

## THE LINGERING HELLENISM

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**Abstract:** *More and more times, the failure of the predictions did not consist in their insufficiently developed techniques. On the contrary, the more these techniques have evolved, the more the reflection of reality and human aspirations have been blurred within the predictions. Social sciences have the responsibility to rediscover the ancient sources of human knowledge. The purpose of this article is to present a number of social environments in which Hellenistic philosophy has been employed over time providing solutions that have surpassed those offered by other areas of social science.*

**Key words:** *predictions, the Great Asymmetry, stoicism, scepticism, epicureanism, Hellenistic wisdom, the experience machine, the task of thinking.*

### 1. Introduction

It may seem unexpected to bring up Hellenistic philosophy taking into account our actual context and its problems that acutely demand answers. However, one is tempted to ask if integrating the accumulated wisdom of Hellenism into the praxis of social sciences might offer solutions.

The purpose of this article is to present a number of social environments in which Hellenistic philosophy has been employed over time providing solutions that have surpassed those offered by other areas of social science.

### 2. The Great Asymmetry and the Hellenistic wisdom

Firstly, I would like to survey five concepts presented by Nicholas Taleb in his book *The Black Swan: the Impact of the Highly Improbable*. Having accumulated a vast experience on Wall Street, Taleb takes full advantage of the Socratic maieutic, that is taking into account that what we do not know is more valuable than what we know. Thus, exactly because we do not know, we are bound to succeed in our various enterprises “because of the opportunity to be lucky” (Taleb; 2017). Therefore, in a stroke of genius, Taleb changes the meaning of prediction in social sciences, because of the fact that individual events are impossible to predict. But this unpredictability should not be a hindrance in

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our acquiring various benefits. Going against the mainstream of academic social thought, Taleb presents five ways to benefit from unpredictable environments which are as follows:

- (a) making a distinction between positive and negative contingencies;
- (b) avoiding looking for localised precision and accepting the fact that our lives are continually under the sign of contingency;
- (c) always taking advantage of opportunities by going toward any potential opportunities and looking for fortunate coincidences;
- (d) never externalising the *locus of control*, in spite of the governmental guiding signals or the existing cultural traditions;
- (e) never complaining about mishaps in our lives or ascribing the blame to those who make various market predictions.

Thus, the solution offered by Taleb, known as “the Great Asymmetry” (Taleb; 2017) is the fact that, even though the unknown remains unscrutable, we can always predict possible ways in which this unknown might affect us, thus making decisions based on this fact.

### 3. Make the Distinction between Positive and Negative Contingencies

In his course on the history of Greek philosophy, Romulus Chirita shows how for the Stoics, the concept of adaptation (*oikèiosis*), that is, the way in which things have a tendency toward self-preservation is re-shaping the Classical table of values, so that life, health, pleasure, and others become morally neutral.

These latter things are conferred only physical value, some being considered preferable, while others avoidable. This Stoic indifference (*apatheia*) imported from the Cynics during the time of Zeno of Kition (334-263 BCE), the founder of this school, it is a way of reacting against the hardships of fate, according to A. C. Grayling.

During late Stoicism, Epictetus in his *Manual*, chapter VII, cautions: “Remember that achieving your wishes is the end of your desires while the end of your fears is avoiding that which you fear. The one who does not obtain is unhappy, while the one who encounters that which he fears is miserable. So, if one averts only those things contrary to personal good and, depending on himself, one will never encounter the things he fears. Therefore, if one fears death, sickness or poverty, one will continually live in misery. Therefore, move your apprehensions from those things you have no control over towards those you can control, while, as far as your fears are concerned, try to momentarily still them. Because, if you wish for things beyond your reach, as a necessity you will be unhappy, whereas regarding the things under your control, you are not yet aware of those you should desire. So, as you wait for this knowledge, be content with studying things or avoiding things, but always slowly, reservedly and not in a hurry.” (Grayling; 2022).

Our binary logic, with only two values “true” or “false” is our inheritance from the Stoics.

