Secundus the Silent Philosopher

Anonymous, Life of Secundus the Philosopher

About that time the Emperor Hadrian, having arrived in Athens, heard about Secundus and summoned him into his presence; for no good thing escaped this emperor’s notice. When Secundus entered, Hadrian, wishing to test him in order to see whether he was really committed to silence or not, rose up first and greeted him. Secundus, however, maintained his customary silence.

Then Hadrian said to him, “Speak, philosopher, so we may come to know you. It is not possible to observe the wisdom in you when you say nothing.”

But in spite of this, Secundus kept still. And Hadrian said, “Secundus, before I came to you it was a good thing for you to maintain silence, since you had no listener more distinguished than yourself, nor one who could converse with you on equal terms. But now I am here before you, and I demand it of you; speak out, bring forth your eloquence to the top level of its quality.”

Still Secundus was not abashed, nor afraid of the emperor. Then Hadrian, losing all patience, said to one of his followers, a tribune, “Make the philosopher say a word to us.” The tribune answered according to the truth by saying, “It is possible to persuade lions and leopards and other wild beasts to speak with human voices, but not a philosopher against his will.” Then he summoned an executioner, who was a Greek, and said to him, “I do not want any man to live who refuses to speak to the emperor Hadrian. Take him away and punish him.” Hadrian, however, called the executioner aside privately and said to him, “When you are leading the philosopher away, talk to him along the road and encourage him to speak. If you persuade him to make an answer, cut off his head; but if he does not answer, bring him back here unharmed.”

Secundus was led away in silence, and the executioner taking him in charge proceeded down to the Piraeus, for that was the place where men customarily were punished. And the executioner said to him, “Secundus, why do you die by persisting in silence? Speak, and you shall live. Grant yourself the gift of life by a word. Behold, the swan sings near the end of his life, and all the other winged creatures give forth sound with the voice that nature has given them. There is no living thing that does not have a voice. So reconsider, and change your purpose. The time that you will have gained thereby will be ample for your silence.” With these and many other words he sought to encourage Secundus and to lure him into the trap. But Secundus despised life itself and silently waited for death, unmoved by what had been said to him. After bringing him to the customary place the executioner said, “Secundus, hold out your neck and receive the sword through it.” Secundus held out his neck and took leave of life in silence. Then the executioner showed him the naked sword and said, “Secundus, buy off your death with speech.” But Secundus did not speak.

Thereupon the executioner took him and went back to Hadrian and said, “My lord Caesar, I have brought back Secundus to you the same as he was when you handed him over to me, silent unto death.” Hadrian marveled at the philosopher’s strength of purpose and rising up said, “Secundus, in observing silence you have imposed upon yourself a kind of law, and that law of yours I was unable to break down. Now, therefore, take this tablet, write on it, and converse with me by means of your hands.” Secundus took the tablet and wrote as follows:

“For my part, Hadrian, I shall not stand in fear of you on account of death. You have the power of putting me to death, because you are the ruler of today. But that is all. Over my utterance and the
words I choose to speak you have no power.”

Hadrian read this and said, “Your stand in self-defense is good; but come, answer me on a number of other matters. I have twenty questions to put before you and the first of them is this:

What is the universe?

Again Secundus wrote down his reply.

