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MORAL FABLES

The History of the Human Race*

They say that in the beginning all the inhabitants of the world were created at one and the same time everywhere, and all of them as children, and that they were nurtured by the bees, the goats and the doves, just as the poets fabled concerning Jove's upbringing.* And that the earth was much smaller than it is now, almost all the land flat, the sky without stars, the sea not yet created, and that there was much less variety and splendour in the world than we see today. Men nevertheless took an insatiable pleasure in observing and considering the sky and the earth, marvelling at them and thinking them both beautiful and not merely vast but infinite, in extent as in majesty and grace. They fed themselves besides with the most joyful hopes and, taking unbelievable delight in every emotion they felt, grew up in great contentment, almost believing that they were happy. Having spent their childhood and early adolescence so pleasantly, and coming to a time of greater maturity, they started to sense a certain change. Their hopes, which up to then they had gone on deferring from day to day, without their having yet come into effect, seemed to them to deserve little credence; and the idea of being content with what they enjoyed at present, without the promise of any increase of their well-being, did not attract them. This was above all because the appearance of natural things and every detail of their daily lives, either through long custom or through a decline of man's primeval mental vivacity, fell far short of being as delightful and pleasing to them as in the beginning. They roamed over the earth and visited the most distant places, since they could do that easily, the land being flat and not divided by seas, and there being no other difficulty to impede them; and after many years most of them realized that the earth, although big, was established within certain bounds which were not so wide as to be beyond comprehension, and that all places on earth and all men were, with only slight differences, like one another. For which reasons their discontent increased so much that, before they had left their youth

behind, an overt distaste for their existence took universal possession of them. And gradually during their maturity, and even more in their declining years, as satiety turned to hatred, some of them were filled with such desperation that, unable to bear the light and the breath of life, which in early times they had so much loved, they spontaneously, some in one way and some in another, deprived themselves of them.

This situation horrified the gods – that living creatures preferred death to life, and that life itself in some of its own subjects, without the force of necessity or any other influence, should be the instrument of their destruction. Nor is it easy to say how surprised they were that their gifts were held to be so contemptible, so abominable that anyone should make every effort to divest himself of them and reject them; for it seemed to the gods that they had placed in the world so much goodness and charm, and such arrangements and circumstances, that this dwelling place ought to be not merely tolerated, but most dearly loved by any creature – and most of all by men, that race they had taken particular care to bring to a state of wonderful excellence. But at the same time, besides being touched in no small way by pity for so much human misery as events revealed, the gods even feared that, if these sad examples were to be repeated and multiplied, the human race in a short time, against the decrees of the Fates, would come to perish, and everything would be deprived of that perfection which our species bestowed upon it, and they themselves of those honours which they received from men.

Jove decided therefore to improve the human condition, since that seemed to be required, and with greater favours to guide men towards happiness; and he realized that men complained mainly that things were neither of such immense size – nor infinite in beauty, perfection and variety – as they had at first thought them to be; things were on the contrary very restricted, all of them imperfect, and almost all shaped alike; and he saw that men, deploring not only increasing age, but their time of maturity, and even youth itself, and desiring the sweetness of their early years, prayed fervently to be restored to childhood, and to remain in that state all their lives. In this Jove was unable to satisfy them, since it would be contrary to the universal laws of nature and to those duties and services that men should, in accordance with divine decree, perform

