

Brian Welter

Sagesse: Savoir vivre au pied d'un volcan
by Michel Onfray*

French philosopher Michel Onfray, author of books on philosophy, religion, and history, examines ancient Roman views on wisdom, *sagesse*, under three parts, “The Self,” “Others,” and “The World.” The author takes readers into ancient Roman daily life, starting the book off with a typical day in Pompei just before the volcanic end, and Pliny the Elder’s stoic reaction to the eruption. This ancient writer’s actions paralleled his beliefs, something Onfray considers as philosophy’s highest form. Practical virtue forms the heart of the book’s analysis. Onfray argues that Roman philosophy surpasses Greek thought on account of this practicality. Onfray admires Roman masculine virtue and sees it as part of a solution to the postmodern, post-Christian condition. Readers with an interest in philosophy or Roman history will find *Sagesse* fascinating reading because of the author’s belief that these teachings are not abstract or outmoded, but have much to tell us today. These living philosophies have practical contemporary applications.

Onfray clearly conveys his admiration for the Romans such as by addressing Christian criticism of gladiatorial violence. These critics proved their lack of acquaintance with Roman philosophy. Gladiatorial

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* Michel Onfray, *Sagesse: Savoir vivre au pied d'un volcan* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2019), 500 pages. ISBN: 978-2226-440624.



combat stemmed not from a love of bloody violence, but, surprisingly, from virtue, particularly stoic virtue, which Onfray repeatedly elevates above the other streams of philosophy and moral instruction. The gladiators reaped the crowd's love or hatred depending on whether or not they faced death through honor, courage, and even-temperedness. Onfray's depiction of such virtues contrasts sharply with the modern sugar-coating of courage and deep fear of suffering. Romans faced pain the Roman way, accepting its inevitability and bearing it like men.

The tone and purpose are corrective. Onfray offers refreshing perspectives on well-known ancient personages, including the emperor Marcus Aurelius:

Marcus Aurelius does not live in a world of reason and rationality, employing philosophy as a way to detach himself from the gods . . . he lives like an initiated searching to imitate the perfection of the gods who really exist and not only metaphorically . . . there is for Marcus Aurelius no philosophical conversion, but a utilitarian use of philosophy for religious edification.¹

Despite Roman practicality, Roman religion concerned itself with the gods, and not simply with a pragmatic or materialistic approach to life:

Wisdom, according to Marcus Aurelius, is therefore less a conquest of oneself by the application of reason . . . than the imitation of the gods who do not have much to do with reason and the rational. His philosophical project is closer to hermeticism and the mystery cults than to philosophical rationalism.²

Onfray reads these philosophers as interested in healing the soul. *Sagesse* therefore has much to say to the spiritually-parched modern person.

Ancient philosophy saw itself as medicine for the soul, which means for the author that it can help to heal the modern soul. The proper philosopher steers clear of burdensome, abstract thoughts that lack

¹ Onfray, *Sagesse*, 405.

² *Ibid.*, 404–405.

connection to life or that weigh us down. Onfray esteems Lucien of Samosata, a Greek thinker, for “inventing the idea that it is effective philosophizing to mock philosophy . . . when it proposes tasks that are impossible to achieve,” which makes a clown out of philosophy.³ Lucien and another philosopher, Demonax, exemplify cynicism’s true spirit, “a cynicism of being and not of appearances.”⁴ Other cynics’ clownish or disgusting public behavior defeated any service to philosophy. Onfray, praising Lucien for revealing philosophical frauds, admires the most Roman, that is, the most practical, aspect of the Greeks. It is this practicality that helps to heal the soul. Thus Onfray applauds the pythagorean daily examination of conscience, which allowed for a “dialectic between theory and practice, principles and actions, philosophy and life, that which needs to be done and that which is done.”⁵ Larger issues, such as cosmology, can also provide something practical: “The role of the philosopher consists of indicating the appropriate place held by man in the universe’s immensity as well as the type of relationship that he must maintain with the great Everything.”⁶ Such words convey a sense of humility and therefore of light-heartedness toward oneself.

Roman philosophy reaches neither for the gods nor for a perfect metaphysical world, but reveals man’s true nature and limits. Simple virtues such as courage and honor matter more than abstract ideals. Nevertheless, not all Romans succeeded philosophically: “Throughout his life, Seneca loved glory and honors; he accumulated wealth without ever following philosophy.”⁷ Onfray characterizes him as a pseudo-

³ *Ibid.*, 363.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 367.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 377.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 380.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 232.

philosopher: someone who writes and reads about philosophy without living it.

