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Introduction

Compare the following two questions, both of which greatly exercised ancient Greek and Roman thinkers:

1 What is a good human life?
2 Why isn't the earth falling?

They appear about as different as any two questions could be. The first is one that most of us continue to consider important today. The second is not a question we are likely even to think worth asking: however little physics we know, we know enough to realize that the question itself rests on false suppositions.

Despite this and other contrasts, those who manage to get inside the subject – Greek and Roman philosophy – to which this book aims to provide an entry route should find that the two questions come to exercise an equal fascination. They may even find that the two of them have more in common than at first appears, as I shall suggest below.

Take the first of them, what a good human life is. How would you react to the answer that it should in principle be no harder to work out what makes a human life a good one than it is to work out what makes a doctor, a scalpel, an operation or an eye a good one? The latter kind of question is answered by first determining what the essential *function* of a doctor, a scalpel, an operation or an eye is, a good one simply being any that is such as to be successful in performing that function. Analogously, then, find out what is the function of a human being, or of a human life, and you will know what it is to be a good human being and to have a good human life. If, for example, man's natural function is fundamentally social, a human life's goodness will be defined accordingly; if intellectual, in a different way;

if pleasure-seeking, in yet another way. Despite their very various answers, nearly all the major philosophers of antiquity were united in this same fundamental conviction: by studying human nature we can aspire to determine the true character of a good human life.

One common and understandable modern reaction is to protest that this kind of functional analogy confuses two radically different kinds of good, one moral, the other non-moral: the functional 'goodness' of a scalpel has nothing in common with the moral 'goodness' of a person, an action or a life. Some may go so far as to congratulate themselves that we today are no longer deaf to an equivocation that tricked even the greatest thinkers of antiquity.

But why be so confident that there *are* these two incommensurable kinds of good? The confidence arises – as the history of ancient philosophy reveals – because we are ourselves heirs to a tradition in ethics which emerged relatively late on in antiquity. It was the Stoics of the third century BC who, building on a set of insights provided by their figurehead Socrates, set the standard for what is to count as 'good' so high that only moral virtue could satisfy it; all other, conventional uses of 'good', they inferred, as applied for example to what is merely practically advantageous, represent a different and strictly incorrect sense of the term. The Stoics did not themselves go on to infer that the (genuine) goodness of a life is not something given in nature, but their distinction is nevertheless the very earliest forerunner of that radical division between kinds of goodness.

Once we have reconstructed where and how our own presupposition began its long career, it becomes not only easier, but also potentially liberating, to put the clock back and consider the advantages of the earlier outlook, where 'good' was not roped off into moral and functional senses. It was from such a unified starting point, for example, that Aristotle was able to compose an ethical treatise, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which has still not in two and a half millennia been superseded by any rival.

Another common reaction to the same treatment of moral goodness as some kind of functional goodness is to protest that, unlike a scalpel, a human being cannot be assumed to have any function at all – not, at any rate, without supplying some contentious theological presuppositions. Here too there is much to learn from Aristotle, who made a powerful case for understanding living beings, humans included, and their parts in terms of their natural functions, without for a moment admitting divine design or government.

My point is not to insinuate that our intuition is wrong and that the ancients were right about the nature of good (or for that matter that the reverse is true). It is to underline how retracing the early history of our own philosophical concepts and assumptions is almost bound to be enlightening, not only about our forerunners but also about ourselves.

My second example, the earth's stability, could hardly be more different. Understanding why the ancients thought it a problem in the first place is already half the challenge. Immobile heavy objects, such as buildings and boulders, are immobile precisely because they rest on solid earth. All the more reason, then, to be confident that the earth, which provides that immobility, is itself immobile. But some further reflection – exactly the kind of reflection that kick-started philosophical thought in the sixth century BC – undermines this initial confidence. The heavier an object is, the harder it will fall downwards when dropped; and since earth is itself a heavy substance, won't that comprehensive amalgam of it, *the* earth, be the likeliest object of all to hurtle downwards, this time without any obstacle to stop it? Showing why, in the face of this danger, the earth stays still was one of the earliest and most persisting challenges for those thinkers committed to explaining the regularity and orderly arrangement of the world. The Greek for this 'order' is *kosmos*, and the word came to signify the world-order taken as a whole, embracing the earth, the surrounding heaven, and everything in between. Thus it is that explaining the earth's stability was a focal question in the emergence of *cosmology* as an area of inquiry.

