

## Readings for July 22

For Sunday, July 22, 2018 the Today's Issues group will discuss two articles from the July 19 issue of the New York Review of Books

Page 27 - Andrew Stark Oh, Canada! A review of three books about Canada in the age of Trump

Page 38 Jim Holt, Lovers of Wisdom, a review of a book about the Lives of Eminent Philosophers - Is philosophy a quest for truth or a search guidelines for living?

The group meets in the parlor of the Religious Education building next to the church. Please do the reading and join our lively discussion.

A copy of the readings follows:

Oh, Canada!

Andrew Stark JULY 19, 2018 ISSUE

Common Ground

by Justin Trudeau

HarperCollins, 343 pp., CAN\$19.99 (paper, 2014)

Canada's Odyssey: A Country Based on Incomplete Conquests

by Peter H. Russell

University of Toronto Press, 535 pp., \$39.95

Could It Happen Here?: Canada in the Age of Trump and Brexit

by Michael Adams

Simon and Schuster, 178 pp., \$24.00

Maximum Canada: Why 35 Million Canadians Are Not Enough

by Doug Saunders

Knopf Canada, 249 pp., \$20.95

Mark Blinch/Reuters

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau posing with airport staff as they await the first planeload of Syrian refugees, Toronto, December 11, 2015

A cover of The Economist in 2003 featured a moose—that universally recognized symbol of Canada—wearing sunglasses. Inside, the magazine extolled Canada's new sophistication: its openness, even then, to legalizing gay marriage and decriminalizing marijuana; its cosmopolitan cities (Toronto would soon become the most diverse metropolis in the world, with over half of its residents foreign-born); and its growing international cultural clout.

It was another thirteen years before Canada received such coverage again. In October 2016, shortly before Donald Trump's election, the iconography was reversed. Instead of a symbol of Canada wearing an accessory identified with America, the cover featured a quintessential

symbol of America—the Statue of Liberty—brandishing a hockey stick. The accompanying headline read “Liberty Moves North: Canada’s Example to the World.”

The sunglasses-bedecked moose suggests that Canada had, in 2003, finally shed its fabled stodginess—V.S. Pritchett once jibed that Canadians drink tea as a stimulant, while the English consume it as a sedative. Thirteen years later, Canada, with its wholehearted embrace of multiculturalism and multilateralism, seemed to have become the destination for those seeking better opportunities.

There is much talk these days about the “Canadian example,” at least in certain quarters: Barack Obama hailed the country as a polestar for the democratic world. (Trump might loath it for the same reason.) How is it that Canada has avoided the xenophobia and isolationism that now trouble the US and European democracies? It’s not that Canada has no tradition of robust right-wing populist movements. The gun-supporting, science-questioning Reform Party became the official opposition to the governing Liberals in the 1990s. After it merged with the old Progressive Conservatives to form the Conservative Party, it held power under Prime Minister Stephen Harper from 2006 to 2015. The white working-class voters who form a large part of Trump’s base also form a considerable part of the Canadian electorate.

Yet polls show that 80 percent of Canadians value immigration. In fact, those Canadians who most strongly describe themselves as patriotic are also the most supportive of immigration and multiculturalism; in America the opposite is true. And approval of multiculturalism at home is matched by support for multilateralism abroad: a 2014 public-opinion analysis concluded that Canadians remain resolute “liberal internationalists”: believers in strong international institutions, especially the UN, and robust global governance regimes, particularly trade and environmental treaties.<sup>1</sup>

No wonder that Bono, for instance, insists that “the world needs more Canada.” But does Canada, in its openness to multiculturalism and multilateralism, immigration and globalization, have anything to teach the world? It might seem just lucky to be shielded by its geographical location from the flows of migrants that roil American and European politics. “We have the luxury,” Canada’s immigration minister Ahmed Hussen admits, “of being surrounded by oceans on three sides, and then by the US border.” Its success, though, has a deeper basis as well: Canada’s longstanding regional rivalries and economic history have helped encourage support of immigration and global trade to a degree not seen in much of the developed world.

In the fall of 2014, as he was preparing to topple Stephen Harper and bring his Liberals to power, Justin Trudeau published *Common Ground* to give Canadians a sense of his life and thinking. The world knows Canada’s prime minister—the son of Pierre Trudeau, prime minister nearly uninterruptedly from 1968 to 1984—as a man who personally welcomed Syrian refugees with free winter coats at the Toronto airport while Trump was turning them away, and who charmed the Davos crowd that Trump left cold. He has boosted immigration levels and fought hard to preserve NAFTA. A charismatic forty-six-year-old snowboarder and boxer, Trudeau

winsomely cuddles pandas and balances babies in the palm of his hand; he has appeared on the covers of Rolling Stone as well as a Marvel superhero comic book. He is the coolest of Canadians, he is the moose sporting sunglasses. But what, exactly, is Trudeau's connection with the hockey stick in the crook of Liberty's arm—with the idea of Canada as a port in the storm of international right-wing populism?

