Philosophy and Life in Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy: Three Aspects

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Abstract
Philosophy, in the ancient Graeco-Roman world, and in various other cultures too, was typically thought of as, among other things, bearing on how to live. Questions of how to live may now be considered by some as merely one optional specialism among others, but Derek Parfit for one, we shall see, rightly treats implications for how to live as flowing naturally from metaphysical theories. In the hope of showing something about the ancient Graeco-Roman tradition as a whole, I shall speak of things that I and others have said before,[1] but I will highlight certain *aspects* of how the various groups or individuals related their philosophy to their lives. I shall start with the ancient Stoics as providing a clear case, then move on more briefly to their rivals, the Epicureans, and finally, more briefly again, to consider their predecessors and successors in other ancient schools and periods. This will not be a survey of the main central doctrines, although that is also something useful to attempt. But it will involve a selection of important ideas to illustrate their application to how to live.

1. Stoics

Stoicism was founded in 300 BCE in Athens by Zeno of Citium, who had first been trained by a Cynic, as well as by a Platonist, and Cynicism was very strikingly a way of life. Its first exponent, Diogenes, lived in a wine jar, rather than accept conventional comforts, and, when visited by Alexander the Great and asked what he would like from the conqueror of the world, he is said to have replied only, 'Stand out of my light'. Although his un-conventionalism was admired, few self-respecting Athenians would copy his lifestyle, and one of the clever things achieved by Zeno was to make some of the Cynic ideals a respectable philosophy that could be widely followed.[2] He used the word 'indifferent' in a new way to express agreement with the Cynic rejection of conventional objectives, but qualified it, by saying that some indifferent things were preferred

[1] To avoid excessive reference to ancient texts, I will sometimes refer to an earlier treatment where references have been given.

[2] Sorabji, *Gandhi and the Stoics* (henceforth *Gandhi*) (Oxford, 2012), 58–61.

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by nature, not by convention, and these it was right to prefer for oneself and others, so long as they were available. Their indifference should be acted on only to remind oneself that it would not matter if they were to prove or had proven unavailable. On this view, very little mattered without qualification, only good character and the rational understanding on which character was taken to be based, and these were to be chosen. But still, natural objectives had a 'selective value', that is to say, they were the right thing to 'select' for oneself or others, where 'selection' expressed a more reserved attitude than choice. A typical reservation was 'if God wills'. Zeno thus gave a place after all to widely accepted objectives, and at the same time a central place to good character or virtue. To this he added another reassuring requirement, that people should take part in public life and rear a family, at least in normal circumstances.

Early Stoicism, however, still retained a very discouraging idea that anyone who is not virtuous is vicious, just as a drowning person cannot breathe, whether near the surface or at the bottom.[3] This was still compatible with the idea of moral progress, for a person struggling up towards the surface is progressing, though still not breathing. But since it allowed no degrees of virtue or vice, it moved the emphasis from distance travelled to the virtually unattainable terminus of the perfect Stoic sage, even though such sagehood was admitted to be as rare as the proverbial phoenix. Panaetius by contrast made Stoicism much more directly valuable to ordinary imperfect people. I do not mean that Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic Emperor of the Roman world, was ordinary, but he was neither an ideal sage, nor a wicked sinner, but a human who recognised his own imperfections and made light of his unusual liabilities. What Panaetius said (born c. 185 BCE, head of Stoic school 129–109), if Cicero is reporting Panaetius in his account in Latin, could be applied to Marcus too: since we do not live among perfect people, we should most cultivate those who are *most* adorned with propriety, temperance and justice.[4] The reference to those *most* adorned transforms Stoicism by allowing *degrees* of these virtues after all, and by attending to the achievements of ordinary people with their foibles and weaknesses. Cicero comments again on the greater utility of later Stoicism in his *On Laws*. The old Stoics, he says, before

[3] Cicero *On Ends* 3.14.48; Plutarch *On Common Notions* 1063A; *Gandhi* 116–7

[4] Cicero *On Duties* 1.46

Diogenes of Babylon and Panaetius, discussed the State alright, but not as a guide to popular civic utility.[5]

Cicero follows Panaetius' work on duties which considered how to decide on conflicts between moral considerations and between prudential considerations, and he takes up a promise, which he says Panaetius never fulfilled, of considering conflicts between moral and prudential considerations, although Cicero considers the last only *apparent* conflicts.[6] In Book 3 of his *On Duties*, Cicero reports the rival solutions of other Stoics on the last type of case: should the seller of a house warn the prospective buyer of rot? Other examples, such as who should get the only plank offering survival in a shipwreck, had been started by the challenging Platonist Carneades in 155 BCE. The debates give a foretaste of the casuistry of 1550–1650, and they concern dilemmas that people can imagine being real for themselves, although so far they concern special *types* of case, rather than the individuality of the moral agent. But Cicero records Panaetius as addressing *individuality* with his advice on *personae*.

In making decisions in life, one should consider who one is,[7] and not only, like Kant nearly two millennia later, that one is a rational being. That universally shared *persona* is indeed always to be observed, and ethics here appeals to a fact about human nature. But on its own our rationality does not give us enough guidance and is only the first *persona*.[8] Within the constraints of rationality, one must think also of particular duties to which one was born, or which one chose, and of one's particular abilities. In choosing a career, for example, should one follow one's parents' profession? If a parent was a successful lawyer, piety might suggest that one should follow the family precedent. But would you be good as a lawyer, or would you only let your parents down? Sometimes a *persona* is unique and calls for a unique decision. When Julius Caesar in the civil war captured the town of Utica, it was right for the Stoic Cato among the defenders to commit suicide, but not for anyone else in the same situation – the last phrase present only in some manuscripts – apparently because he had always stood for such uncompromising rectitude. No doubt, if there *had* been anyone else exactly like Cato, suicide would have been right for

[5] Cicero *On Laws* 3.14

[6] Cicero *On Duties* 1.9; 3.7

[7] Different from 'Who am I?' is the question 'What sort of person do I *want* to be?'. This belongs not so much with Panaetius' subject of making right decisions (*kathêkonta*), as with the further objective of reaching virtue.

[8] Cicero *On Duties* 1. 107–121

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him too, but that is not mentioned because the morally interesting point is that there *was* no one exactly like Cato. Pierre Hadot, who has made the idea of Philosophy as a way of life so prominent, made the interesting point that Cato was a Stoic, without writing any Stoic texts. It should be added, however, that he *studied* Stoicism – Cicero met him reading in the same library[9] – and he built his life on what he read.[10] Under the Empire that followed the Roman Republic, Roman Senators are credited with resisting the Emperor to carry out their now restricted *persona* as senators, and it has been said that the charges against one of those executed included his being a Stoic.[11]

The Stoics have much advice on getting rid of undesirable emotions (*pathê*), that is, emotions based on false values. To show that they can be got rid of by taking rational thought, they developed the first systematic cognitive therapy. The Stoic Seneca in the first century CE took up the founder's view that emotions involve, and from the third head Chrysippus onwards, that they actually are, value judgements. Except in the case of a short list of good emotions (*eupatheiai*), they are *mistaken* value judgements, and so lead to collision with reality, but since they are *judgements*, not for example sensations, reason should be able to correct them. In a statement which, I think, is nearly true, they said that each emotion involves (or more dubiously is) two value judgements, the judgement that good or bad is at hand, and the judgement that it is appropriate to react accordingly.[12] The two judgements provide us with two targets for demolition, and demolishing either should demolish the emotion. It helps to distinguish the initial *appearance* of good or bad and of appropriate reaction, from the actual *judgement*. The *judgement* is produced by giving the assent of reason to the *appearance* and that assent can be withheld, while you assess the truth of the appearance. But non-Stoics are not trained to notice that there are two stages, and that one can stand back and reconsider the appearance. If it appears that something really bad has happened, as opposed to something merely dis-preferred, it may help to reflect that you are not the

[9] Cicero *On Ends* 3.2.7

[10] Pierre Hadot, 'Philosophy as a way of life', in his *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1995), Ch. 11, page 272, translated from the French of *Exercises spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris, 1981).

