

SUBWAY LINE, No. 12

Upper West Side Philosophers, Inc. provides a
publication venue for original philosophical
thinking steeped in lived life, in line with our
motto: *philosophical living & lived philosophy.*

about this book

Alexandre Jollien, who is the first and only philosopher and spiritual teacher in history to have been born with cerebral palsy, tells the story of how he grew up in an institution for the severely disabled and was destined to roll cigars; how he discovered philosophy, which changed his life forever, helping him to confront his fate, endow it with meaning, and turn his disability into a source of strength and creative energy; how, against all odds, he fought his way out of the institution and into high school and university, where as an undergraduate he wrote *In Praise of Weakness* ...

Imbued with human warmth and wisdom, this modern Socratic dialogue is a poignant testament to the inestimable value of friendship, the power of imagination, and the will to overcome.

ALSO BY ALEXANDRE JOLLIEN

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In Praise of Weakness

Alexandre Jollien

With a Foreword by Matthieu Ricard

Translated from the French
by Michael Eskin

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*For my parents
and
for Étienne Parrat for the spirit of
her faithful friendship.*

*This book also owes a great debt to
Pierre Carruzzo, André Gilloz, Antoine Maillard and
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who, together with them and many others, have
accompanied me on my life's joyous, if at times
chaotic, journey.*

*All my gratitude, finally, to my childhood
companions, who have given me so much.*

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“I have all the time in the world!” Socrates says to Alexandre Jollien in this wonderful book.

Who wouldn't love to open their heart to Socrates and be guided by him through an intimate introspective dialogue? Alexandre used this approach during the most trying times of his life, as he badly needed a benevolent mentor. A mentor who would be available anywhere, anytime; a trustworthy guide whom he could rely upon on his arduous journey. Someone who would extend a loving hand in times of sadness and give him an energetic push in times of discouragement.

Alexandre is the first great philosopher in history who has suffered from a serious congenital disorder. To me, he is a dear friend and a most remarkable human being.

Disabled since birth, he spent seventeen years with little contact with the outside world in a center for children with cerebral palsy. There, he and his companions huddled close together to find some solace in the midst of their caregivers' lack of understanding. As he recounts in this book:

in praise of weakness

The present was ... the sole focus of all our preoccupations, all our thoughts ... Mutual gestures of friendship helped us through difficult moments and prevented us from becoming discouraged. Friendship united us, made us stronger. We loved each other. That's how it was. We didn't have a choice. The tenderness of our mutual affection alleviated our loneliness. Collaboration was absolutely vital if we wanted to attain our main goal: making progress ... life lay before us—open-ended and rife with possibility—and we had everything to gain.

He was able to move on from this dire situation to become a compelling thinker who has inspired thousands of people through his raw authenticity and depth of thought. Soothed by the gentle presence of his comrades and by the kindness occasionally shown by others, Alexandre's disability—or “weakness,” as he calls it—became the fertile ground for his admirable intellectual and spiritual accomplishments.

Alexandre's disability is very obvious and often attracts cruel remarks from insensitive passers-by. It confronts us with our own image, our conceit, of being ‘normal’. Let's be honest: we are all afflicted with handicaps that might be less obvious and more easily concealed, but

nonetheless crippling. They manifest as the various dysfunctions of our minds, clouded by confusion, scorched by animosity, poisoned by jealousy, shrunk by selfishness, distorted by pride, and torn apart by obsessive desires. Becoming aware of our own shortcomings is a good lesson in humility.

Thanks to travelling through his inner world in the company of Socrates, Alexandre, a lovable person facing adverse circumstances, discovered his inner richness. He became fully aware that no one should remain imprisoned within conventional norms, since the beauty of being human is to free oneself from the shackles of such conventions.

Recently, one of his daughters (he has three children) told him, “Papa, we love you.” Alexandre asked his children in turn: “If you had had to choose between a handicapped and a normal father, which one would you have taken?” They answered that none of them would have ever dreamed of exchanging him for a “normal” father.

Alexandre never tries to hide his disability. One of his classmates in the public school he eventually was sent to had a misshapen thumb and always kept his hand in his pocket. Alexandre told him: “Don’t try to hide your disability.

in praise of weakness

Look at me, I would have to walk around wrapped in a garbage bag!” He realized that attempting to hide one’s disability leads to isolation and estrangement. He had to come to terms with it. “To achieve this,” adds Alexandre, “knowing one’s weaknesses is key.”

Times of intense suffering allowed Alexandre to open his eyes and reach toward others. “It is they who saved me,” he says. “I feel the opposite of what Sartre wrote (‘Hell is other people’). I would rather say: ‘Salvation is other people.’”

Anyone who meets Alexandre quickly finds him to be a very endearing person. His candor and his sense of humor transform his “weakness” into the strength to spark friendships and gently invite other people into his sphere. There, they rediscover the potential for kindness that we all have within ourselves.

Alexandre cannot use his hands to write, but his books have been able to touch the hearts of hundreds of thousands of readers all over the world. His words surge not only from his brilliant mind, but also from his heart and guts.

I am, therefore, delighted that *In Praise of Weakness* is finally available to English readers.

Matthieu Ricard

In Praise of Weakness

The characters in this book speak under
fictive names—with the exception of
Father Morand ... and Socrates.

author's note

It is through wonder that men now begin and originally began to philosophize ... He who wonders and is perplexed feels that he is ignorant ... It was to escape ignorance, therefore, that men studied philosophy.

—Aristotle

And so philosophy was born of man's wonder at the world. Going beyond what 'goes without saying' and the clichés of everyday life—that's what distinguishes the philosopher.