Common Ground, like most campaign manifestos, refers repeatedly to its author's "vision" concerning his country. Yet as one reads the book, the word "vision" comes to resemble the harmonica in a Robert Klein comedy routine, which Klein repeatedly raises to his lips and then—just as you think he's about to play a few bars and show us what it sounds like—lowers again to start tapping his toes or snapping his fingers.

"My vision for this country," Trudeau writes, "is very much shaped by my experiences and the influences upon me." And what might that vision be? He doesn't say, moving on immediately to a meditation on his childhood. Or: "The audience...engaged...in a great discussion about our shared vision for our kids and our country." Terrific—could he say a little more about that vision? But no, he's now on to a description of the immigrant community in his parliamentary constituency.

Trudeau's vision, one starts to realize, is not for the country, but of it. It's the vision not of a leader, but of a lover. Nothing else can quite compare with what excites his ardor. Canada is "perhaps the only country on earth that is strong because of our differences, not despite them," he gushes. It's the world's "first post-national state." There is "no mainstream in Canada." These starry-eyed utterances diminish the way in which cultural differences strengthen many other countries. They also ignore the fact that Canadian employers often favor job applicants with Canadian work experience, educational credentials, and language skills over candidates with abundant skills and experience acquired in other countries, thus helping to perpetuate an economic, if not a cultural, mainstream that can be difficult for some immigrants to break into.

So it's not surprising that Trudeau believes, as he said in 2017, that "my role...is to...govern in such a way that [Canada would be] a positive example in the world." And yet in the same breath, he quietly cautions that it's not his place to "lecture another country on how they choose to govern themselves." We Canadians, the Vancouver writer George Woodcock once said, "pride ourselves on our ironic modesty." Trudeau clearly takes pride in Canada's shining beacon, and the fact that he holds it. But how, specifically, can other nations follow and perhaps join him? Modesty prevents him from saying.

And so we must look elsewhere. The political scientist Peter Russell, author of *Canada's Odyssey: A Country Based on Incomplete Conquests*, is known for his sensitive and searching work on Canada's indigenous communities, whom he aptly describes as possessing the joint status of colonies and nations. European settlers, Russell writes, colonized Canada's native peoples in every sense of that word. They stole their wealth, attempted to assimilate them, and broke down their social structures. They left a horrendous legacy that, to this day, includes

Indian reserves without potable water and, since 1980, at least 1,100 murdered or missing Aboriginal women. Yet despite that long experience of colonization, Canada's indigenous peoples also remain "nations" in every sense of the word: linguistically, ethnically, culturally, and (on reserves) territorially distinct. Canada's failed attempts to assimilate its first nations, Russell argues, left Canadians with a rueful lesson in the value of difference and the plight of the persecuted: a lesson, he believes, that helps account for the country's current openness to immigrants and refugees.

Brutally colonized but enduring as full-fledged nations, indigenous Canadians are one of the two "incomplete conquests" of Russell's title. The other is Quebec, the second-largest of Canada's ten provinces and the only one with a majority French-speaking population. Quebec too, as Russell says, constitutes its own linguistically and territorially distinct nation within Canada. Accordingly, its governments have over the years demanded special powers over immigration, culture, the judiciary, social policy, and foreign policy that would be denied to the other nine English-speaking provinces, and even, on a couple of occasions, attempted to secede from the country altogether. But unlike Canada's indigenous communities, French-majority Quebec—a society that itself originated in European settlement—was never colonized by Canada's English-speaking majority. Precisely because it ultimately accepted Quebec's distinctiveness, Russell argues, "multinational, multicultural" Canada offers a shining "example of how diverse peoples can live together," replacing "empire and nation-state as the most attractive model in the twenty-first century."

But of course multinational, multicultural states have sometimes spawned xenophobic political movements. And so if we are asking why Canada remains uniquely open to immigration and globalization, we must look at a third phenomenon that qualifies as an incomplete conquest, although Russell does not describe it that way. It's the relationship between Canada's four western provinces—British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba—and its largest province, Ontario.

After Canada's founding in 1867, in order to encourage the east–west trade between its provinces that would protect the fledgling nation against the economic influence of America, the Canadian government imposed tariffs on US-manufactured imports. The resource-heavy western provinces were henceforth compelled to sell their timber, fur, and minerals to the metropole of Ontario and then buy manufactured products back at tariff-protected high prices. Later, in 1980, Pierre Trudeau infuriated the west with the National Energy Program, which subsidized energy consumption in Ontario through taxes on western oil production.