The problem, once posed, attracted all manner of answers. That none of them will strike us as entirely correct is somewhat less important than the variety of explanatory devices and models that were devised in the process of getting it wrong. One kind of answer was the mechanical model: even very heavy objects can float on a fluid, as wood does on water, as leaves do on the wind, and as a saucepan lid does over steam. Perhaps then the earth floats on water (Thales), or air (Anaximenes), in which case there may also be grounds for regarding this same fluid as the ultimate pool of stuff on which our world depends. A second mode of solution invoked equilibrium (Anaximander): the world is a mathematically symmetrical structure surrounded by a spherical heaven and with the earth at its exact centre, where it consequently has no more reason to move off in one

direction than in any other. A third suggestion (Xenophanes) is that the earth is stable because it rests on more earth, and that earth on yet more earth, and so on *ad infinitum*. However far down you were to dig, you would never come to a portion of earth that, because unsupported by more earth, was liable to fall. It is earth all the way down.

All these suggestions predate the fifth century BC. In the fifth century itself, yet other models emerged. Some philosophers, for example, pointed to the way that in a vortex the heavy material will naturally gravitate to the centre, and suggested that the cosmic vortex, evidenced by the perpetual rotation of the heavens, in some comparable way forces the earth to the centre. Around the same time a more mathematical alternative became current. Not only the world but also the earth, located at its centre, is spherical. The direction which we call 'down' represents in reality the natural motion of all heavy objects, not in parallel vertical lines, but towards that centre. If not yet the Newtonian theory of gravity, this was an impressive forerunner to it, and it proved to explain the astronomical and other data more successfully than any of its rivals.

Yet another twist was added by Plato, who, in a classic passage of his *Phaedo*, presents Socrates arguing that no such explanation of the earth's stability achieves much until it shows why it is *better* that the cosmic order, the earth's fixed location in it included, should be as it is. Socrates is assuming here that the world-order is the product of intelligence, and he compares a merely mechanistic explanation of this order to someone answering, when asked why Socrates is sitting here in prison (where he is awaiting his own execution), that it is because of his bones, muscles etc. being arranged in a certain way, with no mention of his rational decision that it is *better* not to escape but to stay and face the death penalty. Likewise if the earth is, say, a sphere in equipoise at the centre, the only adequate explanation will be one that among other things tells why that arrangement is 'better' than any alternative. But how might a cosmic arrangement be 'better'? Plato's idea seems to be that such an explanation would reveal how the world's arrangement maximizes the chances of its inhabitants' own self-improvement – for example through studying mathematical astronomy, or through appropriate relocation in each successive incarnation that a soul undergoes. In such ways, even the cosmological puzzle of the world's stability may bring us back to the

issue of goodness, and to the all-important issue of what makes a life a good life (see further, pp. 112–13 below).

More significant from the point of view of philosophical history is the fact that Plato, in setting this challenge, was announcing a new agenda for *teleological* explanation. That agenda was thereafter to dominate scientific thinking until at least the seventeenth century. The evidence of design in the world, once Plato had drawn attention to it, became extraordinarily hard to discount or ignore. In antiquity there remained those, such as the atomists, who were prepared to argue that chance on a large enough scale could account for apparent purposiveness. But, as R. J. Hankinson's chapter on 'Philosophy and Science' brings out, the teleologists were by and large to have the better of the ancient debate.

The business of cataloguing these solutions to the problem of the earth's stability belongs primarily to the domain of intellectual history. What we are likely to appreciate is less the specific solutions than the development of increasingly sophisticated explanatory strategies. However, it also illustrates a second cardinal point about the value of studying ancient philosophy. In reconstructing the thought of the ancients, we need not be seeking to vindicate their beliefs, whether by assimilating our ideas to theirs or theirs to ours. But what we can always fruitfully do is find out *what it would be like* to face the questions that they faced and to think as they thought. Learning to strip off our own assumptions and to try on the thought processes of others who lacked them is almost invariably an enlightening and mind-stretching exercise.