[11] Epictetus *Discourses* 1.2; Miriam Griffin, *Seneca, A philosopher in Politics* (Oxford University Press, paperback 1992), 363, citing Tacitus *Annals* 16.22

[12] Seneca *On Anger* 2.2–4

only one to have suffered this. If it appears that retaliation is the appropriate reaction, it may help to reflect that you have recently treated someone else the same way. There is another safeguard besides that of distinguishing the two judgements from each other and from the two appearances with a view to demolishing one of the appearances. The appearances may first produce an initial shock, a 'pre-passion' or 'first movement', before they lead on to assent or judgement, which is said to be the real emotion. The shock may be a sensation or a physical reaction of teeth chattering, hair standing on end, growing pale or heated. It helps to distinguish the mere shock from the emotion, so as to avoid what I have called the William James effect. William James said, 'we do not cry because we are sad; we are sad because we cry'. That is a danger: we are inclined to think, 'I am crying; I must have been badly treated'. But that does not follow. You are crying, so you are crying, and you should ignore that as unimportant. The important question is whether you have really been badly treated. For assessing the two appearances the Stoics have a whole host of further questions to ask yourself, many of which I have described elsewhere.[13] Particularly useful is distinguishing the un-expected from the bad, since the unfamiliar often presents itself as harmful, when in fact it may be neutral or even advantageous.

This appeal to the deceptions of the unexpected, of the merely dispreferred, or of forgetting the similarity of your own past conduct is an appeal to life, rather than to philosophy. But if philosophy is to be applied to your life, it is not surprising that you have to take life into account as well as philosophy. The philosophy here is not, or not exclusively, a piece of ethics. It is a very penetrating analysis of the nature of emotions as involving two value-judgements and two stages, the first of which can give rise to shocks. This would be put in the separate compartment of philosophy of mind, not ethics, in the modern philosophy curriculum. But for the Stoics, the braches of philosophy are a seamless whole. How to tackle your emotional life is an ethical question. But I believe that philosophy of mind and other branches of philosophy are actually needed for the ethical conclusions about what to do. Seneca's *Letter* 95 is about the value of doctrines in ethical life. I believe the doctrines are not necessarily ethical. I imagine they would include doctrines from the philosophy of mind. A view has been put on the other side that philosophy cannot

[13] Richard Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (Oxford University Press, 2000), Chs 15 and 16

help with emotional life; that is the task of psychiatry.[14] Indeed, it is true that only some emotional problems yield to cognitive therapy. The Stoics themselves believed that their therapy would deal with bereavement. I have said elsewhere that in my view that involves a kind of detachment from friends and family that is impoverishing. But there is no price to be paid for using Stoic therapy for the ordinary ups and downs of daily life.

The doctor Galen in the second century CE, though first stabilising emotion and mental capacities by the right diet,[15] used Stoic techniques for eradicating anger and distress in two works, one only recently discovered, *On Avoiding Distress*.[16] Here he explains how he avoided distress after losing much of his highly original work in a fire after storing it in the safest place in Rome with a view to organising back-up copies later in the year.

The Stoics advocated a special kind of freedom, being one's own agent, which did not require freedom in the sense of not being subordinate or not being a slave.[17] An account of it was given by Epictetus in his discourse on freedom.[18] By making sure that your heart is set only on what is within your power, you can be freed from both inner tyrannies and outer, so that you are enslaved to nothing, not to house, farm, horses, clothes, furniture, family. As if writing for academics, he adds books,[19] and, finally your own body. He gives his students a large number of exercises to rehearse setting their hearts only on what is so fully under the control of their will that no tyrant could take it away. They are to engage in the mental exercise of imagining a threatening outer tyrant. You can tell him that he cannot put *you* in chains, only your leg, since you have identified yourself only with a will (an inadequate rendering of *prohairesis*) that cannot be constrained. In other words you have created a self, and a self which is inviolable. Such exercises are to be 'ready to hand (*prokheiron*)'. Philosophers ought to practise them (*meletân*),

[14] Bernard Williams, 'Stoic philosophy and the emotions: a reply to Richard Sorabji', in Richard Sorabji, ed., *Aristotle and After*, Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies, supplementary volume **68** (1997), 211–13, available from http://events.sas.ac.uk/support-research/publications/596

[15] Galen, *That states of mind follow the chemistry of the body*, 67, 2–16

[16] The other is Galen, *On the diagnosis and therapy of the distinctive passions of the individual's soul*.

[17] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 7.121

[18] Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.1

[19] Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.4, 1–2

write them down every day, and train themselves (*gumnazein*).[20] He sends his students out at dawn to report what they saw: a consul passing by, a man grieving over his dead child. When they give their reports, he asks if the consulship or life and death are under the control of the will. No? Then they must throw their attachment to such things away.[21] Epictetus finds only two examples of this freedom as inviolability, namely Diogenes the Cynic and Socrates. In a famous lecture, 'Two concepts of liberty',[22] Isaiah Berlin said that this was not freedom, but sour grapes, the attitude that what is unavailable is no good anyhow. But, rare though it is, in adverse circumstances it has supplied more than one person with genuine freedom. This is how Gandhi remained freer than the viceroys when they had him put in prison, since they were afraid of the consequences if he came to harm, while he had abandoned all such attachments.[23]

Seneca's *Letters*, an artistic exercise in correspondence, though written as to his real friend Lucilius, address the anxieties of an ordinary person who is to be introduced gradually to Stoicism. Should he take early retirement from the rat race? Is he too anxious about his health? What physical exercise is appropriate for a philosopher? Not exercise that builds up the body, nothing more than walking. But even better is being carried in a litter, which joggles every muscle in your body, while allowing you to continue dictating your thoughts to the secretary who is hurrying alongside. At the same period, Epictetus' teacher Musonius Rufus addresses equally common anxieties in short essays. Should a young person always obey their parents? What if your father forbids you to study philosophy?

The Stoics argued that it was in accordance with nature and right, which is not to say that it was easy, to extend a feeling of kinship to all humans, recognising them as fellow rational beings, and that this made justice to all humans, even foreigners and slaves, natural and right. Hierocles around the end of the first century CE spoke of circles of fellow-humans surrounding each person and advocated drawing outer circles nearer in to oneself at the centre. He further

[20] Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.1.23

[21] Epictetus *Discourses* 3.3.14–19

[22] 1958, first printed in Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford University Press), reprinted in his *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford University Press, 2002)

[23] Richard Sorabji, *Gandhi and the Stoics* (Oxford and Chicago University Presses, 2012), Ch. 3

suggested exercises for doing so: we should call cousins 'brothers' and aunts and uncles 'fathers and mothers'.[24] Some cultures indeed do draw family distinctions differently and partially follow this advice.

The Stoic idea of justice being naturally owed to all humans was to have a long history. It would be used in the 16th century Spanish opposition to the conquest of the American Indians in Latin America.[25] It contrasted with the view of their Epicurean rivals of humans as gaining security from each other only by contracts not to harm or be harmed, whether or not Epicurus' successors Hermarchus and (writing in Latin) Lucretius, added modifications.[26] This suggests a very different psychological view of one's fellow-humans as potential threats. Such a view might be needlessly self-fulfilling. But it was to be equally influential. Thomas Hobbes drew on it in the 17th century in his *Leviathan*, to make a case for a contract with a powerful sovereign to guarantee security, a role he would present as fitting equally the king's replacement, Oliver Cromwell, or the restored monarch, Charles II.