Russell notes all of this. But what it means is that the Canadian west has long felt as if it's treated as a colonial outpost by Ontario: as nothing more than a trove of resources to be exploited. In Ontario, the ritziest gathering places have imperial-sounding names like the Albany Club and the York Club; their equivalents in Alberta are the Petroleum Club and the Ranchmen's Club. Yet as part of English-speaking Canada, the west, though feeling colonized,

never became a distinct nation: it is a reverse image of Quebec, that nation that was never colonized.

If there is anywhere that right-wing populism of the kind plaguing American and European politics could be expected to take hold in Canada, it is in the west. The right-wing component is certainly there. Western Canadians, legates of the American ranchers and farmers who migrated north in the 1800s, are far more opposed to gun regulations or carbon taxes than Canadians elsewhere. The anti-elite, anti-expert component of populism is certainly there too. Criminologists who show that crime is down, or climatologists who warn of carbon emissions from Alberta's oil sands, are peremptorily rejected as out-of-touch eggheads by the right-wing political parties that have emerged from the west. "We're not governing on the basis of the latest statistics," Conservative justice minister Rob Nicholson said in 2011. "We're governing on the basis of what's right."

And yet Canada's right-wing populist politicians, storming as they did out of the western provinces, enthusiastically embraced both multiculturalism and globalization, since these turned out to be powerful tools for challenging Quebec and Ontario. Multicultural immigration, in western eyes, became a means of diluting Quebec's status as a distinct nation within Canada: if one could argue that Quebec's French Canadians were no different than Somali Canadians or Chinese Canadians or Greek Canadians in their possession of a distinct language, culture, and history, then, as Russell notes, that would undercut Quebec's claims to powers unavailable to western provinces.

Kevork Djansezian/Getty Images

Spectators at the Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Canada, February 2010

Meanwhile, globalization appealed to westerners because it would liberate them from the consequences of what they saw as a century of "Ontario first" economic policy. The Canada-US Free Trade Agreement, the precursor of NAFTA negotiated by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney in the late 1980s, dismantled the tariffs that had required westerners to pay higher prices for manufactured imports in order to protect Ontario industries. NAFTA's rules also prohibit any future federal government from enacting its own version of Pierre Trudeau's National Energy Program. And so Canada's right-wing populists, rooted in the west, supported NAFTA, since it drove down the price of goods. Even in Ontario the famous Ford brothers, the late Toronto mayor, Rob, and the province's new premier, Doug, have hewed to this Canadian model for right-wing populism. Though railing against taxes and social programs, and media and academic elites, they have remained staunchly pro-NAFTA and pro-immigration.

In his book, Trudeau deplores "resentment between provinces." But in a strange twist of fate, interprovincial resentment has turned out to be a profound blessing for Canada.

There are good political reasons, then, why Canada's right-wing populist parties have not supplied anti-immigration and anti-globalization options to their voters. But why haven't

Canada's white non-college-educated voters demanded them? As Trudeau acknowledges, they face "all the pressures and anxieties that people are feeling around the world." A recent book by the social scientist Michael Adams helps explain why those voters take the positions they do.

To the question he posed in his title—*Could It Happen Here?: Canada in the Age of Trump and Brexit*—Adams gives a definitive no. In Canada, there exists no equivalent of Trump's white-nationalist electorate. Few Canadians view incarceration or expulsion as the most appropriate responses to immigration. Nor are there any significant numbers who deem domestic isolationism, or, in rarer instances, militia-protected enclaves to be the best protections against globalization. Incarceration, expulsion, isolation, and enclaves are all spatial solutions, suggesting a belief among American right-wingers that the answers to their country's problems lie in geographic separation and distancing. Adams, a prominent Canadian pollster, finds little evidence of such sentiment north of the border.

But there is a constituency in Canada that resembles Americans who live in "depressed coal-mining town[s]...in West Virginia," as Adams puts it, yet who have not turned to the extreme right. Although Adams doesn't say so, the anti-globalization and anti-immigration sentiments of such Americans can be better understood through the lens of time, not space. They spent many years working in mines and mills only to find the promised rewards—their livelihoods, their pensions, the possibility of passing their jobs down to their children—snatched from them by globalization. And while they have put in a great deal of time for no reward, they see immigrants as receiving rewards, in the form of American jobs and social services, without having put in the time to earn them.

