and even that of speculative reason is conditional, and it is only in the practical employment of reason that it is complete."[59] In fact, Kantian philosophy is addressed only to those who feel this practical interest for the moral good, who are gifted with moral sentiment, and who opt for a supreme end and a sovereign good. It is, moreover, remarkable that in his *Critique of the Faculty of Judgment,* this interest for the moral good and this moral sentiment appear as the precondition for the interest we can feel for the beauty of nature: "This immediate interest in the beauty of nature is not in fact common. It is peculiar to those whose habits of thought are already trained to the good or else are eminently susceptible of such training."[60]

Kant's theoretical discourse, both on his part and on the part of his audience, is linked to a decision—an act of faith leading to the choice of a certain way of life, inspired, in the last analysis, by the model of the sage. We thus see the extent to which Kant was influenced by the ancient concept of philosophy. Moreover, in the "ethical ascetics" which Kant proposes at the end of his *Metaphysics of Morals,* he sets out the rules for the exercise of virtue, trying to reconcile Epicurean serenity with the tension of Stoic duty.[61]

It would take a large volume to tell the entire history of the reception of ancient philosophy by medieval and modern philosophy. I have chosen to concentrate on a few major figures: Montaigne, Descartes, Kant. We might mention many other thinkers—as different as Rousseau, Shaftesbury,[62] Schopenhauer, Emerson, Thoreau, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche, William James, Bergson, Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, and still others. All, in one way or another, were influenced by the model of ancient philosophy, and conceived of philosophy not only as a concrete, practical activity but also as a transformation of our way of inhabiting and perceiving the world.

Online - Epictetus

CHAPTER TWELVE

# Questions and Perspectives

Now that we have reached the end of this work, the author notices everything he has left unsaid, as well as the questions the reader would like to ask him. If, for instance, the "theoreticizing" of philosophy has been presented as the result of the encounter between Christianity and philosophy, wouldn't it have been better to give an overall study of the relations between philosophy and religion, both in antiquity and in the modern world? In antiquity, the philosopher encountered religion in his social life (in the form of the official cult) and in his cultural life (in the form of works of art and of literature), yet he lived religion philosophically, by transforming it into philosophy. If Epicurus recommended participation in civic festivals and even in prayer, this was to allow the Epicurean philosopher to contemplate the gods as conceived by the Epicurean theory of nature. Even the late Neoplatonists, who practiced theurgy, integrated it into a course of spiritual progress which was essentially philosophical, in order to rise ultimately to a transcendent and unknowable God who was completely foreign to traditional religion. Although they constructed a rational theology according to which philosophical entities corresponded to the gods of the official religion, this theology no longer had much in

common with the ancient beliefs which they wanted to defend against Christianity. The philosophical way of life never entered into competition with religion in antiquity, because at the time religion was not a way of life which included all of existence and all of inner life, as it was in Christianity. It was, rather, philosophical discourse which could collide with the received ideas on the gods within the city, as it did in the case of Anaxagoras and of Socrates.

As we have seen, the relations between philosophy and Christianity were much more complex, and it would take a lengthy study to define them. It could be said that almost all philosophies since the Middle Ages have felt the influence of Christianity. On the one hand, their philosophical discourse developed within an intimate relation with Christianity, whether in order to justify Christian doctrine—directly or indirectly—or to combat it. On this point, one must commend the work of Étienne Gilson, who shows how the philosophy of Descartes, Malebranche, and Leibniz is, in the last analysis, situated within the Christian problematic.[1] He might also have added Kant's name,[2] but it must be admitted that by assimilating Christian faith to moral faith, Kant essentially transformed Christianity into a philosophy. Moreover, from the Middle Ages, through Petrarch and Erasmus or the Christian Stoics and Epicureans, to the Christian existentialism of Gabriel Marcel, the philosophical way of life was long identified with the Christian way of life—so much so, that we can discern traces of Christianity even in the existential attitudes of modern-day philosophers.[3] Nor is this surprising, given the strength of this tradition, which suffused the entire Western tradition. One would therefore need lengthy reflection in order to give a more adequate definition of the relations between philosophy and religion.