Roman philosophy granted a special place to friendship, according to Onfray, who laments what he considers Christianity's later destruction of it. The Romans characterized true friendship as rare. One could usually have at most only one true friend at a time: "Only those possessing high moral quality" were capable of friendship; "friendship was not for the mediocre."⁸ Cicero thus differentiated between vulgar and authentic friendship. The former, for "those who only look for their own interests and utility,"⁹ contrasts with friendship that "contribute[s] to the achievement of virtue and, especially, to wisdom" built on mutual aid.¹⁰ Friendship heals the soul. "Friendship permits two individuals to obtain what each by themselves could not: a superior degree of being."¹¹ Such discussions illustrate the critical role of virtue for the Romans. Onfray finds it fascinating and inspiring that the Romans sought the virtuous and moral life without belief in a rewarding or punishing Abrahamic God. The lack of a strong belief in the afterlife, in fact, made Roman courage all the more courageous: The Christian, in facing death, looked with certainty toward a wonderful afterlife whereas the Roman saw nothing sure. He died into a void, not eternal bliss.

For Onfray, Plutarch reveals the Roman spirit, including this pre-Christian moral capacity.¹² Though born in Boeotia, Greece,

Plutarch incarnates the Roman way of doing philosophy. First, because he is totally indifferent to questions of pure theory; second, because each text proceeds from an occasion given by life;

⁸ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 259.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 269.

finally, because all of his thought aims at serving to edify existence.¹³

Plutarch's unconcern with metaphysics and ontology contrasts with the main tendencies of Greek thought, which Onfray scorns for abstract ideals and unconcern for the ideals' application to reality: "Plato could write a dialogue on friendship" that, purely intellectual, lacked any direct knowledge. "He could have not loved his entire life and written nonetheless on love."¹⁴ Plutarch, on the other hand, "first lived and then philosophized. He philosophized on his life, in the direction of his life, to sculpt his own statue."¹⁵ Such philosophy shares little with the contemporary university philosophy department. Perhaps this explains Onfray's accessible writing style, without the usual scholarly footnotes and index.

Onfray juxtaposes Roman courage and valor with Christianity's supposedly "crybaby" mentality, which he spots in Augustine. He regards the North African saint as, at best, exemplifying some Roman ideals under a Christian hue. The Middle Ages, a wasteland of unRoman Christian tears and decadence, only ends with the "detoxification" of the Renaissance,¹⁶ at which time Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* helped "heal the souls of one thousand years of Christian poisoning."¹⁷ Yet readers do not have to wade through page after page of lecturing about Christianity. Only in a later chapter, "Celse, le dernier païen," does Onfray really go after Christianity.

The author aims to open the way for Roman values to re-energize the contemporary West. Following Michel Foucault in some ways, Onfray sees the pre-Christian Roman West as a guide to the floundering

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 271.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 269.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

post-Christian West. He continues Nietzsche's project. Decadent (post-) Christian culture needs ancient values, though Onfray rejects much of the ancient Greeks. Isn't Christianity merely ancient Greek philosophy in fresh clothing? "Christianity is spiritually Greek—Pythagoras's dualism; Protagoras's sophism; Plato's immaterial soul; Aristotle's metaphysics of substance; Plotinus's hypostases; this long list of idealism intellectually nourished Christianity,"¹⁸ something that Christianity in turn bequeathed to German university philosophy, Onfray observes.

By the book's end, readers are clearly aware of the author's stance, and why. Ancient Roman philosophy, interwoven with ancient Roman virtue and without Greek abstraction, can steer us clear of the German idealism (e.g., Husserl and Heidegger) and French thinking (e.g., Sartre, Lacan, Deleuze) that so confuses us. Such modern philosophy will not stand the test of time. We no longer read Deleuze, who was with us only years ago, yet continue to read Michel de Montaigne almost half a millennium later because of the latter's classicism, Onfray observes. The Romans expressed and embodied the peak of ancient philosophy, and can provide guidance to us today.

The appendix, subtitled "Du bon usage dans l'Antiquité," and the annotated "Bibliographie" provide much more than the titles suggest, as here Onfray directly discusses modern, mostly French, academic discussions of the ancient Romans and applications to today. This provides an excellent resource on recent French scholarship and political debates inspiring various perspectives. The book as a whole is an excellent resource for Christians who want to understand why many are tuning out to the Christian message even while feeling dissatisfied with the modern post-Christian world.



¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 501.

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SUMMARY

This paper is a review of the book: Michel Onfray, *Sagesse: Savoir vivre au pied d'un volcan* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2019). The author highlights that: (1) by arguing that Roman philosophy surpasses Greek thought on account of its practicality, Onfray sees Roman masculine virtue as part of a solution to the postmodern, post-Christian condition; (2) Onfray's book provides Christians with understanding why many are tuning out to the Christian message even while feeling dissatisfied with the modern post-Christian world.

KEYWORDS

Michel Onfray, wisdom, Roman philosophy, Greek philosophy, Christianity.

REFERENCES

Onfray, Michel. *Sagesse: Savoir vivre au pied d'un volcan*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2019.