In Adams's telling, the Canadian experience shows that smart policies can divert such voters from their anti-globalization and anti-immigration bias. In the 1950s, Canadian politicians recognized that if its federation was to survive, it would have to include a system for redistributing resources to the country's poorer regions. Only then could fishermen in Newfoundland, farmers in Saskatchewan, and miners in Quebec continue to earn a livelihood while staying in the far-flung regions where their families had for generations been rooted, instead of flooding to cities to look for work and incurring harsh psychological and economic costs. Canada's constitutionally enshrined "equalization" system, which ensures that each province has roughly the same fiscal capacity to provide government services, has helped working Canadians stay in their homes and supported communities in troubled economic times. So have a suite of federal agencies dedicated to developing Canada's poorer regions, along with the country's much-vaunted public health care system and its well-regulated banking sector, which avoided the American foreclosure crisis.

These policies all have their flaws. Equalization can discourage poorer provinces from growing their economies, since greater local wealth means they will receive less in equalization payments. Regional-development agencies, meanwhile, tend to channel money to businesses that otherwise could have relied on private lenders, using tax revenue that might more profitably have been spent on health care and education. But they are part of what, as Adams says,

underlies the saying that “the best way to achieve the American dream [is] to become a Canadian.” They have headed off the rage against globalization—against trade and climate agreements—that afflicts some American workers. For them, their third-generation jobs are woven into a broader cultural heritage—a way of life—that is entitled to a good chance of surviving, not simply positions that they should have to earn and re-earn every day in a ruthless labor market. Canadian policy has responded precisely to that kind of deep-seated belief.

Many Trump voters describe their jobs as a kind of cultural heritage, not as something they should have to keep earning. Yet while the voters quoted in recent dispatches from Trump country by Arlie Hochschild, Joan C. Williams, and others never speak of the importance of immigrants culturally assimilating, they do believe citizenship is something that immigrants must earn. What bothers these voters is their sense, however unfounded, that immigrants are enjoying the perks of citizenship without having put in the time necessary to go through the required legal hurdles in the case of the undocumented, or to acquire valuable skills to offer the US economy in the case of the documented. Instead, immigrants are admitted on unearned, line-jumping criteria such as their regional or familial origins. They slip across a porous border, or win country-specific lotteries, or take advantage of the fact that they have relatives in the US.<sup>2</sup>

Canada has astutely deflected comparable voters from their xenophobic temptations, according to the sociologist Irene Bloemraad. Motivated by its commitment to multicultural pluralism, Canada has long maintained a region-blind approach in deciding whom to admit, and it has reduced its family reunification program. Instead, she observes, Canada selects most of its immigrants on the basis of their labor-market qualifications: their education, training, linguistic abilities, and work experience. That Canada principally admits “people with skills that are thought to contribute to the economy” is, for Bloemraad, a major “reason for...Canadian exceptionalism,” and these might be anything from computer to caregiving skills, depending on what the economy needs. It’s why Canada, even though it has “by far the highest percentage of foreign-born residents” among transatlantic countries, has the lowest percentage of citizens who think immigration “represent[s] more of a problem than an opportunity.”<sup>3</sup> And although there have been some fluctuations in recent opinion, the latest Gallup Global Migrant Acceptance Index confirms that Canada continues to embrace immigration more enthusiastically than either America or Europe (with the exception of Iceland).

With economic disparities between Canada’s regions rendered less relevant as criteria for inner migration, Canadians can make their job decisions based more on cultural and familial considerations. And with cultural and familial differences rendered less relevant as criteria for accepting immigrants, Canada chooses new citizens based more on economic considerations.

Even if Canada’s peculiar regional rivalries and economic policies cannot be replicated anywhere else in the world, though, the world can perhaps be transplanted to Canada. Some have supported the idea of Canada’s attaining a population of 100 million by 2100. With its current population of 36 million, Canada will have to markedly step up immigration if it is going

to sustain its increasingly aging citizenry, as the journalist Doug Saunders argues in *Maximum Canada*.

Aging populations will, of course, burden other developed countries. But Canada has unique reasons for ramping up immigration. Some have to do with long-standing gripes among Canadian writers, actors, musicians, and other artists—now emigrated to the US—that the domestic market simply did not have the money or collaborative talent to support their ambitions. Saunders once asked the Toronto-born Frank Gehry why he hadn't stayed in Canada. Gehry replied that the country's creative class was simply too small to sustain daring architectural work. There are also future economic threats. If Canada fails to increase its population severalfold, its GNP will fail to rise accordingly, and it will lose its membership in the G-7 well before the turn of the next century.

Canada has the capacity to sustain a much larger population. As Saunders notes, even the 10 percent of the country's landmass near the US border, where 90 percent of Canadians live, could accommodate 400 million people before it would have the population density of today's Netherlands. A group of prominent Canadians has formed the "Century Initiative" to promote the "100 million by 2100" idea. And Immigration Minister Hussen has already said he intends to increase Canada's annual intake.