It may also be useful to give a brief overview of my notion of philosophy. I am quite ready to accept that philosophy, both today and in antiquity, is a theoretical and "conceptualizing" activity. I also believe, however, that in antiquity it was the philosopher's



choice of a way of life which conditioned and determined the fundamental tendencies of his philosophical discourse. I also think that this is ultimately true of all philosophy. I do not mean, of course, that the philosopher is determined by a blind, arbitrary choice; I mean that practical reason takes primacy over theoretical reason. Philosophical reflection is, in Kant's words, motivated and guided by "that which interests reason"—in other words, by the choice of a way of life. I would agree with Plotinus that "it is desire that engenders thought."[4] Nevertheless, there is a kind of reciprocal interaction or causality between what the philosopher profoundly wants, what interests him in the strongest sense of the term—that is, the answer to the question "How should I live?"—and what he tries to elucidate and illuminate by means of reflection. Reflection is inseparable from the will. On occasion, this interaction also exists in modern or contemporary philosophies, and we can, up to a point, explain philosophical discourses by the existential choices which motivate them. For instance, we know from one of Wittgenstein's letters that his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* which is apparently, and indeed truly is, a theory of the proposition, is nevertheless fundamentally a book of ethics in which "what pertains to ethics" is not said but shown.[5] Wittgenstein elaborates his theory of the proposition in order to justify this silence concerning ethics, which is foreseen and deliberate from the beginning of the book. What motivates the *Tractatus* is the will to lead the reader to a certain kind of life, and a certain attitude, which, moreover, is fully analogous to the existential options of ancient philosophy: "to live within the present,"[6] without regretting, fearing, or hoping for anything.[7] We have seen that many modern and contemporary philosophers have remained faithful, in Kant's terms, to the Idea of philosophy. In the last analysis, it is the scholastic *teaching* of philosophy, and especially of the history of philosophy, which has always had a tendency to emphasize the theoretical, abstract, and conceptual side of philosophy.

This is why it is necessary to insist on a few methodological imperatives. In order to understand the philosophical works of antiquity, we must take into consideration the particular conditions of philosophical life at that time. We must discern the philosopher's underlying intention, which was not to develop a discourse which had its end in itself but to act upon souls. In fact, each assertion must be understood from the perspective of the effect it was intended to produce in the soul of the auditor or reader. Whether the goal was to convert, to console, to cure, or to exhort the audience, the point was always and above all not to communicate to them some ready-made knowledge but to *form* them. In other words, the goal was to learn a type of know-how; to develop a *habitus*, or new capacity to judge and to criticize; and to *transform*—that is, to change people's way of living and of seeing the world. If, then, we remember that philosophy's assertions are intended not to communicate knowledge but to form and to train, it will come as no surprise if we find *aporiai* in Plato, Aristotle, or Plotinus in which thought seems to be enclosed—points at which there are reformulations, repetitions, and apparent incoherences.

The relation between a work and its addressee is of the utmost importance, for the content of the work is partially determined by the necessity of adapting itself to the addressee's spiritual capacities. We must never forget to situate the works of ancient philosophers within the perspective of the life of the school to which they belonged, for they almost always bear a relation—direct or indirect—to the teaching. For instance, Aristotle's treatises are, to a large extent, preparations for oral teaching, while Plotinus' treatises are echoes of difficulties which were brought up during his classes. Finally, most works of antiquity, whether philosophical or otherwise, were intimately related to orality. They were intended to be read out loud, often at public readings. Such a close link between writing and speech can explain some of the unnerving particularities of ancient philosophical writings.



The reader will also no doubt wish to ask if I think the ancient concept of philosophy might still exist today. I think I have already answered this question, at least in part, by showing how many philosophers of the modern period, from Montaigne to the present, have considered philosophy not as a simple theoretical discourse but as a practice, an *askēsis*, and a transformation of the self. This concept is therefore still "actual" and can always be reactualized.[8] For my part, I would put the question differently: Isn't there an urgent need to rediscover the ancient notion of the "philosopher"—that living, choosing philosopher without whom the notion of philosophy has no meaning? Why not define the philosopher not as a professor or a writer who develops a philosophical discourse, but, in accordance with the concept which was constant in antiquity, as a person who leads a philosophical life? Shouldn't we revise the habitual use of the word "philosopher" (which usually refers only to the theoretician) so that it applies to the person who practices philosophy, just as Christians can practice Christianity without being theorists or theologians? Do we ourselves have to construct a philosophical system before we can live philosophically? This does not mean, of course, that we needn't reflect upon our own experience, as well as that of philosophers of both past and present.

Yet what does it mean to "live like a philosopher"? What is the practice of philosophy? In this book I have tried to show, among other things, that philosophical practice is relatively independent from philosophical discourse. The same spiritual exercise can be justified after the fact by widely different philosophical discourses, in order to describe and justify experiences whose existential density ultimately escapes all attempts at theoreticizing and systematizing. For instance, the Stoics and the Epicureans, for various and almost opposite reasons, advised their disciples to live always aware of the imminence of death, freeing themselves from the worry of the future and the weight of the past. Yet the person who

practices this exercise of concentration sees the universe with new eyes, as if he were seeing it for the first and the last time. In his enjoyment of the present, he discovers the splendor and mystery of existence and of the world's emergence; at the same time, he achieves serenity by experiencing how relative are the things which provoke anxiety and worry. Similarly, Stoics, Epicureans, and Platonists, each for their own reasons, exhorted their disciples to raise themselves to a cosmic perspective, plunge into the immensity of space and time, and thereby transform their vision of the world.

