Eidos volume 5 no. 1 (2021)

A JOURNAL FOR PHILOSOPHY OF CULTURE

DOI:10.14394/eidos.jpc.2021.0001

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Ancient Philosophical Inspirations for *Pandemiconium*

Reserved him to more wrath; for now the thought
Both of lost happiness and lasting pain
Torments him; round he throws his baleful eyes
That witnessed huge affliction and dismay
Mixed with obdurate pride and steadfast hate:
At once as far as angels' ken he views
The dismal situation waste and wild

— John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 1, lines 54–60

At times, the COVID-19 Pandemic has spent words of their value. We academic philosophers have written many articles in relation to it, and plenty of social media posts, as well as other discourse on it. It all seems effete to stop the flames we have kindled that led to this global tragedy. Our civilizational unsustainability and instability have borne down on us the last year and a half, and at times it seems to reveal a dire fall. There is a sense of failing to avoid a *pandemic*-onium all too visible and nearing as we descend to the depths. Like the Devil's palace, this place is also of our own creation. Whether this zeitgeist is but the Calvinist vision of perennial despair reappearing its fantastical face or indeed a portent of the times to come, we cannot but at time see through the eyes of the rebel fallen angel, with smoldering sorrow and anger for our world, if not heaven, well lost.

It becomes hard in such moments to have any hope that one's own work at self and communal cultivation is anywhere near enough. It sometimes feels as if all we can do is fiddle as Rome burns. Are we participating in our own downfall? Even if not in the confines of academic philosophy, and doing broad based cultivation

work in philosophy as a way of life (PWL), how can one not but feel helpless and wrathful about our own situation, for the countless dead by government inaction to the virus, corporate greed and entitlement to protect vaccine formulas, hubristic populace quests for superior conspiratorial knowledge, growing authoritarianism, unchecked white supremacist fascism, and biological devastation caused by an unsustainable late-capitalistic, hyper abstracted, global economy? Those feelings seem righteously luciferian. However, our global wisdom traditions, with nuance, challenge us against mere smoldering anger, or at least not without guidance. To go further, our PWL wisdom traditions have long exhorted us to strive for *ataraxia* (a state of serene calm and clarity), and even to *amor fati* (love [our] fate), especially at the worst of times.

So, between luciferian rage and angelic sage like calm, what can PWL teach us at such a moment? When the world finds itself in the middle of a pandemic with its consequent confinement and social isolation, a related economic crisis, the unmasking of ongoing systematic racism, the global rise of far-right politics, and the spread of violence, what role can the work of philosophers have in helping individuals and communities strive for a wise, just, and meaningful life? Is there also room for righteous indignation against the devastating forces in our world?

From Marcus Aurelius' meditations written in the midst of war and plague, and Montaigne's *Essais* penned amidst civil strife, to Martin Luther King Jr.'s sermons which incited a movement rooted in non-violence to fight systematic racism in the United States, those committed to the philosophical life have used a variety of literary genres to affect, exhort, enlighten and console their readers. Today we find ourselves in a profound crisis of civilization, as the COVID-19 pandemic unleashes a pandora's box of suffering that was underneath the "old normal."

The idea of PWL is pre-eminently associated with French philosopher and philologist Pierre Hadot. According to this idea, the goal of philosophy is to transform its practitioners' lives. Ancient Western philosophy, as Hadot asked us to see it, was abidingly oriented by Socrates' question of "how is it best to live?" It included in its purview prescriptions of "spiritual exercises" or what Michel Foucault called "technologies of the self" to actively transform how people perceive the world and live their lives: exercises like the view from above, heightened attention to the present moment, the examination of conscience, or the premeditation of death and misfortunes. These older practices of philosophy were also tied to, and expressed within, different literary genres than those we recognize today, from dialogues to consolations, meditations, discourses, handbooks, aphorisms, even poems and prayers. Ancient philosophers aimed to do more, or different things with words, than perhaps we do today. The study of PWL in historical thinkers hence invites philosophers today to reconsider the ends and means of their work, their relations to others, to the university, to the city, and to the global community. Our present situation makes such reflection more urgent than ever.