and provide. Neither could he communicate his own infinity to mortal creatures, or make matter infinite, or make the perfection and happiness of things and men infinite. It seemed good to him, therefore, to broaden the bounds of creation, to adorn it more and make it more varied; and once he had taken this decision, he enlarged the earth all round, and poured the sea into it so that, being interposed between the inhabited areas, it diversified the appearance of things and, by interrupting travel, prevented their bounds being easily known to men, and so presented to the eye a lively semblance of immensity. At that time those new waters covered the land of Atlantis,* and not that alone, but other vast and innumerable tracts, although of Atlantis there is a particular memory, one that has survived over countless centuries. Many places he lowered, many he filled up by raising mountains and hills; he sprinkled the sky with stars, refined and purified the nature of the air and increased the brightness of daylight; he deepened the colours of the sky and the countryside and made them more various than before, and confused the generations of men so that the old age of some coincided with the youth and childhood of others. And, resolving to multiply the appearances of that infinitude which men desired above all (since he could not gratify them with the reality) and wishing to feed and encourage their imaginations (from which he understood the great blessedness of their childhood had principally proceeded), among the many expedients which he adopted (like that of the sea) he created echoes, which he hid in the valleys and caves, and he placed a deep, hollow murmur in the woods, together with a vast swaying of their treetops. In the same way, Jove created the crowd of dreams, and charged them with deceiving, under various guises, the thoughts of men, and with suggesting to men that fullness of incomprehensible happiness which he saw no way to bring about in reality; Jove charged them also with suggesting those confused and indefinite images of which he himself, even if he had wished to and men had ardently desired it, could not produce one actual example.

By these measures taken by Jove, the minds of men were recreated and elevated, and the charm and love of life renewed in each of them, no less than their persuasion of the delight and wonder of the beauty and immensity of earthly things. And this happy state lasted longer than the first, mainly because of the different times of birth introduced by

Jove, so that those minds that had grown cold and weary through their experience of life were comforted by seeing the warmth and hopefulness of those in their salad days. But in the course of time, once the novelty had disappeared, and tedium and the contempt of life were restored and reconfirmed, men were reduced to such despondency that it was then, so it is believed, that the custom arose which history records as preserved by certain ancient peoples: when someone was born, relatives and friends gathered to lament him; and the day of his death was celebrated with feasts and discourses congratulating the dead man. In the end all mortals turned to impiety, either because it seemed to them that they were not listened to by Jove, or because it is the nature of wretchedness to harden and corrupt even the most cultivated minds and make them fall out of love with honesty and righteousness. Anyway, this is why they are deceived who believe that man's unhappiness was brought about in the beginning by their iniquity and their crimes against the gods: on the contrary, their wickedness had no other source but their afflictions.

Now, when the gods had punished the arrogance of mortals with Deucalion's flood and taken vengeance for the affronts they had suffered, the two sole survivors from the universal drowning of our race, Deucalion and Pyrrha, deciding for themselves that nothing could be of more help to humankind than its extinction, sat on top of a crag summoning death with the most earnest longing, neither fearing nor deploring the common fate. However, exhorted by Jove to redress the earth's solitude, and not being able to bring themselves, in their discouragement and disdain for life, to set about the work of generation, they took stones from the mountain, as the gods instructed them, and, throwing them over their shoulders, they restored the human race.* But Jove was aware from past experience of the true nature of men, how it is not enough for them, as it is for other creatures, to be alive and free from all bodily aches and pains, and how, in fact, since they always desire in all circumstances the impossible, this desire troubles them the more, the less they are afflicted by other ills. He decided therefore to preserve this wretched race by novel means, and two especially. The first was to fill their lives with real ills; the second was to involve them in a thousand toils and trammels, in order to occupy them and distract them as far as

possible from conversing with their own minds, or at least with that unknown and vain felicity of theirs.

So he began by spreading among them a multitudinous variety of diseases and an endless array of other misfortunes. He wished, by varying the conditions and chances of mortal life, to obviate satiety and increase the value of benefits in contrast to ills; and he hoped that the lack of pleasure, in those now accustomed to worse things, should prove to be much more bearable than it had in the past; and he even had the intention of breaking and taming men's ferocity, training them to bow the neck and yield to necessity, reducing them to being more easily satisfied with their own lot, and blunting, in minds weakened no less by the infirmity of their bodies than by their personal travails, the edge and vehemence of their desire. Besides which, he knew that it must happen that men oppressed by disease and calamities would be less ready than formerly to turn their hands against themselves because they would be cowed and disheartened, as happens with the experience of suffering. Which also has the effect, by opening the way to hopes of better things, of binding men to life: because those who are not happy are firmly persuaded that they would be happy indeed once they recovered from their personal misfortunes; which, as is the way of men, they never fail to hope will come about somehow. Thereafter he created the storms of wind and cloud, armed himself with thunder and lightning, gave Neptune his trident, propelled the comets in their courses and ordained eclipses; with these things and with other dreadful signs and effects he arranged to terrify mortals from time to time, knowing that fear and present danger would reconcile to life, for a short time at least, not merely those who were unhappy, but even those who held life in the greatest abomination and were most disposed to flee from it.