Seen in this way, the practice of philosophy transcends the oppositions of particular philosophies. It is essentially an effort to become aware of ourselves, our being-in-the-world, and our being-with-others. It is also, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty used to say, an effort to "relearn how to see the world" and attain a universal vision, thanks to which we can put ourselves in the place of others and transcend our own partiality.[9]

There is a text by Georges Friedmann that I have often cited in other works. It seems to be of capital importance here, insofar as it shows how a contemporary man, engaged in political struggle, realizes that he can and should live as a philosopher:

> "To take flight" every day! At least for a moment, which may be brief, so long as it is intense. A "spiritual exercise" every day—alone or in the company of a person who also wants to better himself.
>
> Spiritual exercises. Leave duration behind. Try to strip yourself of your own passions, of the vanities and the rash of noise surrounding your name (which, from time to time, itches like a chronic affliction). Flee backbiting. Strip yourself of pity and of hatred. Love all free human beings. Become eternal by transcending yourself.
>
> This effort upon yourself is necessary; this ambition is just. Many are those who become completely absorbed in militant politics and the preparation of the social revolution. Few, very few, are those who, to prepare for the revolution, are willing to make themselves worthy of it.[10]



Yet philosophers in antiquity, in order to practice philosophy, lived in more or less close proximity to a community of other philosophers, or at least they received their rules of life from a philosophical tradition. Their task was thereby made easier, even if actually living according to such rules of life demanded strenuous effort. Today there are no more schools, and the "philosopher" is alone. How shall he find his way?

He will find it as many others have found it before him—as Montaigne, Goethe, or Nietzsche found it. They, too, were alone, but in accordance with their circumstances and innermost needs, they chose the ways of life of ancient philosophy as their models. Nietzsche, for instance, wrote as follows: "So far as praxis is concerned, I view the various moral schools as experimental laboratories in which a considerable number of recipes for the art of living have been thoroughly practiced and lived to the hilt. The results of all their experiments belong to us, as our legitimate property. Thus, we will not hesitate to adopt a Stoic recipe just because we have profited in the past from Epicurean recipes."[11] It is lengthy experience acquired over centuries, and lengthy discussions about such experience, which give the ancient models their value. To use the Stoic model and the Epicurean model—successively or alternately—was a way of achieving a certain balance in life for Nietzsche, but also for Montaigne, Goethe, Kant, Wittgenstein, and Jaspers.[12] And there are other models that could just as effectively inspire and guide philosophical practice.

The reader might also ask how these ancient models could still be reactualized, despite the intervening centuries of global evolution. First of all, as Nietzsche remarked, this could happen because the ancient schools were a kind of experimental laboratory, thanks to which we can compare the consequences of the various types of

spiritual experience they proposed. From this point of view, the plurality of ancient schools is precious. But the models they offer can be actualized only if they are reduced to their essence or their most profound significance. They must be detached from their antiquated cosmological and mythical elements, so that their fundamental positions, which the schools themselves considered essential, can be brought out. We can go further—for as I have said elsewhere, I believe these models correspond to permanent, fundamental attitudes which all human beings find necessary when they set about seeking wisdom.[13] In *The Inner Citadel* I spoke of a kind of universal Stoicism, which we find not only in the West but also, as Jacques Gernet has shown, in China.[14] As I said, I have long been hostile to comparative philosophy because I thought it could cause confusions and arbitrary connections. Now, however, as I read the works of my colleagues Guy Bugault, Roger-Pol Droit, Michel Hulin, and J.-L. Solère, it seems to me that there really are troubling analogies between the philosophical attitudes of antiquity and those of the Orient.[15] These analogies cannot be explained by historical influences; nevertheless, they do perhaps give us a better understanding of all that can be involved in philosophical attitudes which illuminate one another in this way. The means that enable us to achieve inner peace and communion with other human beings, or with the universe, are not unlimited. Perhaps we should say that the choices of life we have described—those of Socrates, Pyrrho, Epicurus, the Stoics, the Cynics, and the Skeptics—correspond to constant, universal models which are found, in various forms, in every civilization, throughout the various cultural zones of humanity. This is why I earlier mentioned a Buddhist text, as well as some considerations by Hulin, who was inspired by Buddhism: because I thought they could give us a better understanding of the essence of the Greek sage. It is most interesting that in Greece, India, and China, one of the paths to wisdom is indifference, or the refusal to accord things differences in value.