In times such as these, one is called to also assess the severity of circumstances while playing a role in empowering and catalyzing action to improve our lot, no matter how dire the situation. And indeed, inspired by the ancients, what is common across traditions is what Dewey once called "reasonable hopefulness," which is no mere optimism:

> After all, the optimism that says that the world is already the best possible of all worlds might be regarded as the most cynical of pessimisms. If this is the best possible, what would a world which was fundamentally bad be like? Meliorism is the belief that the specific conditions which exist at one moment, be they comparatively bad or comparatively good, in any event may be bettered. It encourages intelligence to study the positive means of good and the obstructions to their realization, and to put forth endeavor for the improvement of conditions. It arouses confidence and a reasonable hopefulness as optimism does not. For the latter in declaring that good is already realized in

> ultimate reality tends to make us gloss over the evils that concretely exist. It becomes too readily the creed of those who live at ease, in comfort, of those who have been successful in obtaining this world's rewards. Too readily optimism makes the men who hold it callous and blind to the sufferings of the less fortunate, or ready to find the cause of troubles of others in their personal viciousness. It thus co-operates with pessimism, in spite of the extreme nominal differences between the two, in benumbing sympathetic insight and intelligent effort in reform. It beckons men away from the world of relativity and change into the calm of the absolute and eternal.[1]

And one might add that not only does naïve optimism and passive pessimism fall into this trap but so does unguided luciferian rage. What is Milton's Lucifer but a manifestation of the bitterness of our imagination faced with a dreadfully determined universe whose omnipotent power one is impotent against? It is our manifestation of imagining ourselves into a predestination that provides us security in our own doom and gloom. One of the great selfish satisfactions of life is to imagine oneself as a tragic hero or anti-hero, an all-too-common ploy in our long-term romantic relationships. We would rather see ourselves as the protagonist than be interpreted in uncomfortable ways by those who are nearest and dearest to us. Analogously, it is easy in the face of the perhaps irreparable damage already done to this planet and its creatures to forsake the reasonably hopeful and let ourselves fall into a fantasy of a fall we cannot escape. While there are many ways in which global civilization is in profound crises, drawing from Dewey's *sofia perrenis*, we still can always "better our situation," even if but a little bit. Even though our situation is in many ways (and not all ways) comparatively bad, the melioristic, reasonably hopeful attitude of PWL exhorts us to that "better" available in any present. While wrath perhaps has a place as empowerment to action, it should not be used to maintain a tragic self-pleasing façade for ourselves. That is the easy way out.

To get at this "better," the ancients advocated clear-headed equilibrium. Thus, their goal was to not only find personal peace but to act for the best ends possible, to hit the *kairos* needed in the moment to decisively serve justice. To be a sage was to do so from the very character of one's being, that is to have the virtue of *wu-wei* 無為 (effortless [right] action). Across the ancient globe, in different ways, with different discourses, and in different contexts, philosophers exhorted their audiences to clearly see their duty to act with bravery, do what they could to serve others, and attend to the world with openness, attentiveness, care, and magnanimity.

While the authors of our Thematic Section will devote themselves to explicating these virtues, maxims, and models to develop ongoing clarity of mind and heart – ones we may reconstruct and use for our present circumstances as part of our reasonable hopefulness – there is one great resource that is essential to all that I want to turn to now: the solace of philosophical friends to support us on our quests for cultivation, to witness our struggle, and to exhort us to be better. To better understand this point, we can draw from another cultural context. There is an Indonesian phrase *gotong royong*, which usually is translated as to "share the burden, weight" or "share and share alike." It is often used as a collectivist call to communal solidarity. But there is yet another existential sense to this phrase that is revealed by the pandemic; when times are hard the desire for visibility and recognition is needed as a firm foundation for action. In the words of Philodemus of Gadara, "there is nothing so grand as having one to whom one will say what is in one's heart and who will listen when one speaks. For our nature strongly desires to reveal to some people what it thinks."[2] It is in this spirit of philo-

1) John Dewey, *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899–1924: 1920, Essays, Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Collected Works of John Dewey, vol. 12, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), 181–82.

