

Pantheon
Quintus Curtius

Single-handedly revives the field of philosophy

Quintus Curtius is a philosopher. Philosophy itself, systematic inquiry into how people should live, has been a dead letter for a century or more. Political philosophy addresses the question of how we should order our collective lives to the greatest benefit of all. Moral philosophy attempts to tell us how we should treat our fellow man, to answer the question of what is the proper course of action in a given situation. Personal philosophy advises the individual with regard to how to realize as much as possible of his God-given talents.

The major insight of the 20th century was that it couldn't be done. Everybody will come up with different answers, and given that all morality is relative, and happiness is defined differently by each individual, there can be no definitive philosophy. Why should we bother?

Curtius approaches the question of why we should bother from a number of different directions. Some of his essays are accounts of feats by remarkable men who were motivated by their personal philosophies. We are inspired by the examples of intrepid explorers in the empty quarter of Arabia or an obscure corner of Antarctica, or the heroics, resolves, and teamwork of military men under extreme stress. In other essays he examines what the classical Greek and Roman philosophers, the Arabs who became intellectually dominant following Mohammed, and the Jewish and Christian philosophers of the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Those of us Americans who were educated back when the pedagogues took their job seriously learned enough to know how much we did know. Few American schools teach the classics, but we were exposed to Plato, Augustine, Spinoza and other great minds to the extent that we regretted not knowing them better. Quintus Curtius is a balm for the soul. He has read virtually everything that you have heard of, in the original Greek, Latin and Arabic, and has the gift of being able to summarize briefly and eloquently, flattering the reader's intelligence. That is my first bit of advice in this review. Given that very few of us will have time to read the classic authors, reading Curtius is the next best thing. His essays are concise. He may not go into as much depth as other authors such as Ferdinand Mount or Will and Ariel Durant, but he deftly conveys the gist of the arguments.

His most thought-provoking articles are on morality. What matters more: the quality of the outcome, or the purity of the motives? One essay strongly supports letter position. What are our obligations to our family, community and nation? How do we arbitrate among conflicting demands? In one essay, he examines the classical arguments for and against marriage. He allows the skeptics' argument to stand, asserting that a man should enter marriage only for the purpose of having children, and only when he has found a close to ideal mate.

This is an area in which I wish Quintus Curtius would press further. The society, our civilization is brought forward through the ages not by the offspring of extraordinary people, but those of the average people who somehow rise upon occasion to become extraordinary. Somewhere among the obligations of a human being must be the duty of continuing the species, culture, tribe and clan. Curtius does not give it the attention I would like to see. On the other hand, I do not recall classical authors doing so either. Even Jewish and Christian Scripture, while they admonish people to behave in such a way that will encourage offspring, do not justify assuming the burden of parenthood beyond saying that it pleases the Lord and that children will be a crown of glory in one's old age.

One of the great pleasures of reviewing books is encountering towering intellects, people in whose presence I am sure I would feel quite humbled. I have enjoyed reviewing Richard Dawkins, Stephen Pinker, Richard Feynman, Daniel Kahneman and Nicholas Nassim Taleb. These are people who could have done anything that they wanted in life. They have chosen to increase mankind's knowledge, and have the gift of writing clearly and incisively to share what they have learned. I add Quintus Curtius to this company.

Curtius is a man of many parts. In this book we learn, among other things, that he was a Marine intelligence officer in Serbia and has worked as a lawyer. But his profession does not define him. He could find worldly success pursuing any number of paths. However, true to his philosophy, he continues the pursuit of knowledge of the classics, and the practice of writing essays to convey his insights to the rest of us. I leapt at the chance to read Pantheon, having vastly enjoyed his first book, *Thirty Seven: Essays On Life, Wisdom, And Masculinity*. Although the book is structured to let the reader put it down after any essay, I found myself not wanting to until I got to the end.

