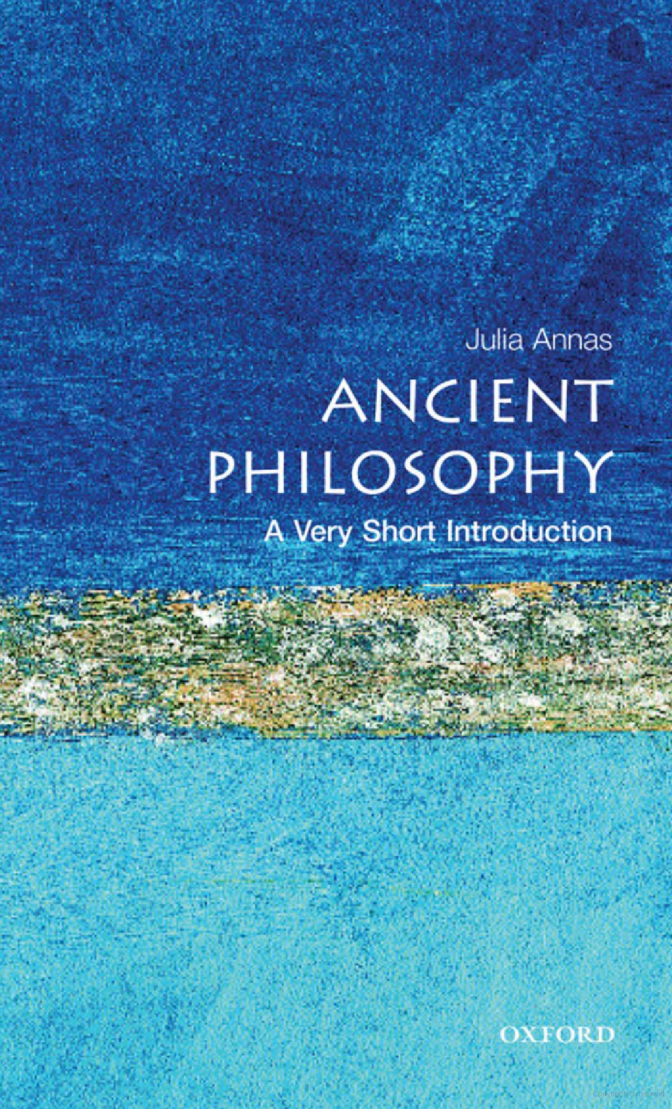
Julia Annas
ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY
A Very Short Introduction
OXFORD

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Introduction

A very short introduction should have modest aims. It is also, however, an opportunity to give the reader direct ways into the subject, and lead him or her straight off to what is most important about the subject. In this book I have tried to engage the reader with ancient philosophy in the way that matters, as a tradition of discussion and engagement, a conversation which I hope will continue after the reader has finished this book.

Because I have focused on important and revealing features of ancient philosophy, I have not tried to work through a standard chronological account of the tradition. Not only does the *very* short nature of this book make that a bad idea (since the tradition is too rich to cram into a very short account), but there is no shortage of books available that will help the beginner deepen his or her interest in ancient philosophy. The list of Further Reading indicates good places to start; beginners have never been better served with reference books, translations and companions than they are today.

I start by introducing the reader, in Chapter 1 ('Humans and beasts: understanding ourselves') to an issue in ancient philosophy, about understanding the conflict of reason and emotion within ourselves, an issue which is readily understandable and one that a modern reader can engage with before knowing much about the background of the theories involved. I am hoping to get across the centrality to the ancient tradition of argument, and also of practical engagement with issues important to our lives. In the