And to banish their previous laziness he infused into the human race the need and the appetite for novel food and drink; these could not be provided without a very great effort, whereas before the flood men, quenching their thirst with water alone, had fed on the herbs and fruits which the earth and trees gave them spontaneously, and with other simple nutriments which were easy to procure, such as some peoples live on even today, especially in California. He assigned different climates to different places, and likewise to different seasons of the year,

which up to that time had always been benign and pleasing over the whole earth; men had had no need of clothing, but from this time forth they were constrained to provide themselves with it, and to cope with the changes and inclemency of the weather with much hard work. He commanded Mercury to found the first cities, and to divide the human race into peoples, nations and tongues, placing competition and discord among them; and to reveal to men the art of singing and those other arts, which because of their nature and origin were called, and still are called, divine. Jove himself gave laws, conditions and civil ordinances to the new peoples; and finally wishing them to have the benefit of one incomparable gift, he sent among them some phantasms* of excellent and superhuman appearance, to whom he granted to a great extent government and power over these peoples: these phantasms were called Justice, Virtue, Glory, Patriotism and other such names. Among which phantasms there was likewise one called Love, which only at that time, like all the others, made its first appearance upon earth: because previously, before clothes were worn, it was not love, but sheer cupidity, not dissimilar in the men of that time to what it is at all times in beasts, which urged one sex towards the other, in the same way as everyone is drawn to food and similar things, which are not truly loved, but hungered for.

It was wonderful how much good fruit for mortal lives these decrees brought forth, and how far the new condition of men – notwithstanding their labours, their alarms and their grief, which were things previously unknown to our race – surpassed in comfort and pleasure what had been before the flood. And this effect derived in great part from those marvellous phantasms: by men they were regarded now as spirits, now as gods, and followed and venerated with inestimable ardour and with vast and phenomenal labours for many a long age; the poets and other noble artists for their part took infinite pains inspiring men to do this, to such an extent that innumerable mortals did not hesitate to offer up and sacrifice, to one or other of these phantasms, their very lifeblood. This was not unwelcome to Jove; indeed it pleased him beyond measure because, apart from anything else, he judged that men must be less prompt to throw their lives away voluntarily, the readier they were to lay them down for beautiful and noble causes. In duration too these good arrangements exceeded the former ones by far: although after

many centuries they manifestly decayed, even after their decline and fall they were nevertheless of great force: right up to the start of an age not very remote from the present one, human life, which by virtue of these ordinances had once been, in certain periods especially, almost joyful, continued to be, on their account, reasonably easy and tolerable.

The causes of this change, and the means by which it occurred, were the many expedients discovered by men to provide for their own needs easily and quickly; the immeasurable growth of the disparity in the conditions and responsibilities instituted among men by Jove when he founded and organized the first republics; the sloth and vanity which, after being exiled so long, for these reasons occupied life once more; the diminution, not merely of the substance of things, but still more of men's opinion of the grace and variety of human life, as always happens after long habituation; and finally those other graver matters which, since they have been identified and described by so many, need not be specified now.* Certainly among men there was a renewal of that boredom with their own affairs that had troubled them before the flood, and there was a resurgence of that bitter desire for a happiness unknown and alien to the nature of the universe.

