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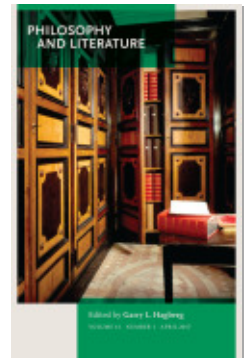
Fearless?: Peter Weir, The Sage, and the Fragility of  
Goodness

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## FEARLESS? PETER WEIR, THE SAGE, AND THE FRAGILITY OF GOODNESS

**Abstract.** Rafael Yglesias's *Fearless*, adapted for film by Peter Weir, stages a striking ethical reflection on the nature of the best human life. Section 1 looks at the film's portrayal of Max Klein, an ordinary man who becomes "fearless" after conquering his worst fear. Max exhibits a profile of supererogatory virtues recalling those of the classical sage, yet section 2 argues that *Fearless* as a whole presents a powerful criticism of such a "fearless" life. Echoing criticisms of the invulnerability of the sage in Michel de Montaigne and Martha Nussbaum, *Fearless*'s true hero is its less ostentatious heroine: Max's wife, Laura.

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the Angelic  
Orders? And even if one were to suddenly  
take me to its heart, I would vanish into its  
stronger existence. For beauty is nothing but  
the beginning of terror, that we are still able to bear,  
and we revere it so, because it calmly disdains  
to destroy us. . . .  
—Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, first elegy

"So what are you telling me, there's no God, but there's you?"  
—Carla to Max Klein, in *Fearless*

PETER WEIR'S FILM *FEARLESS* appeared in 1993 to critical acclaim and middling box office fortune. The film draws on all of Weir's considerable art, a stunning sound track (memorably featuring the first movement of Górecki's *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*), and powerful performances by Jeff Bridges, Rosie Perez, and Isabella Rossellini. Based on the novel of the same name by Rafael Yglesias, *Fearless* is first of all the story of

Max Klein, a highly stressed San Francisco architect with a pathological fear of flying, Max finds himself on a routine Intercity Air flight across America that suffers catastrophic hydraulic failure. In the chaos that unfolds as the plane begins to plummet, however, something remarkable happens. His eyes arrested by a piercing flash of sunlight through his cabin window, Max undergoes a kind of metanoia from the animal terror that initially seizes him as he realizes what is transpiring. "This is it," he says to himself as he stares, mesmerized, at the white light. "This is the moment of your death." Then, after a short pause, with a kind of astonished conviction, his inner voice continues: "I'm not afraid. I have no fear . . ." (*F*, 31:50–32:20).<sup>1</sup> "Let it go," he directs himself, this unlooked-for conviction growing: "I can let it go" (*F*, 1:04:55).

In the pandemonium, Max acts with a kind of preternatural serenity and supererogatory benevolence. Seeing a small, terrified boy alone, Max leaves the side of his friend and business partner, Jeff, reassuring him with a wink: "It's going to be OK." As he passes down the plane's aisle, calmly surveying the aspects of terror unfolding around him, he stops to place his hand on the shoulders of a terrified young woman, then a man, looking comfortingly into the eyes of each and mouthing to the latter, "Everything's going to be all right." "Everything is wonderful," Max tells the young child, Byron, whom he goes to assist, as he positions Byron's head on the pillow instants before impact.

After the crash, which is the film's opening, oneiric shots convey Max leading Byron and other survivors he has helped extricate from the wreck through a dense cornfield; he is carrying a peaceful infant who is clutching his hand. Finding some authorities amidst the confusion and carnage, Max quietly hands Byron over, explaining to the distressed boy, while indicating the infant he is cradling: "I got to find the mother" (*F*, 2:05). When Max does find her, sobbing uncontrollably, he gives the child to her without ceremony, asking no gratitude for his astonishing act. Instead, he walks calmly away, hails a taxi ("You've got to be kidding," says the cab driver), and leaves the scene for a local hotel (*F*, 4:45–55). Later, asked by bemused authorities about his conduct, Max explains baldly, "They didn't need me anymore" (*F*, 13:40).