I have left to last the most discussed example of the Stoic interconnexion of the nature of the universe with ethics. This was their belief in divine Providence as a backing for ethical conclusions. I have postponed it for two reasons. First, I have been looking for examples, such as the analysis of emotion – whatever analysis may commend itself to the reader – which do not depend on views that many nowadays repudiate. Not everyone now believes in divine Providence. Secondly, the Stoic conception of Providence is different from that of the Christian New Testament, according to which every hair of your head is numbered and not a sparrow falls to the ground without God, or is forgotten before him.[27] Stoic Providence attends to individual humans indeed, but neglects small matters

[24] Hierocles *Elements of Ethics*, excerpts preserved in Stobaeus *Florilegia*, ed. Hense, 4.671,7–673,11, partly translated in A.A. Long. D.N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), Ch. 57, text G.

[25] Relevant texts are cited in Richard Sorabji, 'Just war from ancient origins to the Conquistadors debate and its modern relevance', in Richard Sorabji, David Rodin, eds, *The Ethics of War: Shared Problems in Different Traditions* (Ashgate, Aldershot, 2006), 18.

[26] Epicurus *Key Doctrines* 31–7; Hermarchus ap. Porphyry *On Abstinence*, 1.7.1–1.12.7, but the reference in 1.7.1 to fellow feeling as one factor may be a comment by Porphyry. Lucretius inserts a stage of monogamy, families, winsome children and friendships as leading to contracts, *On the nature of things*, 5.1011–27

[27] Matthew 10:29; Luke 12:6.

like the destruction of an individual's crops,[28] which are anyhow indifferent. Later the Stoic Emperor Marcus Aurelius in the 2nd century CE went further. He coped with the dangers he faced by stressing that we are *only* parts of a larger whole, which seems to make us less significant as individuals.[29]

In this short recapitulation, I have highlighted three features of Stoicism, and particularly of later Stoicism. One is the use of mental exercises to give the philosophy impact on one's life.[30] A second, prominent in later Stoicism from Panaetius onwards, is the concern with the particular. A third is the need to bring other branches of philosophy to bear, besides ethics, in drawing ethical conclusions, so that ethics is treated as but one part of philosophy as a seamless whole. Although I shall speak of exercises quite frequently, I am not using the term here in as broad a way as has been made famous by Pierre Hadot's talk of spiritual exercises. For Hadot is not merely saying, as I will, that the Socratic dialogues *contain* some exercises useful for life that the reader can re-use, such as Socrates' appeal at one point to his *persona*. Rather, his point is that a Socratic dialogue *is* a spiritual exercise for the reader, because it seeks to convert the reader's soul, so that someone entering into philosophy will be entering into a way of life. I shall later come to a very clear example of this happening in the Neoplatonist Simplicius. But I am not otherwise addressing philosophy as *itself* an exercise, nor, in a phrase that Hadot has also made famous, as a *way* of life, but only as *containing* exercises which are a *help* to life. Hadot also draws attention to what I have called the seamlessness of the branches of philosophy, logic, physics and ethics. But he is not speaking, as I am, of them often entering into a seamless *exposition*. Rather he is willing to concede that for *expository* purposes they are divided into branches by seams. His point is rather that, as a spiritual exercise, philosophy is a 'single act, renewed at every instant, that one can describe, without breaking its unity, as being the exercise of logic as well as of physics or of ethics, according to the directions in which it is exercised'.[31]

[28] Cicero *On the nature of the gods* 2. 167

[29] Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford University Press 1993), Ch. 5, on Marcus especially pages 175–6

[30] On this see Paul Rabbow, *Seelenführung* (Munich, 1954)

[31] I am here following Arnold I. Davidson's quotation from a work of Pierre Hadot's, in the introduction to a set of Hadot's papers, translated by Michael Chase and edited by himself, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1995). The collection contains a translation of some of

As regards seamless *exposition*, the situation in Stoicism has been made very clear by others, and my main task will be to consider other groups. At first it was widely thought that Stoic ethics rested on physics as a base. But an influential paper by Jacques Brunschwig showed the situation to be more complex. He cited Plutarch as complaining[32] that the Stoic Chrysippus gave the right order of exposition as logic, ethics, physics, but that he contradicted himself because in three of his texts physics formed a basis for ethics. Brunschwig pointed out, however, that these three texts were texts about *physics*, but that there were other texts which treated ethics on its own. He concluded that ethics would be presented *twice over* to Stoic students, first on its *own*, as Hadot had been willing to concede, but later enriched, when physics was expounded, by being shown to fit in with the larger picture of the physical universe. This finding was developed by others and now has a wide following, but some interrelation between the exposition of ethics and physics was never in doubt among the parties to the discussion.[33] As for Stoic *logic* permeating their ethics, Brunschwig found logic also treated twice over in an ancient catalogue of Chrysippus' works, arranged in his preferred order of logic, ethics, physics. Although works on the *theory* of dialectical argument came in the opening section on logic, the second section on ethics contained logic *all over again* as applied to ethics, with works on dialectical premises for ethical arguments and demonstrative proofs of ethical arguments.

2. Epicureans

Of the three features I have been stressing, particularism is the least common, but the other two features, the seamlessness of philosophy and the value of exercises for guidance, are found in the Epicurean school, founded also in Athens seven years before the Stoics in 307

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the most relevant articles at chapters 3 and 11, but Davidson is here referring to several other papers by him and quoting one of them.

[32] Plutarch *On Stoic Self-Contradictions*, 1035A ff

[33] Jacques Brunschwig, 'On a book title by Chrysippus, "On the fact that the ancients admitted dialectic along with demonstrations"', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, supplementary vol. (1991) 81–96; developed by Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford University Press, 1993), Ch. 4; Gabor Betegh, 'Cosmological ethics in the *Timaeus* and early Stoicism', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, **24** (2003), 273–302, and others.

BCE. A major concern of the Epicureans was avoiding fear of death, which Lucretius describes as acting unconsciously to drive restlessness and ambition.[34] The fear can take many forms, a number of which they discussed. One form is horror, shared only by some people, not others, at the thought that after death, one will never exist again. We will not then know, but we can be harmed by things of which we never know, and in this case we may now know, or expect, the outcome which instils horror. The Epicureans thought that freedom from pain was our primary aim, and we will, admittedly, not then be in pain. But the Stoics held that our primary initial aim was self-preservation, and we will not then be preserved.[35] Epicurus said that we are made of atoms which will be dispersed at death, and so are our souls. So many of the fears are groundless. We will not be there to be punished or to suffer in any other way. This provides another case of the seamlessness of philosophy, because a materialist theory of humans and indeed of the universe, is used to advise us on the right attitudes to life and death. But the answer does not so far address horror at non-existence, as opposed to suffering.

Epicurus' follower Lucretius has been credited with a reply to this, that we feel no horror at our past non-existence before birth, so why should we feel horror at future non-existence, since the two are mirror-images of each other?[36] In my 1983 treatment of this subject, I expressed doubt whether Lucretius was addressing horror at future *non-existence* or fear of future *suffering*, and this doubt is corroborated in a very thorough treatment by James Warren, who also looked to see whether the argument about future non-existence is to be found in non-Epicureans.[37] The author in whom I was inclined to think that there may be such an argument, but concerning the death of *another* person, was the Platonist Plutarch, to whom I shall come later, in his *Consolation to his wife*, 610D concerning the death of their daughter. He said: 'Try in your thought to move and restore yourself repeatedly to the time when the child was not yet born, and we had no complaint against fortune. Then match this present time to that one, seeing that our

[34] Lucretius *On the nature of things* 3. 59–97; 1053–70

[35] Epicurus *Key Doctrines* 2; Stoics in Cicero *On Ends* 3.16

[36] Lucretius *On the nature of things* 2.972–7

[37] Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum* (Duckworth:London, 1983; repr. Chicago University Press, 2006; Bloomsbury London, 2012), 176–9; James Warren, *Facing Death, Epicurus and his Critics* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

circumstances have become the same again. If we make things before she was born less a cause of complaint, we shall seem to be regretting her birth.'

