

THE PHILOSOPHER

No title is now easier to acquire than that of Philosopher: living in obscurity & off the beaten track, a few marks of wisdom along with a little study are enough for it to be granted to certain people, who grace themselves with it, without deserving it.

Others, strong enough to rid themselves of the prejudices of education in matters of Religion, see themselves as the only true Philosophers. A few natural traits of reason & a few basic observations on the mind & heart of man, have shown them that no supreme being requires human worship, that the multiplicity of Religions, their mutual contradictions, & the various changes that occur within each of them are clear proof that there never was a single revealed religion, & that Religion is nothing more than a human passion, like love, the daughter of admiration, of fear, & of hope; but they stopped at this one speculation, & this is enough nowadays to be recognised as a Philosopher by a great number of people.

But a wider & more correct conception of the Philosopher is needed, & here is how I will now depict him.

The Philosopher is a human machine like any other man; but he's a machine who, by his mechanical constitution, thinks about his own movements. Other men are determined to act without either sensing or knowing the causes that make them move, without even dreaming that there is any such thing.

The Philosopher, however, sorts out the causes as far as he can, & even sometimes prevents them, or knowingly hands himself over to them: he's a clock who, so to speak, sometimes winds himself up. Thus, he avoids those objects which might inspire feelings unsuitable to his welfare and to a rational being, & seeks after those which might stimulate in him those affections which are suitable to the state he's in.

Reason is to the Philosopher what grace is to the Christian; in the system of Saint Augustine. Grace resolves the Christian to voluntary action; reason resolves the Philosopher without taking away the relish of what is voluntary.

Other men are carried away by their passions, and their actions are not preceded by any reflection; these men walk in darkness; whereas the Philosopher, even in his passions, only acts after reflection: he walks by night, but a torch goes ahead of him.

The Philosopher forms his principles on an infinity of specific observations; the Masses adopt the principle without thinking about the observations which produced it: they believe that the maxim exists, as it were, *per se*; but the Philosopher takes the maxim from its source; he examines its origins; he knows its proper value, & only uses it as he finds it suitable.

From this knowledge that principles originate only in specific observations, the Philosopher has high regard for the science of facts; he loves to learn about the details & everything that isn't easy to guess at. Thus, he regards it as a maxim totally opposed to the progress of the mind's enlightenment to stick to meditation alone, & to believe that man can only find truth within himself. Certain Metaphysicians say: avoid the impressions of the senses. Leave to Historians the knowledge of facts, & that of languages to the Grammarians. Our Philosophers, on the contrary, are sure that all our knowledge comes from the senses, that we have only given ourselves rules because of the uniformity of sense impressions, that our understanding reaches its limit where our senses are insufficiently fine or strong to bring us new intelligence; convinced that the source of our knowledge is entirely outside us, they urge us to make an ample stockpile of ideas, by opening ourselves up to the external impressions of objects; but opening ourselves up as a disciple who consults, & listens, & not as a master who decides & who imposes silence; they want us to study the precise impression that each object makes in us, & to avoid confusing it with that of any other object.

The certainty & the limitations of human knowledge are determined in this way. Certainty: when one feels that one has received, from outside oneself, the proper & precise impression that each judgement presupposes; for each judgement presupposes an external impression specific to itself. Limitations: when one cannot receive impressions, due either to the nature of the object, or due to the weakness of our organs: increase, if possible, the power of the organs, you will increase knowledge. It's only since the discovery of the Telescope & the Microscope that so much progress has been made in Astronomy & Physics.

It is also to increase the number of things we know & our ideas, that our Philosophers study the men of other times & those of our own day.

Spread out, they say, like bees through worlds past & the present, you will soon return to your hive to make your honey.

The philosopher applies himself to the knowledge of the universe & of himself; but just as an eye cannot see itself, the Philosopher knows that he cannot know himself perfectly, since he will not be able to receive external impressions from within, & we know nothing but by such impressions. This thought does not bother him, because he takes himself as he is, & not as his imagination would have him. Moreover, this ignorance gives no occasion for him to decide that he is composed of two opposite substances: thus, since he only has imperfect knowledge of himself, he says that he doesn't know how he thinks; but since he feels that what he thinks is so dependent on everything, he recognises that his substance is capable of thinking in the same way as it is capable of hearing & and seeing. Thought is in man a sense, like seeing & hearing, no less dependent on an organic constitution. Only air is liable to sound, from fire alone comes heat, only eyes can see, only ears can hear, & only the substance of the brain can have thoughts.

If men find it so hard to combine the idea of thought with the idea of extension, this is because they have never seen extension thinking. They are, in this respect, like a man born blind with respect to color, a man born deaf with regard to sound; they don't know how to combine these ideas with the extension that they can feel, because they've never seen this combination.