2) Philodemus, *On Frank Criticism*, ed. John T. Fitzgerald, vol. 43, 13, Society of Biblical Literature: Texts and Translations (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998), 45 [28].

sophical friendship and dialogue that one ought to approach the essays. They are witnesses and sophisticated exhortations for our times.

Michael Chase begins our Thematic Section by insightfully and creatively addressing several domains that agitate our righteous indignation: the abuse of the planet and its ecological system that catalyzed the likelihood of this pandemic; the growing dismissal of scientific insight, through conspiratorial semiotic webs and quack solutions, which have created an "epistemological crisis" that weakens our capacity to respond propitiously to our critical situation; and scientific reductionism and a promethean attitude toward nature that exacerbate misunderstanding and distrust of the best of experimental inquiry. Chase, drawing from the insights of the ancient Empiric Medical school and its form of qualified probabilist skepticism, in relation to Michael Bitbol's advocacy of an intransitive, humbler scientific attitude, provides a vision of responsible and sensitive *ataraxia* to address our current crises of fake news and scientific hubris. We can return to an ancient *epoché* of sorts. This suspension can help us be attentive to our world in ways that can help regrow and rebuild it, if carried out through what Hadot called an orphic attitude toward nature:

> An idea: nature is art and art is nature, human art being only a special case of the art of nature, an idea that, I believe enables us better to understand both what art can be and what nature can be. An experience – that of Rousseau, Goethe, Hölderlin, Van Gogh and many others – an experience that consists in becoming intensely aware of the fact that we are a part of nature, and that in this sense we ourselves are this infinite, ineffable nature that completely surrounds us.[3]

Through lessons from the Empiric Skeptical School as part of an orphic attitude, we can develop a sensitive and contemplative way of living that is respectful, modest, receptive, and attentive.

Matthew Sharpe, in turn, with sophistication and thoughtfulness affirms that the ancient model of the stoic sage, if properly understood, has much to teach us about a consistent *hexis*, or tenor or character, in line with the dispositions of cosmos/logos, at this present time of crises. Sharpe rejects the interpretation of classical stoicism as envisioning the sage as close to omniscient (knows reality as it is in-itself) and proposes a more nuanced and moderate reading. After a close study, the sage appears as being able to face challenging times with a variety of virtues, including with *aproptôsia* (non-precipitancy). For example, not following the latest conspiracy theory on the internet trying to find certainty about the pandemic under complex circumstances. The sage also exemplifies "reasonableness, given their limited powers, and [is] characterized by inner freedom (*autarkeia*), and tranquility (*ataraxia*)." If we are to try and follow the stoic sage then it seems we ought to refuse that luciferian indignation, for it but reveals our desire for revenge against some perceived wrongdoer, and does not put us line with the cosmos, as is needed to face and respond to our situation justly. We must resist our inclination to gullibility and to assenting to particular kinds of impulses.

The Thematic Section moves then from Western consciousness – and its ancient wisdom traditions for insight into our current crises – to the East and perennial maxims to guide us through life, especially in hard times. In a highly creative and elegantly constructed piece that breaks away from the traditional academic essay, Marc-Henri Deroche offers us 12 maxims in three domains/categories that help us engage with our world with mindfulness that helps us attend to others and ourselves with deep care. Drawing on the "philosophy-medicine of Buddhism" in comparative dialogue with Western philosophy, Deroche proposes a way to escape the pandemonium produced by the passive distraction of digital media content, and the anger and stress that such

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3) Pierre Hadot, *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 319.

a lifestyle produces. Again, the inspiration here is for a life of equanimity that allows us to respond to our situation as best as we might and with the deepest care for our world with others. Deroche also advocates for ways to replenish one's inner resources so we can take a broader perspective and renew our creative capacities "to live, to live well, to live better,"[4] as Alfred North Whitehead once put it.