Whoever did or did not address horror at future non-existence, the argument is a powerful one, and my reaction to it was that the difference of attitude to future and past, though widespread in human attitudes, is shown to be irrational in the case of non-existence, but that that does not help us, because the difference of attitude to past and future non-existence has been made inescapable at least for many people by natural selection. Those little children, if there were any, who felt less anxiety about future non-existence than about past non-existence did not live long enough to pass on their preferences to any offspring. Derek Parfit came up independently with a partly similar conclusion shortly afterwards, that natural selection may have established our various preferences between past and future, but argued with highly thought-provoking examples for a different conclusion, that we might be better off without these preferences in a variety of cases, not only concerning our non-existence.[38] In returning to the subject in 2006, I considered the limitations of philosophy in affecting our attitudes. The argument about past non-existence will not liberate those who feel horror from a feeling caused by natural selection. But by convincing them that the horror is irrational, it can prevent the horror being intensified through the thought, 'how rational it is to be horrified'.[39] Even if Lucretius' appeal to past non-existence does not address horror at future non-existence, but only fear of future *suffering*, it still constitutes a thought exercise, and the Epicurean discussion of how to face death, illustrates not only the value of thought exercises, but also the seamless connexion of a materialistic physics with ethical conclusions. I should say that Parfit does the same. His use of thought exercises to draw conclusions on how to live is as powerful as any of the ancient examples, and he also illustrates the seamlessness of Philosophy, by bringing to bear arguments about personal identity on appropriate attitudes.

The Epicureans also made a contribution to the subject of moral conscience, and this brought in exercises of various kinds. This is despite Cicero and Seneca ascribing to to Epicurus a view of

[38] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford University Press, 1984), corrected 1987, 174–7; 186. I discuss his view in *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life and Death* (Oxford and Chicago University Presses, 2006), Ch. 15.

[39] Richard Sorabji, *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life and Death*, 337–341

conscience as merely *fear* of detection and punishment.[40] Cicero finds this an unsettling form of conscience and complains that Epicurus rejects the steady conscience that he believes in.[41] It is true that the Epicurean Lucretius in the first century BCE, using a standard Latin term for conscience, says that the mind which shares consciousness with itself (*sibi conscia*) of bad deeds torments itself with *fears* about the Furies and punishment after death in Tartarus, even though punishment cannot come from supernatural sources, nor after death, when our atoms will have dispersed.[42] But Cicero ascribes to Epicurus a more fruitful idea, closer to our own idea of conscience: that of being *watched*. People believe (wrongly according to Epicurus) that even if they escape human eyes, they are watched by the gods, and so they are troubled in conscience (*conscientia*).[43] Epicurus held that members of the school should *imagine* that *he* was watching them as a witness to avert wrongdoing.[44] As well as imagining a watcher as *witness*, Epicurus is credited by Seneca with the idea of imagining an admired philosopher as an example (*exemplum*). This moves from one function of conscience, averting wrongdoing, to another, directing towards doing right. Both ideas are credited to Epicurus in a single passage.[45] Epicurus' imagined philosophical watcher was approved by the Stoics, who allowed a choice of imagined watchers, not confined, as by Epicurus, to any one person. I believe that it was from the Stoics, and hence indirectly from Epicurus that Adam Smith in the 18th century acquired his idea of conscience as an imagined impartial spectator.[46]

Still more striking is the connexion made by the Epicurean Philodemus around 100 BCE between conscience and the practice of *confession*. Philodemus' *Rhetoric* describes people who because of a guilty conscience (*syneidêsis*) engage in law suits until they are convicted and ruined.[47] But more striking for our purposes is the treatise *On frank criticism* about the practices in the residential school in Athens two hundred years after Epicurus, which included confession by students and even teachers more than a hundred years before the

[40] Seneca, *Letters* 97, 15–16; Cicero, *On ends* 2.16.53
[41] Cicero, *On ends* 2.22.71
[42] Lucretius *On the Nature of Things*, Book 3, lines 1011–1024
[43] Cicero, *On Ends* 1.16.51
[44] Seneca, *Letters* 25.5
[45] Seneca, *Letters* 11.8–10
[46] Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Part III, Ch. 1
[47] Philodemus, *Rhetoric* II, *frg.* 11, lines 1–9 (Sudhaus), 139–40

birth of Christ.[48] One fragment declares: 'Even the servants share his (guilty) knowledge (*synoidasin*)'.[49] Another fragment, on the standard reading, says that if the professor quickly turns away from assisting the student who is slipping up, the student's swelling (*synoidêsis*) will subside.[50] Why should professorial neglect make a *swelling* subside? This makes no sense, and an emendation suggested a long time ago by C. J. Vooys should be accepted. *Syneidêsis* (conscience) differs from *synoidêsis* (swelling) by only the one letter 'e', which, in Greek as in English, looks very like an 'o'. Moreover four short lines later the related verb *syneidenai* appears. It makes perfect sense that the student's conscience will become less intense, if the professor does not attend to criticism and help of the right sort. This gives us a picture of the Epicurean school in Athens at the time of Philodemus' teacher, Zeno of Tarsus, in the second century BCE which Philodemus is describing. Confession is concerned with the past, but the school is concerned with the future-looking functions of conscience and wants to develop the consciences of its students through a process of confession of misdemeanours and carefully tailored, but frank, criticism. Both the confession and the imagining of a witness or an exemplary model are thought exercises designed for guidance. Both involve something highly personal, an imagined witness or model chosen in the Stoic case by the individual and a confessional interchange between student and teacher. Of course the guidance supplied by the imagined model or by the teacher conducting the confession would vary according to the teacher or the model in question. In the case of Epicurus, we can tell from his writings what the guidance would be like and it would follow *general* Epicurean principles even though it was addressed to a *particular* individual about their particular circumstances.

3. Pre-Socratic philosophers

I will now go back to the beginnings of Greek Philosophy, to the Pre-Socratic philosophers of the 6th and 5th centuries BCE, and will proceed in chronological order. The Pre-Socratic philosophers were individuals, Greek-speaking, but starting on the coast of what is now Turkey and quickly spreading to Sicily and the heel of Italy.

[48] Philodemus, *On frank criticism*, *frg.* 41
[49] Philodemus, *On frank criticism*, col. XIIa, line 5
[50] Philodemus, *On frank criticism*, *frg.* 67. I thank David Sider for showing me the emendation.

Some began schools in their areas, but no one school or town was dominant. However, because the Greeks were sea-farers and many towns were by the coast, they could much more quickly hear of developments elsewhere, or even move, as Pythagoras did by 530 BCE from the island of Samos in the East to the Italian town of Croton in the West.

The most discussed case of seamlessness in philosophy concerns Empedocles of Agrigentum in Sicily (c. 495–435 BCE), who accepted some of the views of Pythagoras in his philosophical poetry. Poetry was a common medium for important ideas and we are told of two titles for Empedocles' poetry, *Purifications*, and *On nature*. Because we have only fragmentary excerpts preserved, it was long thought that there were two poems. In *Purifications*, Empedocles laments that, though he is a *daemon*, a divine spirit, he has been punished for eating meat and needs to be purified by being reincarnated in successive different forms which he can remember, currently as a human, but at other times as an animal or even a bush. The fact, earlier accepted by Pythagoras and others, that one can be reincarnated as an animal Empedocles takes as meaning that in sacrificing and eating animals one may be eating one's own family: 'The father lifts up his own son changed in form, great fool, and with a prayer slays him shrieking piteously and beseeching as he sacrifices. But he, heedless of his cries, slays him and has an evil meal prepared in his halls. Likewise son seizing father and children their mother, tear out the life and eat the flesh of their own'.[51] We do not have his explanation of why it is alright to eat plants. Other fragments describe the history of the universe and the periodic evolution of animals and humans, capable of sexual reproduction after natural selection has eliminated unviable combinations of organs. These bodies are made from what Empedocles is the first to identify as the four elements, earth air, fire and water, themselves divine beings that are cyclically combined or separated by the two forces of Love and Strife. It was occasionally suggested that the two themes might belong to one poem, a view argued in detail in 1987,[52] and the editing and publication of new fragments in 1999,[53] confirmed that at least the themes were *connected*, as a

[51] Empedocles, Fragment 137, Diels-Kranz

[52] A powerful case was made by Catherine Osborne, now Rowett, in 'Empedocles Recycled', *Classical Quarterly* **37** (1987), 24–50. She saw the ethical theme of purification as dominant.

