

**LEARNING
TO LIVE**

**A USER'S
MANUAL**

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TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY THEO CUFFE



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FOREWORD

While chatting over supper on holiday, some friends asked me to improvise a philosophy course for parents and children. I decided to accept the challenge and came to relish it. The exercise forced me to stick to essentials – no complicated words, no learned quotations and no references to obscure theories. As I worked through my account of the history of ideas, without access to a library, it occurred to me that there is nothing comparable in print. There are many histories of philosophy, of course; some are excellent, but even the best ones are a little dry for someone who has left university behind, and certainly for those yet to enter a university. And the rest of us are not particularly concerned.

This book is the direct result of those evenings amongst friends, so I have tried to preserve the original impromptu style. Its objective is both modest and ambitious: modest, because it is addressed to a non-academic audience; ambitious, because I have not permitted myself any concession to simplification where it would involve distortion of the philosophical ideas at its heart. I feel too much respect for the masterpieces of philosophy to caricature them. Clarity should be the primary responsibility of a work addressed to beginners, but it must be achieved without compromising the truth of its subject; otherwise it is worthless.

With that in mind, I have tried to offer a rite of passage, which aims to be as straightforward as possible, without bypassing the richness and profundity of philosophical ideas. My aim is not merely to give a taste, a superficial gloss, or a survey influenced by popular trends; on the contrary I want to lay bare these ideas in their integrity, in order to satisfy two needs: that of an adult who wants to know what philosophy is about, but does not necessarily intend to proceed any further; and that of a young person who hopes eventually to further their study, but does not as yet have the necessary bearings to be able to read these challenging authors for herself or himself.

I have attempted to give an account of everything that I consider to be truly indispensable in the history of thought – all that I would like to pass on to family and those whom I regard as friends.

But why undertake this endeavour? First, because even the most sublime spectacle begins to pall if one lacks a companion with whom to share it. I am increasingly aware that philosophy no longer counts as what is ordinarily thought of as ‘general knowledge’. An educated person is supposed to know his or her national history, a few standard literary and artistic references, even a few odds and ends of biology or physics, yet they most likely have no inkling of Epictetus, Spinoza or Kant. I am convinced that everyone should study just a little philosophy, if only for two simple reasons.

First of all, without it we can make no sense of the world in which we live. Philosophy is the best training for living, better even than history and the human sciences. Why? Quite simply because virtually all of our

thoughts, convictions and values exist and have meaning – whether or not we are conscious of it – within models of the world that have been developed over the course of intellectual history. We must understand these models in order to grasp their reach, their logic and their consequences.

Many individuals spend a considerable part of their lives anticipating misfortune and preparing for catastrophe – loss of work, accident, illness, death of loved ones, and so on. Others, on the contrary, appear to live in a state of utter indifference, regarding such fears as morbid and having no place in everyday life. Do they realise, both of these character-types, that their attitudes have already been pondered with matchless profundity by the philosophers of ancient Greece?

The choice of an egalitarian rather than an aristocratic ethos, of a romantic aesthetic rather than a classical one, of an attitude of attachment or non-attachment to things and to beings in the face of death; the adoption of authoritarian or liberal political attitudes; the preference for animals and nature over mankind, for the call of the wild over the cities of man – all of these choices and many more were considered long before they became opinions available, as in a marketplace, to the citizen. These divisions, conflicts and issues continue to determine our thoughts and our words, whether we are aware of them or not. To study them in their pure form, to grasp their deepest origins, is to arm oneself with not only the means of becoming more intelligent, but also more independent. Why would one deprive oneself of such tools?

Second, beyond coming to an understanding of

oneself and others through acquaintance with the key texts of philosophy, we come to realise that these texts are able, quite simply, to help us live in a better and freer way. As several contemporary thinkers note: one does not philosophise to amuse oneself, nor even to better understand the world and one's own place in it, but sometimes literally to 'save one's skin'. There is in philosophy the wherewithal to conquer the fears which can paralyse us in life, and it is an error to believe that modern psychology, for example, can substitute for this.

Learning to live; learning to fear no longer the various faces of death; or, more simply, learning to conquer the banality of everyday life – boredom, the sense of time slipping by: these were already the primary motivations of the schools of ancient Greece. Their message deserves to be heard, because, contrary to what happens in history and in the human sciences, the philosophers of time past speak to us in the present tense. And this is worth contemplating.