second chapter ('Why do we read Plato's *Republic*?') I focus, by contrast, on factors that distance us from the ancient philosophical writers. One is the literal distance of time and the loss of much evidence. Another is the influence of other factors, which we should be aware of, which make our concern with the ancients a selective and changeable one, so that a text like Plato's *Republic* is read very differently at different times. Both the immediacy and the distance are things we should be aware of. In Chapters 3 and 4 ('The happy life, ancient and modern' and 'Reason, knowledge and scepticism') I show how we can understand and engage with the ancient variety of views on ethics and on knowledge – how we can come to engage with the ancients in a respectful but critical way, both disagreeing with them and learning from them. Chapter 5 ('Logic and reality') takes up the rest of the ancient philosophy syllabus, focusing on one particular metaphysical debate, namely whether there are purposes in nature or not, and if so what they are. Chapter 6 ('When did it all begin, and what it is anyway?') raises the issue of what, if anything, unites the ancient philosophical tradition. This is a question better asked at the end than at the beginning of an account of it, since I hope that the reader will agree that the main lines of what I say have emerged from the previous chapters. (And if she disagrees, this will, I hope, be in the spirit of the debates which have been covered.)

However, if you are quite new to the subject you might appreciate a quick chronological sketch of the tradition you are being so briefly introduced to, so one follows. There is also a timeline placing the major figures in ancient philosophy, not all of whom can be adequately dealt with in this book, though many are discussed in the text and the text-boxes.

Ancient philosophy is traditionally held to begin in the sixth century BC, in the Greek cities of coastal Asia Minor. A large number of philosophers are generally grouped as 'Presocratics'; their activities cover the sixth and fifth centuries. Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes are early cosmologists, giving ambitious accounts of the world as a whole. Pythagoras began a tradition emphasizing mysticism and authority. Heraclitus produced

notoriously obscure aphorisms. Xenophanes begins a long concern with knowledge and its grounds.

Parmenides and Zeno became famous for arguments which apparently cannot be refuted but which reach conclusions impossible to accept. These arguments provoke a crisis in philosophical accounts of the world; responses to it can be found in the cosmologies of Anaxagoras, Empedocles and the Atomists Leucippus and Democritus.

In the second half of the fifth century, intellectuals called sophists developed some philosophical skills, particularly in argument, and philosophical interests, particularly in ethical and social thought. The best known are Protagoras, Hippias, Gorgias and Prodicus.

Some of these people are not strictly *Pre*socratics, since their lives overlapped with that of Socrates, but Socrates is generally held to mark a turning-point in ancient philosophy. He wrote nothing, but greatly influenced a number of followers, including Aristippus, a founder of hedonism, the idea that our aim should be pleasure, and Antisthenes, a founder of Cynicism, the idea that our needs should be as minimal as possible. Socrates' emphasis on questioning and argument made him the key symbolic figure of the Philosopher to the ancient world.

Socrates' most famous follower is Plato, the best-known ancient philosopher, who wrote a number of philosophical dialogues famous for their literary skill. Plato founded the first philosophical school, and he and his most famous pupil, Aristotle, dominate the philosophy of the fourth century. Both left extensive works – Plato in finished form, Aristotle in the form of lecture and research notes.

The 'Hellenistic' period (traditionally from 323 BC, the death of Alexander the Great, to the end of the Roman republic at the end of the first century BC) is marked by the emergence of two new philosophical schools, those of Epicurus and the Stoics, and also of philosophical movements which were not

institutionalized as schools, such as the Cynics, and Pyrrho, the first sceptic. Plato's school practised a form of scepticism in this period, and several mixed or hybrid schools try to bring together the insights of different schools of thought.

During the first century BC to the second century AD, the early Roman empire, the existing schools continue, and philosophy flourishes. No new major schools emerge, but there is renewed interest in Pythagoras, and also in studying Plato's ideas positively and systematically.

Late antiquity sees the emergence, in the second to third centuries, of an original new school, that of Plotinus, which revives some of Plato's ideas and is called 'Neoplatonism'). As Christianity becomes the official religion of the Roman empire, which divides into an eastern and a western part, the dominant world-view becomes Platonism, and this is the tradition most influential on Christianity. The first major western Christian thinker, Augustine, is influenced by Platonism, but has already lost touch with the major traditions of ancient philosophical thinking.

