogan:

> “Live harmoniously with nature.”

It wasn’t only for ethical, but also for intellectual reasons that Zeno had abandoned the Cynics. In Cynicism, which was a method of life rather than a complete philosophy, our erstwhile reader of Heraclitus failed to find the sort of metaphysical matter that would satisfy his hungry mind. He fashioned a richer doctrine for himself, each of whose parts seemed necessary to him. Philosophy, he said, is like an animal: its bones and nerves are logic; its flesh is ethics; its soul is physics.

His death was a simple, discreet harmony, just like his doctrine and his life. He was quite old when, distancing himself from the Porch where he had come once again to pronounce his noble, dense formulae, he suffered a fall. While falling, he broke a finger. Then, gently striking the ground, he addressed the ground with a line of tragic poetry which means, basically: “You don’t need to call me, I’ll come of my own accord.” And, returning home, he allowed himself to die of hunger.

Cleanthes, his successor, a philosopher without profundity or originality, is one of the purest heroes of the Porch. Heavy, clumsy, timid, but supported by noble evenness in his thought and efforts, one day he wrote a masterpiece, which is one of the fullest and soundest poems left to us by the ancient world. In his Hymn to Zeus, where, under the name of the popular god, Cleanthes celebrates the Stoic God, Order mixed with Force, the season itself becomes enthusiasm, and the singing words vibrate like the lyre’s cords: “Nothing is done without you on the Earth, O God, nothing in ethereal heaven, and nothing in the sea… By you, excess is moderated, confusion becomes order, and discord, harmony. You blend what is good with what is not, so that a unique and eternal law is established throughout the entirety.”

Chrysippus, the successor of Cleanthes, is the great genius of Stoicism. He strongly reconstituted, for ages to come, Zeno’s somewhat lax synthesis, which Cleanthes had allowed to fall by the wayside. It was said: “Without Chrysippus, there is no Porch.” For Chrysippus, Logic, Metaphysics, and Ethics form a totality. The teaching of philosophy may be begun with either. The whole doctrine might also be taught from the perspective of Logic, Metaphysics, or Ethics. But it’s impossible to explicitly talk about one of the three aspects of the unique and harmonious science without the two others being discussed for the intelligent listener. The powerful harmony, the rigorous correspondence of the various parts, the unique and supple life he gave to the whole system struck even his opponents with admiration.

The Logic of the Stoics is only a curiosity and an object for the erudite. Their Metaphysics and Ethics remain vivid. But, as Chrysippus would say, Metaphysics is only the Logic of the universe; wisdom is the Logic of the individual.

In the universe, as in the individual, Chrysippus refuses to separate thought from action. Whether it is posed with respect to the man, or whether enlarged to the great Whole, the old question which we currently call the problem of the primacy of will or intelligence has no meaning for the orthodox Stoic.

The Stoic metaphysics is a powerful materialistic monism. Everything that exists is corporeal. Outside of bodies, all we know is abstraction, mental conceptions, i.e., time, space, and general ideas.

But what is a body? It’s that which is at once both active and passive. There is no passivity without some activity; no activity without some passivity.

The passive element of all body is what we call matter, strictly speaking. To the active element we give the name of force. But there can be no matter which is not grouped and held together by force; there can be no force which does not rest on some matter.

When we consider the assemblage of things, we call the universe the unity of matter, and we call God the unity of force.

Even force, in the final analysis, should be conceived as something material. The Stoics thought of it as kinds and manifestations of fire. But their God is not the kind of fire which our senses can know. It’s not the kind of fire that dries out and destroys. It’s a living, life-giving fire; it’s an intelligent and artistic fire. This strangely subtle fire penetrates and surrounds, like some modern savants’ ether, all parts of matter.

God, the artist-fire, is only intelligent force and intelligent movement. Yet His movement is dual in nature: it is both extinguished and reignited. This rhythm is translated throughout the universe by these contractions and distensions. An immense systole and an immense diastole extended across the entire world, here is the essential dual phenomenon which produces all change.