When a scientific theory is revealed to be false, when it is refuted by another manifestly truer theory, it becomes obsolete and is of no further interest except to a handful of scientists and historians. However, the great philosophical questions about how to live life remain relevant to this day. In this sense, we can compare the history of philosophy to that of art, rather than of the sciences: in the same way that paintings by Braque or Kandinsky are not 'less beautiful' than those by Vermeer or Manet, so too the reflections of Kant or Nietzsche on the sense or non-sense of life are not inferior – or superior – to those of Epictetus, Epicurus

or the Buddha. They all furnish propositions about life, attitudes in the face of existence, that continue to address us across the centuries. Whereas the scientific theories of Ptolemy or Descartes may be regarded as 'quaint' and have no further interest other than the historical, we can still draw upon the collective wisdom of the ancients as we can admire a Greek temple or a Chinese scroll – with both feet planted firmly in the twenty-first century.

Following the lead of the earliest manual of philosophy ever written, *The Discourses* of Epictetus from c. 100 AD, this little book will address its readers directly. It speaks to a pupil on the threshold of adulthood yet attached still to the world of the child. I hope the reader may take my tone as a sign of complicity rather than familiarity.

I

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

I am going to tell you the story as well as the history of philosophy. Not all of it, of course, but its five great moments. In each case, I will give you an example of one or two transforming visions of the world or, as we say sometimes, one or two great 'systems of thought'. I promise that, if you take the trouble to follow me, you will come to understand this thing called philosophy and you will have the means to investigate it further – for example, by reading in detail some of the great thinkers of whom I shall be speaking.

The question 'What is philosophy?' is unfortunately one of the most controversial (although in a sense that is a good thing, because we are forced to exercise our ability to reason) and one which the majority of philosophers still debate today, without finding common ground.

When I was in my final year at school, my teacher assured me that it referred 'quite simply' to the 'formation of a critical and independent spirit', to a 'method of rigorous thought', to an 'art of reflection', rooted in an attitude of 'astonishment' and 'enquiry' . . . These are the definitions which you still find today in most introductory works. However, in spite of the respect I have for my teacher, I must tell you from the start that, in my view, such definitions have nothing to do with the question.

It is certainly preferable to approach philosophy in a reflective spirit; that much is true. And that one should do so with rigour and even in a critical and interrogatory mood – that is also true. But all of these definitions are entirely non-specific. I'm sure that you can think of an infinite number of other human activities about which we should also ask questions and strive to argue our way as best we can, without their being in the slightest sense philosophical.

Biologists and artists, doctors and novelists, mathematicians and theologians, journalists and even politicians all reflect and ask themselves questions – none of which makes them, for my money, philosophers. One of the principal errors of the contemporary world is to reduce philosophy to a straightforward matter of 'critical reflection'. Reflection and argument are worthy activities; they are indispensable to the formation of good citizens and allow us to participate in civic life with an independent spirit. But these are merely the means to an end – and philosophy is no more an instrument of politics than it is a prop for morality.

I suggest that we accept a different approach to the question 'What is philosophy?' and start from a very simple proposition, one that contains the central question of all philosophy: that the human being, as distinct from God, is mortal or, to speak like the philosophers, is a 'finite being', limited in space and time. As distinct from animals, moreover, a human being is the only creature who is aware of his limits. He knows that he will die, and that his near ones, those he loves, will also die. Consequently he cannot prevent himself from thinking about this state of affairs, which is disturbing and absurd,

almost unimaginable. And, naturally enough, he is inclined to turn first of all to those religions which promise 'salvation'.

The Question of Salvation

Think about this word – 'salvation'. I will show how religions have attempted to take charge of the questions it raises. Because the simplest way of starting to define philosophy is always by putting it in relation to religion.

Open any dictionary and you will see that 'salvation' is defined first and foremost as 'the condition of being saved, of escaping a great danger or misfortune'. But from what 'great danger', from what 'misfortune' do religions claim to deliver us? You already know the answer: from the peril of death. Which is why all religions strive, in different ways, to promise us eternal life; to reassure us that one day we will be reunited with our loved ones – parents and friends, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, children and grandchildren – from whom life on earth must eventually separate us.