“The universe, Hadrian is the system of the heavens and the earth and all things in them, and of this I shall speak a little later on, if you pay heed to what is now being said. You, too, Hadrian, are a human being like all the rest of us, subject to every kind of accident, mere dust and corruption. The life of brute beasts is even such. Some are clothed with scales, others with shaggy hair; some are blind, some are adorned with beauty; all have the clothing and the means of protection with which they were born and which nature has given them. But you, Hadrian, as it happens, are full of fears and apprehensions. In the bellowing wind of winter you are disturbed too much by cold and shivering, and in the summer time you are too much oppressed by the heat. You are puffed up and full of holes, like a sponge. For you have termites in your body and herds of lice, that draw furrows through your entrails; and grooves have been burned into you, as it were, like the lines made by the fire of encaustic painters. Being a short-lived creature and full of infirmities, you foresee yourself being cut and torn apart, roasted by the sun and chilled by the wintry wind. Your laughter is only the preface to grief, for it turns about and passes into tears. What about the necessity that controls our lives? Is it destiny decreed by Heaven or the whimsy of personal luck? We know not whence it comes. Today is already passing us by, and what the morrow will be we do not know. Think not lightly, therefore, O Hadrian, of what I am saying. Boast not that you alone have encircled the world in your travels, for it is only the sun and the moon and the stars that really make the journey around it. Moreover, do not think of yourself as being beautiful and great and rich and the ruler of the inhabited world. Know you not that, being a man, you were born to be Life’s plaything, helpless in the hands of Fortune and Destiny, sometimes exalted, sometimes humbled lower than the grave? Will you not be able to learn what life is, Hadrian, in the light of many examples? Consider how rich with his golden nails was the king of the Lydians. Great as a commander of armies was the king of the Danaans, Agamemnon; daring and hardy was Alexander, king of the Macedonians. Heracles was fearless, the Cyclops wild and untamed, Odysseus shrewd and subtle, and Achilles beautiful to look upon. If Fortune took away from these men the distinctions that were peculiarly their own, how much more likely is she to take them away from you? For you are not beautiful like Achilles, nor shrewd as was Odysseus, nor untamed like the Cyclops, nor fearless like Heracles, nor hardy and daring like Alexander, nor such a commander of armies as Agamemnon, nor yet rich like Gyges, the king of the Lydians.”

These things, Hadrian, I have written by way of a preface. Now let us proceed according to your questions:

What is the Universe?

A circumference beyond our reach, a theoretic structure, an eminence not easily perceived in its entirety, a self-generated object of contemplation, a conformation with many aspects, an eternal establishment, nourishing ether, a globe that does not wander from its place, the light of the sun, day, stars, darkness, night, earth, air, water.
What is the Ocean?

The thing that embraces the world, the frontier by which the world is crowned, the girdle of brine, the Atlantic bond, a circuit embracing all nature, a mirror to reflect the sun's light, the holder of the inhabited world.

What is God?

A self-formed good, an image of many shapes, an eminence too lofty to be seen, a conformation with many aspects, a problem hard to understand, immortal intelligence, an all-pervading spirit, an eye that never closes in sleep, a power known by many names, light that prevails over all.

What is the Day?

A stadium of toil, a twelve-hour course, the daily beginning, a reminder to get one's living, prolongation unto evening, lively contact with people, an everlasting reckoning on the calendar, Nature's mirror, back-running reminiscence.

What is the Sun?

The eye of the heavens, the adversary of night, a globe in the ether, the indicator of the cosmos, unsullied flame, unceasing light, a torch freely supplied, a traveler through the sky, the ornament of the day.

What is the Moon?

The crimson of the heavens, night-time consolation, an all-night vigil for sailors, encouragement for travelers, alternate to the sun, the enemy of evil-doers, the heralder of festivals, the cycle of the months.

What is the Earth?

The base of the sky, the middle of the universe, a stage-scene without a foundation, a thing rooted in midair, an immeasurable circumference, the arena of life's struggle, a system established by God, the object of the moon's nighthlong vigil, a spectacle that cannot be seen all at once, the nurse of the rains, the protection of the crops and their mother, the covering of Hades, a region occupied by many inhabitants, the origin of all things and their final repository.

What is Man?

Mind clothed in flesh, a vessel containing spirit, a receptacle for sense-perception, a toil-ridden spirit, a temporary dwelling-place, a phantom in the mirror of time, an organism fitted with bones, a scout
on the trail of life, Fortune's plaything, a good thing that does not last, one of life's expenditures, an exile from life, a deserter of the light, something that earth will reclaim, a corpse forever.