Apart from the Stoics, Aristotle had introduced in his logic another possible value, that of “neither true nor false” when referring to an event that could take place in the future.

The Stoic Chrysippos (279-206 B.C.E.) was arguing that even statements about the future fall under the incidence of true or false from the start, that is from the present moment of discussion, thus their nature being identifiable. In the same manner of the Stoic Chrysippos, Taleb advises us to establish sets of positive or negative contingencies about the unpredictable future starting from the present.

#### 4. Lives under the Sign of Contingency

In his twenty-eighth *Epistle*, Seneca was admonishing his friend Lucilius to stop searching for new pastures and, instead, to change his state of mind. He was cautioned not to become attached to a particular place because: "It matters more the state of mind with which you go than where you go, so therefore we must not become attached to any place. We must instill in ourselves the belief that we were not born in a small corner of the world, but rather the whole world is our country. If this were not be evident, you would not be astonished by the fact that changing places does not help since you encounter them with the same boredom as where you were before. Had you considered all the places similar to the first one, you would have stayed in the first place. Because now, you are not travelling, but rather wandering against your will and change place after place when that which you seek, the beautiful life, can be found anywhere." (Seneca; 2020).

Therefore, the ancient dictum *Ubi bene, ibi patria* was not a superficial saying, but rather a sign of their having that state of mind of considering the whole Universe as their abode, going beyond the mere adaptation to the novelty provided by the social, political and geographical environments.

It is possible that a source of power for the ancients to be happy, or at least to be contented was their understanding of the way in which contingency can strike in their life anytime. In his forty-ninth *Letter* to Lucilius, Seneca continues as follows: "What am I supposed to do? Death is always in pursuit and life passes quickly. Teach me how to lose the fear of death and how not to let life pass me by. Give me courage in front of hardship and full stillness in front of the unavoidable. Untie me from the chains of time. Show me that the value of life does not consist in its length, but rather in the way you live it, so that is very often possible for those who have lived a long life to have lived very little. Everytime I go to bed remind me that: "It is possible that you may never wake up again" and, when I wake up that: "You may never go to sleep again". Tell me when I leave: "You may never wake up" or, upon return: "You may never return again". If you, however, get rid of this disease, any change of place will bring you joy. Even if you make it to the end of the world, or any wilderness you would settle in, regardless, that place would seem welcoming to you." (Seneca; 2020).

Donald Rumsfeld (1933-2021), former Defense Secretary of the United States during two mandates, made the most eloquent statement about the way in which our lives are affected by contingency: "There are known things which we know. These are the things which we know. There are unknown things which we know. These are the things about which we know that we do not know. But there are also unknown facts which are unknown. These are things about which we do not know that we do not know."

(Sloman, Fernbach, 2017). In the same manner as the ancient people, the American military are educated to be aware that: "It is essential for leaders to stay calm under the pressure of events and to spend their energy wisely on things they can influence positively and not to worry about things they cannot control." (Evans, 2013)

In a similar manner with the ancient people, but different from Seneca, Michel Foucault (1926-1984), in his third volume of his *History of Sexuality* presents the ways in which the Divine urges humanity to deal with contingencies, taking his lead from Achilles Tatius' *The Adventures of Leucippe and Clitophon*: "The Divinity likes to show people the future in a dream, not because they can thus avoid disaster, because nobody is stronger than Destiny, but rather to better endure suffering. Because all unexpected things are heavy blows bound to rattle the spirit, while knowing about things yet to happen can gradually alleviate trouble." (Foucault, 2004).

Beyond the warning regarding the all powerful nature of Destiny, we notice that contingency reigns supreme over anything so that any future scenario can at most be predicted by a dream.

Only a conscious awareness of the fragility of human nature can afford a prayer, such as the Serenity Prayer of A.A.: "Lord grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can and the wisdom to know the difference." (Evans; 2013).

