

What is this *Philosophia* Anyway?

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It is a good Socratic point that, if you are looking for the presence(s) of something somewhere, it is advisable to have a firm idea of the identity of that something as you begin. In that spirit, then, what was *philosophia* in the world of the ancient novel – meaning by ‘world’ both the environments constructed by the authors of the ancient novels for their stories to unfold in, and their own immediate cultural surroundings – in the period between the first century BC and the third or fourth century AD?

Notoriously, the modern meanings and associations of the word ‘philosophy’ (or *philosophie*, *filosofia*, *Philosophie*, and so on) are both helpful and unhelpful in coming to an understanding of *philosophia*, as it was experienced by a Cicero, a Seneca, a Lucian, or a Chariton, a Longus, an Apuleius, or a Heliodorus. There are of course connections and continuities, there to be asserted if not agreed on all hands and in all cases; but, overall, we have to think in terms of a different scope and a different ideological and institutional positioning in the culture and the social structures of the cities, kingdoms, and provinces of the late Hellenistic and Roman Imperial periods. *Philosophia* claimed a different kind of authority, bore a different relation to both socially approved values and ideas of cultivation (*paideia*), had a different internal structure, and was expressed in a different set of forms and practices, from what is referred to by ‘our’ terms ‘philosophy’, ‘*filosofia*’, ‘*philosophie*’, and the rest.

Some definitions and commendations

A set of quotations from first- and second-century authors may help us to begin to get the measure of these differences. Two to begin with directly confront the question of definition, though – as we shall see – within a rela-

tively restricted angle of vision. The Platonist Alcinous, in his *Manual of Platonic doctrine* (*Didaskalikos logos tōn Platōnos dogmatōn*) puts the matter like this, with a specifically Platonic inflection:

Philosophia is a striving (*orexis*) for wisdom (*sophia*), or the freeing and turning around of the soul from the body, when we turn towards the intelligible and what truly is; and wisdom is the science (*epistēmē*) of things divine and human.¹

The Stoic Seneca similarly emphasises the notion of striving and aspiration in his *Epistle* 89 to Lucilius, but at the same time displays an awareness that there is room for disagreement over details and emphasis, if not over the essential point:

Wisdom (*sapientia*) is the perfected good of the human intellect, *philosophia* is love of wisdom and striving after it: the one sets its course towards the destination the other has already reached. The origin of the term ‘*philosophia*’ is evident: by its very name it confesses the object of its love. Some have defined wisdom so as to declare it ‘knowledge of the divine and the human’, others as ‘to know the divine and the human and their causes’. ... There have been yet others who have also defined *philosophia* in their own different ways: some have said that it is ‘devotion to virtue’, others ‘devotion to the correction of the intellect (*mens*)’; by others still it has been styled ‘the pursuit of right reason (*ratio*)’. What is pretty much agreed is that there is a difference between *philosophia* and wisdom, as it is impossible for that which pursues and that which is pursued to be identical.²

A second sequence of passages bears more widely not so much on the definition in itself, as on the perceived aims and goals of contact with *philosophia* thus defined, and subscription to its values. First, in the *Hermotimus*, Lucian has the eponymous mature student list the benefits promised him by his instructor as:

¹ Alcin. *Intr.* 1,1, echoing Pl. *Phd.* 67d and *R.* 475b and 521c; see Dillon 1993, 51–53.

² Sen. *Ep.* 89,4–6. The formula ‘knowledge of the divine and the human’, invoked by both Seneca and Alcinous, and in general one of the most widely used definitions, seems to go back to Stoic roots: *SVF* 2,35 (Aetius).

Wisdom and bravery and ultimate beauty (*to kalon auto*) and justice and universal knowledge based on unshakeable conviction of the nature of each individual thing. Wealth and reputation and pleasure and all other such bodily phenomena he [the *philosophos*] lets fall away and shrugs off as he rises aloft, as they say Heracles was incinerated on Oeta and became a god. ... They too [*philosophoi*] have all these things stripped from them by *philosophia* as if by some fire, everything that other people in their error mistakenly believe to be marvelous; they reach the summit and there enjoy true happiness (*eudaimonia*), no longer even recalling wealth and reputation and pleasure, and laughing to scorn those who believe in their existence.³

Another Lucianic character, Parrhesiades in the *Fisherman*, praises *philosophoi* – pointedly, true *philosophoi* like those of the heroic past, not the degenerates of the present day – as:

... legislators for the best life, who stretch out their hands to help those who are striving towards it and proffer the best and most constructive advice, for anyone who neither transgresses nor slides back from it, but fixes his gaze intently on the rules that you have set forth, and shapes and directs his own life in accordance with them ...⁴

Plutarch, addressing the young Nicander in his essay *On listening to lectures*, admonishes him that

You have often heard that to follow God and to obey reason are the same thing, so I ask you to believe that in persons of good sense the passing from childhood to manhood is not a casting off of control, but a recasting of the controlling agent, since instead of some hired person or slave purchased with money they now take as the divine guide of their life reason (*logos*), whose followers alone may deservedly be considered free. ... And so you, who have been brought up for a long time in contact with *philosophia* ... ought to feel like an old friend and familiar when you come to *philosophia*, which alone can array young men in the manly and truly perfect adornment that comes from reason.⁵

³ Lucian *Herm.* 7.

⁴ Lucian *Pisc.* 30.

⁵ Plu. *On listening to lectures* 1–2 (*Mor.* 37d–38a), tr. Babbitt (Loeb).