An hour will come — and it has already come an infinite number of times — when the whole universe will be burned up. There will then be no more world, nothing besides God. But no sooner will that occur than God will begin extinguishing Himself again, in order to reconstruct the universe[1]. The double, alternating movement never ceases; all things move in a circle which recommences at every instant, or rather, which had no beginning. Each cycle, each eternity reproduces exactly, strictly, without any change at all, the same beings and the same phenomena in the same sequence. Clearly, Nietzsche, the prophet of the Great Return, invented nothing.

Such is the world, and such is man. God is the effort which is coextensive with the world: wisdom is the effort which is coextensive with the sage. Force, for the Stoic, is not distinct from reason. Socrates was not wrong to believe that science and practice always go together. Where we go wrong is in calling "science" things that are nothing but faces and appearance; people aren't skilled carpenters because they can talk with equal ease about planes and saws, but because they saw and plane well. People aren't expert philosophers because they can talk eloquently about virtue, but because they practice virtue. The sage is at once the masterpiece and the creator of the masterpiece.

This masterpiece, as we can join Zeno in calling it, is the harmonious life; with the Cynics and with Cleanthes, the life in harmony with nature; with the Pythagoreans, the life in imitation of God. For Chrysippus, these three formulations are all equivalents. If I am in harmony with myself, I am necessarily in harmony with nature and I am like God: I create my harmony the same way God creates the universal harmony.

Harmony, form, and beauty, are all that matters. But, there is no beauty but the beauty of particular things; there is no form but the form of some matter.

In one sense, the matter of my life is indifferent. It makes no difference Phidias's artistry whether he's modeling clay or striking marble with his chisel. But some matter is more malleable than others: among the things I declare indifferent by comparison to the single good thing, the beauty of my life, some of them I consider preferable, and they should be pursued to a certain extent, as long as such efforts don't affect the highest good. I avoid whatever is contrary to these preferable things when I can do so without debasing myself.

It's often said that the Stoics were the first to use the word "duty". There is some error or confusion in this. In Stoicism we find nothing like our servile modern conception of duty. The Stoics would say that I owe nothing to anyone, I have no innate debts, I have incurred no obligations, and I am the slave to no alien power, real or abstract, a personal God or a categorical imperative. I am a natural being who fulfills natural functions. The Stoic word which is translated as duty could only be translated correctly as functions. Or rather, the Stoics would have spoken the same way about the duties of man as the duties of animals and plants.

Man has a vegetative and an animal life. He therefore fulfills the functions of all that lives. But beside this he has his own functions, such learning and loving others. "It's man's lot," said the Stoics, "to be a philanthropist". And again: "It is natural for man to love other men, not from self-interest, but from the heart." And the beautiful word which the first Christians used nobly, and which Christian decadence degraded to the point of rendering it the equivalent of alms, the word which meant love with its procession of grace, pleasantness, and exquisite spontaneity: the word charity. The Christians got it from the Stoics. The Stoics were the first in the West to proclaim as one of our noblest functions, and the most necessary one for our happiness, the immense "charity of mankind".

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[1] I've tried to express this doctrine poetically in the last of my Paraboles cyniques.

In the soul of the Stoic, this wide feeling ruined all respect for country, which commits the double crime of oppressing the individual and separating him from his brothers. Zeno, and all the Stoics after him, consider the whole universe as the City of men and gods; they celebrate the natural kinship which unites as one all peoples, making a single family of everyone with a portion of reason.

Regular fulfilment of my natural functions is not enough to fashion a beauty and a truly human happiness of me. The animal who eats when hungry and drinks when thirsty is not a sage. No more so is a man who instinctively instructs himself in the truth or instinctively loves his fellows. In addition, in order to enjoy harmony, it is necessary for me to fulfil my natural functions with an aim to harmony. Wisdom is beauty within light, a self-aware harmony. Only the wise man is happy. He lives amid the continual joy of his self-accord, and his agreement with the universe, just like God. He lives within the continual pride of knowing that his harmony is his own workmanship.

What is the first natural function and the most essential tendency of all that lives? Callicles is wrong: he who thinks that it's the love of conquest and domination, Epicurus is wrong to mistake indices of health for health itself, and to claim that living beings seek pleasure for its own sake.