## 5. Look for fortunate coincidences

Seeking opportunities is similar to Epicurus' injunction to train with that which brings you happiness. By this token, one should stop rejecting joy, being always open to happy occurrences. In his introductory study on the philosophy of Epicurus, Andrei Cornea argues for its actuality which is conferred by the need of modern man for autonomy and independent and efficient living.

According to Andrei Cornea, Epicurus' basic message is: "even though we cannot control the circumstances of our lives, we can actually extract from them the maximum amount of good, so that we absorb the blows of fate without bending too much. Fear, pain and worry are not unavoidable [...] there is freedom and we can remain free almost in any circumstances and under any twist of fate." Or, as Romulus Chirita underlines, we must follow the lead of the Epicurean sage, especially since "only the sage can reach such a level where pain is not present, having reached this summit after a thorough education of his insensitivity and impassibility." (Cornea, 2021).

We could compare, for example, the experience machine imagined by philosopher Robert Nozick in his *Anarchy, State and Utopia* with our performance in maximizing our meeting any potential opportunity. Nozick affirms that: "firstly, we desire to do certain things and not just to have the experience of accomplishing them. For certain experiences, only because we want to realise them, we also need to experience their realisation or to think that we have accomplished them.

It is especially important that "we want to live in a certain way and to be a certain kind of person". What we are by means of "being connected to an experience machine is limiting us to a man-made reality, to a world which is not any deeper or more important

than that which can be built by humans. There is no real link with a deeper reality, even though such an experience can be simulated.” (Nozick, 2013).

Following, Nozick continues by saying that: “Because the experience machine cannot fully satisfy our desire to be in a certain way, let us imagine a transformation machine which can make us into any kind of person we would like to be, while maintaining our identity at the same time. Therefore, there can be more important things than our experiences or who we are. The reason for that is the fact that what we experience is irrelevant compared to who we are. Because the experience machine could be limited to creating experiences geared only to the type of person connected to it. Is it that the reason we are looking for is that of our being the meaning of something in this world?” (Nozick, 2013).

Returning to Epicurus, I consider that his concept of *pareklisis* (Lat. *clinamen*), meaning the deviation of the atoms, which were assigned weight for the first time by Epicurus, which allows for an “ontological legitimacy of human freedom” (Chirita, 2008), gives us the moral imperative of fully exploit opportunities. And the increase of our exposure to happy occurrences would not be possible without following Epicurus’ injunction to follow the fundamental values of his philosophy, which are wisdom and friendship.

## **6. Keep the *locus of control***

One of the possible arguments for the necessity of social structure was presented by John Locke (1632-1704) in his *Second Treatise of Government*: “the main important reason for the people’s association into communities and who themselves submit to ruling authority is the preservation of their property, regarding which the natural state is very deficient.” (Locke; 2016). Starting from this argument, the next step is the externalisation of the *locus of control* and the full acceptance of governmental predictions from all times and from all over the world.

Known for their rejection of the possibility of a certain knowledge of reality, the Sceptics were known for prescribing the attainment of serenity by means of suspending judgment (*epoche*) especially because “they did not even know that they do not know” (Evans, 2013), as was put forward by Pyrrho of Elis, the founder of Scepticism (360-270 B.C.E.). Few generations of Sceptics later, Sextus Empiricus (mid-late 2nd century C.E.) produced a guide for attaining *ataraxia*, which promoted the idea of developing one’s capabilities by means of an empirical method.

As Romulus Chirita has noted, the intuitions of the Sceptics are a very important heritage of the West: that is, logical reason has intrinsic limits; the fact that knowledge is an open-ended process leading to the modern series of paradigm revolutions in science; the process of knowing automatically involves the subjectivity of the bearer of knowledge; any process of knowing is global and it involves more than logical reasoning.

Philosophers Thales (624-548 B.C.E.) and Anaximander (610-546 B.C.E.) have created a breakthrough development in the problem of change which led to the theory of scientific falsification put forward by Karl Popper (1902-1994), which eventually found its own climax in the way Sceptics handled the process of knowing.