[53] Alain Martin, Oliver Primavesi, *L'Empédocle de Strasbourg, Introduction, édition et commentaire* (De Gruyter, 1999)

number of ancient sources had claimed, whether or not there was only one poem. For our purposes what matters is that the reconstructions showed various ways in which it would be perfectly possible to interconnect Empedocles theory of the history of the universe with ethical conclusions about bloodshed, and that Empedocles seems to have done so.

Pythagoras (who had left Samos by 530 BCE) left no written philosophy behind. One of the few pieces of contemporary evidence about him comes from Xenophanes (c.570–c.475), that he forebade the beating of a dog, because he heard in its yelping a friend's voice. So we can take it that, like Empedocles after him, he drew conclusions from his views about our reincarnation as animals concerning how we should treat them. Even so, later authors claim that his rules were adapted to circumstances, one might say to *personae*, in that he allowed meat to an athlete.[54] If Pythagoreans lived then, as later, in secluded communities,[55] he might well have made stricter rules for them, but not the same rules for everyone. What he is said to have warned the athlete against was concern with victory. We hear later of many Pythagorean exercises which may have originated in these communities, some that were to be adopted by Stoics, such as nightly self-interrogation on one's day-time conduct, or renouncing a feast at the last moment, avoiding soft beds and warm baths, and correcting anger by looking at its effect on your face,[56] while other exercises, poverty and silence, are said to have lasted for the first five years of initiation.[57] The practice of self-interrogation at bedtime was learnt from the Pythagoreans by the Christian Origen as well as by the Stoics Seneca and Epictetus, but whereas Origen and Epictetus applied it with the compunction originally intended, Seneca was more self-congratulatory with his different perspective of progressing towards virtue.[58]

There is no contemporary evidence for Pythagoras already having the later Pythagorean interest in numbers in things in the physical

[54] Porphyry, *On Abstinence* 1.26; *Life of Pythagoras* 15; Diogenes Laertius *Lives of eminent philosophers* 8.12, disbelieved by Iamblichus, *On the Pythagorean Life* 5.25

[55] Porphyry, *On Abstinence* 1.36; Iamblichus *On the Pythagorean Life* 21.96

[56] References in my *Emotion and Peace of Mind* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 213–4

[57] Timaeus frag. 13a Jacoby; Schol. on Plato *Phaedrus* 279C; Diogenes Laertius *Lives* 8.10 and 23; 10.11; Iamblichus *On the Pythagorean Life* paragraph 72. 17

[58] Richard Sorabji, *Gandhi and the Stoics*, 147

world. But the Pythagoreans were credited with discovering the mathematical ratios of string lengths in pairs of plucked consonant notes, and with looking for numbers in astronomy and cosmology. Plato was to take over both the interest in reincarnation in his *Meno*, *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*, including reincarnation as animals in his *Timaeus*, and the interest in numbers, even though he claims to go beyond the Pythagorean concern with using numbers to explain music[59] and perhaps astronomy. Indeed, it has been argued that he makes numbers responsible for the entire orderly structure of the cosmos, going beyond the Pythagoreans in making arithmetic prior to geometry, with numbers defining the triangular shapes of which the three-dimensional universe is physically composed and defining the soul which makes it rotate. The connexion of physical philosophy with mathematics is seamless.[60]

Democritus of Abdera in Northern Greece (fl. After 435 BCE), though most famed as the co-inventor with Leucippus of the theory of atoms, has far more fragments surviving on ethics, many of them conjecturally assigned to his treatise *On Contentment*. Two fragments, 3 and 191 Diels-Kranz, advise moderate pleasures, like the later atomist Epicurus, keeping in mind what you can attain, and recognising those less fortunate than yourself, and keeping in mind the limits to what you can attain. The last has been compared with the later appeal to *personae*.[61] We need not believe the story that he accepted the request of the bereaved King Darius of Persia to bring his wife back to life, but on condition that the king found three members of his great kingdom who had not suffered bereavement too. This circulating story has been attached to more than one philosopher and has an analogue in Indian thought. Did Democritus connect particular kinds of atomic motion in the soul with cheerfulness? Fragment 191 says that souls are not cheerful if big movements are set up which move them out of large intervals (*diastêmata*). If the reference is to physical motions of atoms, are they being moved by large disparities of fortune, or by large movements, or, as James Warren has suggested possible, away from the

[59] Plato *Republic* 531C

[60] Marwan Rashed, Nellie Wallace lectures (Oxford University, 2013), partly explained in his 'Plato's Five Worlds hypothesis (*Ti* 55cd)', in Riccardo Chiardonna, Gabriele Galluzzo, eds, *Universals in Ancient Philosophy* (Edizioni della Normale, Pisa, 2013), 87–112

[61] Christopher Gill, 'Peace of mind and being yourself: Panaetius to Plutarch', *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, 2.36.7, 4599–4640.

wide intervals needed for quick-moving atoms?[62] Unfortunately, it has not proved possible to determine whether Democritus intends such a seamless connexion between his atomism and his ethics.

4. Socrates and Plato

Socrates (469–399 BCE) left no writing, but is represented in the dialogues of Plato (427–348 BCE) as talking to individuals about their beliefs and values. The dialogues are not historical records, but works of art based on Plato's knowledge of Socrates. In the *Euthyphro* Socrates is imagined as starting from a particular action, Euthyphro's proposal to sue his father. He conducts the discussion on the basis of the interlocutor's own beliefs, but he draws it away from the particular to the general, in this case to the question, what is piety? He typically ends in uncertainty. Plato makes Socrates claim in his *Gorgias*, despite his turning people away from current political values, that in trying to make people good, he alone was practising true politics.[63] These dialogues have been judged early on stylometric grounds. Rather different from the other early dialogues was Plato's *Apology*, in which Plato makes Socrates put forward his *own* views in his defence at his trial on capital charges of introducing new gods and corrupting the youth. In Plato's *Crito,* Socrates is made to explain why he should not avoid execution by escaping from prison. He is persuaded among other things by an appeal to his *individual* history, which foreshadows the systematic appeal to individual *personae* later on in Panaetius, the Stoic. Since Socrates has been content never to leave Athens, except on military service, he has thereby shown himself satisfied with Athenian laws which have condemned him and should abide by them.[64] Socrates' claim to be warned off certain particular decisions by an inner guardian spirit, or *daemôn*, is first found in Plato's *Apology*, and was a ground for the charge of introducing new gods. Although the *daemôn* addressed *particular* decisions, it was later equated by Plato in his *Timaeus* with Socrates' intellect,[65] and the principles on which it admonished would in that case have been understood to be *general*. The individual debates in which Plato shows Socrates engaging are not like the

[62] James Warren, *Epicurus and Democritean Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 58–72
[63] Plato *Gorgias* 521A-D
[64] Plato *Crito* 52A-D
[65] Plato *Timaeus* 90 A-D

thought exercises we have found in others. But Socrates is credited by Plutarch, and by the Stoic Seneca, with an exercise noticed by his friends not so much in thought as in behaviour. To avoid becoming harsh in his arguments, he would lower his voice, put on a smile, and change his facial expression. Seneca recommends this behavioural exercise, adding slowing one's gait.[66]