Luis de Miranda follows with his intercultural constellation of principles for a meaningful life, especially during hard times. With praiseworthy polythematic PWL insight from the likes of Hadot, Kant, Hegel, Whitehead, Kierkegaard, and from across the arts and sciences, de Miranda weaves together his principles of "mental heroism, deep orientation, critical creativity, deep listening, and the 'creal' (the creative Real as ultimate possibility)." The vision he provides – especially through the lens of philosophical coaching and therapy – is an attentive supporting of the flowering of our creative capacities, individual and collective, as nurtured by the creative process of possibility from which they are drawn. He thus provides a vision of a rich, blessed, and ever maturing life that heralds luciferian individual capacity to develop, but does not imagine itself into a determinism against a universe it cannot control. Rather, it seeks to ride the wave of that creative force and provide *amor fati* through the cultivation of *wu-wei*.

The call to love such an endeavor, that is to love wisdom as an emphatic call to praxis, is what we find in the insightful work (and no mere academic essay) that ends the Thematic Section. Lucio Angelo Privitello in his "Another Kind of Octopus" (a tribute to Eco) responds to nine of the questions that were in the original call for papers for these issues of our journal. Drawing on the insights of American philosophy, especially Dewey and William James, instead of merely answering the questions of this first issue on "PWL in a Time of Crises" through the very "disciplinary capture" of the academic essay, or by practicing a stale literary genre that is not an authentic response to the call we proposed, Privitello enacts a new and authentic mode of epistle that deconstructs the limits and implicit assumptions of our CFP questions. These questions themselves, as I think he shows, are all too bedraggled by the demands of academic philosophy in a journal such as this one. It is a complex, fragile, tour-de-force that is the perfect "embrasure"[5] to further dialogue on PWL in our contemporary crises. Despite his doubts about the ability to escape disciplinary capture and for deep authentic writing within the confines of academic life, his essay itself enacts an alternative route.

We also have two excellent and dynamic contributions in our Forum section. Marcin Poręba, drawing on the affinities between the work of Gödel and Wittgenstein, proposes a new bold interpretation of Platonism that maintains a realism about concepts and their ability to be accessed and guided by feeling through intuition. This project challenges and reconstructs more standard interpretations of Platonism. We are offered a new "sensible realism," in response. Next, Maria Alina Asavei offers an important account of the role of tradition in culture and aesthetics, including the tradition of rebelling against it and be suspicious of it, especially by artists. Asavei seeks to move beyond the binary between stale tradition and novel contemporary, and offer a coordinated account of what "tradition means" and the role it plays for contemporary artists.

In our original CFP, we invited readers to not only reflect on which philosophical-literary genres we ought to be drawing upon in times of crises but invited contributors to revive them for the leading motif of this issue. Thus, we have two pieces of the highest caliber that are responses to our theme in the third section. These pieces sit outside of the traditional parameters of a peer review essay but play a more than vital role in our discussion. We are honored, for example, to have the eminent award-winning writer, philosopher, and practicing Soto Zen Buddhist Charles Johnson begin the section with an elegant personal testament to the love of wisdom in the

4) Alfred North Whitehead, *The Function of Reason* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 8.

5) For more on this usage of "embrasure," see: Lucio Angelo Privitello, "The Devil Wears Damask: Twilled Teaching as Apprenticeships in Creativity," *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 3, no. 4 (10) (2019): 138–49, https://doi.org/10.14394/eidos.jpc.2019.0046.

context of his experience as a Black American philosopher, whose work in philosophy as a way of life moves across a variety of media and styles, from fiction to epistolatory letters to his grandson. Jan Zwicky follows with a Thoreauvian meditation on nature, which acerbically acknowledges the seeming futility to aspire to justice in our classrooms and beyond them in an ecologically and socially devasted world. This piece is unique in that it is being published at the same time in the preeminent literary journal *Brick*.