But Plutarch also insists, in the essay *On old men in politics*, that the lecture hall is far from the only relevant venue, however prevalent that stereotype may be:

Most people of course think that *philosophoi* are people who sit in a teacher's chair and converse (*dialegesthai*), and deliver lectures over books; but they fail to notice the continuous practice of ... *philosophia*, seen consistently, from day to day, in both words and deeds. Socrates at any rate was a *philosophos*, even if he did not set out benches or seat himself in an armchair or observe a fixed hour for conversing or promenading with his pupils, but joked with them, when the occasion came up, and drank with them, and served in the army and lounged in the *agora* with some of them, and right to the end continued to philosophise, even when in prison and drinking the poison. He was the first to show that life admits *philosophia* at all times and in all parts, and without qualification in all experiences and deeds.⁶

A different kind of broadening gesture, finally, is to be found in Maximus of Tyre's *Oration 26*, in a context that brings Homer too, and the great poets of old more generally, into the fold, and equates philosophic wisdom with the inspiration of Apollo and the Muses. His concluding words bring us back to a relative of Seneca's and Alcinous' formal definition, but in an enlarged context:

When I read Homer's stories I am quite unable to praise the man from my personal resources, and once more need him to lend me some of his own verses, so that I can avoid spoiling my praise by having to express it in mere prose:

I praise you, Homer before all other mortals
Your teacher was Zeus' daughter, the Muse, or Apollo.

It is quite improper to suppose the instruction of the Muses and Apollo to be any other than that by which due order is introduced into the soul. What else could that be than *philosophia*? And how are we to understand

⁶ Plu. *On old men in politics* 26, 796de. The Socrates here is that of Xenophon's and (especially) Plato's Socratic writings, with particular reference to the *Symposium* and the *Phaedo*. For the claim that *philosophia* is at home in all conceivable circumstances of life, see also Max. Tyr. 1,1–3.

philosophia, if not as detailed knowledge of matters divine and human, the source of virtue and noble thoughts and a harmonious style of life and sophisticated habits?⁷

Some implications and additions

Unmistakable in all these declarations, for all their variations in focus, is the note of admiring enthusiasm and warm recommendation. We shall see in due course that this was anything but the only stance available, but for the time being it makes sense to concentrate on the positive claims on *philosophia*'s behalf that these passages imply and endorse, so as to tease out more fully what they put at stake.

Perhaps the strongest and most obvious initial impression they make is of the sheer weight of authority, moral and intellectual, that is claimed for and accorded to *philosophia* in them. What this *philosophia* aims at, and the great *philosophoi* are acknowledged as having achieved and being in a position to pass on, is complete and ultimate knowledge, possession of the totality of the highest (deepest) and most significant truths: the real nature of all that exists, the universe, the gods, human nature, human life. This ultimate knowledge, moreover, is not just of fact, but also of value, not just descriptive, but also normative. Besides the real nature of things, it embraces unique insight into the right way to live, so as not only to be in tune with the real nature of things, but also to achieve the most truly fulfilling existence open to a human being – a unique grasp not only of reality, but also of the means to true happiness. To draw a superficial, but still revealing modern analogy, what is thus accorded to *philosophia* in these texts is a combination of the kinds of authority and respect that subsequent eras have accorded separately to Science and to Religion. The question of the total range of responses that this (to put it mildly) ambitious claim could call forth in the later Hellenistic and Roman periods will occupy us shortly. For the time being, we should simply register its ambitiousness – the aim for a position of transcendence, to which all other forms of knowledge and sources of normative value could be relativised – and turn to further examination of what follows from accepting it.

⁷ Max. Tyr. 26,1; the Homeric quotation (*Od.* 8,488) is transferred to Homer from Demodocus. The argument that early poetry is the equivalent of *philosophia* is developed also in *Oration* 4.

Very obviously (and a matter of much recent discussion), it follows that to subscribe to *philosophia* is to buy in not just to a quest for knowledge (at however preliminary or advanced a stage), but also to a quest for a fulfilled existence.⁸ As some of the texts just quoted hint, and many others that could be quoted make emphatically clear, this is a quest that is to be thought of as anything but an easy or a short one. Acquiring the ‘art of right living’ is no instantaneous or automatic process, but a long (life-long), difficult, uphill slog. Knowledge, in the form of a grasp of doctrines expressing the truth about the world, and of the arguments in which they are articulated and defended, is certainly required, which is hard enough. But this knowledge has also to be acted on, in an extended process of self-(re)formation. For the path to individual fulfilment is held to lie through the reshaping of the individual’s character – his aims, ambitions, tastes, reactions, his emotions, desires, and aversions, all of which have to be refocused and reoriented in the light of philosophical truth. And that in turn is something that, it is held, can only be achieved over the long term, by constant exercise and iteration, which will slowly, step by careful, reflective step, bring about the desired changes.

The image of the long steep road, available to moralists of effort and self-restraint at least since the days of Hesiod⁹ is repeatedly redeployed in this period to underline this central proposition about both the essentially practical point of *philosophia*, and the dimensions of the commitment that it imposes. A fleeting and partial invocation of the image has already been visible in the passages from Lucian’s *Hermotimus* and *Fisherman* quoted above, but the largest and most vivid of all is that to be found in the anonymous, first century (BC or AD) *Tablet of Cebes*, where both the length of the journey and its essential concern with the inner world of moral effort and moral reshaping are spelt out with lavish elaboration. Here, human life from birth is depicted as a journey by foot, in which it is possible to take either the right path or a multiplicity of wrong ones. The wrong paths, on to which the unwary can be seduced by such inner and outer forces as Opinions, Fortune, and False Culture, lead to a variety of more or less destructive and disastrous dead ends. The right path leads onwards and upwards, away from Opinions, Fortune, and False Culture, via Perseverance and Self-Mastery, to the lofty citadel of True Culture, where the faithful pilgrim is at last admitted to the company of Virtue, Truth, and Happiness. Here he is crowned victor over the mighty beasts of Ignorance, Deceit, Grief, Avarice, Vanity, and Dissolu-

⁸ E.g. Hadot 1995; Sorabji 2000; Trapp 2007, 28–62.