In the Gospel According to St John, Jesus experiences the death of a dear friend, Lazarus. Like every other human being since the dawn of time, he weeps. He experiences, like you or I, the grief of separation. But unlike you or I, simple mortals, it is in Jesus's power to raise his friend from the dead. And he does this in order to prove that, as he puts it, 'love is stronger than death'. This fundamental message constitutes the essence of the Christian doctrine of redemption: death, for those

who love and have faith in the word of Christ, is but an appearance, a rite of passage. Through love and through faith, we shall gain immortality.

Which is fortunate for us, for what do we truly desire, above all else? To be understood, to be loved, not to be alone, not to be separated from our loved ones – in short, not to die and not to have them die on us. But daily life will sooner or later disappoint every one of these desires, and, so it is, that by trusting in a God some of us seek salvation, and religion assures us that those who do so will be rewarded. And why not, for those who believe and have faith?

But for those who are not convinced, and who doubt the truth of these promises of immortality, the problem of death remains unresolved. Which is where philosophy comes in. Death is not as simple an event as it is ordinarily credited with being. It cannot merely be written off as ‘the end of life’, as the straightforward termination of our existence. To reassure themselves, certain wise men of antiquity (Epicurus for one) maintained that we must not think about death, because there are only two alternatives: either I am alive, in which case death is by definition elsewhere; or death is here and, likewise by definition, I am not here to worry about it! Why, under these conditions, would you bother yourself with such a pointless problem?

This line of reasoning, in my view, is a little too brutal to be honest. On the contrary, death has many different faces. And it is this which torments man: for only man is aware that his days are numbered, that the inevitable is not an illusion and that he must consider what to do with his brief existence. Edgar Allan Poe, in one of his

most famous poems, 'The Raven', conveys this idea of life's irreversibility in a sinister raven perched on a window ledge, capable only of repeating 'Nevermore' over and over again.

Poe is suggesting that death means *everything that is unrepeatable*. Death is, *in the midst of life*, that which will not return; that which belongs irreversibly to time past, which we have no hope of ever recovering. It can mean childhood holidays with friends, the divorce of parents, or the houses or schools we have to leave, or a thousand other examples: even if it does not always mean the disappearance of a loved one, everything that comes under the heading of 'Nevermore' belongs in death's ledger.

In this sense, you can see how far death is from a mere biological ending. We encounter an infinite number of its variations, in the midst of life, and these many faces of death trouble us, even if we are not always aware of them. To live well, therefore, to live freely, capable of joy, generosity and love, we must first and foremost conquer our fear – or, more accurately, our fears of the irreversible. But here, precisely, is where religion and philosophy pull apart.

Philosophy versus Religion

Faced with the supreme threat to existence – death – how does religion work? Essentially, through faith. By insisting that it is faith, and faith alone, which can direct the grace of God towards us. If you believe in Him, God will save you. The religions demand *humility*,

above and beyond all other virtues, since humility is in their eyes the opposite – as the greatest Christian thinkers, from Saint Augustine to Pascal, never stop telling us – of the arrogance and the vanity of philosophy. Why is this accusation levelled against free thinking? In a nutshell, because philosophy *also* claims to save us – if not from death itself, then from the anxiety it causes, and to do so *by the exercise of our own resources and our innate faculty of reason*. Which, from a religious perspective, sums up philosophical pride: the effrontery evident already in the earliest philosophers, from Greek antiquity, several centuries before Christ.

Unable to bring himself to believe in a God who offers salvation, the philosopher is above all one who believes that by understanding the world, by understanding ourselves and others as far our intelligence permits, we shall succeed in overcoming fear, through clear-sightedness rather than blind faith.

In other words, if religions can be defined as ‘doctrines of salvation’, the great philosophies can also be defined as doctrines of salvation (but without the help of a God). Epicurus, for example, defined philosophy as ‘medicine for the soul’, whose ultimate aim is to make us understand that ‘death is not to be feared’. He proposes four principles to remedy all those ills related to the fact that we are mortal: ‘The gods are not to be feared; death cannot be felt; the good can be won; what we dread can be conquered.’ This wisdom was interpreted by his most eminent disciple, Lucretius, in his poem *De rerum natura* (‘On the Nature of Things’):

The fear of Acheron [the river of the Underworld] must first and foremost be dismantled; this fear muddies the life of man to its deepest depths, stains everything with the blackness of death, leaves no pleasure pure and clear.