No, these tendencies are not the primary ones. What is primary is the need to preserve my being, to protect what I am; but what am I? I am neither a heart nor a brain, a stomach nor my limbs. I am an assemblage. This assemblage is what I defend against hostile forces. My first tendency is to protect what is doubtless a poor and unconscious, although susceptible of enrichment and intellectual self-enjoyment, a harmony.

The tendency towards my good, the tendency to preserve and realize myself, is perverted in me, if I'm insane. It becomes the four passions, these excessive movements, outside the norms of beauty, whose bawling ugliness works for false goods or timidly flees from apparent evils. The madman, when he is deprived of false goods or is enslaved to a false present enjoyment, suffers from sadness or pleasure. If the possession of false goods or deprivation of them is thought of with respect to the future, the madman suffers from desire or fear.

The sage is not impassive. Instead of the passions, the mad and excessive agitations, he knew the affections, these beautiful and eurythmic movements. There is nothing in him corresponding to sadness, since the sage always possesses the true good, light and force, reason and good will. But, instead of pleasure and its minor tremors, he might know joy, this joy would continue, an ascension in full clarity. Instead of manic fears, he might know the pleasant prudence which forever watches over the internal treasures. Finally, the sage's efforts never call for what is impossible or aleatory, they seek only what he can always realize: the beauty in the effort itself. No matter how the combat, which is the life of the sage, ends, the sage's life is a continual victory. Thus, the sage does not desire, he simply wants.

Clearly, the dominant feature of Stoicism is the sense of the unity of all being and its self-agreement. To know the harmony that I am, to realize it increasingly and, to the extent that I perfect it, gaining an ever clearer and larger and awareness of it, climbing upon everything I know in order to act in a loftier manner, and upon each of my actions to see greater and greater vastness, is the essence of the doctrine.

The Romans give a stiff, tense and theatrical character to Stoicism. Nevertheless, Stoicism was better suited than Epicureanism to undergo Roman influence without being defaced. The Roman Epicureans may be fascinating objects for psychologists and ethnologists to study; but none of them is ethically interesting. Despite the absence of a certain iciness and a lack of pleasantness in heroism, many Roman Stoics remain admirable masterpieces.

Things are different with Seneca. But to what extent is Seneca a Stoic? He's a Stoic every time he applies himself to the matter; he ceases to be once he forgets to apply himself and abandons himself to his nature.

And nobody's nature was ever less certain nature than his.

He praises Stoicism magnificently. He praises it delicately for its most human aspects. "No sect is more benevolent, gentle, more of a friend to humanity, more concerned with the common good: all it counsels is to be useful to oneself, to watch over universal interests, and the interests of all." For the Stoic, "everywhere a man is, there is room for a benefit." His entire book, On Benefits, has no other object but to develop and clarify this great little slogan from On the Blessed Life:

> "Our own pleasure is the benefit, even when painful, provided it eases the pains of others; even when costly to us, provided it eases the needs and troubles of another."

When he applies himself he understands Stoicism in its subtlest essence:

> "The cleanliness of clothing is not in itself a good, but rather the preference one gives to clean clothes. For the good is not in things but in our choices. It's our actions which are upright, not the substance of our actions".

But he often seems more like an advocate for Stoicism than a Stoic. An orator at the forum or perhaps an actor, he extends himself, stiffens, and shouts through a mask. What becomes of the Greek pleasant, regular nature when this Hispano-Roman distrusts fortune and instigates fights? The wrestler is ready; he proclaims a circumstance which allows him to test his strength and virtue. Poor man! He can't then harmonize the humble materials and fight obscure squabbles…

Contrary to Stoic orthodoxy, — there is only one virtue which always acts the same way, whose names vary only with the matter to which it's applied, — Seneca boasts at length — he does everything at great length — of particular precepts and their rare efficacy. Meanwhile, he ignores other perspectives. The advice he gives is always capital; the subject he treats seems to him to be the most important of all, the only important one. When he praises friendship, friendship truly becomes the supreme good. If he alone had to possess wisdom, he would reject it. These declarations, which a true Stoic would find insane, encumber the sixth letter to Lucilius. Naturally, such exaggerations are paid for in rapid contradictions. In letter 9, Seneca proudly preaches, almost wildly so: "He who is content with himself can never be alone. The sage is self-sufficient, having no need of anyone else."

