

On Philosophy

By Seneca (4B.C. — A.D. 65)

You want to know, do you, what philosophy has unearthed, what philosophy has achieved? It is not the gracefulness of dance movements, nor the variety of sounds produced by horn or flute as they take in breath and transform it, in its passage through or out of the instrument, into notes. She does not set about constructing arms or walls or anything of use in war. On the contrary, her voice is for peace, calling all mankind to live in harmony. And she is not, I insist, the manufacturer of equipment for everyday essential purposes. Why must you make her responsible for such insignificant things? In her you see the mistress of the art of life itself. She has, indeed, authority over other arts, inasmuch as all activities that provide life with its apparatus must also be the servants of that of which life itself is the servant. Philosophy, however, takes as her aim the state of happiness. That is the direction in which she opens routes and guides us. She shows us what are real and what are only apparent evils. She strips men's minds of empty thinking, bestows a greatness that is solid and administers a check to greatness where it is puffed up and all an empty show; she sees that we are left in no doubt about the difference between what is great and what is bloated. And she imparts a knowledge of the whole of nature, as well as of herself. She explains what the gods are, and what they are like.

Anacharsis, says Posidonius, 'discovered the potter's wheel, the rotary motion of which shapes earthenware.' Then, mention of the potter's wheel being found in Homer, he would have us think that it is the passage in Homer, rather than his story, that is spurious. I maintain that Anacharsis was not responsible for this invention, and that even if he was, he discovered it as a philosopher, yes, but not in his capacity as a philosopher, in the same way as philosophers do plenty of things as men without doing them in their capacity as philosophers. Suppose, for example, a philosopher happens to be a very fast runner; in a race he will come first by virtue of his ability as a runner, not by virtue of his being a philosopher. I should like to show Posidonius some glass-blower moulding glass by means of his breath into a whole variety of shapes that could hardly be fashioned by the most careful hand - discoveries that have occurred in the period since the disappearance of the wise man. 'Democritus,' he says, 'is reported to be the discoverer of the arch, the idea of which is to bind a curving line of stones, set at slightly differing angles from each other, with a keystone.' This I should say was quite untrue. For there must have been both bridges and gateways before Democritus' time, and the upper parts of these generally have a curve to them. And it seems to have escaped your memory, Posidonius, that this same Democritus discovered a means of softening ivory, and a means of turning a pebble into an 'emerald' by boiling it, a method employed even today for colouring certain stones that man has discovered and found amenable to the process. These techniques may indeed have been discovered by a philosopher, but not in his capacity as a philosopher. For there are plenty of things which he does which one sees being done just as well if not with greater skill and dexterity by persons totally lacking in wisdom.

What has the philosopher investigated? What has the philosopher brought to light? In the first Place, truth and nature (having, unlike the rest of the animal world, followed nature with more than just a pair of eyes, things slow to grasp divinity); and secondly, a rule of life, in which he has brought life into line with things universal. And he has taught us not just to recognize but to obey the gods, and to accept all that happens exactly as if it were an order from above. He has told us not to listen to false opinions, and has weighed and valued everything against standards which are true. He has condemned pleasures an inseparable element of which is subsequent regret, has commended the good things which will always satisfy, and for all to see has made the man who

has no need of luck the luckiest man of all, and the man who is master of himself the master of all.

The philosophy I speak of is not the one which takes the citizen out of public life and the gods out of the world we live in, and hands morality over to pleasure, but the philosophy which thinks nothing good unless it is honourable, which is incapable of being enticed astray by the rewards of men or fortune, and the very pricelessness of which lies in the fact that it cannot be bought at any price. And I do not believe that this philosophy was in existence in that primitive era in which technical skills were still unknown and useful knowledge was acquired through actual practical experience, or that it dates from an age that was happy, an age in which the bounties of nature were freely available for the use of all without discrimination, before avarice and luxury split human beings up and got them to abandon partnership for plunder. The men of that era were not philosophers, even if they acted as philosophers are supposed to act. No other state of man could cause anyone greater admiration; if God were to allow a man to fashion the things of this earth and allot its peoples their social customs, that man would not be satisfied with any other system than the one which tradition says existed in those people's time, among whom no farmers tilled ploughed fields; merely to mark the line of boundaries dividing land between its owners was a sin; men shared their findings, and the earth herself then gave all things more freely unsolicited.