Saunders expresses no worry that the 100 million goal would require Canada to dilute its merit-based system, since "merit" is based on whatever the labor market requires at a given time. The most important thing is to continue making it relatively quick and uncomplicated for immigrants, whether health care aides or skilled tradespeople or engineering students, along with their close relatives, to attain permanent resident status. In this way they will gain an immediate stake in the country, and the country in them. So if all else fails, Canada's contribution to ameliorating the ravages of global xenophobia might simply be as a haven for those who want to flee it. After all, even the country's right-wing populists will welcome such newcomers with open arms.

1

Roland Paris, "Are Canadians Still Liberal Internationalists?," *International Journal*, Vol. 69 (2014). ↵

2

See Arlie Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New Press, 2016), and Joan C. Williams, *White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America* (Harvard Business Review, 2017). ↵

3

Irene Bloemraad, "Understanding 'Canadian Exceptionalism' in Immigration and Pluralism Policy," Migration Policy Institute, July 2012. ↵

Lovers of Wisdom

Jim Holt JULY 19, 2018 ISSUE

Lives of the Eminent Philosophers

by Diogenes Laertius, translated from the Greek by Pamela Mensch, edited by James Miller  
Oxford University Press, 676 pp., \$45.00

De Agostini Picture Library/G. Dagli Orti/Bridgeman Images

Plato, Pythagoras, and Solon; fresco in St. George's Church, Suceava, Romania, sixteenth century

Poor Diogenes Laertius. He gets no respect. A “perfect ass”—“*asinus germanus*”—one nineteenth-century scholar called him. “Dim-witted,” said Nietzsche. An “ignoramus,” declared the twentieth-century classicist Werner Jaeger. In his lyric moods he wrote “perhaps the worst verses ever published,” an anthologist pronounced. And he had “no talent for philosophical exposition,” declares *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*.

Then why waste time on him? For this excellent reason: Diogenes Laertius compiled the sole extant work from antiquity that gives anything like a comprehensive picture of Greek and Hellenistic philosophy. He may have been a flaming mediocrity. He may have been credulous and intellectually shallow. He may have produced a scissors-and-paste job cribbed from other ancient sources. But those other sources are lost, which makes what Diogenes Laertius left behind, to quote the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, “truly priceless.” Eighty percent of success is showing up, Woody Allen supposedly said. Well, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* showed up. And by dint of that, its author has become what Nietzsche called “the night watchman of the history of Greek philosophy: no one can enter into it unless he has given him the key.”

What made this fellow so lucky? It's not hard to explain why certain works survive. We still have Plato's dialogues because they were diligently preserved by the Academy. Aristotle too founded a school, and his treatises were widely copied and studied. (Still, the nineteen or so dialogues Aristotle composed—esteemed for their literary quality by Cicero as “a river of flowing gold”—were somehow mislaid by Western civilization.) But Diogenes Laertius didn't have a school, as far as anyone knows. In fact, almost nothing is known about the man. Even his slightly absurd Greco-Roman name is a puzzle—was “Laertius” some kind of nickname? Judging from the historical references in *Lives* (which stop just short of the Neoplatonists), he probably lived early in the third century CE. There is a hint in his text that he might have been a native of the eastern city of Nicea. Beyond that he is a cipher. That his work should endure, when the vast majority of the philosophical writings he drew on perished, may simply have been a “quirk of fate”—so guesses James Miller, the editor of this welcome new translation.

If so, it was not an altogether unhappy quirk. Despite the ridicule to which he has been subjected, Diogenes Laertius has some undeniable virtues. It is true that he shows little interest

in, and scant understanding of, actual philosophical reasoning. But he is keenly attuned to the philosopher as a social type, and an eccentric one at that. Philosophy to him was not a mere body of propositions; it was a way of life, one that pretended to be superior to conventional modes of human existence. He treats his subjects as public exemplars, for good or ill, of the precepts they advanced. The tension between logos and bios—between doctrine and life—keeps his heap of often dubious biographical reportage from sinking into tedium. So too do his flickers of irony: his philosophers are often “eminent” in the same sense that Lytton Strachey’s Victorians were. The life of reason, though noble on the whole, is seen to be hedged about by hypocrisy and absurdity. Even Nietzsche, who as a young philologist cast scorn on Diogenes Laertius for his mindlessly slipshod ways, came to prefer his work to “the soporific fumes” of more scholarly sources, because in it “there lives at least the spirit of the ancient philosophers.”