And Epictetus, one of the greatest representatives of another of the ancient Greek philosophical schools – Stoicism – went so far as to reduce *all* philosophical questions to a single issue: the fear of death. Listen for a moment to him addressing his disciple in the course of his dialogues or *Discourses*:

Keep well in mind, then, that this epitome of all human evils, of mean-spiritedness and cowardice, is not death as such, but rather the fear of death. Discipline yourself, therefore, against this. To which purpose let all your reasonings, your readings, all your exercises tend, and you will know that only in this way are human beings set free. (*Discourses*, III, 26, 38–9)

The same theme is encountered in Montaigne's famous adage – 'to philosophise is to learn how to die'; and in Spinoza's reflection about the wise man who 'dies less than the fool'; and in Kant's question, 'What are we permitted to hope for?' These references may mean little to you, because you are only starting out, but we shall come back to each of them in turn. Bear them in mind. All that matters, now, is that we understand why, in the eyes of every philosopher, fear of death prevents us from living – and not only because it generates anxiety. Most of the time, of course, we do not meditate on human mortality. But at a deeper level the irreversibility of things is a kind of death at the heart of life and threatens

constantly to steer us into *time past* – the home of nostalgia, guilt, regret and remorse, those great spoilers of happiness.

Perhaps we should try not to think of these things, and try to confine ourselves to happy memories, rather than reflecting on bad times. But paradoxically those happy memories can become transformed, over time, into ‘lost paradises’, drawing us imperceptibly towards the past and preventing us from enjoying the present.

Greek philosophers looked upon the past and the future as the primary evils weighing upon human life, and as the source of all the anxieties which blight the present. The present moment is the only dimension of existence worth inhabiting, because it is the only one available to us. The past is no longer and the future has yet to come, they liked to remind us; yet we live virtually all of our lives somewhere between memories and aspirations, nostalgia and expectation. We imagine we would be much happier with new shoes, a faster computer, a bigger house, more exotic holidays, different friends . . . But by regretting the past or guessing the future, we end up missing the only life worth living: the one which proceeds from the here and now and deserves to be savoured.

Faced with these mirages which distract us from life, what are the promises of religion? That we don’t need to be afraid, because our hopes will be fulfilled. That it is possible to live in the present as it is – *and* expect a better future! That there exists an infinitely benign Being who loves us above all else and will therefore save us from the solitude of ourselves and from the loss of our loved ones, who, after they die in this world, will await us in the next.

What must we do to be 'saved'? Faced with a Supreme Being, we are invited to adopt an attitude framed entirely in two words: trust (Latin *fides*, which also means 'faith') and humility. In contrast, philosophy, by following a different path, verges on the *diabolical*. Christian theology developed a powerful concept of 'the temptations of the devil'. Contrary to the popular imagery which frequently served the purposes of a Church in need of authority, the devil is not one who leads us away from the straight and narrow, morally speaking, by an appeal to the weaknesses of the flesh. The devil is rather one who, spiritually speaking, does everything in his power to separate us (*dia-bolos* in Greek meaning 'the who who divides') from the vertical link uniting true believers with God, and which alone saves them from solitude and death. The *diabolos* is not content with setting men against each other, provoking them to hatred and war, but much more ominously, he cuts man off from God and thus delivers him back into the anguish that faith had succeeded in healing.

For a dogmatic theologian, philosophy is the devil's own work, because by inciting man to turn aside from his faith, to exercise his reason and give rein to his enquiring spirit, philosophy draws him imperceptibly into the realm of *doubt*, which is the first step beyond divine supervision.

In the account of Genesis, with which the Bible opens, the serpent plays the role of Devil by encouraging Adam and Eve – the first human beings – to doubt God's word about the forbidden fruit. The serpent wants them to ask questions and try the apple, so that they will disobey God. By separating them from Him,

the Devil can then inflict upon them – mere mortals – all the torments of earthly existence. The ‘Fall’ of Adam and Eve and their banishment from the first Paradise is the direct consequence of *doubting* divine edicts; thus, men became mortal.