For a variety of reasons, the Greek and Roman philosophers are supremely suitable subjects for the kind of enterprise I have been sketching. For one thing, as inaugurators of the tradition to which most of us are heirs they inevitably have a very special place in our understanding of our own intellectual make-up. For another, their brilliance, originality and diversity would be hard to parallel in any other single culture. Even if this volume had chosen to focus just on the extraordinary trio of Socrates, his pupil Plato, and *his* pupil Aristotle, it would be dealing with three utterly diverse but equally seminal thinkers, each of whom over the next two millennia was to inspire more than one entire philosophical movement. Yet to concentrate on these three would be to leave out of account a large part of the ancient world's legacy, as well as to impoverish our

understanding even of them, by isolating them from their historical milieu.

It is unlikely that any other philosophical texts have been subjected to the minute analysis that the writings of these philosophers, and especially those of Plato and Aristotle, have enjoyed from the first century BC to the present day. Yet this tradition of philosophical exegesis is very far from having led to a convergence of views about how best to interpret them. It is hard for us not to recreate our philosophical predecessors to some degree in our own image, since to read them wherever possible as believing what we ourselves take to be true or at least sensible is an application of the commendable Principle of Charity, whereby of two or more competing and equally well-founded interpretations the one to be preferred is whichever makes the philosopher under scrutiny come out looking better. However, philosophical truth (even on the unlikely hypothesis that we are privileged arbiters of this) is only one criterion of a charitable reading: others include internal consistency, argumentative soundness, and, by no means least, historical plausibility. Again and again it turns out that, when all these factors are weighed against each other, the view we must attribute to the philosopher is strangely *un*like anything we ourselves would be inclined to believe, but for that very reason all the more valuable both to acknowledge and to seek to understand from the inside.

The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Philosophy has been designed, not to take readers all the way to this goal, but to provide a suitable entry route.

It offers overviews of the main philosophical movements and trends, written by leading specialists as the fruit of many years' close study: the Presocratics (Malcolm Schofield), the Sophists and Socrates (Sarah Broadie), Plato (Christopher Rowe), Aristotle (John Cooper), Hellenistic philosophy (Jacques Brunschwig, in partnership with myself), Roman philosophy (A. A. Long), and late ancient philosophy (Frans de Haas). In addition, Jonathan Barnes surveys the place of argument in ancient philosophical thinking, and Jill Kraye surveys the part played by ancient philosophy in the classical tradition down to the seventeenth century. Three further chapters examine the relation of philosophy to other dominant aspects of ancient culture: literature (Martha Nussbaum), science (R. J. Hankinson), and

religion (Glenn Most). If the twelve chapters differ considerably from each other in focus and approach, that reflects to some degree the varying nature of the material, and to a greater extent the personal methods and priorities of those writing, which it would have been counterproductive to obliterate by excessive homogenization.

In addition to this introductory function, the book also has a secondary function as a handbook. You will not find in it constant instructions directing you to the primary texts, since it is conceived as a survey to read *before* moving on to the closer study of the subject. But you will find, in addition to the historical surveys, the following aids. (a) Advice on how best to gain access to the original philosophical writings and sources in English translation. (b) An introductory bibliography, concentrating on the sort of books, in English, that you will want to acquaint yourself with in order to move deeper into the subject. (Please do not take this restriction to English as xenophobic or anglocentric. A vast part of the modern scholarship on which this volume draws and depends is in other languages. The restriction is motivated purely by didactic and practical considerations.) (c) A glossary, to which you can refer when pursuing this further reading. (d) Various charts, throughout the book, setting out the chief philosophical authors and their work in accessible tabular form.