This has to be kept in mind each time we are dealing with predictions made by

governments of international financial organisations. The externalisation of the *locus of control* would only hamper the exercise of our autonomy and cancel any possibility of authentic knowledge.

In the same way Sextus Empiricus by means of his *Guide* cautioned us about using observation and not deduction, we, in our turn should notice when such government predictions are made and try to corroborate them with other social contexts. And, we must also take into account that the externalisation of the locus of control, even though without effects on the social norms, will end up producing weak citizens lacking the inner resources to come back from a social crisis bound to be created by a government that decides most matters on behalf of its citizens.

### **7. Never complain about predictions**

Returning to the Stoics, Epictetus was saying that whenever we may be confronted by an adverse situation, we should not complain because the Gods are training us to become better persons. Joseph Schumpeter (1883-1950), who became famous as the author of the term “gale of creative destruction” (Schumpeter; 2018), invited us to find opportunities in any crisis situation. Self-control, as the training of the self has become a very important predicting factor for success. If, just out of curiosity we would write down every time an international organisation announces a crisis and then check what happened next, then we would be able to understand Nicholas Taleb’s injunction against looking for those responsible for market predictions.

Jules Evans was saying regarding self-control that: “setting goals and following our progress toward attaining them is our motivator in continuing the struggle” (Evans; 2013). In this context, we discover that the value of belief in ourselves is at least equal to the value of official predictions such that, as an example, the probability on the stock market is 50% for both “bull” and “bear”. He is also reminding us of the “goal of the Stoics to train for achieving inner freedom from both external attractions and aversions.” (Evans, 2013).

As a participant in the study of public opinion and having tested in 2004 the theory of the Spiral of Silence promoted by Elisabeth Noelle Neumann, I can testify to having encountered situations which was in contradiction to this theory. This is when I realised the soundness of the opinion expressed by Charles Horton Cooley that “the personal idea is the true person. In this way a person exists for another, acting directly upon their mind. The immediate social reality is the personal idea. Society, in its immediate aspect is a ratio between personal ideas. In order to have a society, it is evidently necessary for persons to have a meeting ground, and this is represented by personal ideas.” (Cooley, 2010).

Also, regarding prediction to mention in closing the point of view of Moritz Schlick (1882-1936), one of the founders of the Vienna Circle, who called the process of predicting “an anticipation of future events, an examination of the possible combinations between the given elements” (Schlick, 2003), adding that “the significance of a statement can be given only by showing the way in which the truthfulness of the statement was tested.” (Schlick, 2003).

## 8. Conclusions

Eugene Ionesco (1909-1994), in his conversations with Claude Bonnefoy (Ionesco; 2017) predicted that, at some point in the future, the readership for literature could be considerably diminished if technology prevails as far as imagination is concerned.

The thinker Nicholas Taleb makes reference to exactly such a moment in his statement regarding the stages of prediction in social sciences. Without a contribution from the Hellenistic culture, the game of prediction becomes a smokescreen that can actually separate us from what is really bound to happen.

In a similar manner, in his book *The Secret Morals of the Economist* (2019), Albert O. Hirschman tells us that the inability to predict the coming to power of Adolf Hitler was filed under the category of “important exceptions”. During his training as an economist for the implementation of the Marshall Plan in Europe, Hirschman was saying that he had always been “more interested in extending the area of possibilities rather than predicting the most likely outcome based on statistical reasoning.” (Hirschman, 2019).

The book *The Black Swan: the Impact of the Highly Improbable* (2007) by author and former options trader Nassim Nicholas Taleb offers a great opportunity to reflect upon the role that Heidegger was ascribing to philosophy, saying that “it has a calling to offer each one of us ‘wisdom’, if not ‘guidance for a happy life.’ It is also possible for such thinking to have exhausted its guiding possibilities today, being unable to offer a useful wisdom for living.” (Heidegger, 2017).

It is up to us, if we so desire, to take advantage of our heritage of Hellenistic wisdom.

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