⁹ Hes. *Op.* 287–292, influentially picked up at X. *Mem.* 2,1,20, where the passage is juxtaposed with Prodicus’ myth of Heracles at the Parting of the Ways.

tion. He is truly blessed because now his entitlement to happiness rests entirely within himself, rather than depending on others. From this time on, he will be safe wherever he goes: the whole world will be for him like a place of asylum; he will be immune to further injury from pain, grief, avarice, poverty, or any other form of ill, just as someone who has survived a snake-bite cannot be poisoned a second time.¹⁰ But it has indeed been a long and difficult road, in which he has had to struggle hard to remember and apply the instructions he received at the start of his journey and the instructions and encouragement that have been added along the way.

Yet the *Tablet*, for all the elaboration of its allegorical landscape and cast of characters, still deals in inspiring generalities rather than in hard detail. For a more textured and a more realistically austere sense of what the process of self-scrutiny, self-reform, and self-development was held to require, we have to look elsewhere: to Arrian's record of Epictetus' *Discourses*, Seneca's *Epistles*, Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, and perhaps above all to the essays on moral progress in Plutarch's *Moralia* – not only the *How to be aware of one's progress towards virtue*, but also the *How to profit from your enemies*, the *On immunity to anger*, the *On tranquillity*, and the *On inquisitiveness*.¹¹ In these, Plutarch maps the laborious path towards improvement, with all its various stages and its pitfalls, in terms of the practical exercises, and the worked examples of the self-examination, self-assessment, and self-exhortation that are required day after day, and week after week. The life of *philosophia* as moral aspiration is likened by all to a long course of medical treatment, in the face of a stubborn and intractable disease or disability, or to an unrelenting military campaign:

If, in the spirit of the oracle granted by the god, to 'fight the Cirrhaeans through every day and every night', you know in your own mind that you have carried on the fight against moral deficiency unremittingly night and day, or at least that you have not frequently slackened your watch, nor constantly admitted ambassadors from it under truce, in the form of this or that pleasure or recreation or pastime, then you could reasonably advance on the remainder of the task with confidence and enthusiasm.¹²

¹⁰ On the *Tablet* see Hirsch-Luipold et al. 2005, Trapp 1997b, and Fitzgerald & White 1983.

¹¹ Plu. *Moralia* 75a–86a, 86b–92f, 452e–464d, 464e–477f, 515b–523b. On all these texts, see Trapp 2007, 42–62.

¹² Plu. *Progress* 3,76e. For the idea of watchfulness, compare Arr. *Discourses of Epictetus* 1,20; 2,18 (esp. 2,18,23–26).

Philosophia, then, was a way of living, rather than a circumscribed and discontinuous intellectual exercise. Its whole point was to make its adherents different, both from their own past selves, and from the unregenerate mass of others who either did not, like them, realise the need for personal reform and the long grind of self-(re)formation, or who lacked the necessary stamina to see it through – like those travellers in the allegory of the *Tablet* who give up in the face of the steepest slope, and thereafter dedicate their lives to slandering the very quest for enlightenment.¹³

To what extent this inner difference was or should be externally visible as well was a matter for some debate. Popular imagination assumed that professional – i.e. teaching and publishing – representatives of the calling would typically be distinguished by a luxuriant beard, an austere sartorial style, and an impressively dishevelled (or at least not excessively well cared-for) general appearance. The stereotype is constantly harped on by Lucian.¹⁴ Other voices contested such a simplistic approach, asserting on the one hand that appearances could legitimately vary from one philosopher or school to another,¹⁵ on the other that outer appearance was of trifling importance in any case, compared with what really mattered, the inner state of the individual's soul.¹⁶ At a more sophisticated level, however, and more within philosophical circles, it could be debated whether or not the devotee ought to draw attention to his difference, by dress or by any other externally visible trait. Arrian's Epictetus insists that philosophical commitment cannot but mark you out overtly, changing the way you appear to your erstwhile companions, and in all likelihood leading you to break with them.¹⁷ Seneca, by contrast, insists to Lucilius that, to avoid the dangers of ostentation and the pointless alienation of others, external appearances should remain the same, even when everything has changed within.¹⁸ But from a different vantage-point again, Plutarch can be found suggesting that the true connoisseur, just as he can detect the similarity in physical comportment between two individuals trained in the same gymnasium, can also see the community in moral character between two co-devotees of the same philosophical persuasion.¹⁹

Institutionally, the dual focus of *philosophia*, as both a body of knowledge and an art of living, placed it in an interestingly distinctive position. It

¹³ Ceb. 27–28.

¹⁴ E.g. *Pisc.* 41–42, *Herm.* 86.

¹⁵ *Ap. Apol.* 22, *Max. Tyr.* 1,10.

¹⁶ *Max. Tyr.* 1,10, Arrian *Discourses of Epictetus* 4,8.

¹⁷ *Arr. Handbook* 22 and 48, *Discourses of Epictetus* 4,2; see also *Handbook* 1,4 and 13.

¹⁸ *Sen. Ep.* 5; cf. 14,14.