From the beginning, philosophers have been preoccupied with questions that may have seemed self-evident, if not trivial, to their contemporaries. In the following pages, I endeavor to apply this method to the experience of growing up in a residential care facility: disabled since birth, I spent seventeen years in a center for children with cerebral palsy.

"Memory is the stomach of the mind," writes St. Augustine. This creative process led me to ruminate on some of the experiences along my journey, turning my past into pasture for my

in praise of weakness

reflections. Having settled on the menu, I still had to find the appropriate digestif. Why not the tonic of humor—that royal road to putting in perspective life's often tragic situations? "If you want to know who the good philosopher is, line them all up," Nietzsche suggests. "The one who laughs is the good one."

I cannot write by hand. Therefore, I had to dictate these pages into a computer that transcribed them—which is why the style sometimes feels like spoken language.

As to my choice of the Socratic dialogue, it faithfully reflects the manner in which I learned to philosophize. In order to overcome the obstacles of daily life, I read the philosophers. They became my favorite interlocutors. Among them, Socrates played a decisive role: my nascent interest in philosophy coincided with my discovery of his thinking. Also, it seems to me that the complete absence of prejudice that we commonly associate with Socrates made him an ideal traveling companion for the adventure that I am about to relate.

prologue

Where did this strange dialogue take place? Feel free to take your pick! In Greece, perhaps, amid the bustling crowds of anonymous passers-by in the agora: some heading to the market or visiting an old friend, others returning home from the doctor's or on their way there ... Or was it, more modestly, in the poorly-lit dormitory where under the secret cover of night I lay awake surrounded by my brothers-in-misfortune? When? No one knows. Why? Search well, and you shall find. There is meaning in everything.

The conversations with Socrates were frequent and went on for a long time. Here, I only relate their gist, sparing the reader the long hours of discussion during which Socrates confounded his interlocutor, unmasked his most egregious prejudices and forced him to clearly define each of the key concepts used.

one too many somersaults

ALEXANDRE: Socrates?

SOCRATES: Indeed, I am.

ALEXANDRE: Greetings, Socrates!

SOCRATES: Greetings? What is it that you want?

ALEXANDRE: To tell you ... how extremely grateful I am.

SOCRATES: What for? What have I done for you?

ALEXANDRE: You have given me the greatest of gifts!

SOCRATES: Have we met before?

ALEXANDRE: In a certain sense.

SOCRATES: Now you are making curious.

ALEXANDRE: If you are not in too much of a hurry ...

SOCRATES: I have all the time in the world! Go ahead ... unless, that is, you don't like talking.

ALEXANDRE: Well, then, allow me to introduce myself: my name is Alexandre. I am twenty-three years old, and I am majoring in philosophy at the university.

SOCRATES: So far, nothing out of the ordinary.

in praise of weakness

ALEXANDRE: Still ...

SOCRATES: Back to your story, then. Proceed with confidence!

ALEXANDRE: As I said, I am twenty-three, and I have embarked on the study of philosophy.

SOCRATES: Go on, step by step. Tell me everything. Stick to the facts and try not to digress. If need be, I will ask the necessary questions. First, tell me about your childhood.

ALEXANDRE: Where to begin? I saw the light of day on November 26, 1975, in a little Swiss village that I had to leave almost immediately. A birth accident wrested me from my family, forcing my parents to put me in a specialized institution—‘would-be specialized’ is probably more accurate. There, I had ...

SOCRATES: Let’s not get ahead of ourselves! What birth accident?

ALEXANDRE: Athetosis.

SOCRATES: Can you be more specific!

ALEXANDRE: As you can see, I have great difficulty controlling my movements, my gait is unsteady, and I speak slowly. These are the long-term effects of a particular form of asphyxiation that goes by the scientific name of ‘athetosis’.

SOCRATES: And what was the cause of it?

ALEXANDRE: Turning one too many somersaults

in my mother's womb, I got my neck all tangled up in the umbilical cord ... You are looking at the fallout now.

My birth transpired in a frenzied atmosphere. My mother told me that what she saw emerging from her womb was a baby that was completely black and did not cry. "Is he dead?" she screamed. "No," the midwife replied, "but we don't know if he'll make it." For a brief moment, the baby fixed its mother's tired gaze, and then they were separated. I was taken to a hospital where I received cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

SOCRATES: Your last chance?

ALEXANDRE: More like my first and only chance! To my mother, the word 'resuscitation' meant hope. Deprived of her newborn, she stubbornly insisted with the attending medical staff: "He must live, he must live, no matter how—so long as he lives!" As fate would have it, her wish was granted. Ten days later, she was holding a magnificent baby in her arms. The doctors abstained from making any prognoses about the infant's development. But that didn't matter; her child was alive.

the strange creature that I am

ALEXANDRE: Since I was four, I have undergone multiple therapies: physical therapy, ergo-therapy, speech therapy ... All that to fix the strange creature that I am.

SOCRATES: Strange?

ALEXANDRE: My good Socrates, I was so different: I couldn't walk at all. I expressed myself awkwardly. And my motor skills left a lot to be desired in terms of control and precision, to say the least. In sum, I really wasn't normal.

SOCRATES: So, what did you do?

ALEXANDRE: A myriad of exercises: I practiced sitting straight, coordinating my arms and legs, controlling my jerky movements. I learned how to use knife and fork (without slitting my neighbor's throat). And it wasn't long before I became an expert at wielding the soup spoon (or was it the dessert spoon?). Then there were also my daily attempts at beating my own record in one thousand meters on all fours ...

SOCRATES: I imagine that all of these excellent practical results took a lot of time and hard work on your part.