But the complete reversal of their fortunes, and their final exit from that state which today we are accustomed to call "ancient" arose mainly from a different cause. And this is what it was: among those phantasms which were so esteemed by the ancients there was one called in their tongues Wisdom who, honoured universally like all her companions and held in particular veneration by many, had contributed as they had to the prosperity of past ages. Wisdom had more and more frequently, indeed daily, promised and sworn to her followers that she would show them Truth, who she said was a very great spirit, and her own mistress, and had never come down to earth, but was seated with the gods in heaven. Wisdom promised to use her own authority and charm to draw Truth thence, and to induce her for some period of time to wander among men; so that, with long use and familiarity, the human race would reach a stage that, in height of understanding, excellence of institutions and customs, and happiness of life, would be well-nigh comparable to the divine. But how could a mere shade and an empty semblance make good any promise, and especially that of bringing Truth to earth? So

men, after believing and trusting for so long, realized the vanity of those professions; and at the same time they hungered for something new, particularly because of the sloth in which they lived. So, urged partly by their ambition to equal the gods, and partly by their desire for that bliss which, according to the words of that phantasm Wisdom, they thought they would, after some acquaintance with Truth, achieve, they turned to Jove and in the most insistent and presumptuous terms asked him to permit that most noble spirit to come to earth. They rebuked him for denying his creatures the enormous benefit that they would derive from that presence, and at the same time they reproached him with the human lot, renewing their ancient and loathsome complaints about the pettiness and poverty of their condition. Those beautiful phantasms, the authors of so much good in past ages, were now commonly held in little esteem: not that they were known for what they really were, but the general low-mindedness and customary indolence meant that no one venerated them any longer. Consequently men wickedly cursed the greatest gift that the eternal powers had given and could give to mortals; they objected that the earth was considered worthy only of lesser spirits, and that as for the greater spirits, those before whom it would be more reasonable for the human race to bow down, it was not thought right or proper to place them in this world, the lowest pit of all the universe.

Jove's goodwill had long since been alienated from mankind yet again by many things, including their incomparable vices and misdeeds, which in number and in seriousness had left the wickedness avenged by the flood far behind. He was quite sickened, after all his experience of it, by the unquiet, insatiable, immoderate nature of human beings, for whose tranquillity, let alone happiness, he was certain by now that no measures could provide, no condition be suitable, no place be satisfactory: even when he had been willing to increase a thousandfold the range of the earth and its pleasures, and things in general, these had soon seemed to men, who were as avid for infinitude as they were incapable of it, to be straitened, unpleasing and of little worth. Ultimately their stupid and arrogant demands roused the wrath of the god to such an extent that he resolved to lay all sympathy aside and to punish the human race for ever by condemning it for all

future ages to a wretchedness much greater than that of the past. For which reason he decided to send Truth not merely to stay with men for a while, as they requested, but to dwell for ever among them, and made her, to the exclusion of those charming phantasms which he had placed here, the perpetual director and mistress of the human race.

And when the other gods showed their surprise at that decision, thinking it would raise our status too high and prejudice their own pre-eminence, Jove disabused them of that notion. He pointed out that not all the spirits, however great, were beneficent, and Truth was not: she would have the same effect among men as among the gods: whereas she showed the immortals their beatitude, to mortals she would reveal all their unhappiness and keep it continually before their eyes, representing it as not merely the result of chance, but something they could by no accident or remedy escape – nor ever, while they lived, interrupt. “And since most of their ills have this characteristic – that they are ills in so far as they are believed to be so by those who suffer them, and are more or less as serious as they are thought to be – one may imagine what enormous harm the presence of this spirit will do to men.* Nothing will seem to them truer than the falsity of all mortal goods, and nothing solid but the hollowness and vanity of everything except their own misery. For these reasons they will be deprived even of that hope by means of which, from the beginning right up to the present, more than by any delight or comfort, they have maintained their life. And, hoping for nothing, and seeing no worthwhile result of their activities and labours, they will arrive at such negligence and such abhorrence of any energetic – let alone high-minded – work, that the common customs of the living will differ little from those of the dead and buried. But in their desperation and discouragement they will not be able to prevent their desire for immense felicity, which is innate, from stinging and tormenting them even more than previously, in that they will be less hampered and distracted by a variety of concerns and the impulse of action. And at the same time they will find themselves deprived of their natural power of imagination, which alone could to some degree supply that happiness which is not possible, and not understood, either by me or by those who crave it. And all those semblances of infinitude that, in