¹⁹ *Plu. Dio* 1 (of Dion and Brutus as fellow products of the Academy).

asked to be understood as a lifelong, personal quest, but also as a quest into which the novice would almost always need to be inducted by an expert – one already pursuing the same goals, with a greater awareness of what the pursuit involves, and how it should be engaged in. *Philosophia* is thus constructed in part like a branch of education, composed of expert teachers, who both practice their expertise, their *technē*, on their own account, and undertake to pass it on to the as yet unformed young, thus creating a fresh generation of fellow professionals. But the nature of what they have to teach – its lifelong, all-embracing quality – means that the status of these experts, the end-product envisaged for their professional activity, and the relationship between them and their former pupils differ from those attaching to other professions and forms of education. *Philosophoi* are experts not only in Truth, but also in right living, good character, and true happiness; thus as teachers they are moral exemplars as well as subject-specialists, and so must be looked up to in a distinctive way. The cohorts of pupils they send out into the world, moreover, are ‘fellow professionals’ not primarily in the sense that they will themselves claim the status of educators in their own right (though some of course will), but in taking with them a shared dedication to a style of life, and one that claims to provide the governing framework for everything else that they are and do. Whereas an ordinary teacher creates potential professional rivals, the teacher of *philosophia* is in the business of recruiting collaborators and allies in the shared pursuit of enlightenment, virtue, and happiness.²⁰ The parallel with the status of the ‘professional’ (ordained) clergy in Christian culture, and their relationship to the laity, is a tempting one; perhaps all the more so as it can be extended to the threefold division of humanity into institutional *philosophoi*, subscribers to philosophical values (*i.e.* their pupils), and the unenlightened – corresponding to clergy, faithful, and infidels.²¹ The immediate recognition of limits to the analogy – no equivalent to the mechanism of ordination, or the structure of institutional authority and liturgical practice within which it takes place; no rights of persecution over outsiders – only helps to sharpen our understanding of the distinctive ancient positioning of *philosophia* in its society.

We need now to revert to the idea of a challenge to choice, which *philosophia* in fact issued to the wider world in a double rather than a single form. On a first level, as we have seen, the challenge was to choose the life

²⁰ Max. Tyr. 1,6.

²¹ Or even, when the division into competing schools is added to the model (see below), institutional *philosophoi*, their pupils, representatives and devotees of rival sects, and the unphilosophical – corresponding to clergy, laity, heretics, and infidels.

devoted to truth and the pursuit of self-realisation; but alongside that stood a second, to choose between the different varieties of this quest and this commitment that were on offer. For of course, as has already been implicitly acknowledged in passing several times, the *philosophia* of the Hellenistic and Imperial periods was not a single, unified practice; it was divided into a multiplicity of rival, competing sects (*haireseis, sectae*), each with its own version of the truth about reality, human nature, and happiness, and its own corresponding modulation of the philosophic life, propounded and defended in vigorous reciprocal polemic with its competitors. To opt for *philosophia* was thus, typically if not entirely inevitably, to make the narrower sectarian as well as the broader ideological/existential choice, as a Stoic, Epicurean, Peripatetic, Platonist, Pyrrhonist or Academic Sceptic, Cynic, or even Pythagorean.

As just indicated, the primary differences between the sects were intellectual: it was on the ground of their differing doctrines on the central issues of truth and life that they conducted their reciprocal polemic, and on this ground that each sought to be chosen in preference to its competitors. But it is clear that more than purely intellectual factors often operated – as would seem only reasonable when what was being chosen was a version of the ‘art of life’, rather than just a set body of theory. Other features too could evidently tip the scales of an individual seeker’s choice in one direction rather than the others. Lucian’s Hermetimus voices a satirically reductive account of how it might be conditioned, explaining that he opted for the Stoics because he

... saw the majority making for their *philosophia*, and so guessed that it was the best. ... But that was not the only reason. ... I also heard everyone saying that the Epicureans were sweet-tempered and hedonistic, the Peripatetics fond of money and argumentative, the Platonists puffed up and status-hungry; but of the Stoics it was widely asserted that they were manly and omniscient, and that the man who trod this path was the only king, the only rich man, the only sage, and everything rolled up together.²²

Doctrinal differences, flippanantly paraphrased, underpin the contrasts made here, but the added suggestion of motives of personal taste is not mere satirical froth. The different schools had their own intellectual styles, varying for instance over the relative importance to be attached to theory and practice, or

²² Lucian *Herm.* 16.

the authority and openness to revision of the work of their founders, and these too could influence choice. Plutarch's remarks in the preface to his lives of Dion and Brutus – that shared membership of a given school of thought can give individuals a perceptible kinship, just as it is evident to the experienced eye that two athletes have worked with the same trainer²³ – could reasonably be applied to the motives for the original choice, as well as to the effects of the teaching.

It should not, however, be concluded that this dividedness, and the consequent invitation to choice and sectarian commitment, were regarded in the same way by all contemporary observers. For all those who straightforwardly accepted the invitation to sectarian commitment and partisanship, there were others who saw it, and the institutional landscape that created it, as more of a problem. According to individual inclination, doctrinal diversity could come to seem an indication that no existing sect had yet got things quite right, an indication that no sect ever could get things right, or a challenge to show that the sects themselves had misconceived the relationships between them. Scepticism, in its Pyrrhonist variety, was the standing formal philosophical embodiment of the perception that disagreement (*diaphōnia*) flatly discredited any positive doctrinal claims.²⁴ A more everyday version of the perception is represented by Lucian's character Hermotimus, who may believe at one stage that his search has brought him to the right sect and the right teacher, but is eventually convinced by his interlocutor Lycinus that none of them can deliver on his promises of insight and happiness, and that all should accordingly be shunned like rabid dogs.²⁵ In the celebrated case of Galen, however, we see review and rejection of the standard range of competing options leading not to retreat into philosophical scepticism, or wholesale abandonment of *philosophia* itself, but to a kind of critically independent eclecticism.²⁶ Others, though not many, were encouraged by a similar line of thought to attempt to found new schools of their own; the best known case is that of the Sextii, commemorated by Seneca.²⁷

But for others again, what struck them as the frustrating, even scandalous, diversity of sects called forth yet another, more irenic and conciliatory reaction. If reality and truth are one and indivisible, as they surely must be, then must it not also be possible to see the groups dedicated to their pursuit,

²³ Plu. *Dio* 1.