These are venial faults which may have more to do with the manner of the writer than his character. They certainly raise concerns about his character, and even lead us to fear an absence of either honesty or at least profundity and soundness.

Here's something more serious. In countless places, Seneca condemns slavery, laughs at nobility, despises money, and makes fun of pomp and ceremony. His ornate and chatty eloquence gladly dwells and is amused at these commonplaces. Alas! He even contradicts himself on these basic points. He wants people to be good to their slaves but this strange individualist forbids "anyone to say that he calls for their emancipation and that he desires to turn their masters out of the heights they occupy". Often Stoic as to fine generalities, in particular cases he turns out to be quite accommodating. Lucilius desires to make a dangerous experiment on a man. Seneca, a lovely director of consciences, recommends to him: "Only try it on the least of your slaves."

In the fourth book of On Benefits, one finds a rather curious understanding of nobility and the privileges of birth:

> I would even give certain things, as I won't deny, to unworthy men, by consideration for other people. This is how, in the quest for public functions, nobility has led to the preference of infamous people over more capable, but new men… Why should Providence give the government of the world to Caligula, that man who was so thirsty for human blood, who made it flow before him as if he were thirsty for it? You can't think that it was he whom Providence gave the power: it was given to his father, Germanicus…

What a funny Providence!

His words praising poverty — somewhat ridiculous coming from a man whom fortune rises to forty million in our currency, with a man who was probably a usurer and whom Dio Cassius accuses with high likelihood of having caused the Britannic war through his bitter demands for complete and immediate repayment on his capital, without granting his debtors any liberty at all on many occasions — at least these burlesque panegyrics have the merit of coming only on occasion.

"We should not affect any contempt for money," he affirms in the fifth letter to Lucilius: "In all things, we must act with moderation."

You could fill a small volume with such astonishing Stoic traits. Here, for example, is a panegyric for vain expenditures. Three hundred thousand sesterces (a hundred thousand francs) sunk into a single party do not, for Seneca, constitute an outrageous expense, if instead of offering it to gluttony (the gullet, gulae) one offered it to representation and to pomp (to honor, he says, honori!). Then, he solemnly affirms, "It's not debauchery, it's solemn magnificence". He is no harder on drunkenness than on spending big. He says that:

> "We can sometimes go as far as intoxication, not to lose ourselves in it, but to calm ourselves in this way." And if less indulgent men criticize Cato for his drunkenness, for Seneca they would be paying "an honorable accusation rather than dishonor for Cato."
>
> I believe I've found the secret behind these weaknesses and contradictions in the preface to the Natural Questions. Those who are not initiated in the profundities of science, Seneca declares, are better off never having been born.

Virtue, on its own, is not happiness. Its role and merit is to liberate the mind and prepare it for the knowledge of celestial things. What scandalous declarations for a Stoic as well as a

Cynic, for a Cyrenaic as well as an Epicurean, and truly for the entire Socratic lineage. But a Pythagorean would approve of them. Seneca seems to me like a mind, Pythagorean by nature, brought by circumstances to speak the Stoic language and play the part of a Stoic. Why does he consent to this alteration? Because being openly Pythagorean implied, in those days, a complete renunciation of all public influence and all political action. Meanwhile Stoicism was, at Rome, a party which allowed for worldly ambitions. Doesn't Seneca seem like a modern anarchist who, through a wish to be a deputy and a minister, joins the party which is the furthest thing from anarchy, the Socialist Party?

Seneca's behavior has been judged in quite different ways. Diderot's impassioned admiration for his virtue is well known. Diderot, the hothead, seems to be a mediocre psychologist and, when he's mistaken about a character, isn't only a bit wrong. — Subtle Rochefoucauld put at the head of his Maxims a figure with the mask of hypocrisy and, beneath it, the name of Seneca. Doubtless, Seneca allowed himself to be led into many lies and grimaces. And yet he seems like the perfect hypocrite to me. His words and deeds lie in the same way as the words and deeds of lesser politicians, maybe even less so. Seneca seems like the archetypal climber: he has every possible ambition, even to be a philosopher and a man of virtue. He is greedy for wealth and power; he is no less so for literary and philosophical glory: he is even greedy, when he has time for it, for moral beauty and practical wisdom. In his first youth, persuaded by the speeches of the Pythagorean Sotion and, I think, also drawn by a natural inclination, he abstained for a certain time from all animal flesh. Listen to the way he tells Lucilius the outcome of the adventure:

> My mind seemed more agile then, and I wouldn't dare claim that it wasn't. You ask me how I stopped. My youth came under the government of Tiberius. In those days certain foreign faiths were persecuted. Among the marks of these superstitions was included abstinence from certain meats. At my father's insistence, who had no hostility against philosophy but was afraid of informers, I returned to my former habits and he easily persuaded me to make better fare.

This anecdote seems significant to me. Seneca loves philosophy and even philosophical practice. But, if either of the two risk harming his advancement, he renounces it "easily". He seems forever ambitious for all that looks pretty and shiny. He became Julia's lover from snobbery; he became Agrippina's lover from material ambition. Exiled to Corsica, he despaired at being far from the court and, to obtain his return, descended to the vilest tactics. To hold onto the high station he had finally obtained, he multiplies platitudes, palinodies and, as necessary, the most odious complicity. He has the affairs of Nero and Actea protected by his friend Serenus: he gives, when pressed, advice of parricide, and even wrote a defense of it. Incapable of displeasing the mighty, at the same time he composed the brilliant funeral oration of Claudius, which Nero read to the Senate, along with a pamphlet against Claudius which, in secret, amused Nero and Agrippina. His ambition does not recoil from treason. He conspired against the Emperor and allowed a conspiracy within a conspiracy; he wasn't unaware that many of his friends sought, along with the death of Nero, to kill their leader Piso and set Seneca on the throne. Cowardly in countless circumstances, he only seems courageous when destiny, binding him in an impasse, allows him no other ambition but that of a fine death[2].

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[2] For my views on Seneca: Seneca the ambitious man, additional information can be found in the second chapter of my Apparitions d'Ahasvérus.

It’s hard for a Roman to be a full philosopher. Except for enervation by vulgar enjoyments, he cannot escape the temptation to activity. Under the Empire, cowards took refuge in this porcine Epicureanism which has nothing in common with the Greek Epicureanism except part of a vocabulary. Braver men are all Stoics. But some understand their doctrine so poorly that they think they find encouragement to political action in it.

Epicurus forbade the sage from busying himself with politics, unless he were forced to do so. Zeno asked him to busy himself with politics except where one couldn’t. But what a malicious smile must the subtle Phoenician have had on his face when he wrote such advice and followed up with this remarks that, if one lives in a corrupt or unjust State, this constitutes an impediment, and that one should then renounce public affairs. As an individualist, he knew full well that every State is necessarily corrupt and unjust. Also happy to distinguish between the small City where our haphazard birth casts us and the great City, the Cosmos, he said: “Be useful to the universe”. He also explained that all I do in favor of the great and Small Republic is to give them a perfect sage. That was far too subtle and disinterested for even the best Roman minds.

Besides, we must not condemn all the political Stoics as severely as we do Seneca. Many are somewhat ostentatious masterpieces, admirable even despite their open drive and desires to be admired. They are especially found in the circle of Thrasea. His beautiful mother’s heroic death is well known. Arria and the dagger, with which she had just taken her own life, and now extending it, a perfumed model for her hesitant husband, with the magnificent phrase: “Paetus, it doesn’t hurt”. Epictetus has, with due admiration, preserved a dialogue of rare firmness between Thrasea’s son-in-law, Helvidius Priscus, and Emperor Vespasian. — Thrasea himself was the great principled man of the opposition. Many of his heroic abstentions are well known, and one never tires of rereading, in Tacitus, about his somewhat theatrically sublime death.

* * *

A little later, Dio the Golden-Mouthed tried, as a Cynic, to bring about popular edification. But instead of proceeding by buffoonery and wisecracks, he pronounced discourses of noble composition and moving verbal power. The true inventor of preaching and the first missionary, he rushed from town to town and village to village, pacifying quarrels, calming violent passions, doing his best to awaken men’s consciences.