deference to their propensities, I have studiously placed in the world to deceive and feed them with vast and indeterminate thoughts will prove to be inadequate as a result of the doctrine and the habits that they will learn from Truth. So that the earth and the other parts of the universe which before seemed tiny to them will in future seem minuscule: they will be instructed and enlightened as to the secrets of nature which, contrary to men's present expectation, will seem all the more restricted the more they know about them. In the end, once their phantasms have been taken from the earth, through the teachings of Truth, which will enable men to understand them fully, human life will lack all value, all rectitude, in thought as in deed; and not merely study and charity, but the very names of nations and native countries will be extinguished everywhere, drawing all men, as they will be in the habit of saying, into one nation and native country, as it was in the beginning; and, professing universal love to all their species, they will in reality disintegrate the human race into as many peoples as there are men. So that, no one having a native land to claim as his loved one, or foreigners to hate, everyone will hate everyone else, loving only, out of the whole race, himself. The many and various troubles that will arise from this would take an eternity to recount. Nor will such great and desperate unhappiness embolden mortals to abandon the light of day of their own accord: this spirit's imperium will make them as craven as they are wretched and, increasing immeasurably the bitterness of their life, will deprive them of all power to reject it."

These words of Jove's led the gods to think that our fate was about to be more savage and terrible than divine pity could consent to. But Jove went on speaking. "They will nevertheless derive some small comfort from the phantasm that they call Love, which I am willing, after removing all the others, to leave in human society. And Truth will not be able, although she is so powerful and will continually wage war against them, either to drive men from the face of the earth, or to overcome them, except rarely. So that men's lives, occupied equally with the cult of that phantasm and this spirit, will be divided into two parts, and those two will share a common dominion over mortal minds and matters. All other occupations, except for some few of little account, will be lacking among most men. In old age the absence of Love's consolations

will be compensated for by their natural tendency to be almost content with life, as happens with the other species of animals, and to foster it diligently for its own sake, not for any delight or comfort that they might draw from it.”

Thus, once these beautiful phantasms were removed from the earth, with the solitary exception of Love, the least noble of them all, Jove sent Truth to be among men, to dwell with them for ever and have perpetual lordship over them. From this followed all those regrettable effects that he had foreseen. And something truly amazing happened: whereas that spirit, before her descent upon earth, when she had no power or jurisdiction among men, had been honoured by them with many temples and sacrifices, now that she had arrived with all the authority of a prince and had begun to be known personally, then she – in contrast to all the other immortals, who seem worthier of veneration the better they are known – troubled the minds of men and struck them with such horror that they, though bound to obey her, refused to adore her. And while those other wraiths were accustomed to be the more revered and loved by any soul the more they exerted their power over it, that spirit received fiercer maledictions and deeper hatred from those over whom she achieved the greatest dominion. So mortals, unable to escape or resist her tyranny, lived in that extreme misery which they suffer to the present day, and always will suffer.

Except that not long afterwards compassion, which is never utterly spent in heavenly minds, touched the will of Jove concerning such great unhappiness, and particularly that of some men distinguished by the fineness of their intellect, the nobility of their habits and the integrity of their lives; he saw that they were commonly oppressed and afflicted, more than others were, by the power and harsh domination of that spirit. In ancient times, when Justice and Virtue and the other phantasms governed human affairs, the gods were in the habit of visiting their own creatures from time to time, now one and now another coming down to earth, and signifying their presence here in diverse ways: this had always been of the greatest benefit either to all mortals or to some of them in particular. But life being once again corrupted and wallowing in every kind of wickedness, the gods had for a long time disdained to associate with human beings. Now Jove, in pity for our extreme