²⁴ S.E. *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1,165.

²⁵ Lucian *Herm.* 86.

²⁶ Gal. *Affections and errors of the soul* 1,8,42–43. On Galen, see in the first instance Singer 1997, vii–lii; Nutton 2004, 216–247; Dillon 1977, 339.

²⁷ Sen. *Nat.* 7,32,2; *Ep.* 59,7; 73,12; 98,13; 108,17.

for all the surface differences, as partners and collaborators rather than mutually exclusive competitors? In surviving writing, this is a position most consistently developed by Maximus of Tyre (which itself may or may not be an indication that it was one that flourished best among the politely interested, rather than among the professional teachers of *philosophia*). In *Oration* 1 Maximus suggests that the saving message of all *philosophia* is one, in spite of surface details of presentation; in *Orations* 4 and 26, that all modern *philosophia* should be seen as the continuation of a once unified tradition of ancient wisdom originally sustained by the early poet-sages of Greece; and in *Orations* 29–33 that the competing sects, like colonies sent out in different directions from a mother city, need to have their essential kinship reasserted. The only sect pointedly excluded from this happy picture of concord and common enterprise is Epicureanism, damned as always by spokesmen of the Socratic tradition for its scandalously unacceptable theology, and its equally scandalous dethroning of reason and moral virtue in favour of the pursuit of pleasure.²⁸

Evidently, then, institutionalised diversity, reciprocal polemic, and demands for choice and partisanship were seen as both part of the landscape and a difficulty requiring carefully considered response – though one that was bound to vary according to individual inclination, and according to degree of concern for and commitment to *philosophia* as an individual life project.

Philosophia, society, and culture

Discussion of the identity of *philosophia* as a personal project has inevitably involved some incidental attention to the institutional structures that grew up around it, particularly to the extent that its life-forming aspect naturally fitted it for a place in formal education. This institutional side to the picture now needs to be examined more directly, with an eye both to practical arrangements and procedures, and to the supporting environment of ideas.

A useful way of posing the question is to ask how easy or difficult it must have been for the average individual of good breeding and education to make (or to avoid) contact with *philosophoi* and their product. For the clear

²⁸ Max. Tyr. 4,4; 11,5; 15,8; 19,3; 25,4; 30–33; 41,2. Compare also Hierocles' stinging dismissal, as cited by Aulus Gellius from Calvenus Taurus: ' "Pleasure is the goal" – only a whore could assert that; "there is no Providence" – not even a whore could assert that' (Gel. 9,5,8).

answer is that complete avoidance must have been notably difficult, given what all the evidence tells us of the educational organisation and civic culture, even the public adornment, of the cities of the eastern half of the Empire. A central fixed point was the existence – in larger or smaller numbers, and covering a greater or lesser stretch of the doctrinal spectrum, from one city to another – of formal schools run by *philosophoi* operating as professional teachers, pitching for pupils for whom this would complement (or occasionally replace) study with a *rhētōr* as the final stage of their education.²⁹ It is in this context that the largest numbers of the young of the governing classes will have had their most sustained and closest contact.³⁰ But there were many other modes too, operating both for those who undertook formal instruction, and for those who did not. Even before progression to philosophy classes came into question in the individual's educational career, classic philosophical texts could have been read, and philosophical themes used in training exercises – the *progymnasmata* – with *grammatikos* and *rhētōr*.³¹ At the other end, the enthusiast could maintain live personal contact by re-visiting the classroom,³² by continuing to associate with *philosophoi* in informal social intercourse (whether or not actually sponsoring a *philosophos* as a member of his household),³³ and by attending public lectures; and mediated contact could be sustained by private reading, and by correspondence with fellow enthusiasts.³⁴ Public lectures and private reading were of course available to anyone, whether or not they had undergone formal study; so too was unstructured (sometimes wholly unsought) contact with individual *philosophoi*, not only in standard social situations, but also in impromptu public interventions contrived by *philosophoi* themselves, particularly those motivated or influenced by Cynic ideas of effective preaching. And besides

²⁹ See e.g. Marrou 1957, 206–216 (with 414–416); Clarke 1971, 55–108 (esp. 85–108).

³⁰ The normal caveats have to be entered here: a 'formal school' in antiquity was what a combination of general shared expectations and the individual circumstances of teacher and pupils made it, not what was dictated by any centrally established stipulations over structure or curriculum. References to schools are everywhere in the literature of the period; Arrian's *Discourses of Epictetus* is the closest we get to an insider's view of everyday procedure and atmosphere: see Clarke 1971, 85–108, Brunt 1977.

³¹ See for instance Quint. *Inst.* 10,1,81–4 and 123–124; Plu. *On listening to poets* 14e, *On listening to lectures* 37c–f; Theon *Prog.* 11.

³² Some of Epictetus' audience, for instance the addressee of 1,11, were evidently returners of this kind; see further Brunt 1977.