Plato was not present on the day of Socrates' execution, which he describes in the *Phaedo*, and it is commonly thought that the theory of Forms he here puts into Socrates' mouth, was not Socrates' but Plato's. He also represents Socrates as telling his grieving companions that philosophy is, in a certain sense, practising death.[67] Practising death here is purification of the soul by separating it from bodily desires; it is emphatically not suicide, a misconception which Socrates corrects. This gave rise in the Neoplatonists to the idea of levels of virtue. Plato went on later in his *Republic* to describe the virtue instilled into his ideal city there as civic (*dêmotikê*) virtue. Justice and other virtues in that ideal city involve the *irrational* parts of the soul, the parts concerned with indignation and *bodily* appetites. But if we could see the soul in its true nature, without parts, not encrusted by barnacles from the *body*, but in its philosophy or love of wisdom, then we would see justice more clearly.[68] From Plotinus and Porphyry onwards, the Neoplatonists distinguished the merely civic (*politikê*) virtue of the *Republic* from the purified (*kathartikê*) virtue of the *Phaedo*, and still higher levels of virtue than these. In Alexandria of the 6th century CE, prolegomena were written to the philosophy curriculum, which offered different definitions of philosophy, including practising death by purification from the body. They also warned against the misinterpretation of one, Cleombrotus, who accepted the definition of philosophy as an invitation to commit suicide, so that discussion was required of when and whether suicide was permissible.[69]

I have already mentioned Plato's interest in reincarnation in the *Meno* and *Phaedo*, and in the later dialogues *Timaeus* and *Phaedrus*, and how it illustrates the seamless connexion of ethics with other branches of philosophy. But the *Phaedrus* gives the most poetic illustration of this. Erotic love is justified through Socrates' mouth by a theory of the universe. It is a divine madness caused when physical

[66] Seneca *On Anger* 3.13.3; Plutarch *On freedom from anger* 455A-B
[67] Plato *Phaedo* 64A
[68] Plato *Republic* 500 D; 611A–612A
[69] Richard Sorabji, Introduction to *Aristotle Transformed*, (Duckworth, London, 1990)

beauty reminds one unconsciously of the Form of Beauty glimpsed by the soul to various degrees when it is allowed every 10,000 years, or in the case of philosophers every 3000, to process, disembodied, round the heavens in the train of an appropriate god, before again losing its wings and returning to successive incarnations.[70]

As brought out by Myles Burnyeat and Marwan Rashed,[71] Plato asserts a seamless connexion also between *mathematics* and ethics, as well as aesthetics, in his *Republic*, *Timaeus*, *Philebus*, and perhaps in his lost but legendary mathematical lecture on the Good, identifying it with unity, although no one else understood, according to Aristoxenus.[72] Mathematical ratios are found not only in music and astronomy and the other mathematical sciences, but also in the constitution of the World Soul, which supposedly drives the stars around us and of human souls and in the constitution of cities, and in the virtues of the soul and virtues in cities, where the ratios are harmonious. The reference to virtue expresses a connexion between mathematics and the Good, which is the supreme subject to be understood by the rulers of the ideal State described in Plato's *Republic*. Their training gives their souls harmonious ratios first by music and gymnastics and then by ten years of higher mathematics, culminating in harmonics, the study of ratios. By studying the ratios in the circuits of the stars they make similar the ratios in the circuits of their own rational souls. The virtues they need and the virtues they will need to understand and to inculcate into citizens all involve harmonious ratios in the soul. Mathematical training is not enough on its own for coming to understand the Good, but mathematics gives the first understanding that ordinary justice is a mere shadow, and if the Good has a mathematical character, this will be used in applying true justice in governing the State.

Plato, then, not only ascribes to Socrates a particularist reason for not escaping prison, but also gives expression to the seamless connexion of ethics with other branches of philosophy and with mathematics. We might expect him as one of the most imaginative of all

[70] Plato *Phaedrus* 243E–257B

[71] Myles Burnyeat, 'Plato on why mathematics is good for the soul', in Timothy Smiley, ed., *Mathematics and Necessity*, Proceedings of the British Academy vol. 103 (Oxford University Press), 1–81; Marwan Rashed will, 'Plato's five worlds hypothesis (*Tim 55* c-d), mathematics and universals', in R. Chiaradonna, G. Galluzzo, eds, *Universals in Ancient Philosophy*, Pisa 2013, pp. 87–112.

[72] Aristoxenus, *Elementa Harmonica* II I, 30, 20–31, 2, Meibom

Western philosophers to provide the third feature of inquiry, thought exercises for guidance. Certainly he portrays characters being given thought exercises, as when the slave in the Meno is given a geometrical exercise, or he makes Glaucon object to Socrates in the *Republic*, that everyone would be unjust, if they owned the magic ring of Gyges which could make them invisible. This is used as a ground for suggesting, before Epicurus, that justice is not natural but based on contract.[73] But Plato does not use these thought exercises to help the individual reader decide what to do, or how to maintain resolve. Perhaps there is a reason for this. Although Plato came to abandon the argument he gives Socrates against Protagoras that it is not in human nature to be willing (*ethelein*) to go after what one *thinks* (*oiesthai*) bad, instead of good things,[74] he nonetheless held to the view that genuine *knowledge* of what is the better course is effective. So *knowledge* will not need further exercises as aids. Even Aristotle was prepared to say that what is overthrown by temptation is not knowledge (*epistêmê*) from one's deliberations about the best policies for a good life, but the full awareness of the particular fact that you are failing to follow them.[75] What Plato does do in the *Republic* is to offer a discussion that would later be used by others as a helpful thought exercise. He discusses how the philosopher is a lover of the whole of knowledge, just as an erotic lover is a lover of the whole person and may even be found to re-label the sallow as honey-coloured.[76] The Epicurean Lucretius derides such re-labelling, in order to cure us of the disturbances of passion, but the Latin poet Ovid goes one better by *advocating* the re-labelling for purposes of seduction, and reverse-labelling to cure ourselves of love.[77]

Whatever the general tendencies in Plato, he provides guidance for life even in stray examples. In the *Gorgias*, he makes Socrates speak against the insatiability of an unrestrained life, as something that can never satisfy,[78] and he compares a bird, the plover which is forever eating and simultaneously excreting, whence its name (*kharadrion*), which means a running torrent. Past food never satisfies; more is always needed. Are there careers which make this inevitable,

[73] Plato *Republic* 357A ff.
[74] Plato *Protagoras* 358 B-E
[75] Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 7.3, 1147b15–17
[76] Plato *Republic* 474D–475A
[77] Lucretius *On the nature of things* 4. 1160–70; Ovid *Art of Love* 2. 657–62; *Remedies of Love* 325–30
[78] Plato, *Gorgias* 494B

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trying to be the richest, and lives which avoid it, a simple life of neighbourliness? Plato does not ask the question, but it is in the spirit of what he puts in the mouth of Socrates. The Stoics, characteristically, go uncomfortably further with a hard saying. We should never pin our hopes on the future, but should live each day as if our last, able to say at any moment, 'I have lived'.[79] This implies that, for a life complete at any moment, a philosopher should not set his or her heart on finishing the next book, but be content with the thought, 'I am thinking philosophy'. Teaching might come nearer the mark with the thought, 'I am teaching now'.

5. Aristotle

It is remarkable that so imaginative a philosopher as Plato should have had as his pupil a philosopher so keen as Aristotle to get everything sewn up and secured. Both qualities are needed in philosophy. Aristotle (384–322 BCE) more than anyone except the later Stoics and perhaps the Platonist Plutarch was concerned with the *particular* in ethics. He thought that he could help mature people already brought up in good habits to see what were the important objectives in life, objectives valuable in themselves. He encouraged them to deliberate on policies for securing those objectives, always subject to the disappointments of bad luck. Only some could hope to do philosophy, one of the important objectives. Carlo Natali's biography of Aristotle describes his ideals of philosophy and leisure as aristocratic, which was not the perspective of the Stoics, among whom one of the most influential figures, Epictetus, was an ex-slave. Although *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.7 presents the case for philosophising as the best activity to aim at in life, as Plato had made Socrates suggest in the *Phaedo*, I believe the case is hedged with many qualifying expressions such as 'it is thought' and 'if', and the opposite case that such a life is possible for God, not for humans, seems to be confirmed in the next chapter, 10.8, where the view is only that the more philosophy you can fit in, the happier your life will be. But for Aristotle virtue of *character* was also an objective valuable in itself. Moreover, we could never pass beyond the need for social virtues, because (*Nicomachean Ethics* 10.8), we are social beings dependent on food, and will not survive death to become like the gods, or as Socrates

[79] Seneca, *Letters* 12.9; 101, 10; *On Benefits* 7.2.4–6; Marcus Aurelius *Meditations* 2.5; 7.69

had hoped in Plato's *Phaedo*, pass to the joys of the Blessed (115D) to do philosophy without such bodily needs.