Truth is not, for the Philosopher, a mistress who corrupts his imagination, whom he thinks he sees everywhere. He is content to discern it wherever he does find some mixture of it. He never confuses it with plausibility; he takes as true that which is true, false that which is false, doubtful that which is doubtful, & plausible that which is only plausible. In addition, & this is a great perfection of the Philosopher, when there is no good reason to decide, he can remain undecided. Every decision, as noted above, presupposes external motivations leading to it: the Philosopher has a sense of due motivations for his decisions. In the absence of such a reason, he does not decide, he waits, & consoles himself when he sees that he has waited in vain.

The world is full of smart people, some of whom are very bright, who always lay down judgments: they are always guessing, for it's only guessing when you judge without feeling that one has suitable grounds for judgment. They are ignorant of the extent of human

intelligence; they think man can know everything: they therefore feel ashamed not to give some judgment, & imagine that intelligence consists in judging. The Philosopher thinks it consists in judging properly: he is happier with himself when he has suspended his faculty of decision-making, than if he had decided before having felt the proper grounds for the decision. So, he judges & speaks less; but he judges more soundly & speaks better; he does not reject the striking features that present themselves naturally to the mind by a rapid assembly of ideas which one is often surprised to see united. This rapid drawing of connections is what is commonly called intelligence. But that is also what he pursues least of all; he prefers to such brilliance a concern for the proper order of his ideas, for knowing their real scope & their precise connections, & for avoiding error by carrying some particular relation between two ideas too far. This discernment is called judgement & mental acuity.

To this acuity are also added flexibility & lucidity: the Philosopher is not so much attached to a system that he fails to grasp the force of the objections. Most men are so strongly attached to their opinions that they never even take the trouble to examine those of others.

The Philosopher understands the opinion he is rejecting with the same broad scope & lucidity as in the one he adopts.

The Philosophical spirit is thus a spirit of observation & accuracy which relates everything to its true principles. But it's not only the spirit that the Philosopher cultivates, his attention & concern extend further than that.

Man is not a monster who belongs in the abyss of the ocean, or in the heart of a forest. Life's simple necessities make interaction with others necessary to him; & in whatever state he may find himself, his needs & welfare compel him to live in society. Thus, reason calls him to know, study, & work to contract sociable qualities. It is astonishing that men attach themselves so little to all that is practical, & that they get so worked up about vain speculations. Just look at the disorders that so many different heresies have caused. They have always turned on various theoretical points: sometimes it was about the number of Persons in the Trinity & their emanations, sometimes about the number of Sacraments & their virtues; sometimes about the nature & the efficacy of grace: how many wars, how many disturbances for illusions!

The Philosophical population is subject to the same visions: how many frivolous disputes in the schools, how many books on vain questions! A single word would either resolve the matter, or show that they are unsolvable.

There is a sect, now in vogue, which criticizes scholars for neglecting to study their own mind, in order to fill their memory with facts & research on the ancient world, & we criticize both for neglecting sociability, & for failing to mix with society at all.

Our Philosopher does not think he is an exile in this world; he doesn't consider himself to be in enemy territory; he wants to wisely enjoy the goods offered to him by nature; he wants to find pleasure with others, & if it is to be found, it must first be created. Thus, he seeks to be agreeable to those beside whom chance or choice have placed him; & he also finds that which suits him: he's an honest man, eager to please & be of use.

Most of the powerful, whose wild ways don't leave time for thought, are ferocious towards whoever they don't consider their equals.

Ordinary Philosophers, who think too much or rather who do not think straight, are unpleasant with everyone; they flee mankind, & men avoid them.

But our Philosopher, capable of dividing his time between withdrawal from & interaction with others, is filled with humanity¹. He is Terence's Chremes, who feels that he is a man, & that mere humanity interests him in the bad or good fortune of his neighbour.

It would be pointless to point out here the Philosopher's zeal for all that is called honour & integrity: this is his only Religion.

Civil society is, as it were, the only divinity he recognizes on Earth; he praises it, he honours it with his integrity, with strict attention to his duties, & with a sincere desire not to be a useless or troublesome member of it.

The sense of integrity comes as much from the mechanical constitution of the Philosopher as do the lights of his intelligence. The more rationality you find in a man, the more integrity

¹ *Homo sum, humani à me nihil alienum puto.* (Translator: "I am a man, nothing that is human can be alien to me". From Terence's play *Heautontimoroumenos*)

you will also find. Whereas, wherever fanaticism & superstition reign, so also reign the passions & rage. It's the same temperament, concerned with different subjects: Madeleine who loves the world, & Madeleine who loves God, it's always Madeleine who's doing the loving.