³³ Compare Pliny's description of his dealings with Euphrates in *Ep.* 1,10, and Lucian's *Merc. cond.*

³⁴ E.g. Seneca's Lucilius, the recipients of the letters of Diogenes of Oenoanda, and papyrus correspondents such as those of *P. Mil. Vog. 11* (cf. Trapp 2003, 288–290).

the representation of the thoughts and arguments of the *philosophoi* in books, representations of their physical features and celebrations of their names were everywhere in public space, in sculpted and mosaic portraits, on coins, and in honorific inscriptions.³⁵

This ubiquitousness of *philosophia* and *philosophoi* in both public life and the individual careers of the elite reveals a further, hugely important fact. It is evident that by this period *philosophia* was so pervasive because it had become deeply rooted and richly entangled in educated culture, Culture with a capital 'C': that *paideia* that made a badge of identity for the ruling elite, and perhaps – as Thomas Schmitz and others have argued – a symbolic justification of their entitlement, as *pepaideumenoí*, to dominate the social and political order.³⁶ *Philosophia* and *philosophoi* made their claim to respect and prominence in public space not solely on the grounds of their supposed monopoly on deeper truth and the means to fulfilled existence, but also in virtue of the historical contribution of their calling to the tradition of admired achievement on which *paideia* was based. In the great story of Greek achievement, the intellectual conquests of *philosophoi* – the initiation of natural-philosophical speculation by Thales, the discovery of the ratios of the concords and the invention of the ideal of *philo-sophia* itself by Pythagoras, the establishment of ethics as the central discipline by Socrates – featured alongside political innovation and military conquest. *Philosophoi* rubbed shoulders with other admired high-achievers in key periods and episodes in the glorious past: Anaxagoras and Socrates in the Athens of Pericles and the Peloponnesian War, Diogenes and Aristotle in the story of Alexander the Great. Most importantly of all, philosophical writing provided some of the central classics of the literary heritage, shaping the shared sense of what counted as good literary composition, style, and language. Plato is the towering, inevitable figure in this respect; but we should also remember the high regard as classics and models in which Xenophon, Theophrastus, and Aristotle – the Aristotle of the exoteric dialogues, not the esoteric lectures – were held in Hellenistic and Roman times.³⁷

Attention to *philosophia* was thus not simply or inevitably a matter of accepting or rejecting a set of intellectual claims, or of finding it impossible to avoid living, contemporary *philosophoi* and their products in everyday civic life. It was also a question of being brought up with a multiply-

³⁵ See Nock 1926, xvii–xxv (esp. xix–xx); Tod 1957; Hahn 1989, 128–130; Sharples 2005; Trapp 2007, 246–248.

³⁶ Schmitz 1997, 26–31 and 39–66.

³⁷ See again Quint. *Inst.* 10,1,81–84 and 123–131, with D. Chr. 18,13.

reinforced impression that *philosophia* and *philosophoi* were interwoven into the very fabric of educated culture; something that the educated, cultivated individual could not afford to be ignorant of, on pain of forfeiting his title to cultivation and education. It is indeed a remarkable (and often remarked) feature of Imperial period writing that so much of it deals with philosophical material: not only professional literature (in which the commentary on a classic philosophical text is an increasingly popular form),³⁸ debating the interpretation and validity of substantive points of doctrine, but also – still more voluminously – works of summary and contextualisation (handbooks of doctrine, biographies, and histories of the schools),³⁹ and works of more or less demanding popularisation, bringing philosophical themes in both reading-text and live oratorical performance before an interested but not necessarily deeply committed audience.⁴⁰

Counter-currents

Prominence, however, has its problems. So far, I have been painting what should have looked, with very little qualification, like a story of success. Most of the quotations used to explain the contemporary identity of *philosophia* have been drawn from the works of subscribers and devotees; the accent in the account of the social and institutional positioning of *philosophia* has been on its successful integration as a valued and respected part of the civilised order. But this of course cannot be the whole picture. There is a counter-tale to be told, of criticism, scepticism, and a resistance to either some or all of *philosophia*'s large claims.

Among the most generally familiar elements in this counter-tale are the availability (though not, clearly, the inevitability) of an aversion to *philosophia* as something un-Roman, and the intermittent perception on the part of (some members of) the Roman political elite of *philosophoi* as dangerous subversives. The former is most economically illustrated by Tacitus's famous reference to Agricola's confession of youthful indulgence in *philosophia* 'further than was legitimate for a Roman and a Senator',⁴¹ the latter by the periodic banishments of *philosophoi* (as individuals and as a class) under

³⁸ On the commentary tradition, see Sedley 1997; Alberti & Sharples 1999; Sellars 2004.

³⁹ For example, Alcinous' *Didaskalikos* and the pseudo-Plutarchan *Doctrines of the philosophers*.

⁴⁰ For instance, the works of Dio Chrysostom, Favorinus, Apuleius, and Maximus: Harrison 2000, 136–173; Trapp 1997a, xvi–xliv.

⁴¹ Tac. *Ag.* 4.4.

Nero, Vespasian, and Domitian, which feature largely in modern scholarly discussion of the ‘philosophical opposition’ to the Principate.⁴² In both of these cases, however, the vantage-point from which a cooler or a more positively hostile attitude towards *philosophia* is being evinced is not exactly central to the world of the novel, which is either Greek or provincial, or both, as opposed to Roman gubernatorial.