Chapter 1
Humans and beasts: understanding ourselves

Medea's revenge

Medea, daughter of the King of Colchis, has betrayed her country and family out of love for the Greek adventurer Jason, who has brought her back to Greece. Now they have fallen on hard times, and to mend his fortunes Jason has left Medea and their two sons and is to marry the daughter of the King of Corinth. He does not understand the depth of her outrage; her sacrifice and devotion mean little to him. Medea realizes that there is only one way to bring home to Jason what he has done, what kind of commitment he has discounted. The only way to hurt him as much as he has hurt her is to kill their sons, depriving him of any descendants and leaving his life empty. But can she do this? They are her children too.

In Euripides' famous play, produced at Athens in the fifth century BC, Medea resolves to kill her sons, then goes back on her resolve when she sees them. Sending them away, she steels herself to do the deed, and speaks words which were to become famous:

> I know that what I am about to do is bad, but anger is master of my plans, which is the source of the greatest troubles for humankind.

She recognizes two things going on in her: her plans and her anger or *thumos*. She also recognizes that her anger is 'master of' the plans she has rationally deliberated on carrying out.

What is going on here? We may think that nothing is going on that a philosopher needs to concern herself with; we simply have something which happens every day, though usually not in such spectacular ways. I think it better for me to do A than B, but am led by anger, or some other emotion, to do B instead.

But how do we understand what is going on? How can I genuinely think that A is the better thing to do, if I end up doing B? How can anger, or any other emotion or feeling, get someone to go against what they have deliberately resolved on doing? Until we have some systematic way of understanding this, we and the way we act are mysterious to ourselves. Many people, of course, do remain this way, with many of the sources of their actions and their patterns of behaviour opaque to themselves. But the society in which Euripides' play was produced and continued to be a classic fostered a kind of thinking, the kind we call philosophical thinking. This kind of reflective, probing thinking regarded Medea's situation as calling for explanation and understanding in terms that they, and we so many years later, can readily recognize as philosophical.

As already indicated, the question of what, if anything, distinguishes ancient philosophy and its methods will emerge by the end of the book; here we will focus on an issue where we can readily understand what ancient philosophers are doing.

The Stoics: the soul as a unity

Are there really two distinct things operating in Medea, her plans and her furious anger? How do they relate to Medea herself, who is so lucidly aware of what is going on? One school of ancient philosophers, the Stoics, developed a distinctive view of Medea as part of their ethics and psychology. They think that the idea that there are really two distinct forces or motives at work in Medea is an illusion. What matters in this situation is always *Medea* herself, the person, and it is wrong to think in terms of different parts of her. After all, she is quite clear about how her

Stoicism is a philosophical school named after the Stoa Poikile or Painted Porch, a colonnaded building in Athens where the first heads of the school taught. The school was founded by Zeno of Citium, who arrived in Athens in 313 BC. After Zeno the most influential head of the school was Chrysippus of Soli (*c*.280–208 BC) who wrote extensively on just about every philosophical topic, and produced what became authoritative Stoic positions.

Stoicism often presented itself, particularly at first, in a deliberately harsh light, emphasizing doctrines that are so far from common sense as to be paradoxical. However, Stoicism as a philosophy is holistic – that is, its parts can be developed separately, but ultimately the aim is to understand them all in relation to the other parts. Hence Stoic 'paradoxes' increasingly make sense and acquire conviction as they are appreciated against the background of Stoic arguments and connected ideas. There are thus many ways of teaching Stoicism; where you begin depends on the audience's level of interest and expertise. Epictetus, a later Stoic (AD *c*.50–130), taught in a way that appealed directly to his audience's interest in ethical and social matters, and accounts of his teaching have continued to be used as a vivid introduction to Stoic thought. The universal aspect of Stoicism is illustrated by the fact that Epictetus, a former slave, was influential on the Stoic reflections of the emperor Marcus Aurelius (AD 121–180).

thoughts are going. First she resolves to do one thing, then to do another – but these are both *her* resolves, decisions that she comes to as a result of giving weight to resentment on the one hand or love on the other.