But what makes a man honest is not whether he acts from love or hate, from hope or fear². It's in acting by the spirit of order or by reason. This is the temperament of the Philosopher; but it's only the virtues of temperament that count: trust your wine with the man who doesn't like it naturally, not with the man who promises every day that he'll never get drunk again.

The pious man is only upright through passion; but the passions have nothing certain about them: in addition, the pious man, I dare say, is in the habit of not being an honest man with respect to God, since he is in the habit of not following the rule exactly.

Religion is so little matched to humanity that even the most just of men commits faithless acts against God seven times a day, that is, many times. Frequent confessions by the most pious reveal in their heart, according to their way of thinking, a continual alternation of good & evil; on this point, all it takes for a person to be guilty, is to think he's guilty!

This eternal combat in which man so often knowingly succumbs, forms in him the habit of sacrificing virtue to vice; he gets used to following his pulsions, & making mistakes, hoping to revive himself by repentance. When people are so often faithless to God, they also gradually tend to act that way with men.

Moreover, the present always has more power over the mind of man than the future: Religion only restrains human action by means of a future which their self-regard always depicts as rather distant. The superstitious man flatters himself with the idea that he has enough time to fix his mistakes, to avoid punishments, & to deserve rewards: likewise, experience so often shows us that the restraints of Religion are very weak. Despite the fables the people believe regarding the Deluge, the heavenly fire that fell on five cities; despite the powerful depictions of eternal punishments & rewards; despite so many sermons & so much advocacy, the people remain the same. Nature is stronger than chimeras: it seems to be

² Oderunt peccare boni, virtutis amore. Horace, L. I. Epist. 16. (Translator: "The good hate to sin from their love of virtue")

jealous of its rights; it often pulls off the chains in which blind superstition insanely sought to contain it: only the Philosopher, who knows how to enjoy it, regulates it by his reason.

Examine all those against whom human justice is obliged to wield its sword, you will find either ardent temperaments or unenlightened minds, & they're always either superstitious or ignorant. The calm passions of the Philosopher may lead him to pleasure; but not to crime: his cultivated reason is his guide, & never leads him to act in a disorderly way.

Superstition can only give men a weak sense of the importance, with respect to their present interests, of following the laws of society; it even damns those who only follow them for this reason, which it contemptuously calls a human motive. What is chimerical is, in a superstitious perspective, more perfect than what is natural. Thus, superstitious exhortations can only work in the same way as an illusion; they upset, they frighten; but, when the power of its imagery fades, when the short-lived fire of the imagination is extinguished, man remains, without light, handed over to the weaknesses of his temperament.

Our sage, who, by neither hoping nor fearing anything after death, seems to find an additional reason to be upright during his life, thereby gains, as it were, consistence, & intensity in the motives that drive him to act; motivations which are all the stronger, since they are purely human & natural. This motivation is the proper satisfaction he finds in self-contentment, & following the rules of integrity; a motivation which the superstitious man only has imperfectly, for he must ascribe all his good qualities to grace. To this motivation of the sage is related another, quite powerful motivation, which is his self-interest & a present & real interest.

Separate, for a moment, the Philosopher from the good man: what's left for him? Civil society, his only God, abandons him; he is deprived of life's sweetest satisfactions; he is banished from mixing with good men. Thus, it matters far more to him than to other men to employ all his resources to produce only those effects which are consistent with the idea of an upright man: there is no reason to fear that, when nobody has an eye on him, he'll act contrary to probity! No, this would be against the mechanical disposition of the sage; he is kneaded, as it were, with the leaven of good order & rules; he is full of ideas of the good of civil society; he knows these principles better than other men. Crime would meet too much opposition in him; there would be too many ideas, both natural & acquired, to eliminate. His faculty of acting is, as it were, like the string of a musical instrument tuned to a certain pitch;

which can't make any other sound. What he fears is being detuned, being discordant; which reminds me of what Velleius said regarding Cato of Utica:

"He has never," he said, "done good deeds for show; but only because it was not in him to do otherwise".³

Moreover, in all the deeds men do, they only seek their own present satisfaction: it's the present good or rather attraction, following their mechanical disposition, which makes them act. But why should you expect, since the Philosopher expects neither punishment nor reward after this life, that he would find a present attraction driving him to kill or deceive you? Is he not, on the contrary, better disposed, through his reflections, to find greater appeal & pleasure in living with you, in winning your confidence & respect, in performing the duties of friendship & recognition? Don't these feelings lie deep in man, independently of all belief? Once again, the idea of the dishonest man is as far from the idea of the Philosopher, as is the idea of the stupid man; & daily experience shows that the more reason & light a person has, the more sound & well-suited he will be for human interaction. ("An idiot doesn't have what it takes to be good"⁴) People only sin because their mind is weaker than their passions; & it's a maxim of Theology, which true in a certain sense; that all sinners are ignorant⁵.