We come closer, while still staying within an Imperial administrative frame of reference, with the issue of *ateleia* – immunity from various forms of taxation and ‘voluntary’ public contribution – which from another angle, closer to everyday Greek civic attitudes and procedures, gives an intriguingly nuanced foothold to the suggestion that the integration of *philosophia* into the formal order of things was never as complete or as secure as *philosophoi* themselves would have wished. In a system apparently put in place under Vespasian, and lasting past the reign of Antoninus, designated categories of professional of manifest prestige and civic usefulness were officially released from ‘serving as gymnasiarchs, market-commissioners, priests, providers of billets, providers of corn, and providers of oil, and are not to act as judges or ambassadors or be enrolled for military service against their will, nor be compelled to perform any other kind of provincial or other service.’⁴³ The evidence for the implementation of this measure does indeed show that there was a period during which *philosophoi* qualified for exemption, along with *grammatikoi*, rhetors, and doctors, which at first sight might seem a strong sign of endorsement; for it obviously means that there was a period, in the heyday of the early Empire, during which the claim of *philosophoi* to central civic usefulness and the attendant status were officially endorsed. However, it also emerges from the same evidence that this was a very limited period, hedged about at either end with something less welcome and welcoming. *Philosophoi* were not included in the very first version of the legislation, but only thanks to a subsequent adjustment; and when, under Antoninus, restrictions were re-imposed on what was coming to seem an unduly generous measure, it was *philosophoi* again who felt the squeeze most. Notoriously, while setting limits on qualifying numbers for the other professions, Antoninus imposed none for *philosophoi*, explaining that real specimens of the kind were few, and that in any case the desire to claim immunity showed an unphilosophical concern for wealth – thus giving local

⁴² For discussion see MacMullen 1966, 70–94; Rutherford 1989, 59–64; Griffin 1989; Trapp 2007, 226–233.

⁴³ *Dig.* 27,1,6,8. On the whole issue of *ateleia*, see Bowersock 1969, 33, with Griffin 1971; Millar 1977, 491–506.

administrations every reason to turn down any application for *ateleia* from a *soi-disant philosophos*. To be last in and first out, while *grammatikoi*, rhetors, and doctors continued in undisturbed enjoyment of the privilege, says a good deal about how relatively peripheral *philosophia* could seem – for all its own good opinion of itself – to the official eye.

Yet a fuller understanding of the issue requires us to get behind official enactments and attitudes to diffuser underlying currents of perception and sentiment. In this attempt, one body of work in particular stands out for its promise of the kind of insight that is needed. Lucian's satire, so far appealed to in the construction of a more sympathetic reaction, comes back into the reckoning in an altered guise, because in fact (as not so far stressed) so splendidly and revealingly double-edged. For, in the combination of 'philosophical' content with detached, ironic viewpoint, it implies a very particular kind of target audience: an audience of cultivated non-professionals, who simultaneously know a good deal about *philosophia* – its proclaimed ideals, its history and classic works, the distinctive profiles of the competing *haireseis*, the great focal-points of argument – but also evidently revel in the experience of hearing the ideas guyed and the thinkers themselves made ridiculous. The tone of the assault is indeed not uniform across the whole possible range of targets. Broadly speaking, modern *philosophoi* come in for harsher treatment than the great figures of the past. The latter may be gently ribbed, as they are for instance in *Fisherman*,⁴⁴ but they are not pounded as the moderns are, as charlatans unable to deliver on their high promises, and hypocrites unable to live up to their own moral standards, or indeed not interested in trying to do so in the first place.⁴⁵ Yet even among the moderns, the picture is not uniform: the occasional paragons stand out, notably Demonax and Nigrinus, though in the case of the latter fun seems to be had with the exaggeratedly deferential reactions of a pupil, even as the master himself is praised.⁴⁶ Overall, though, there is unmistakably more of the amused, the sceptical, and the downright damning than there is of the admiring and the supportive.⁴⁷

On one reading, this material might be taken to show both Lucian and his audience happily having their cake and eating it, in a way that ultimately confirms the security of *philosophia*'s social and cultural status rather than

⁴⁴ Which is itself 'apologising' for the appearance (?) of earlier disrespect in *Lifestyle auction*.

⁴⁵ E.g. *Pisc.* 29–37 and 41–52; *Symp. passim*.

⁴⁶ Lucian *Demon.* and *Nigr.*; the amusement at a pupil's over-reaction comes at *Nigr.* 1–7 and 35–38.

⁴⁷ See Ogden (this volume) on Lucian's use of philosophy and philosophers.

calling it into question. The very need to take swipes at *philosophia* and *philosophoi*, it might plausibly be suggested, confirms that these are things that most of the time have to be deferred to as part of an authoritative order; and the very manner of the swiping involves author and audience in confirming, to themselves, each other, and the world at large, that they know all about them as part of their shared culture as members of the privileged circle of *pepaideumenoí*. But another, edgier reading becomes possible when Lucian's satire is put together with other contemporary evidence of amusement, coolness, criticism, and sometimes downright hostility towards *philosophoi*, to add to the specifically Roman notes already mentioned. Disobliging remarks based on professional rivalry and competition for customers, such as those of Quintilian in Bk. 1 of his *Education of the orator*,⁴⁸ may not in themselves show very much; but they nonetheless add to the pattern, and we can point in addition to a large body of further material: attacks by Fronto and Aristides (admittedly, still speaking as rhetors on one side of the old rivalry of rhetoric with *philosophia*),⁴⁹ but also such interestingly varied testimonies as Petronius' Trimalchio ('he never went to a philosopher's lecture' as a funerary boast), and the anti-philosophical satire on *POxy* 3659 (second or third century AD).⁵⁰ Revealing too is the vivid episode reported by Aulus Gellius, of a Stoic *philosophos* observed by his fellow passengers to turn pale and grimace with fear during a storm at sea; as a result, he was aggressively taxed with failure to live up to his own ideals of *apatheia*, and forced to refer to textual evidence (one of the now lost volumes of Arrian's *Epictetus*) to clear his reputation.⁵¹

When all these manifestations are put together, there is at least some encouragement to pursue the suggestion that there is more in play than the simple combination of professional jealousy with a general desire for the revenge of mockery on a prestigious institution. Given the volume and the variety of anti-philosophical sentiment in circulation, might it not make sense to diagnose something deeper-seated and more anxious? Might we not at least test the supposition that there was something about the particular kind of claims to attention and respect that *philosophoi* made on behalf of their discipline that created not simply an inclination, but something like a positive need to have means available to deflect and resist them – in some

⁴⁸ *Inst.* 1 *Pref.* 9–17; see also 12,2.