Virtues of character, however, bring in *particularity*, because they require more than recognising their value and adopting the right policies to implement them. You have to spot what the virtues call for in particular situations, because their different requirements have all to be taken into account. This calls for perception, not sensory, but more like intellectual spotting in mathematics, or the spotting of defining characteristics in science. It requires an 'eye of the soul', an expression ascribed earlier to Socrates, which belongs only to the wise (*phronimoi*). In reasoning what to do you have to be able to see what the virtues require of us now in this situation, and this forms the minor premises of moral reasoning, in other words, the premiss concerned with *particulars*.[80] This does not tell us what to do, but I once thought that one could hardly say more. I now think that the Stoic Panaetius' advice on decision-making by reference to individual as well as shared personae does go further in supplying guidance.

Aristotle gives a different answer to a problem about particularity put by Plato into the mouth of the visiting stranger in *Statesman* 294A-C. How are we to deal with the fact that law is too general to be applicable to the details of particular circumstances. The stranger suggests that law is an inevitable second-best, since the wise person cannot sit beside everyone telling them what to do. Aristotle's solution is that judges must be allowed discretion in applying the law, and he compares the carpenters of Lesbos who used a leaden ruler, flexible enough to go round corners, *Nicomachean Ethics* 5.10, 1137b30–1.

Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.6 addresses Plato's view that there is a single Form of the Good. He calls it an uphill discussion because friends had introduced the theory of Forms. But perhaps it is better, he thinks, especially for philosophers, though both are dear, to honour the truth above friends. He does not accept such a *general* idea of good, but insists that different goods are needed for war, medicine and gymnastics.

Friendship is another subject involving particularity, and it occupies two whole books, 8 and 9, of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. It is another of life's objectives valuable in itself, and Aristotle says much about the value of friendship.[81] Plato had said in his *First*

[80] Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 6, 1142a23–30; 1143a35-b5; 1144a28–31; 1143b11–14

[81] Richard Sorabji, *Self*, 233–9

Alcibiades, 132C–133C, that we know ourselves best by seeing ourselves reflected in another as in a mirror. But he had intended this knowledge to be of a general sort, knowledge of human nature as rational. Aristotle as so often moves from the general to the particular and applies the point to friendship. We take pleasure in our friends' good actions as if they were our own. One of the pleasures of friendship is that, because the friend is another self, we gain knowledge of ourselves through knowledge of them. Again, friends give us the pleasure of shared attention to things and of recognising that the attention is shared.

As regards the other two features of interest, Aristotle is not a great source of thought *exercises* to help with character, perhaps because the people he is addressing will be mature and already have acquired the right habits.[82] As regards the *seamlessness* of philosophy, the 6th century CE Neoplatonist Simplicius recognised that Aristotle's ethics presupposes his *logic*, and for that reason Simplicius chose instead to discuss Epictetus for his ethical lectures to beginners. For Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* introduces syllogistic arguments, demonstrations and logical divisions.[83] On the other hand, I am not sure that it presupposes much knowledge of *physics*. At most, Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics* in its last few lines makes contemplation of God a central objective, 8. 16, 1249b26–31, and the first book of his *Politics* appeals to human nature in order to decide what is right for society.

6. Middle Platonists

Plutarch of Chaeronea (c. 46–120 CE) was a Platonist contemporary of Epictetus. His *Moralia* is a huge collection of essays, and many of them include exercises on foibles of character on which we might not have reflected and on which advice is hard to come by, as a glance at the table of contents shows. *On Garrulousness* tells us of the shortest reply in history: when Philip threatened the Spartans, 'if I invade, I shall turn you out', they replied, 'If'. *On inquisitiveness* advises that you should practise not looking through people's windows or reading graffiti, and that you should never tear open letters with your teeth. In *On fear of giving offence*, you are advised not to stay and listen to a bore, not to consult your local doctor if you need a

[82] Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.3, 1095a 1–13

[83] References in Richard Sorabji, *The Philosophy of the Commentators 200–600 AD*, vol. 1, Ch. 15a

skilled physician, not to use the local innkeeper if you need someone better, not to invite to a wedding anyone who runs up to you.

Some of the more philosophical essays illustrate the *seamlessness* of philosophy. On contentment (*peri euthumias*) carries the same title as a work by Democritus and may also be influenced by Panaetius, and it discusses the deliberate formation of selfhood, a subject also addressed in a very different way in Epictetus' creation of an inviolable self. Plutarch thinks you should *weave* the narrative of your life, so that the past does not slip away, leaving you with so many momentary selves. Perhaps there would still be a human being there, but not one who had adopted any identity. He compares the painting of a man in Hades plaiting a rope, who does not notice that a donkey is eating it up as fast as he throws the plaited bits over his shoulder. But there is more advice on weaving a tapestry. You must weave in the bad parts as well as the good, because a picture needs dark patches as well as bright. On the other hand, you must not *wallow* in the bad parts, like beetles struggling in the place called 'Death to beetles'.

The concern with weaving an individual self out of an individual life shows Plutarch's interest in *particularity*. He was also interested in another way in particularity, because the essays of the *Moralia* sometimes overlap with the paired individual biographies of great Greeks and Romans in the fifty *Lives*.

Plutarch was very well read in philosophy, although he often mixed different viewpoints without distinguishing them. Unfortunately he is sometimes read chiefly as a source for the ideas of others because of the excerpts cited in the essays attacking Stoics and Epicureans. But there he is not interested in reconstructing their thought, but in alleging absurdities in it. Except as a source for others, therefore, I think these are the least interesting of his essays. The essays as a whole deserve to be on the shelves of every reflective couple starting a family.

7. Neoplatonists

'Neoplatonism' is a name given by modern scholarship to Platonists in the tradition of Plotinus (c. 205–260 CE). Plotinus' pupil and editor Porphyry produced a delightful book, which illustrates the seamlessness of philosophy better than almost any. His *On Abstinence from Animals* makes a case against sacrificing and eating animals, after recording in the first Book the arguments on both sides, by studying in the other three books in turn the nature of the gods, of animals and of humans. If you understood the immaterial

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gods you would see that they do not want material sacrifice. If you understood animals, you would see that they meet the Stoic requirement for being owed justice, since some of them are rational. If you knew about human races, you would realise that many cultures are vegetarian with no harm to themselves. There is also practical advice on what can be taken without harm – fruit, or on what our work entitles us to share – honey, and on what sacrifice is acceptable to God – that of a pure mind.