unhappiness, suggested to the immortals that some of them might be persuaded to visit, as they had in antiquity, that troubled progeny of theirs and comfort them in their travails, especially those who showed that they themselves did not deserve the universal disaster. They all remained silent at this, except for Love, the son of celestial Venus, of one name with the phantasm called Love, but utterly different in nature, virtue and deeds; he offered (being unparalleled among the gods for his compassion) to perform the office suggested by Jove, and to come down from heaven, whence he had never been drawn before, because the council of the immortals, which held him inexpressibly dear, had not allowed him to be away, even for a brief time, from their company. Despite this, from time to time many ancient peoples, deceived by the transformations and the various frauds carried out by the phantasm known as Love, believed that they had unmistakable signs of the presence of this most great god. Yet he had never visited mortals before they were placed under the rule of Truth. Since then he visits only infrequently, and does not stay long; this is because of the general unworthiness of the human race, and also because the gods are very disturbed by his absence. When he does come down to earth, he chooses the tenderest and noblest hearts of the most high-minded and magnanimous people, and he stays with them for a brief space; into them he infuses such rare and marvellous sweetness, and fills them with such noble feelings, and so much virtue and strength, that they then experience something quite new to the human race: the actuality rather than the semblance of blessedness. Very infrequently he joins two hearts together, embracing them both at the same time, and inducing mutual ardour and desire; and although this is urgently prayed for by all those of whom he takes possession, Jove does not allow him to gratify them, apart from some few, because the felicity which is born from such a blessing comes too near to that of the gods. In any case, being filled with Love's godhead surpasses in itself the most fortunate state of any man at the very best of times. On whomsoever Love comes to rest, that person is surrounded by those wonderful phantasms, invisible to all other people and long cut off from human acquaintance, which Love, with Jove's permission, brings back down to earth for this purpose. Nor can Truth prevent this, although she is utterly hostile to those phantasms, and cut to

the quick by their return: it is not given to spirits to oppose the gods. And because the Fates have endowed Love with eternal youth, so he, in accordance with his nature, in a manner answers that first prayer ever offered up by men, which was to return to the state of childhood: in the souls where he elects to dwell he arouses and reinvigorates, for all the time he remains there, the infinite hope and the beautiful and dear imaginations of our tender years. Many mortals, inexperienced and incapable of Love's delights, mock and taunt him all day long, whether he is present or far off, with the most unbridled audacity; but he does not hear their opprobrium; or, if he does hear it, is not affected by it, so magnanimous and mild is his nature. Besides which the immortals, satisfied with the revenge they take against the whole species, and with the incurable wretchedness with which the whole species is punished, are indifferent to men's individual offences; and fraudsters and the unjust and blasphemers against the gods have no special punishment but to be, for their part, excluded from Love's grace.

THOUGHTS

1

For a long time I have denied the truth of the things I am about to say, because, apart from the fact that they are utterly foreign to my nature (and we always tend to judge others by ourselves), I have never been inclined to hate people, but to love them. In the end experience has persuaded me, indeed almost forced me, to believe the truth of these things. And I am certain that those readers who happen to have had many and various dealings with human beings will admit the truth of what I am about to say. Everyone else will maintain that it is exaggerated, until experience, if they ever do have occasion to experience human society fully, brings them face to face with it.

I maintain that the world is a league of scoundrels against honest men, and of the contemptible against the high-minded. When two or more scoundrels find themselves together for the first time, they have no trouble in recognizing each other for what they are, almost as if they had signs upon them to point it out, and they are immediately at one, or, if their personal interests will not permit this, they certainly feel inclined towards each other, and have great respect for each other. If a scoundrel has dealings or business with other scoundrels, it often happens that he acts honestly and without deceit. If he is dealing with honourable people, it is impossible for him to be trustworthy, and whenever it is to his advantage, he will not hesitate to ruin them. He will do this even if they are spirited people, capable of taking their revenge, because he hopes that his tricks will get the better of their cleverness, as almost always is the case. More than once I have seen very frightened people, finding themselves caught between a scoundrel more frightened than they are and someone who is honest and full of courage, take the scoundrel's part out of fear. Indeed, this always happens when your average person finds himself in similar situations, because the ways of the brave and honest person are straightforward and well known, while those of the rogue are concealed and endlessly varied. Now, as everyone is aware, the unknown

is much more frightening than what is known, and you can easily guard against the vengeance of the right-minded, because your own baseness and fear will save you from it. But no fear and no baseness can save you from secret persecution, from deceit, or even from the open attacks made on you by enemies who are themselves contemptible. In daily life true courage is generally little feared, simply because, since there is no imposture about it, it is without that ostentation which makes things frightening. Courage is often not believed in, while scoundrels are feared as though they were brave, because, by virtue of their impostures, they are frequently held to be brave.