Lives of the Eminent Philosophers is organized into ten “books,” each of which is devoted to one or more philosophical schools and their founders. Plato gets his own book (the third); so does Epicurus (the tenth and final). Other figures afforded ample space include Zeno (the Stoic) of Citium, golden-thighed Pythagoras, Pyrrho the Sceptic, Aristotle, and Socrates. On the other hand, important figures like Parmenides and Anaximander get short shrift, and the entry for Cebes, a disciple of Socrates, reads in its entirety: “Cebes was a Theban. Three of his dialogues survive: The Tablet, The Seventh Day, Phrynichus.” (These dialogues are now lost.) An especially complete portrait is given of Diogenes of Sinope, the most prominent of the Cynics. And this is not the only Diogenes in play. There is also an entry for the less famous Diogenes of Apollonia, whom Diogenes Laertius, in an embarrassment of Diogeneses, manages to confuse with Diogenes of Smyrna. (It should be noted that Diogenes Laertius lived five or six centuries later than the multiple Diogeneses he writes about.)

In all, over eighty individual figures get entries—including one apparently rather clever “lady-philosopher,” Hipparchia the Cynic. (A couple of female students of Plato are also mentioned, one of whom is reported “to have worn men’s clothes.”) The author typically says something about the philosopher’s family origins and his teachers, then moves on to anecdotes about his life and apothegms expressing his opinions. We are furnished with details of his sex life, the more scandalous the better. Letters (some spurious) and wills are quoted, and the philosopher’s written works are listed. These stacks of titles, sometimes extending over several pages, are extremely valuable, since the works in question (like the aforementioned dialogues of Aristotle) have generally vanished. Finally, we are given an account, or several alternative accounts, of the philosopher’s death, often with an ironizing comment by the author in what he calls “my own playful verses.”

The principle of selection for these biographical materials is simple: cram in everything, without regard to plausibility or philosophical relevance. Physical details are abundant, if not always consistent. We are told of Zeno the Stoic, for example, that “he was lean, longish, and swarthy,” but also that he was “thick-legged, flabby, and weak”; also that “he delighted...in green figs and

sunbathing.” Plato is “weak-voiced” but mocked for his “long-windedness.” Aristotle had thin calves and small eyes, wore fine clothes and lots of rings, and “spoke with a lisp.”

If the principle of selection for Lives is “anything goes,” its principle of organization is more definite—and not what we are used to today. Recent histories of Greek philosophy proceed both by chronology and filiation of ideas, falling into three broad chapters. First come the pre-Socratics, who were concerned with questions about the world’s origins and basic makeup—that is, with natural philosophy. Then comes the pivotal figure of Socrates, who turned philosophy in an ethical direction by asking the question “How to live?,” followed by Plato and Aristotle, who expanded its scope to take in not just ethics and natural philosophy, but also metaphysics, epistemology, and logic. Finally come the Hellenistic schools—Cynics, Stoics, Skeptics, and Epicureans—who narrowed the scope again by making philosophy primarily an ethical inquiry: an attempt to find the formula for the good life.

That is the scheme followed by, for example, Bertrand Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy*. Diogenes Laertius employs a very different one. He is what is called a doxographer. His concern is to catalog the opinions (doxai in Greek) of each famous philosopher, without much regard to how they might have arisen in reaction against the proposals of earlier speculative thinkers. Instead of viewing Greek philosophy as an evolving conceptual inquiry—with an inflection point at Socrates—he takes it to be a cluster of institutional schools. And he organizes these schools not chronologically, but by geography. There is an eastern or “Ionian” succession, originating in the city of Miletus (on the coast of present-day Turkey), and a western or “Italian” succession, originating in Greek colonies in Italy (notably Elea) and Sicily.

Diogenes Laertius treats these as two parallel traditions, with Athens as the convergent point. He devotes the first seven books to the “Ionians,” who range from Thales to Aristotle and beyond; and the last three books to the “Italians,” who range from Pythagoras to Epicurus. This jumbles not only chronology but also lines of influence. For example, Zeno of Elea, who flourished well before Plato and Aristotle, and whose ingenious paradoxes stimulated them both, counts as an “Italian,” so he is presented well after they are. Confusingly, he is also presented well after the other famous Zeno, Zeno of Citium, the much later founder of Stoicism.

*Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* proved highly influential when it was printed in Latin during the Renaissance. Montaigne stuffed his essays with anecdotes drawn from it, declaring that he was “equally curious to know the lives and fortunes of these great instructors of the world as to know the diversity of their doctrines.” Well into the modern era, historians were still following Diogenes’s doxagraphic model: dividing philosophers into institutional “schools” and collecting their sayings.

But around the turn of the nineteenth century that began to change. German historians, vigorously debating the nature of history, sought to trace a longer conceptual arc in the unfolding of philosophy, one transcending schools and geography. The most powerful advocate of this new approach was Hegel. In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel judged the

work of Diogenes Laertius harshly. “A philosophic spirit cannot be ascribed to it,” he declared; “it rambles about amongst bad anecdotes extraneous to the matter in hand.” What is important, Hegel argued, is not that a philosopher lived in such-and-such a way and said this or that; rather, it is how the philosopher fits into the evolution of human consciousness toward truth.