⁴⁹ E.g. Fronto *On eloquence* 1,3–4, pp. 134–135 van den Hout; 2,9–14, pp. 140–142; 4,4, p. 148; Aristid. *Or.* 2 and 3.

⁵⁰ Petr. 71; *P.Oxy* vol. 52 (1984).

⁵¹ Gel. 19,1.

sense to control and circumscribe *philosophia* and keep it at bay? We should at any rate remind ourselves just how strong and potentially challenging those claims were. *Philosophia* asserted authority and rights of control not only over ultimate truth, but also over the living of lives – unimprovable truths about how the serious, worthy person ought to aspire to live and be, on pain of forfeiting any title to seriousness and worth. Those truths moreover, if acted on, dictated patterns of behaviour at variance – sometimes sharply so – with what counted as conventional good conduct among the educated elite. *Philosophia*, as we have seen, made you different – that was its point – and what it called you away from, asked you to see with disenchanting eyes, included central elements not just in individual morality, but in the whole structure of contemporary politics and society. It tried to detach you from specific, differential loyalty to family, place and country;⁵² from competition for honour, status, and their tangible tokens.⁵³ The issue was of course appreciated by *philosophoi*, and all kinds of negotiation and denial were produced – witness for example Arrian's Epictetus' declarations on familial affection, or the discussions by many different individuals of the proprieties of political participation.⁵⁴ But the very energy put into this shows that it was an area of tension and anxiety.

Philosophia, it would seem, if you took it wholly seriously, demanded that you turn away from more than many would be comfortable relinquishing. And it is from this that, on the current suggestion, would flow the need to find ways either of softening its claims, or of feeling justified in resisting them in their starkest versions. To make the issue still more intriguing, this would be true at the level of culture and education, as well as that of personal morality and civic values. *Philosophia* had, indeed, been taken into the embrace of conventional *paideia*, its classics welcomed into the reading lists of the rhetorico-literary curriculum, and its great representatives co-opted to grace the heroes' gallery of Hellenism. But it remained for all that a potential cuckoo in the nest. For the deliverances of this particular element in the overall combination of *paideia* included the suggestion that conventional cultivation itself – just like differential personal loyalties and the quest for

⁵² E.g. Hierocles, as quoted in Stobaeus *Anthology* 4,671,7–673,11 (57G Long-Sedley).

⁵³ E.g. Plutarch *Political precepts* 27, 819f–820e.

⁵⁴ Arr. *Discourses of Epictetus* 1,11; Sen. *On shortness of life* 18; *On tranquillity* 1,10–12; *On leisure, passim*; Arr. *Discourses of Epictetus* 1,10; Max. Tyr. 15–16; Plutarch *On old men in politics* and *Political precepts*; cf. Trapp 2007, 215–225.

status – should be viewed with cool detachment, or perhaps even discarded entirely.⁵⁵

Indeed, it is perhaps in this last dimension of the issue that we see the potential for the greatest tension and unease – at least, if one is at all tempted by a reading of contemporary elite culture along the lines suggested by Schmitz. For, if the game of *paideia* can indeed be read as, among other things, a means of articulating a symbolic ‘justification’ for the economic and political domination of the traditional governing class, then the identity of *philosophia*, as both a central element of the cultural package, and a source of criticism and resistance to that package, becomes a particularly delicate and sensitive one.

If anything like what has just been sketched really was felt at any level of awareness in the society of the cities of the Empire, then it is no wonder that *philosophia* should have elicited such a range of diverse variants and reactions, and should have had such a fluctuating and unstable status as it seems to have done in this ‘world of the novel’. Put another way – so as to relate this approach more firmly to better established scholarly trends – my suggestion is that the old idea of ‘philosophical opposition’, while still a valuable one to some extent, needs to be broadened beyond the purely political sphere, into a picture of *philosophia* as holding a much more general potential for opposition to conventional values and culture; and then in turn that a great deal of Imperial period writing about philosophical topics can revealingly be read in terms of conscious or unconscious strategies of defusing, deflecting, or opposing that oppositional potential. Once this point is reached, I am tempted by a return to the analogy with Christianity, drawn above with reference to a division between professional upholders, interested laity, and outsiders, but this time with reference to cultural positioning. Might *philosophia* in the Imperial period (or indeed Hellenistic times) be comparable to Christianity in Late Antique and Medieval culture also in that both may be argued to have posed a destabilising threat to the workings of the political, social, and moral order that enclosed them, and thus to have been as productive of efforts to tame, deflect, and hold them in check, as of straightforward deference and endorsement? Made this bluntly and crudely, the comparison is bound to sound a callow one, and good reason for bringing this introductory chapter to a close; but I hope that the incentive to sketch it, at least, is clear, and will serve to reinforce the suggestion that there is some-

⁵⁵ For the issue of the philosophical evaluation of conventional learning, see Sen. *Ep.* 88; Philo Judaeus *On congress*; Max. Tyr. 37 (with Trapp 1997a, 290–297); Ceb. 11–14 and 33–35; and for discussion, Hadot 1984, 63–100 (esp. 95–96) and 295–296.

thing more interestingly ambiguous about the social positioning of *philosophia* in the era of the novel than is often acknowledged.⁵⁶

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⁵⁶ I take it that my argument converges to some extent with Tim Whitmarsh's exploration of the capacity of *paideia* to destabilize as well as reinforce social hierarchies and boundaries (Whitmarsh 2001, 90–130), but does not entirely overlap: mine is more a question of an argument or tension within the circle of *paideia*, and of the relation of a particular problematic constituent of the whole package to other schemes of value.

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