Scoundrels are seldom poor. Apart from anything else, if an honest man falls into poverty, no one gives him any aid, and many rejoice at it, while on the other hand, if a rogue becomes poor, everyone gathers round to help him. The reason is not hard to find. It is natural for us to be moved by the misfortunes of anyone who is our companion and fellow sufferer, because it seems to us we are threatened in the same way. So we are glad to lend a hand if we can, because to ignore these misfortunes would seem to us to be agreeing all too clearly deep down inside that the same may happen to us, given the right circumstances. Now scoundrels, who are in the majority in this world, and the richest people in it, think of all the other scoundrels, even if they do not even know them by sight, as their companions and fellow sufferers, and they feel obliged, by that league as it were, which as I have said exists between them, to help them in their need. Also, they think it a scandal that a man known to be a scoundrel should be seen to be in poor circumstances. The reason for this is that the world, which always honours virtue with words, is very likely in such cases to call poverty a punishment, and this is something that results in disgrace, and can turn out to be harmful, to all of them. They work so effectively to remove this scandal that, apart from people who are quite obscure, we see few examples of villains who, when they have fallen on hard times, do not by some means or other improve their circumstances until they are bearable.

The good and high-minded, on the contrary, since they are different from the majority, are regarded by the majority as creatures of another species. Consequently, they are not only not regarded as friends or fellow sufferers, but also not considered to be entitled to human rights.

They are always seen to be persecuted more or less severely according to the degree of low-mindedness and the wickedness of the times and the people among whom they happen to live. Nature always tends to purge creatures' bodies of those humours and those active principles which do not sit well with the ones of which the bodies should rightly be composed, and Nature also brings it about in groups composed of many people that whoever differs very much from the generality, especially if such difference is so great as to be contrariety, should at all costs be destroyed or driven out. Also, the good and the high-minded are usually loathed because they tend to be sincere and call things by their proper names. This is a fault that the human race does not pardon, because it does not hate the evildoer, or evil itself, as much as it hates the person who calls it that. The result of this is that often, while the evildoer obtains riches, honours and power, he who names him is dragged to the scaffold, since people are very ready to suffer anything at the hands of others or at the will of Heaven, provided that they are said to be saved from it.

2

Run through the lives of famous men, and if you look at those who are such not merely by ascription, but by their actions, you will, despite all your efforts, find very few of the truly great who were not fatherless in their youth. I am not thinking of the fact that he whose father is alive (speaking of those who live on inherited income) is usually a man without means, and consequently can achieve nothing in the world, particularly when he is at the same time rich in expectations, so that he gives no thought to earning anything by his own effort, which might result in great deeds. (This is not a common circumstance, however, since generally those who have achieved great things have from the start been rich or at least well furnished with the world's goods.) Ignoring all this, a father's power, in all those nations that have laws, involves a sort of slavery for his sons. This slavery, because it is domestic, is more pressing and more perceptible than civil slavery. Although it may be moderated by the laws themselves, or by common custom, or by the

personal qualities of the people involved, it never fails to produce a very damaging effect: that feeling which a man always has in his mind while his father lives, and which is bound to be confirmed by public opinion. I mean a feeling of subjection and dependence, of not being free and not being one's own master, indeed of not being, so to speak, a whole person, but merely a part and a member, a feeling that one's own name belongs more to someone else. This feeling is all the more profound in those more capable of action. Since they are more wide awake, they are more capable of feeling, and more shrewd to recognize the truth of their own condition. It is almost impossible that this feeling should go together with, I will not say doing, but planning anything great. And once his youth has gone by in this way, it hardly needs to be said that the man of forty or fifty who feels for the first time that he is his own master has no incentive, and, if he did have any, would have no enthusiasm or strength or time for great actions. So even in this matter it is clear that we can have nothing good in this world which is not accompanied by bad in equal measure. The inestimable value of having before one's eyes in one's youth an expert and loving guide, such as only one's own father can be, is offset by a sort of insignificance in youth and in life generally.