Medea as a whole veers now in one direction, now in another. How then can she come to a considered judgement as to what to do, and then act on anger which is stronger than this? What happens, the Stoics think, is that, being in an emotional state, she follows the reasons which go with

that state: she seeks revenge because that is how angry people think. But there is no real division within Medea's self. She oscillates between different decisions as a whole; there is no inner battle of parts of her. She is like the example Chrysippus used to explain emotion: a runner who is going too fast to stop, and so is out of control *as a whole*. When, therefore, she says that anger is master of her plans, what is meant is that anger is in control of them; she is reasoning, but the way she does it has been taken over by anger and achieves its aims. The angry person does not cease to reason – he doesn't act blindly – but his reasoning is in the service of anger.

The Stoics think that there are no parts or divisions to the human soul, and that it is all rational. (By the soul they mean the item that makes humans live in a characteristically human way.) Emotions are not blind, non-rational forces which can overcome rational resolve; they are themselves a kind of reason which the person determines to act on. 'It is precisely this, gratifying her anger and being revenged on her husband, that she thinks more advantageous than saving her children,' says Epictetus, a later Stoic. Blind fury could not lead to Medea's carefully planned and self-aware revenge.

But, we say, Medea could not help acting as she did; she was overcome by passion, so surely she had no real choice. No, says Epictetus; she thought she had no real alternative, but this was wrong. She could have adjusted to her loss, difficult though this would be. 'Stop wanting your husband, and nothing you want will fail to come about,' he says. Everything I do, I am responsible for; there is always something else I could have done, some other attitude I could have taken up. To say I am overcome by emotion is to evade the fact that I was the one who acted, who thought at the time that what I was doing was the right thing to do. Epictetus thinks that we should sympathize with Medea, who acted, after all, 'from a great spirit'; we can understand her reasons for revenge even when we see why she would have done better to reject them. 'She did not know where the power lies to do what we want – that this is not

to be got from outside ourselves nor by changing and rearranging things.'

The Stoic view of emotions as a kind of reason is probably unfamiliar, and tends to sound odd when first introduced. I have also plunged into the middle of things by starting with the Stoics, who belong to the period of philosophy after Aristotle, often called 'Hellenistic'. We are likely to be more familiar with the philosophical interpretation of Medea that I shall now turn to. It appears nearer to common sense and it comes from Plato, an earlier and much better-known philosopher.

Plato of Athens (427–347 BC) is the best-known ancient philosopher, largely because he was also a great writer, and produced not philosophical treatises but a number of formally self-contained dialogues, many of which are attractive reading even for non-philosophers. Writing this way is not just for literary effect; the dialogue form formally distances Plato from the views of anyone in the dialogue, and this forces the reader to think for herself what positions are being discussed, and what the upshot is, rather than accepting what is said on Plato's authority.

Plato's ideas are original, bold and wide-ranging. But in the ancient world he was influential for the form of his philosophical activity as much as for the content. There were two major Platonic traditions. Firstly, the sceptical Academy, Plato's own school, for hundreds of years – until it came to an end in the first century BC – took its task to be that of arguing against the views of others without relying on a position of one's own. Secondly, the later Platonists, beginning from the first century BC, were interested in studying Plato's own ideas in a systematic way, and in teaching and furthering them. The relationship of the later, more positive tradition to the earlier, more negative one was varied and often contested.