After Hegel, the reputation of Diogenes Laertius suffered a sharp decline among both classicists and historians of philosophy—as witness the abusive quotations I opened with. Yet one abuser, Nietzsche, later turned into a passionate (if ambivalent) defender. As a philologist, Nietzsche had contempt for the sloppy scholarship that went into Lives. But as a philosophical subversive, he had two motives for championing the work. The first was his hatred of Socrates’s moral optimism—a precursor, he thought, to slavish Christian morality—and his preference for what he saw as the darkly “tragic” worldview of the pre-Socratics. From the materials that Diogenes Laertius had preserved on figures like haughty Heraclitus and Etna-leaping Empedocles, Nietzsche hoped to recapture a sense of pre-Socratic tragic grandeur in Greek culture. His second motive for championing Lives was a more general one. Whereas Hegel insisted that the biography of a philosopher was irrelevant to his conceptual contribution, Nietzsche took the opposite view: bios is the ultimate test of logos. He wrote:

The only critique of a philosophy that is possible and that proves anything, namely trying to see whether one can live in accordance with it, has never been taught at universities; all that has ever been taught is a critique of words by means of other words.

Now, one is loath to put oneself in the position of adjudicating between Hegel and Nietzsche. In this case, however, I think it is safe to render a verdict, if a disappointingly bland one: they are both partly right. The philosophers chronicled by Diogenes Laertius fall into two broad categories: those who are primarily interested in the ethical question of how to live and those who aren’t. In treating the former, he does a pretty good job; in treating the latter, he is horrible.

Take Plato. He was interested in the question of how to live. In fact, his entire philosophy can be seen as emerging from an attempt to make sense of Socrates’s good life, and of the Socratic claim that virtue equals knowledge. But Plato’s dialogues—happily preserved—encompass metaphysical and epistemological doctrines that go far beyond ethics. And Diogenes Laertius’s account of those doctrines in his book on Plato can only be deemed inane. Page after page is given over to enumeration (“There are three kinds of friendship.... There are five kinds of medicine.... There are six kinds of rhetoric”), making Plato’s works seem an exercise in trivial taxonomy. Only in the penultimate paragraph is there the merest hint of his most important metaphysical innovation, the Theory of Forms. To say Diogenes Laertius had “no talent for philosophical exposition” is an understatement: he had an anti-talent.

Vatican Museums and Galleries/Tarker/Bridgeman Images  
Heraclitus of Ephesus; detail from Raphael’s *The School of Athens*, circa 1509

And how does Plato's life, as recounted in *Lives*, serve as a test of his philosophy? We are told that when Dionysius I of Syracuse angrily said to Plato, "You talk like an old fart," Plato intrepidly replied, "And you like a tyrant"—the sort of standard anti-tyrant story that, according to the Plato expert Gilbert Ryle, deserves "no credence." We are told that Plato, a childless bachelor, was a busy seducer of women and boys, and that he addressed verses to a young girl urging her to give up her virginity to him—details lifted from the now lost *On the Luxuriousness of the Ancients*, by a dodgy scandal-monger called the Pseudo-Aristippus. And we are told that Plato may have died from a lice infestation: a presumably unedifying end for this otherworldly philosopher.

Such a preposterous amalgam of myth and hearsay leaves us siding with Hegel's dim assessment of Diogenes Laertius. But then consider him on the Hellenistic schools. He is our main source for the lives and doctrines of Diogenes the Cynic, Zeno the Stoic, Pyrrho the Skeptic, and Epicurus. All these figures focused primarily, if not exclusively, on a single ethical question: What is the formula for the good life? The Stoics equated happiness with virtue, the Skeptics equated it with the tranquility that arises from suspending judgment, and so on. Their views on the best mode of life were not so much argued for as dogmatically asserted. And their metaphysical predilections, when they had any, tended to be at the service of their ethics. Epicurus, for instance, favored atomism because its randomness meant we didn't have to worry about the gods.

These Hellenistic philosophies of life, short on important reasoning but long on practical prescription, are eminently suited to the critique proposed by Nietzsche: How did the lives go of those who propounded them? And here is where Diogenes Laertius doesn't let us down.