Long an orator, he had, in the eyes of the literate public, made, along with the great reputation suggested by his surname, a considerable fortune. When he was converted to philosophy, he was careful to distribute his goods to the poor before daring to preach virtue to others.

Persecuted, exiled, forced to hide who he was, for his daily bread he carried out the most painful tasks in a Roman camp of Dacians. The news of Domitian’s death arrives, along with the proclamation of his successor at Rome. Both from vanity and more material interests, the Dacian legion wants to install its own emperor. It prepares to march against the City. Dio leaps on the altar while proclaiming a line from the Odyssey:

“Finally wise Ulysses dropped his rags.”

He reveals himself, and boasts to the soldiers, who are wild with rage, of the benefits of peace. Their cries cannot drown out his powerful voice, their blows cannot halt his obstinate voice. His clothes in tatters, his face bloody, visibly ready for utter martyrdom, he cries: “Listen to me. It’s not every day you’ll find a man who freely brings you the truth. Freely, honestly, and sincerely. Without ulterior motive, without ambition, without greed, with the sole desire to do what’s right, as well as the firm intention to overcome, for your own benefit, or die at your hands[3].” Following custom, his sincerity was challenged with insults, showing that they rise from personal interests. But he: “Why would I lie to you? For money? Praise? Glory? I have renounced all glory and the elite public to give my soul and my words to the unfortunate. Money? How often have I refused offers of money? And, when I took up the true form of life, I began by distributing all I had to the poor. If I had anything left, I’d give it away too.”

Probably a unique success story in history! This courage, this harsh patience, this obstinate perseverance, this ardent eloquence throughout a beating even, all so nobly regulated like the soul’s movements, astonished the soldiers and produced hesitation, and finally persuasion. “The highly sincere prophet of immortal nature[4] converted a whole army to peace. Dio Golden-Mouthed has the unique glory of having, without external authority, by words and valiance alone, stopped a war that was in the making[5].

* * *

Before Dio, upright Musonius, Epictetus’s teacher, had ventured a similar miracle. Under the ramparts of Rome, he tried to explain to Vespasian’s soldiers the benefits of peace and the criminal follies of war. Musonius was probably no worse in character than Dio; but he lacked his eloquence and the amazing resources of his tongue. He failed, like virtually everyone does in these desperate measures; he had to give up on what Tacitus calls “an untimely wisdom”. Did Epictetus have these two adventures, undertaken with the same heart but which brought such different outcomes, in mind when he made this energetic comment on the “Know yourself”: “How can everyone know what he is capable of? — And how does the bull, when the lion appears, know his own strength, and step forward to defend the herd alone?”

Epictetus would have liked to live like Dio, a contemporary whom he loves and admires, along with Socrates and Diogenes. He would have liked to proclaim the truth in the places where the public gathers. Youthful experiments taught him that he was not made for this task, and he retired to the teaching of his school. But this Stoic sorely regretted this lack of the gifts that allow for public activism. His ideal sage, active and powerful, he often calls: the Cynic, who is “the father of humanity.” And elsewhere: “He’s beaten like an ass and, when he’s beaten, he cherishes, in his quality of brother and father to all men, those who strike him.”

This man, who, became a Stoic only by his incapacity for Cynicism is, however, the archetypal Stoic for posterity. Those who, after him, claimed to belong to the Portico, call him their teacher and cite him more often than Chrysippus or Zeno. The whole Stoic morality seems to be an echo of his views and words. After him, the doctrine of indifferent things is explained, and indeed becomes useful, to explain the great ethical doctrine of Stoicism. It goes all the way back to the sect’s origins and we’ve already encountered it in its original form. But Epictetus expresses it with a new vibrancy and makes it the center of all future Stoicism.

I call “indifferent” all that which does not depend on me. This definition is, to be sure, an act of will at first; but it is one of the forces which will bear me up. From the start, it indicates a goal to be reached; then it speaks of a whole subjective reality. Moreover, it has always spoken of the objective truth, and how these things in no way contribute to the happiness and harmony of my being.

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[3] We do not know Dio’s improvisation before the soldiers. I reconstitute these probable fragments by translating (with quite light modifications? two passages borrowed from the 1st and 32nd speeches of Dio Chrysostom.