Plato: the soul has parts

Plato takes the phenomenon of psychological conflict, being torn between two options, to show that the person so torn is not really a unity; he is genuinely torn between the motivational pull of two or more distinct parts of the soul. Plato uses two examples. One is a person who strongly desires to drink, but reasons that he should not do so, probably because this would be bad for his health. He is, then, pulled towards taking the drink, and also, at the same time and in the same respect, pulled away from it. However, the argument goes, the same thing can't be thus affected in opposing ways at the same time, so it must be that it is not the person as a whole who is in this contradictory state, but different parts of him which do the pulling in opposite directions. When I reflect correctly, then, I can see that *I* don't want to drink and want not to drink; rather, part of me, which Plato calls desire, wants to drink, and another part of me, which is reason (my ability to grasp and act on reasons), is motivated to refrain.

Plato thinks that our psychological life is too complex to be accounted for purely in terms of reason and desire. There is a third part, called spirit or anger, and involving most of what we would call the emotions. It can conflict with desire, as Plato argues (in the fourth book of his work the *Republic*) from another case of conflict, where giving in to a pathological desire leads the person to feel angry and ashamed with himself. This emotional part is distinguished from reason, on the grounds that it is found in animals and children that don't reason; although it often endorses reason, it is essentially inarticulate and unable fully to grasp or to originate reasons.

The parts of the soul are not on a par; reason is not just a part but grasps the best interests of all the parts and hence of the person as a whole. Plato tirelessly insists that in the soul reason should rule, since it can understand its own needs and also those of the other parts, whereas the other parts are limited and short-sighted, alive only to their own needs and interests.

The real contrast, then, is between reason, articulate guardian of the interests of the whole person, and the other parts, which can't look beyond their own needs. Hence it is not very surprising that, despite Plato's long imaginative descriptions of his three-part soul, the point of the idea was seen as that of contrasting a rational with a non-rational part of me, and so as compatible with a two-part soul.

If Plato is right, then when Medea resolves that it is best to spare her children, but is then led by fury to kill them, there is a real internal division and battle going on in her. Her reason works out what is for the best, but is then overwhelmed by another part of her soul, the furious anger, which is a separate source of motivation and in this case gets her to take what her reason sees to be the worse course.

Clearly Plato will take Medea's crucial lines to be saying that her reason works out what the best course is, but that anger thereupon turns out to be a stronger force, which overwhelms reason. And this might seem to be common sense; we do often have experiences that we are tempted to describe as inner conflict, with reason or passion winning because it is stronger. It seems more common-sensical at first than the Stoic claim that anger and other emotions *are* certain kinds of reason. And yet the Stoics do better than Plato in explaining how the person carried away by fury still can act in a self-aware, complex and planned way. Medea kills her children; horrible though this is, it is a deliberate action. She doesn't run amok. Can the anger that drives her really motivate her in a way that has nothing to do with reason?

There are two distinct ways that Plato's ideas can be developed when we think about inner conflict and the problems we have in understanding what is happening in us. Both of them are found in Plato, who clearly has not seen that he has to choose between them.

What is a 'part' of the soul, like anger or other emotions? So far, we have gone with a fairly intuitive idea; there seem to be two distinct sources of

motivation within us. And we can form a fairly clear notion of the nature and function of the part which is reason. After all, we reason all the time, about the way things are or ought to be, and about what to do; and what in each case I am reasoning about is what *I* shall do, not what part of me shall do.

But what about the part of the soul that motivates me separately from reason? Can it be thought of as a purely irrational force? Although the language of passion fighting with and overwhelming reason might suggest this, it is hard to see how deliberate actions can be produced by something that is a completely irrational push. Surely there must be *something* in Medea's anger which is at least responsive to reason?

In many parts of his work Plato assumes that the parts of the soul are all sufficiently rational for them to communicate with and understand one another. They can all agree, in which case the person functions as an integrated whole. While the parts other than reason cannot do what reason can, namely think in terms of the person as a whole, they can still respond to what reason requires, and so understand it in a limited way. Desire, for example, can come to understand that reason forbids its satisfaction in certain circumstances, and so can come to adjust, not putting up a fight. Desire has thus been persuaded and educated by reason, rather than repressed. In terms of the whole person, when I see that some kind of action is wrong, I feel less desire to do it, and find it less difficult to refrain. Plato represents this position as one in which the soul's parts agree and are in harmony and concord. The parts other than reason have sufficient grip on what reason holds to be right that they willingly conform themselves to this, and the result is a harmonious and integrated personality.