All philosophies, however divergent they may sometimes be in the answers they bring, promise us an escape from primitive fears. They possess in common with religions the conviction that anguish prevents us from leading good lives: it stops us not only from being happy, but also from being free. This is an ever present theme amongst the earliest Greek philosophers: we can neither think nor act freely when we are paralysed by the anxiety provoked – even unconsciously – by fear of the irreversible. The question becomes one of how to persuade humans to ‘save’ themselves.

Salvation must proceed not from an Other – from some Being supposedly transcendent (meaning ‘exterior to and superior to’ ourselves) – but well and truly from within. Philosophy wants us to get ourselves out of trouble by utilising our own resources, by means of reason alone, with boldness and assurance. And this of course is what Montaigne meant when, characterising the wisdom of the ancient Greeks, he assured us that ‘to philosophise is to learn how to die’.

Is every philosophy linked therefore to atheism? Can there not be a Christian or a Jewish or a Muslim philosophy? And if so, in what sense? In other words, what are we to make of those philosophers, like Descartes or Kant, who believed in God? And you may ask why should we refuse the promise of religion? Why not submit with humility to the requirements of salvation ‘in God’?

For two crucial reasons, which lie at the heart of all philosophy. First and foremost, because the promise of religions – that we are immortal and will encounter our loved ones after our own biological demise – is too good to be true. Similarly hard to believe is the image of a God who acts as a father to his children. How can one reconcile this with the appalling massacres and misfortunes which overwhelm humanity: what father would abandon his children to the horror of Auschwitz, or Rwanda, or Cambodia? A believer will doubtless respond that that is the price of freedom, that God created men as equals and evil must be laid at their door. But what about the innocent? What about the countless children martyred in the course of these crimes against humanity? A philosopher begins to doubt that the religious answers are adequate. (Undoubtedly this argument engages only with the popular image of religion, but this is nonetheless the most widespread and influential version available.) Almost invariably the philosopher comes to think that belief in God, which usually arises as an indirect consequence, in the guise of consolation, perhaps makes us lose in clarity what we gain in serenity. He respects all believers, it goes without saying. He does not claim that they are necessarily wrong, that their faith is absurd, or that the non-existence of God is a certainty. (How would one set about proving that God does not exist?) Simply, that in his case there is a failure of faith; therefore he must look elsewhere.

Wellbeing is not the only ideal in life. Freedom is another. And if religion calms anguish by making death into an illusion, it risks doing so at the price of freedom

of thought. For it demands, more or less, that we abandon reason and the enquiring spirit in return for faith and serenity. It asks that we conduct ourselves, before God, like little children, not as curious adults.

Ultimately, to philosophise, rather than take on trust, is to prefer lucidity to comfort, freedom rather than faith. It also means, of course, ‘saving one’s skin’, but not at any price. You might ask, if philosophy is essentially a quest for a good life beyond the confines of religion – a search for salvation without God – why is it so frequently presented in books as the art of right-thinking, as the exercise of the critical faculty and freedom of conscience? Why, in civic life, on television and in the press, is philosophy so often reduced to moral engagement, casting the vote for justice and against injustice? The philosopher is portrayed as someone who understands things as they are, who questions the evils of the day. What are we to make of the intellectual and moral life, and how do we reconcile these imperatives with the definition of philosophy I have just outlined?

The Three Dimensions of Philosophy

If the quest for a salvation without God is at the heart of every great philosophical system, and that is its essential and ultimate objective, it cannot be accomplished without deep reflection upon reality, or things as they are – what is ordinarily called ‘theory’ – and consideration of what must be or what ought to be – which is referred to as ‘morals’ or ‘ethics’.

(Note: ‘Morals’ and ‘ethics’: what difference is there

between these terms? The simplest answer is: none whatsoever. The term 'morals' derives from the Latin word for 'manners, customs', and 'ethics' derives from the Greek term for 'manners, customs'. They are therefore perfectly synonymous. Having said this, some philosophers have assigned different meanings to the two terms. In Kant, for example, 'morals' designates the ensemble of first principles, and 'ethics' refers to their application. Other philosophers refer to 'morals' as the theory of duties towards others, and to 'ethics' as the doctrine of salvation and wisdom. Indeed, there is no reason why different meanings should not be assigned to these terms, but, unless I indicate otherwise, I shall use them synonymously in the following pages.)