There are many ways to divide up the history of ancient philosophy. The one followed in this book is fairly conventional, except in its separate treatment of Roman philosophy. Starting from the celebrated episode, in 155 BC, when three leading Greek philosophers landed in Rome and kindled a passion for their discipline among the local intelligentsia, Roman philosophy took its lead from the Greeks – so much so that it is easy to view it as nothing more than Greek philosophy in translation. However, Roman philosophy – whether written in Latin or in Greek – does in certain ways constitute an autonomous tradition, harnessed to an indigenous moral code, to the dynamics of Roman political life, and to home-grown literary genres. It has very rarely been displayed as an integral whole, and A. A. Long's chapter, 'Roman philosophy', offers a taste of what we have been missing. However, this perspective will not be allowed to obscure the fact that there is also, and perhaps in a stronger sense, a *single* tradition of ancient philosophy, of which the Roman philosophers have to be recognized as integral voices. If their absorption

into the single tradition can look less than complete, and their relation to it one-sided, that is because virtually no Greek philosopher ever shows signs of turning to Latin texts, whereas nearly all Roman philosophers were immersed in Greek texts. In this sense, ancient philosophy remained a Greek-dominated enterprise, and if we call it 'Greek philosophy' we are not doing any major injustice.

There is one somewhat artificial constraint to which this book is unavoidably subject. The period covered by it, which runs from the sixth century BC to the sixth century AD, incorporates the entire history of the western Roman empire, a history that saw momentous developments in Judaeo-Christian culture, among others. The birth, rise and eventual triumph of Christianity is an integral part of the philosophical history of the empire, and not least of Rome itself. Patristic writers of the calibre of Origen, Eusebius, Augustine and Boethius were immersed in contemporary pagan philosophy, and interacted with it on many levels. To understand the nature of early Christianity, it is imperative to relate it to the philosophical culture of late antiquity, of which it is indeed an inseparable part, just as, conversely, understanding the meaning of ancient philosophy itself requires contextualizing it within the religious culture of the ancient world, as Glenn Most explains in the final section of his chapter on 'Philosophy and religion'. However, it would be an unrealistically ambitious undertaking to include Christianity within these same covers. The broad unity of the pagan–Christian philosophical culture of the Roman empire will emerge occasionally, particularly in Jonathan Barnes' chapter on 'Argument in ancient philosophy', and to a lesser extent in the chapters on 'Roman philosophy', 'Late ancient philosophy' and 'Philosophy and religion'. But it will not be among the official themes of the book.

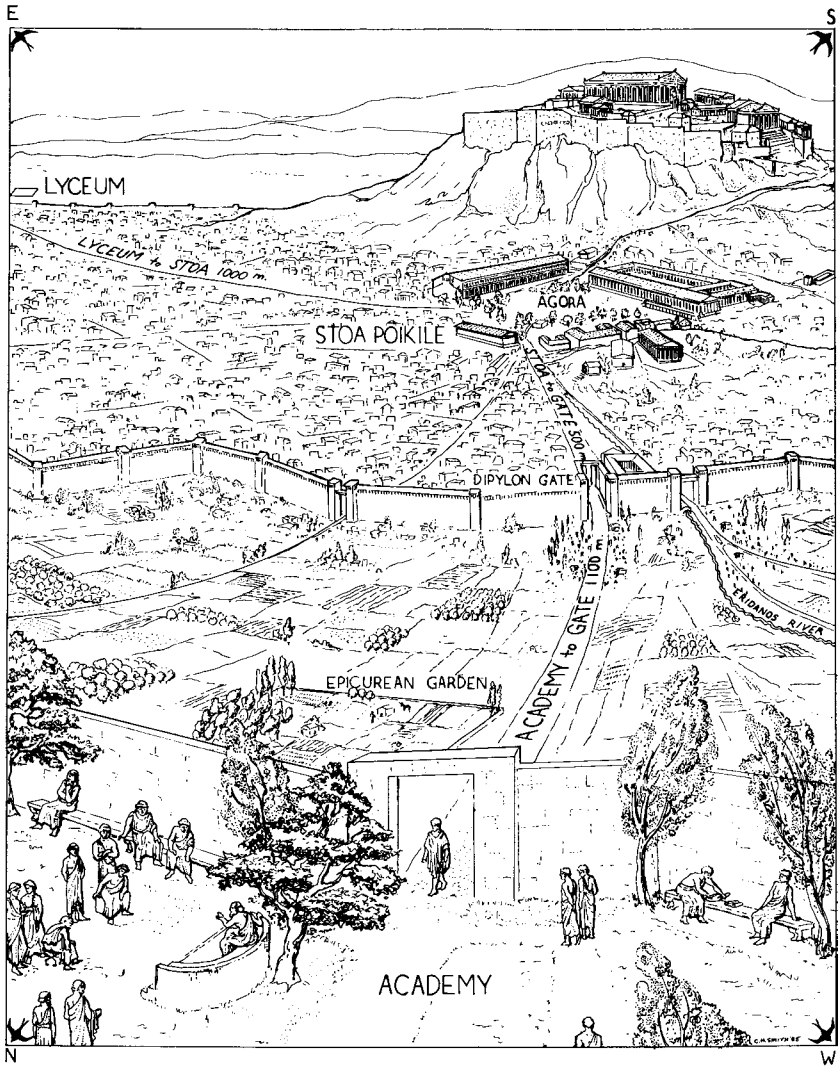
The main phases separated by the book's chapter divisions are:

(a) Presocratic philosophy: the phase philosophically prior to (although chronologically overlapping with) Socrates, whose own activity falls into the second half of the fifth century BC.
(b) The sophists: a heterogeneous collection of professional intellectuals roughly contemporary with Socrates.
(c) Socrates himself.
(d) Plato: early to mid fourth century BC.
(e) Aristotle: mid to late fourth century BC.

(f) Hellenistic philosophy: third to first century BC: Epicureans, Stoics and sceptics.
(g) Roman philosophy: second or first century BC to sixth century AD.
(h) Late ancient philosophy: first century BC to sixth century AD: the re-emergence and eventual dominance of Platonism.

The historian of ancient philosophy is the victim of a curious irony. The division between (a), (b) and (c) was in effect invented by (d), Plato, and represents very much his own perspective; yet so dominant has been Plato's influence on the history of Western philosophy (which A. N. Whitehead famously called a series of 'footnotes to Plato') that however hard we may try to manage without Plato's divisions we usually end up coming back to them. Because history is written by the winners, Plato can be said to have *made* these divisions true. That is, the way that philosophy progressed under Plato's influence determined that, in retrospect, the threefold division of his predecessors into Presocratics, sophists and Socrates *was* the relevant one to make when seeking to understand where he and the subsequent tradition were coming from.

It was Plato who singled out his own master, Socrates, as representing a radical break from the existing tradition, both Presocratic and sophistic, thanks to two factors. The first of these was Socrates' departure from the physical focus that can, with considerable oversimplification, be said to characterize the astonishingly diverse range of early thinkers from Thales in the early sixth century BC to Democritus in the late fifth and early fourth. Socrates, as presented by Plato (in stark contrast to the image of him created in the Athenian mind by Aristophanes' delightfully wicked portrayal in the *Clouds*), abandoned all interest in the cosmos at large, and turned his attention to the human soul, in the process developing the philosophical method that Plato named dialectic. The second factor, in Plato's eyes, was the polar opposition between Socrates, humble open-minded inquirer and critic, and the sophists, opinionated high-charging self-styled experts on everything under the sun. So simplistic a distinction will not survive a reading of Sarah Broadie's chapter 'The sophists and Socrates'. But like it or not, Plato's distinction is still with us, both in the convention embodied in her chapter's title (imposed by the editor, not the author), and in our persisting pejorative



The Athenian philosophical schools (Academy, Garden, Lyceum, Stoa), © Candace H. Smith

uses of 'sophist', 'sophistry' and 'sophistical' – even if the more positive connotations of 'sophisticated' may offer some consolation. Readers of this volume can gain amusement by working out how a whole set of other English words similarly embodies, at best, half-truths about ancient philosophy: 'platonic', 'stoical', 'epicure', 'cynical', and 'sceptical'.