

Book Review

Luc Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living* (New York: Harper, 2011), 304 pp.

Bernard Dauenhauer

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Luc Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought* (New York: Harper, 2011), 304 pp.

Luc Ferry's *A Brief History of Thought* is an engaging, accessible work. It makes no pretense to being a comprehensive history, but it does tell a story that provides strong evidence for an important conception of philosophy's enduring relevance. For Ferry, "all philosophies, however divergent they may sometimes be in the answers they bring, promise us an escape from primitive fears. They possess in common with religions the conviction that anguish prevents us from living good lives: it stops us not only from being happy, but also from being free." (10) From the earliest Greek era, philosophers have sought to respond to the anxiety provoked by the "fear of the irreversible," the fear arising from our inescapable limitations and mortality. This fear keeps people from thinking and acting freely. So the ultimate question for philosophers is how does one persuade people to "save" themselves. Even if Ferry's claim is not true in all cases, one would be hard put to deny that this has been a major factor in philosophy's history.

Ferry regards religion as philosophy's rival, but he does not denounce it. He does not believe that religious faith is absurd or that one can prove that there is no God. But both the problem of evil and the promise of some afterlife that many religions announce strain credulity to the breaking point. When thoughtful people have come to doubt the religious answers, they have turned to philosophy to find a way to "save" themselves from the fear of the "irreversible."

In a way that brings back to mind the famous Kantian triad: What can I know? What ought I to do? What can I hope for? Ferry identifies three dimensions of philosophy. There is "theory" that seeks to discover the full scope of what exists. It is a "deep reflection upon reality, or things as they are." (12) There is ethics that is concerned with human conduct. It considers what we ought to do or avoid. And thirdly, there is the culminating question of wisdom, the question of what we ought to aim to accomplish in our lives as a whole. It asks what it is to be a "sage," namely someone who lives "wisely, contentedly and as freely as possible, having finally overcome the fears sparked in us by our own finiteness." (15) The history of thought is the story of philosophers efforts to answer these questions.

Ferry begins his story with interesting, though brief, discussions of

Stoicism and Christianity. These discussions lay the groundwork for his main project, namely telling the story of Modernity, its origins, its central convictions, and its aftermath.

Stoicism, for Ferry is the culmination of ancient Greek thought. It taught that, beneath the apparent chaos of things, there is a *cosmos*, a logically well-ordered and harmonious universe that serves as the model for all good human conduct. The task for human beings is to find their rightful places within this *cosmos*. Generally speaking for the Stoics, “the good was what was in accord with the cosmic order, *whether one willed it or not* and what was bad ran contrary to this order, *whether one liked it or not.*” (31) Death is part of this natural order, but it is not an annihilation. Instead, it is a passage to a different way of being part of the *cosmos*. “Because the universe is eternal, we will remain forever a fragment—we too will never cease to exist.” (37)

For the Stoics, the two great obstacles to achieving wisdom are nostalgia or attachment to the past and hope or anxiety about the future. In truth, there is no other reality than the one in which we live here and now. If we squarely face this reality, neither poverty nor illness nor death will discomfort us. We will love the world no matter what happens.

Whatever its strengths, though, Stoicism’s attempt to relieve us of the fears associated with death is unsatisfactory. Its doctrine of salvation “is resolutely *anonymous* and *impersonal.*” (52) Death obliterates a person’s identity. Christianity took advantage of this inadequacy and developed a new conception of salvation that held sway for almost 1500 years.

The doctrine of salvation that Christianity proclaims is based on a personal God and is available to anyone. The ultimate source of this salvation is Christian charity, which embraces everyone. And unique among religions is its doctrine of personal resurrection. Thus, “the Christian response to mortality, for believers at least, is without question the most ‘effective’ of all responses.” (90)

But this response carries a high price. Instead of thinking for oneself, the Christian is supposed to put his or her trust in “the Man-God, Christ, who claims to be the son of God, the Logos incarnate.” (63) Faith has priority of over reason and philosophy is turned into a dry scholasticism that is no longer a living source of wisdom.

The Christian worldview collapsed under the impact of the works of Copernicus, Galileo, Descartes, and Newton. Taken together, these works undercut both religious authority and the conception of the universe as a finite, harmoniously ordered universe. They ushered in a time of bewilderment and radical skepticism. Henceforth the fundamental question for philosophy is: “How do we confront the fragility and finiteness of human existence, the mortality of all things in this world, in the absence of

any principle external to and higher than humanity"? (135)

Two philosophers are at the forefront of the Modern response. One is Descartes, who sought to banish doubt by developing a method of thought that could prevent error and could make modern science possible. The other is Kant, who established disinterestedness and universality as the criteria for all ethically proper conduct. Building upon the works of these two figures, Modernity's answer to the question of "salvation" is: We save our lives by devoting them to or sacrificing them for some noble cause. Among the proposed noble causes are (a) the truths of science, (b) the security and welfare of one's homeland, and (c) some form of political revolution, e.g., the French Revolution or Communism.