This picture implies, though, that reason has a kind of internal hold on the other parts – it asks them, so to speak, to do things in terms that they can understand and agree to. But then won't the parts other than reason have to have a kind of reason of their own, in order to understand and go along

with what the reason part demands? And then won't all the parts have to have their own reasons? – which makes it unclear how we are supposed to have found a part of the soul which is *separate* from reason.

Suppose there were some aspect of me which were entirely non-rational and separate from reason: this would indeed look like a different part of me, but with no reason internal to it at all, it is not clear how it can listen to reason, or conform itself to what reason requires in the interests of the whole person. Such a part looks like something sub-human. And indeed we find that in some of Plato's most famous passages about the divided soul he represents the parts of the soul other than reason as non-human animals. In one passage near the end of the *Republic* he says that we all contain a little human trying to control two animals. One part, spirit, is fierce, but stable and manageable – a lion. The other part, desire, is an unpredictable monster, constantly changing shape. Clearly Plato thinks that our emotions and desires are forces within us which are in themselves subhuman, but can be trained and moulded by reason to form part of a human life – indeed, of what he thinks to be the happiest form of human life.

Another passage, in the *Phaedrus*, is even more famous. The human soul is here a chariot, with reason, the charioteer, driving two horses. One horse is biddable and can learn to obey commands, but the other is both deaf and violent, and so can be controlled only by force. In a vivid passage Plato depicts the charioteer struggling to manage sexual desire, represented by the bad horse, only with great effort; that horse threatens to get out of control and has to be yanked back, struggling all the way. It learns to refrain only through fear of punishment.

There is something plausible in this picture as a picture of ourselves; it often does seem that we are motivated by forces within us that are resistant to the reasons that we accept. But if we think systematically of some of the consequences, the picture is considerably more disturbing. If part of me is properly to be represented as an animal, then there is part of

me that is essentially less than human, and so not properly part of *me*. It becomes part of me only when subject to control by what really is me – reason. There is a kind of self-alienation at work here; part of me is regarded as being outside the self proper, because it is the kind of thing it is, and as being always potentially disobedient to my real self.

It is hard not to feel that something like this is going on when Galen, a late writer who sees himself as a Platonist, describes Medea:

> She knew that she was performing an impious and terrible deed . . . But then again anger like a disobedient horse which has got the better of the charioteer dragged her by force towards the children . . . and back again reason pulled her . . . And then again anger . . . and then again reason.

On this view Medea's final action is the result of a battle of forces in which the stronger wins, overpowering reason by brute force. This makes it much harder to see how Medea is in fact performing a deliberate action than it is if we accept the Stoic analysis. Epictetus thinks it obvious that Medea is acting in accordance with a deliberate view of what the best thing is for her to do; the problem is that this view is corrupted and malformed by anger. Given her resentment, what she did makes perfect sense; she is not overwhelmed, her reason drowned out.

Moreover, these different ways of looking at yourself make a difference to the attitude you take to other people who act under the influence of anger. Epictetus is sympathetic to Medea. Her view of what she should do was wrong – appallingly wrong – but we can understand it, and even sympathize with it, when we reflect that it is the response of a proud and dignified individual to a betrayal which refused to recognize her worth. We should pity Medea, says Epictetus; he certainly thinks that we can understand her point of view. Galen, by contrast, regarding her as overwhelmed by the animal-like part of the soul, sees her as animal-like, and like 'barbarians and children who are spirited by nature'. Medea is 'an example of barbarians and other uncivilized people, in whom anger is