What is Beauty?

A picture drawn by Nature, a self-made blessing, a short-lived piece of good fortune, a possession that does not stay with us, the pious man's ruin, an accident of the flesh, the minister to pleasures, a flower that withers, an uncompounded product, the desire of men.

What is Woman?

A man's desire, a wild beast that shares one's board, the worry with which one rises in the morning, intertwining lustfulness, a lioness sharing one's bed, a viper in clothes, a battle voluntarily chosen, incontinence in the form of bed-partner, a daily loss, a storm in the house, a hindrance to serenity, the wreck of an incontinent man, the stock-in-trade of adulterers, the sacking of one's estate, an expensive war, an evil creature, too much of a burden, a nine-wind tempest, a venomous asp, a service rendered in the procreation of men, a necessary evil.

What is a Friend?

A sought-after name, a man nowhere evident, a possession hard to find, an encouragement in time of distress, the refuge of misfortune, an arm for misery to lean upon, an observer of life, a man beyond reach, a substantial and valuable possession, unattainable good fortune.

What is a Farmer?

A servant to the crops, a judge of rains, the companion of solitude, a merchant having no business on the sea, an adversary to the woodland, a tender of the food supply, an improver of the fields, physician to the earth, a planter of trees, trainer of the mountain lands, one habituated to toil and hardship.

What is a Gladiator?

Death on sale, a sacrificial offering made by the master of the show, gluttonous appetite, doom according to instructions, a bloody art, Fortune's mistake, speedy death, doom heralded by the trumpet, death ever at hand, a bad victory.

What is a Boat?

A sea-tossed affair, a house without a foundation, a ready-made tomb, a three-dimensional timber, transportation by the winds, a prison in winged flight, fate bound up in a package, the plaything of the winds, a floating death, a bird made of wood, a seagoing horse, an open weasel-trap, uncertain
safety, death in prospect, a traveler amid the waves.

What is a Sailor?

One who travels through the waves, a courier on the sea, one who follows on the track of the winds, a fellow traveler with the winds, a stranger to the inhabited world, a deserter of the land, the opponent of the storm, a marine gladiator, one who is unsure of his safety, a neighbor to death, a lover of the sea.

What is Wealth?

A burden of gold, the minister to pleasures, fear mingled with hope, a senseless reaping of profits, envy sharing one's board, a source of daily bother, an unstable thing, a beloved piece of misfortune, a thing full of insidious snares, desire that can never be sated, a much-longed for hardship, a high place to fall from, a value conveniently reckoned in terms of money, transitory good luck.

What is Poverty?

A good thing that is hated, the mother of health, a hindrance to pleasures, a way of life free of worry, a possession hard to cast off, the teacher of inventions, the finder of wisdom, a business that nobody envies, property unassessed, merchandise not subject to tariff, profit not to be reckoned in terms of cash, a possession not interfered with by informers, non-evident in good fortune, good fortune free of care.

What is Old Age?

An evil easy to acquire, a living death, a healthy disease, fate in prospect, a timeworn object of laughter, unstrung judgment, a breathing corpse, a stranger to love, the prospect of death, a corpse in movement.

What is Sleep?

Rest from toil the success of physicians, the release of those who are bound, the wisdom of the wakeful, what sick men pray for, an image of death, the desire of those who toil in hardship, the rest of all the spirit, a principal occupation of the rich, the idle chatter of poor men, a daily object of concern.

What is Death?

Everlasting sleep, the dissolution of the body, the desire of those who suffer, the departure of the spirit, the fear of rich men, the desire of paupers, the undoing of the limbs, flight from life and the loss of its possession, the father of sleep, an appointed day sure to be met, the breakup of all things.
Thereupon Hadrian, after reading these things, and after learning the reason why he had made silence a philosophical practice, gave orders that his books should be deposited in the sacred library under the name of Secundus the Philosopher.

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