It has been argued by G. Fay Edwards that Porphyry had his own different reasons for sparing animals, reasons that throw a flood of light on Neoplatonist ethics. He thought that a taste for meat was incompatible with purified virtue, the higher level of virtue, freed from bodily appetites, that Socrates exemplifies in Plato's *Phaedo*. Purification from bodily appetites would endow one with an *ablabia*, a disposition not to harm.[84] In *On Abstinence* 3.26, the conception is expanded. Escape (*phugê*) from animal food is said to be escape from unjust acts concerned with food – one will not kill animals for that motive. Justice consists in not being harmful to those that are harmless. This aspect of *On Abstinence* throws light on how Porphyry would address a puzzle about purified virtue: if one turns away from the life of bodily desires to the purified life of the mind, will one not be neglecting the bodily needs of others, rather than practising justice? Elsewhere in the *Letter to Marcella*,[85] Porphyry writes to his wife instructing her in acquiring purified virtue, and reminding her that he married her not as a woman. He says in *Marcella* 14 and 16 that that if you love the body, you will also love wealth and then you will be unjust. It might be thought that Marcella would need thought exercises to help her free herself from appetites. But reliance may have been placed rather on a *model*, that of Plato's Socrates. Porphyry's *Sentences* 32 is a commentary on Plotinus' distinction in *Enneads* 1.2.3 of purified virtue from ordinary social or civic virtue.[86] The idea is that the purified are no longer motivated by the temptations which fill us with bodily

[84] I owe these points about his own reasons to G. Fay Edwards, *The Puzzle of Porphyry's Rational Animals*, PhD dissertation (King's College, London, 2012); and 'The puzzle of Porphyry's rational animals: a new interpretation of *On Abstinence from Animal Food*', in preparation. Porphyry's book is translated by Gillian Clark, (Duckworth, London, 2000, and Bloomsbury, London, 2011).

[85] Available in English translation.

[86] *The Sentences* is available in English translation.

desires. It fits in with this that in Plato's *Phaedo* Socrates, when purified from bodily desires, neither feared death nor was tempted to break the law by escaping from prison. Nonetheless, Porphyry's emphasis on *not harming* seems too *negative* a conception of justice to answer fully the question whether purified people will not neglect the bodily needs of others. Does not justice require one positively to *look out* for their needs, rather than merely refraining from violating them? Will one even succeed in not violating them, if one does not consider them? Yet Porphyry deliberately rejects the more positive Stoic view of justice, which goes to the opposite extreme, by making justice to others depend on *oikeiôsis*, an extension to all humans of a feeling of kinship such as one feels for oneself and one's nearest. Porphyry complains that that would be philanthropy (*philanthrôpia*, *On Abstinence* 3.26.9).

Plotinus speaks not only of an ascent through levels of virtue, but of an ascent to higher *selves*, such as the intellect. But this does not represent any particularism, because the higher selves, such as intellect, have shed many individual differentiating characteristics. If intellects were still further freed from bodies made of flesh or from 'vehicles' made of finer materials, they might be no more distinct than the different theorems in a unitary mathematical system.[87] Michael Griffin has pointed out that a late Neoplatonist of the 6th century CE, Olympiodorus, commenting on Plato's *First Alcibiades*, interprets his reference to 'each self' as requiring attention to a particular self and its particular acts.[88] Plotinus gave Porphyry his personal attention when he dissuaded him from committing suicide, so we hear in Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*, but the only arguments on suicide that we know from Plotinus are general.

I should not leave the Neoplatonists without mentioning that the late Neoplatonist Simplicius (writing after 529 CE) who wrote the most extensive, highly documented and sometimes technical commentaries on Aristotle and of over 800 years of interpretation of him, as well as a commentary on Epictetus, concluded three of his commentaries with a prayer. This was because the reading of Epictetus and then Aristotle was the first part of a curriculum that moved on to Plato and culminated in two works of Plato interpreted as revealing the nature of God. The reading of the commentaries was

[87] Richard Sorabji, *Self*, 118–126.

[88] Olympiodorus, *Commentary on Plato's First Alcibiades* 204, 3–11, discussed in Michael Griffin's introduction to his translation, vol. 1, (Bloomsbury, London, *forthcoming*).

therefore an exercise, a spiritual exercise, in Hadot's sense, though not in the sense that I have been discussing.

8. Christians in the Neoplatonist tradition

I will mention two Christians steeped in the Neoplatonist tradition, both from the 6th century CE. Both of them illustrate the seamlessness of philosophy. I need not say much about John Philoponus, because I have discussed him extensively before.[89] He wrote seven commentaries expounding Aristotle, studying him word by word, starting under the tutelage of the great master of 6th century philosophy in Alexandria, Ammonius. Consequently he had an understanding of pagan philosophy sufficiently penetrating to be able, as Ammonius' tutelage receded, to argue as a Christian against the pagan philosophers on their own terms. Because they all believed since Aristotle that nothing could finish going right through a more than finite number, much less exceed it, they must agree with the distinctively Christian view, that a Creator God could not have created the universe beginninglessly, as they thought, but must have given it a beginning. Or it would have gone through a more than finite number of years and an even larger number of days. Infinity puzzles of this sort had started with the Presocratic Zeno, the Eleatic (born c. 490–485), as problems that we might classify as logical, although they were classified by Aristotle as being about motion. Now Philoponus was applying such puzzles to physics and the nature of the universe, and hence to differences of religious belief, and by implication to differences of ethical viewpoint.

The other major figure was Boethius, whose commentaries on Aristotle's logic written in the manner of Greek ones but for Latin readers, were the main source for the early Latin Middle Ages. But his project to comment on the rest of Aristotle and on Plato was cut

[89] In Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum* (Duckworth, London, 1983, Chicago University Press 2006, Bloomsbury, London 2013), Chs 13–14; (ed.) *Philoponus and the Rejection of Aristotelian Science* (Duckworth, London, 1987) extensively updated 2nd edition, *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, supplementary volume **103** (2010) available http://events.sas.ac.uk/support-research/publictions/ 815, and eventually from Wiley-Blackwell; with some new proposals on dating and authorship of works, in (ed.) *Aristotle Transformed* (2nd edition, Bloomsbury, London, 2014).

short by a very dubious charge of treason, and awaiting execution in prison, he wrote his masterpiece, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which was to be paraphrased in England by King Alfred, Chaucer and Queen Elizabeth I. His question was whether life is governed by God's Providence, by necessity or by chance. The Lady Philosophy is imagined as visiting him in his prison cell and personally addressing each one of his worries as he expresses them in turn. On Providence and chance, the eventual suggestion is that chance as described by Aristotle is a coincidence, and coincidence leaves room for Providence. A danger for Boethius is that this may violate Aristotle's insight is that coincidences are unexplained conjunctions of things, each of which is itself explicable even as to time and place. If God were to engineer a conjunction, it would no longer be an unexplained coincidence. As regards Providence and necessity, the threat is that if God's Providence means that he foreknows all we will do, our actions and fate will have been inevitable all along. Boethius does not diagnose what I believe to be the real threat here, that if God's awareness of the future has already existed in the past, it is irrevocable, and that his knowledge, unlike human knowledge, is considered infallible. If so, it is both too late so to act that he will have foreknown something different, and his infallibility means that it is impossible for him to be mistaken. Although Boethius in Book 5 leaves the problem undiagnosed, he nonetheless gives a powerful answer. God's knowledge is not *fore*-knowledge, but *time-less* knowledge. If timeless knowledge is an intelligible idea, then Boethius is free to offer his solution, one that he might have learnt from a brilliant and much earlier Christian, Origen from the 3rd century CE. Knowledge which is not foreknowledge of your conduct or fate need no more compel you than the knowledge of someone who *sees* what is happening to you. The point (undiagnosed) about *seeing* is that it parallels timeless knowledge in lacking the element of irrevocability. Here Aristotelian reflections on chance, necessity, time and foreknowledge, lead seamlessly to consolation on the tragedies of life.

9. Retrospect

Of the three features selected for attention, the seamless connexion of ethics with other braches of philosophy, or in Plato's case with mathematics, appears in all periods. Thought exercises to guide the reader's life are also common, although possibly less so in Plato and

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Aristotle, and increasingly so with Epicureans and the later Stoics from Panaetius onwards. Least common is particularism in the sense which sees the individual's particular situation, or the perceptive individual's insight into the present situation, as crucial to making moral decisions. Outstanding in this regard were Aristotle and the later Stoics, although there were some anticipations, but among Platonists there was some preference for drawing guidance from the general.

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