3

The economic wisdom of this century can be measured by what happens with the so-called "compact" editions, where there is little consumption of paper, and endless wear and tear on the eyesight. However, in defence of saving paper on books one might mention that it is the custom in this century to print much and read nothing. To this custom belongs also the abandonment of those round letters that were used generally in Europe in past centuries, and the substitution for them of long letters, to which we might add the gloss on the paper. These are things which are the more beautiful to look at the more harmful they are to the reader's eyes. But all this is very reasonable at a time when books are printed to be seen and not to be read.

What follows is not a thought, but a story, which I am telling here for the reader's amusement. A friend of mine, my life's companion in fact, Antonio Ranieri – a young man who, if he lives, and if people do not go so far as to render his natural gifts useless, will soon be significant by the mere mention of his name – was living with me in 1831 in Florence. One summer evening, while he was walking along Via Buia, he found many people standing on the corner near to the Piazza del Duomo, under a ground-floor window of the building which is now the Palazzo de' Riccardi. They were saying very fearfully, "Ah! The phantom!" And looking through the window into the room, where there was no other light but that which came in from one of the street lamps, he himself saw what looked like the shade of a woman who was throwing her arms about but was otherwise quite still. However, since he had other things on his mind, he passed on, and during that evening and for the whole of the next day he forgot that encounter. The next evening, at the same time, happening to pass once more by the same place, he found that there was a larger multitude there than the previous evening, and heard them repeating with the same terror, "Ah! The phantom!" And looking through the window, he saw the same shade, again throwing its arms about but not making any other movement. The window was not much higher than a man, and one of the crowd, who seemed to be a policeman, said, "If someone would take me on his shoulders, I'd climb up and see what's inside." To this Ranieri said, "If you hold me up, I'll do the climbing." And when the other said, "Climb up," he did climb up, placing his feet on the other's shoulders. He discovered, near to the bars of the window, stretched out on the back of a chair, a black apron which, when the wind stirred it, looked like arms waving about, and on the chair, leaning against the back of it, a distaff which seemed to be the head of the shade. Ranieri took the distaff in his hand and showed it to the people, who dispersed, roaring with laughter.

What is the point of this little tale? It makes, as I have said, a diversion for the reader, and I suspect also that it may even be not entirely useless to historical criticism and to philosophy to know that in the nineteenth century, in the very centre of Florence, which is the most cultured city in

Italy, and where especially the people have most understanding and are most urbane, phantoms are seen, which are believed to be spirits and are in fact distaffs. And here foreigners must restrain their tendency to smile, as they like to do at our affairs, because it is well known that of the three great nations* which, as the papers say, “are at the forefront of civilization” none believes in spirits less than the Italians do.

5

In abstruse matters the minority always sees better than the majority, while the majority sees better in things that are evident. It is absurd in questions of metaphysics to bring into play what is called the general consensus, and no one attaches any importance to that consensus in physical matters, which are subject to the senses, as for example in the matter of the movement of the earth, and a thousand others. On the contrary, however, it is a thing which is foolhardy, dangerous and in the long run useless to oppose the opinion of the majority in civil affairs.

6

Death is not an evil, because it frees us from all evils, and while it takes away good things, it takes away also the desire for them. Old age is the supreme evil, because it deprives us of all pleasures, leaving us only the appetite for them, and it brings with it all sufferings. Nevertheless, we fear death, and we desire old age.

7

There is, strange to say, a disdain of death, a courage which is more abject and despicable than fear. That is the disdain of businessmen and others dedicated to making money, who very often, even for minimum gain, and for niggardly savings, obstinately neglect precautions and measures necessary for their own preservation, and put themselves in extreme danger, where

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