If philosophy, like religion, has its deepest roots in human 'finiteness' – the fact that for us mortals time is limited, and that we are the only beings in this world to be fully aware of this fact – it goes without saying that the question of what to do with our time cannot be avoided. As distinct from trees, oysters and rabbits, we think constantly about our relationship to time: about how we are going to spend the next hour or this evening, or the coming year. And sooner or later we are confronted – sometimes due to a sudden event that breaks our daily routine – with the question of what we are doing, what we should be doing, and what we must be doing with our lives – our time – as a whole.

This combination of the fact of mortality with our awareness of mortality contains all the questions of philosophy. The philosopher is principally not someone who believes that we are here as 'tourists', to amuse ourselves. Even if he does come to believe that

amusement alone is worth experiencing, it will at least be the result of a process of thought, a reflection rather than a reflex. This thought process has three distinct stages: a *theoretical* stage, a *moral* or *ethical* stage, and a crowning conclusion as to *salvation* or *wisdom*.

The first task of philosophy is that of *theory*, an attempt to gain a sense of the world in which we live. Is it hostile or friendly, dangerous or docile, ordered or chaotic, mysterious or intelligible, beautiful or ugly? Any philosophy therefore takes as its starting point the natural sciences which reveal the structure of the universe – physics, mathematics, biology, and so on – and the disciplines which enlighten us about the history of the planet as well as our own origins. ‘Let no one ignorant of geometry enter here,’ said Plato to his students, referring to his school, the Academy; and thereafter no philosophy has ever seriously proposed to ignore scientific knowledge. But philosophy goes further and examines the *means* by which we acquire such knowledge. Philosophy attempts to define the nature of knowledge and to understand its methods (for example, how do we establish the causes of a natural phenomenon?) and its limits (for example, can one prove, yes or no, the existence of God?).

These two questions – the nature of the world, and the instruments for understanding it at our disposal as humans – constitute the essentials of the *theoretical* aspect of philosophy.

Besides our knowledge of the world and of its history, we must also interest ourselves in other people – those with whom we are going to share this existence. For not only are we not alone, but we could not be

born and survive without the help of others, starting with our parents. How do we co-exist with others, what rules of the game must we learn, and how should we conduct ourselves – to be helpful, dignified and ‘fair’ in our dealings with others? This question is addressed by the second part of philosophy; the part which is not theoretical but practical, and which broadly concerns *ethics*.

But why should we learn about the world and its history, why bother trying to live in harmony with others? What is the point of all this effort? And does it have to make sense? These questions, and some others of a similar nature, bring us to the third dimension of philosophy, which touches upon the ultimate question of *salvation* or *wisdom*. If philosophy is the ‘love’ (*philo*) of ‘wisdom’ (*sophia*), it is at this point that it must make way for wisdom, which surpasses all philosophical understanding. To be a sage, by definition, is neither to aspire to wisdom or seek the condition of being a sage, but simply to live wisely, contentedly and as freely as possible, having finally overcome the fears sparked in us by our own finiteness.

I am aware this is becoming rather abstract, so I would like to offer some examples of the three aspects I have touched upon – theory, ethics and the quest for salvation or wisdom – in action.

The best course is therefore to plunge into the heart of the matter, to begin at the beginning; namely the philosophical schools which flourished in Greek antiquity. Let’s consider the case of the first of the

great philosophical movements, which passes through Plato and Aristotle to find its most perfected – or at least its most ‘popular’ – form in Stoicism. This is our way into our subject, after which we can explore the other major epochs in philosophy. We must also try to understand why and how men pass from one model of reality to another. Is it because the accepted version no longer satisfies, no longer convinces? After all, several versions of reality are inherently plausible.

You must understand that philosophy is an art not of questions but rather of answers. And as you are going to judge these things *for yourself* – this being another crucial promise of philosophy, because it is not religion, because it is not answerable to the truth of an Other – you will quickly see how profound these answers have been, how gripping, and how inspired.