What race of men could be luckier? Share and share alike they enjoyed nature. She saw to each and every man's requirements for survival like a parent. What it all amounted to was undisturbed possession of resources owned by the community. I can surely call that race of men one of unparalleled riches, it being impossible to find a single pauper in it.

Into this ideal state of things burst avarice, avarice which in seeking to put aside some article or other and appropriate it to its own use, only succeeded in making everything somebody else's property and reducing its possessions to a fraction of its previously unlimited wealth. Avarice brought in poverty, by coveting a lot of possessions losing all that it had. This is why although it may endeavour to make good its losses, may acquire estate after estate by buying out or forcing out its neighbours, enlarge country properties to the dimensions of whole provinces, speak of 'owning some property' when it can go on a long tour overseas without once stepping off its own land, there is no extension of our boundaries that can bring us back to our starting point. When we have done everything within our power, we shall possess a great deal: but we once possessed the world.

The earth herself, untilled, was more productive, her yields being more than ample for the needs of peoples who did not raid each other. With any of nature's products, men found as much pleasure in showing others what they had discovered as they did in discovering it. No one could outdo or be outdone by any other. All was equally divided among people living in complete harmony. The stronger had not yet started laying hands on the weaker; the avaricious person had not yet started hiding things away, to be hoarded for his own private use, so shutting the next man off from actual necessities of life; each cared as much about the other as about himself. Weapons were unused; hands still unstained with human blood had directed their hostility exclusively against wild beasts.

Protected from the sun in some thick wood, living in some very ordinary shelter under a covering of leaves preserving them from the rigours of winter or the rain, those people passed tranquil nights with never a sigh. We in our crimson luxury toss and turn with worry, stabbed by needling cares. What soft sleep the hard earth gave those people! They had no carved or panelled ceilings hanging over them. They lay out in the open, with the stars slipping past above them and the firmament silently conveying onward that mighty work of creation as it was carried headlong

below the horizon in the magnificent pageant of the night sky. And they had clear views by day as well as by night of this loveliest of mansions, enjoying the pleasure of watching constellations fiddling away from the zenith and others rising again from out of sight beneath the horizon. Surely it was a joy to roam the earth with marvels scattered so widely around one. You now, by contrast, go pale at every noise your houses make, and if there is a creaking sound you run away along your frescoed passages in alarm. Those people had no mansions on the scale of towns. Fresh air and the untrammelled breezes of the open spaces, the unoppressive shade of a tree or rock, springs of crystal clarity, streams which chose their own course, streams unsullied by the work of man, by pipes or any other interference with their natural channels, meadows whose beauty owed nothing to man's art, that was the environment around their dwelling places in the countryside, dwelling places given a simple countryman's finish. This was a home in conformity with nature, a home in which one enjoyed living, and which occasioned neither fear of it nor fears for it, whereas nowadays our own homes count for a large part of our feeling of insecurity.

But however wonderful and guileless the life they led, they were not wise men; this is a title that has come to be reserved for the highest of all achievements. All the same, I should be the last to deny that they were men of exalted spirit, only one step removed, so to speak, from the gods. There can be no doubt that before this earth was worn out it produced a better type of offspring. But though they all possessed a character more robust than that of today, and one with a greater aptitude for hard work, it is equally true that their personalities fell short of genuine perfection. For nature does not give a man virtue: the process of becoming a good man is an art. Certainly they did not go in search of gold or silver or the various crystalline stones to be found in the nethermost dregs of the earth. They were still merciful even to dumb animals. Man was far and away from killing man, not out of fear or provocation, but simply for entertainment. They had yet to wear embroidered clothing, and had yet to have gold woven into robes, or even mine it. But the fact remains that their innocence was due to ignorance and nothing else. And there is a world of difference between, on the one hand, choosing not to do what is wrong and, on the other, not knowing how to do it in the first place. They lacked the cardinal virtues of justice, moral insight, self control and courage. There were corresponding qualities, in each case not unlike these, that had a place in their primitive lives; but virtue only comes to a character which has been thoroughly schooled and trained and brought to a pitch of perfection by unremitting practice. We are born for it but not with it. And even in the best of people, until you cultivate it there is only the material for virtue, not virtue itself.