This love of society, so essential for the Philosopher, shows how true is the remark of Emperor Antonius, that "the people will be happy when the kings are philosophers, or when philosophers are kings".

The superstitious man, elevated to the important posts, sees himself too much as a stranger on Earth to truly look after the interests of other men. The contempt of splendor & wealth, & the other principles of Religion, whatever interpretations it may have been necessary to give of these precepts, are contrary to everything that might make an Empire happy & flourishing.

The understanding which is captivated under the yoke of faith becomes incapable of the wider vision demanded by Government, & which is so necessary for public service. The

³ *Nunquam recte fecit ut facere videretur, sed qui aliter facere non poterat.* Veill. Lib. 2. Ch. 35.

⁴ La Rochefoucauld, *Maxims*, n° 387.

⁵ *Omnis peccans est ignorans.*

superstitious are taught that it's a supreme being who has raised them above their fellows: it's to this being, & not the public, that he will show his gratitude.

Seduced by the authority inherent in his status, & to which other men willingly submit, for the establishment of order, he soon concludes that he's been elevated for his own happiness, & not to work for the benefit of others. He sees himself as the end goal of the dignity, which, ultimately, has no other goal than the good of the republic & of the individuals in it.

I would happily go into much greater detail here; but it seems obvious enough how much more utility the republic must find in those who, when raised up to the higher positions, think only about the order & welfare of the public, & of all that is called humanity; & how it would be desirable to be able to exclude all those who, by the character of their mind, or by their bad education, have other things in mind.

The Philosopher⁶ is, therefore, a good man who always acts according to reason, & adds to this a spirit of reflection, of proper morals, & the sociable qualities.

From this idea it is easy to conclude how far the impassible sage of the Stoics is from the perfection of our Philosopher: We want a man, & their sage was only a phantom: they were embarrassed by humanity, & we glory in it; we want to turn the passions to good use; we want to put them to rational, & consequently possible, use, & they insanely want to destroy the passions, & to debase us below our nature by a chimerical insensitivity: the passions join people to each other, & this connection is a sweet pleasure for us. We want neither to destroy our passions, nor to be tyrannised by them; but we want to use & regulate them.

It's also plain, from what has been said, how far the correct idea of the Philosopher is from those indolent men who, addicted to lazy meditation, neglect their temporal affairs, & all that's called fortune. The true Philosopher isn't wracked by ambition⁷, but he does want the sweet comforts of life; he must have, in addition the strictly necessary, the honest comforts which are necessary for an honest man, & which alone can make men happy: this is the wellspring of manners & charms.

⁶ Definition of the Philosopher

⁷ B. Vid. Horat: Epist. 17. Lib. I. *omnis de cuit Aristipum color, & status & Res* &c. (Translator: "As for Aristippus, every complexion of life, every station and circumstance sat gracefully upon him" (Horace, *Epistles*, Book I, Epistle 17.))

Poverty deprives us of well-being, which is the Philosopher's true Paradise: it banishes far from us all the tangible graces & keeps us from mixing with good people.

Moreover, the better their heart is, the more occasions people find to suffer from their poverty: now it's the inability of having the pleasure of giving a gift to one's friend; now it's an opportunity to give him help, which one cannot afford. At the bottom of your heart, you mean well, but nobody can see your intentions; & even when someone knows your intent, isn't it an evil to be unable to manifest it?

In truth, we don't esteem a Philosopher any less highly for being poor; but we banish him from our society, unless he does what he can to escape his poverty. It's not that we are afraid that he'll become a burden to us: we'll help him in his needs; but we don't believe that indolence is a virtue.

Most men, who have a false idea of the Philosopher, imagine he should be content with precisely what he needs: false Philosophers have created this prejudice through their laziness & with certain dazzling maxims. The striking notion always corrupts the rational conception: there are base sentiments that degrade man below pure animality, even; there are others which seem to raise him above himself. We condemn both equally, because they aren't suitable for man. It corrupts the perfection of a being if you try to go against his nature, even on the pretext of elevating him.

I would like to end with a few other prejudices commonly held by the population of Philosophers; but I don't want to write a whole book. I hope they find the truth. They have prejudices like everyone else, & especially with respect to civil life: disabused of a few errors, the weakness of which is even felt by libertines, & which are nowadays only dominant among the masses, the ignorant, & those with no time for thought, they think they have done everything they should do: but if they have done so much to improve their minds, they should remember that they still have their work cut out for them in matters of the heart, & refined sociability.