[4] I translate word for word a title which is given on many occasions to Dio Chrysostom.

[5] I hope to publish the novel Dion Bouche-d’Or soon.

That which depends on me are my opinions, desires, inclinations, and aversions: in sum, all my internal actions. That which doesn't depend on me, the indifferent things, are my body, wealth, reputation, and dignities, in sum, all that is not my internal action.

Epictetus' Stoicism remains, clearly, a Socratic philosophy. The "know yourself" is at its root. Wisdom, effort to realize all the good which depends on me, indifference as to what does not depend on me, is based on a critique of the will. The savant positivist, having applied all his intelligence to what can be known, takes no interest in what is unknowable. The disciple of Epictetus, having made every effort with efficacy, loses interest in the impossible. Epictetus essentially made of Stoicism a positivism of the will[6].

* * *

I would love to close the history of individualistic philosophy in antiquity and declare, without fear of reply, that Epictetus is the last great name of Stoicism. The absurd caprice of glory will not grant this justice. Marcus Aurelius is a philosopher, for the historians, anyway.

This astonishing judgment only makes sense in light of the vanity of those who hold a pen: flattered at the idea of having had a colleague on the throne, their self-esteem would be wounded if they confessed how mediocre the imperial writer really was. But Marcus Aurelius, who had neither the ardent and deep sincerity of Socrates, Diogenes, Cleanthes, Dio, or Epictetus, nor the philosophical genius of Chrysippus, nor the literary genius of Seneca, interests the true philosopher only as a case study. He painfully poses the political problem: can a philosopher consent to rule? He teaches, as a small, gloomily drunk island, that a philosopher-emperor is an unviable monster and that the ruler will necessarily devour the philosopher. But, in the third chapter of my Apparitions d'Ahasvérus, I've studied the internal contradiction which destroyed unhappy Marcus Aurelius, both his thought and his character. I beg leave not avoid repeating this task here. This man divided against himself, this who allowed, not without some cowardice of the intelligence and the will, circumstances to make a moral wreck of him; this man who preserves no other nobility but the most inert of regrets, and who ultimately resolved, by suicide, the troubles he had consented to, is not someone I with whom like to spend much time.

After him, Stoicism finds itself again gratuitously, so to speak, asserted by the jurisconsults. Just as between two battles, Marcus Aurelius loves to declare that war is, "from the perspective of principles", brigandage; the Roman jurisconsults, before establishing any positive laws on the status of slaves, were only too happy to indulge in the minor luxury of affirming, in the abstract, the absurdity of slavery and the fact that all men have equal rights by natural.

But if individualism is right, which, since the time of the Sophists, has opposed law and nature, what confusion of ideas might lead certain men to pronounce the individualist's autos-da-fe while creating laws and overseeing their execution? How can they fail to grasp that the simple act of formulating or maintaining what Epictetus scornfully calls "the laws of the dead", excludes them from all individualism, from all understanding of nature, from all respect for what Socrates calls the "unwritten laws" and Epictetus calls "the laws of the living"?…

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[6] I've piously traced a portrait of Epictetus in Les Chrétiens et les Philosophes.

Final Note

I am aware of the lacuna and inadequacies of this little book. Some have to do with my weaknesses; others with extrinsic needs.

Voluntarily, I have restricted myself to the narrow, but luminous, circle of classical antiquity. — I have limited myself to the individualism of the philosophers, setting aside that of the poets, along with religious individualism. I have omitted interesting facts and names worth remembering. In a desire to be understood by all, I've omitted arduous explanations. — And in the parts I've handles, I've consented to irregularity and my own whims. I've removed what I've already said in other books, even when it would have been good to repeat it here. Every possible pretext has helped me impoverish an overly crude subject matter.

All this in order that this little book may be of some use to the ignorant who are aware of their ignorance.

I'd also love to see it employed by those who, having read the histories of philosophy, think they know something. Study of the primary texts has shown me that every textbook is a pile of errors. What joy it would give me if I could inspire in some people a necessary distrust of secondary texts; if I could inspire some with the need to go and look for themselves before making affirmations or denials… This is the rare success that I seek, both from my own honesty and that of the reader.

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