Consider his portrait of Diogenes the Cynic. (It is interesting that Hegel thought the Cynics were too unsystematic to be considered philosophers, whereas Nietzsche aspired to be a modern-day Cynic.) The Cynic philosophy is a tough one to live by, involving as it does a spurning of conventional values and a resolve to live ascetically, by the rudest standards of nature—like a dog. ("Cynic" comes from *kyon*, the Greek word for dog.) Diogenes fully embodied this ideal, hewing so strongly to his idiosyncratic notion of virtue that Plato reportedly called him a "Socrates gone mad." He lived in a disused wine tub, subsisted on abandoned scraps, and subjected himself to every hardship. He was contemptuous of power: when Alexander the Great offered to grant him a wish, Diogenes tersely replied, "Stand out of my light." He outraged standards of decency by openly pleasuring himself in the marketplace and declaring, "If only one could relieve hunger by rubbing one's belly." (His recourse to public masturbation rates a double mention in *Lives*.)

Yet his cleverness in debate, his witty asperities, and his cussed integrity evidently made him beloved by Athenians. He also has modern appeal—not as a Mr. Natural *avant la lettre*, but rather as an opponent of all things tribal and provincial. When asked where he came from, he declared (using the Greek term *cosmopolites*), "I'm a citizen of the world." When asked what he found most beautiful, he said, "Freedom of speech." As a model of his philosophy, which

emphasized praxis over abstract theorizing, he made a strong impression on his biographer, who concludes, "Such were his views and he clearly acted in accordance with them."

Therein lies the value, admittedly curate's-eggish, of *Lives*. But why a new translation? The old Loeb Library version by R.D. Hicks, first published in 1925, served well enough for almost a century. But this one by Pamela Mensch, a distinguished translator of ancient Greek, is superior in three respects. First, it is based on a more accurate edition of the Greek text, made by Tiziano Dorandi in 2013. Second, Mensch avoids the bowdlerization that the Hicks translation was often guilty of. Here is one example, from the life of the Academic philosopher Arcesilaus, involving a sodomitic jest:

Hicks: Again, when some one of immodest life denied that one thing seemed to him greater than another, he [Arcesilaus] rejoined, "Then six inches and ten inches are all the same to you?"

Mensch: To a man who let himself be penetrated and who recalled to him the doctrine that one thing is not greater than another, Arcesilaus asked whether a ten-incher did not seem to him greater than a six-incher.

Until I read the new version, I thought I was the one with the dirty mind.

Third, the Mensch translation is furnished with a weighty apparatus of footnotes that are delightfully revealing of Greek history and folkways. For example, an otherwise puzzling reference by Diogenes Laertius to a radish is cleared up by a footnote informing us that one Athenian punishment for adultery "involved inserting a radish in the rectum of the guilty man." Other virtues of this new edition of *Lives* include the hundreds of philosophy-inspired artworks with which the editor has chosen to adorn the text (a de Chirico, a Daumier, a Francesco Clemente...) and sixteen superb essays by such scholars as Anthony Grafton, Ingrid Rowland, and Glenn W. Most. (I am particularly indebted to André Laks's essay, "Diogenes Laertius and the Pre-Socratics.")

From time to time while making my way through *Lives*, I was moved to ponder what some future Diogenes Laertius might make of the present philosophical era. Which figures would strike him as models for living? Whose dramatic public gestures, whose devastating coruscations would he record? Who would strike him as a "philosopher" in the original Pythagorean sense: a lover of wisdom?

The Columbia philosopher Arthur Danto, in a somewhat acidulated "Letter to Posterity," published shortly before his death in 2013, wrote, "Never, in my entire experience, have I encountered a philosopher I thought of as wise." Most of his professional peers, he went on to say, were "shallow, vain, silly" compared with the best of humanity. Surely, though, we can think of a few philosophers from the last century who were as existentially impressive as those in *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*. Ludwig Wittgenstein comes to mind; so does Simone Weil;

perhaps Iris Murdoch, with her amatory adventurousness and devotion to a Platonic ideal of the Good; also Derek Parfit, who burned with a hard gem-like flame in pursuit of philosophical truth.

I think a future Diogenes Laertius might be especially attracted to a lesser-known figure of our era, the Columbia philosopher Sidney Morgenbesser, who upon his death in 2004 was justly memorialized in *The New York Times Magazine* as “one of the rare philosophers who lived a genuinely philosophical life.”\* Morgenbesser was revered for his dialectical cleverness, his unconventional ways, his willingness to suffer for philosophy, and especially his rapier-like flashes of humor. Like Diogenes the Cynic, he embodied the *spoudogeloios* (seriocomic) ideal even in extreme circumstances. During the 1968 student uprising at Columbia, Morgenbesser joined a human chain of protesters and got clubbed by the police. When later asked about the beating, he pronounced it “unjust but not unfair”: “It was unjust because they hit me over the head, but it was not unfair because they hit everyone else too.”

\*

See James Ryerson, “Sidewalk Socrates,” *The New York Times Magazine*, December 26, 2004.

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