Such differences express the egoistic, partial, and limited viewpoint of the individual—the viewpoint of "the frog at the bottom of the well" or of "a vinegar-fly at the bottom of a barrel," as mentioned by Chuang-tzu: "All I knew of the Tao was what a vinegar-fly stuck inside a barrel can know of the universe. If the master had not lifted the lid, I would still be unaware of the universe in its integral grandeur."[16] Such disinterestedness and indifference bring us back to an original state: the quiet and peace which exists deep within us. It preexists the affirmation of our individuality against the world and against other people, and hence preexists the egotism and egocentricity which separate us from the universe, and which sweep us inexorably into the worried pursuit of pleasure and the perpetual fear of pain.

Spiritual exercises such as "living in the present" and "looking at things from above" can be found in Goethe, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein.[17] They are quite accessible to the "philosopher," in the sense in which we understand him. I hope to return to this theme in future works.

More generally, I hope I have implied that, in Solère's words, "the ancients were perhaps closer to the Orient than we are."[18] The same point is made by a modern Chinese author who writes: "Chinese philosophers were all Socrates, to various degrees. Knowledge and wisdom were inseparable in the person of the philosopher. His philosophy demanded that he live it, and he himself was its vehicle. Living in accordance with his philosophical convictions was a part of his philosophy."[19] The "philosopher," or lover of wisdom, in the sense in which we understand these terms, can therefore seek models of life in the oriental philosophies, and these will not be so very far from the ancient models.

Such a "philosopher" will, moreover, be exposed to many risks. The first of these will be the temptation to be satisfied with philosophical discourse. There is an abyss between fine phrases and becoming genuinely aware of oneself, truly transforming oneself. It

certainly seems, moreover, as if the deepest reason for the "theoreticizing" of philosophy is this tendency—innate, as it were, to the philosopher—which leads him to be satisfied with discourse, or the conceptual architecture which he builds, rebuilds, or admires. Throughout the history of ancient philosophy, and in all the schools, we encounter the same warnings against the danger the philosopher incurs, if he thinks his philosophical discourse can be sufficient unto itself without being linked to a philosophical life. Plato already sensed this ever-present danger when, in order to justify his decision to go to Syracuse, he wrote: "I was afraid that I would see myself as a fine talker, incapable of resolutely undertaking an action."[20]

Another danger, the worst of all, is to believe that one can do without philosophical reflection. The philosophical way of life must be justified in rational, motivated discourse, and such discourse is inseparable from the way of life. Nevertheless, we have to reflect critically on the ancient, modern, and oriental discourses which justify a given way of life. We must try to render explicit the reasons we act in such-and-such a way, and reflect on our experience and that of others. Without such reflection, the philosophical life risks sinking into vapid banality, "respectable" feelings, or deviance. To be sure, we cannot wait until we have read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in order to live as philosophers. Nevertheless, living as a philosopher also means to reflect, to reason, to conceptualize in a rigorous, technical way—or, as Kant used to say, "to think for oneself." The philosophical life is a never-ending quest.[21]

Finally, and despite the tenacious clichés which still clog philosophy manuals, we must never forget that ancient philosophical life was always intimately linked to the care for others, and that this demand is inherent in the philosophical life, especially when it is lived in the contemporary world. In the words of Georges Friedmann: "A modern sage—if such existed—would not turn away from the human sewer, as so many disgusted aesthetes have



done."[22] That said, however, Friedmann found the problems in the relations between ancient philosophers and the State almost insoluble. We must agree, for the "engaged" philosopher always runs the risk of letting himself be swept along by political passions and hatreds. This is why it was vital, in Friedmann's view, that in order to improve the human situation we concentrate our strength "on limited groups, even on individuals," and "on the spiritual effort (the transformation of a few)," which, he thought, would eventually be communicated and diffused. The philosopher is cruelly aware of his solitude and impotence in a world which is torn between two states of unconsciousness: that which derives from the idolatry of money, and that which results in the face of the misery and suffering of billions of human beings. In such conditions, the philosopher will surely never be able to attain the absolute serenity of the sage. To do philosophy will therefore also mean to suffer from this isolation and this impotence. But ancient philosophy also teaches us not to resign ourselves, but to continue to act reasonably and try to live according to the norm constituted by the Idea of wisdom, whatever happens, and even if our action seems very limited to us. In the words of Marcus Aurelius: "Do not wait for Plato's Republic, but be happy if one little thing leads to progress, and reflect on the fact that what results from such a little thing is not, in fact, so very little."[23]