Nonetheless, whatever the attractiveness of any of these noble causes, "even if we devote ourselves to a 'higher' cause, in the conviction that the ideal is infinitely superior to the individual, it remains true that in the end it is the individual who suffers and dies" (138). Modernity's recipe for salvation, under the postmodern assault Nietzsche initiated, has shown itself to be no real solution.

Postmodern thought undermines the two main Modern tenets, namely the beliefs "that the human individual is at the centre of the world...and that reason is an irresistible force for emancipation" (143). Nietzsche argued that these tenets are "idols." They amount to a faith analogous to the religious faith that Modernism had rejected. For him, the Modernist search for absolute truth demeans the reality of the sensible world by emphasizing some ideal, supposedly intelligible, world such as the world of science or of religion.

Instead of the enlightenment conception of salvation, Nietzsche promotes the notion of "eternal recurrence." On Ferry's interpretation, to embrace this notion is to adopt as the criterion for deciding which moments of life are worthwhile and which are not the "rule" that "regrets and remorse have no place and make no sense. Such is the life lived according to truth" (187). This criterion leads one to *amor fati*, "to love the real whatever is the case, without picking and choosing, and above all without wishing anything to be other than it is" (190). Nietzsche thus promotes a kind of salvation that resembles Stoicism, but with one crucial difference. For him, it makes no sense to consider the world a harmonious universe in which each thing has its appointed place.

Nietzsche's answer, Ferry argues, fails. Is it not, on the one hand, itself an ideal? And more importantly, does not a life without genuine ideas lead to pure cynicism and unbridled competition (196-97)? Neither Nietzsche nor the other postmodern thinkers have a satisfactory rejoinder to the technological world we now inhabit, a world devoid of purpose. In this world, progress is "reduced to meaning no more than the automatic outcome of the free competition between its constituent parts" (215). Against

this backdrop, Ferry proposes his own conception of the kind of salvation philosophy can reasonably promote today.

Alasdair MacIntyre concluded his *After Virtue* with a provocative claim, namely that today the intellectual choice is between Nietzsche and St. Benedict. Ferry offers a “third way.” Nietzsche overthrew the idols of the Enlightenment, but at the price of denying that there are any transcendent values to live for, values we do not invent but instead discover. By contrast, in the history of thought, Christianity’s doctrine of salvation has no equal. Nothing can match its promise of a resurrection of our bodies and reunion with those we love in the next life. But if we, like Ferry, cannot believe in Christ, “then we must learn to think differently about the ultimate question posed in all doctrines of salvation, namely that of the death of a loved one” (361).

Ferry’s own answer is a call for a new humanism, a humanism without metaphysics. The theoretical dimension of this new humanism emphasizes the kind of self-knowledge that the study of history induces. To approach the present without prejudices we cannot ignore the ways in which the past weighs upon us.

The moral dimension of this humanism amounts to a secularized restatement of the content of Christianity, but without invoking God. This is “a reversal of divinization, or a *making sacred of the human*” (245). This reversal appears, for example in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the several humanitarian interventions that call for treating enemies no less well than friends.

Ferry’s conception of salvation has three principal components. First, as Kant saw, this wisdom requires an “enlarged thought” that understands human life as an invitation and exhortation to us “to come out of ourselves the better to find ourselves—which...enables us better to know and love others” (252).

The second component is the recognition of the wisdom of love. Profound human love is not merely the love of some particular traits that the beloved may possess. Nor is it simply an abstract love for humanity. It is the love for some specific, unique person or persons, whatever they do or undergo. The beloved is recognized and embraced in his or her irreplaceability or singularity.

But death disrupts our loves. The third component of Ferry’s wisdom is the acceptance of the fact of unavoidable death. Resolutely facing the fact of death can teach us to live and love as adults, It can show us what we need to do here and now with and for those we love, but from whom death is sure to separate us. This wisdom, Ferry concludes, “is the crowning achievement of a humanism released finally from the illusions of metaphysics and religion” (264).

The sobriety and fairmindedness that Ferry's story displays are admirable. And readers of Paul Ricoeur's works will find in the kind of wisdom that Ferry advocates much that they can profitably compare with the Ricoeurian reflections on Christianity, hope, and natality, that Olivier Abel so felicitously calls attention to in his Preface to Ricoeur's *Living up to Death*. For my part, I find Ricoeur's "wisdom" notably richer than Ferry's. But that conclusion is by no means a negative judgment about *A Brief History of Thought*.

Bernard Dauenhauer

University of Georgia