As the title *Fearless* suggests, Max Klein's confrontation with his own worst fear profoundly transforms him. At least apparently, Max has been cleansed of all the fears and anxieties that normally trouble human lives. Characters in the film describe him as a kind of angel. Byron wishes "to be with" him constantly, almost abandoning his own family. The newspapers dub Max "the good Samaritan." Pointed Christological motifs

run throughout the film: Weir has the same uncanny white light that first caught Max's eye in the decisive moment of his metanoia glance across Max's face at decisive subsequent moments in the action. Max's only injury after his ordeal is a small wound in his side. When Max soon after the crash visits his childhood sweetheart, Alison, in Los Angeles (the city of angels), he sits down to a bowl of red strawberries, to which he has been allergic since childhood. They are brought to him by a waitress named Faith. As Alison drearily recounts what she laments as the "pathetic" story of her life, Max leans over to her playfully, prompting her to "have a strawberry." He explains that it's "the forbidden fruit, always tastes good" (*F*, 12:10).

*Fearless* is, in one of its registers, an ethical reflection in narrative form on the question of whether, as the ancient school of the Stoics in particular argued, living a life without any fear is an ideal worth pursuing or a false conception of the good life. By setting Max's remarkable character before us, and showing his subsequent life "unfold" (in both senses, as we shall see), it prompts us to ask about what Martha Nussbaum has called "the fragility of goodness"<sup>2</sup>—what role, if any, an acceptance of "the vulnerability of a man" should play in any pursuit of "the serenity of a sage."<sup>3</sup>

This paper puts Peter Weir's extraordinary film into dialogue with three philosophical sources. The first source consists of recent philosophical writings on Hellenistic and Roman philosophical thought led by Pierre Hadot,<sup>4</sup> Julia Annas,<sup>5</sup> and Martha Nussbaum's *The Therapy of Desire*.<sup>6</sup> These texts have focused on the Hellenistic philosophical schools' conception of "the figure of the sage" as a kind of maximally enlightened, psychically invulnerable, or "fearless" figure. The second source is the powerful criticism of the ancient ideal of such a sage as we find first in Nussbaum's work, and before her (the third source) in the *Essais* of the sixteenth-century skeptical humanist Michel de Montaigne. On first viewing, and in the opening half of the film, Max Klein seems to be Weir's filmic presentation of an admirable, psychically invulnerable sage. Yet, I will argue, the entire unfolding of the film stands as a powerful challenge to the desirability of such fearlessness as an ethical ideal in a way that gives exemplary literary or filmic force to Nussbaum's and Montaigne's philosophical positions.

In the first part of the essay, I examine Max's credentials as an exemplary fearless sage, placing him alongside ancient ideas of such a fully wise individual. In the second part, focusing instead on Max's wife,

Laura, I use Nussbaum and Montaigne to critique Max's credentials as an exemplar of the best life for human beings.

## I

I begin by considering in suitable detail the remarkable career of Max Klein in *Fearless* after his miraculous survival of the catastrophic airplane crash: an event that, for many of us in the latter-day modern world, is *the* most horrifying event imaginable.

First, *Fearless* makes clear that crash survival in itself is not what enables a person to respond as Max does. In the weeks and months following the crash, the airline and its legal team assemble survivors, many of whom are far from attaining any higher or more reconciled self-awareness. They have been psychologically broken by the event, by their loss of loved ones in the crash, and by guilt that they might have done more to save others.<sup>7</sup>

It follows that, second, Max's new persona is the result of an internal, psychological, or philosophical realization he undergoes in the moment of crisis. Weir, by making us privy to Max's internal discourse at decisive moments in the film, allows us to see and hear just what is at stake: Max's recognition, then acceptance, that "this is the moment of your death." This realization does not involve any ordinary, empirical fear—the loss of this or that valued, external thing (family, wife, child, property, career, or reputation). His is a more absolute fear, of the loss of the very subjectivity or self that is capable of valuing anything at all. Yet herein lies the paradox, familiar across a range of spiritual traditions. Only by confronting this absolute negation of everything he had valued—his own kenosis—is Max profoundly psychologically liberated. "I fear God, therefore I fear no other" is an old religious saying that captures the logic here perfectly.<sup>8</sup> The best way to irrevocably cancel all our ordinary fears (does she like me? will they respect me? will I get that raise?) is not by embracing some new hope, project, or plan. It is by confronting, head on, a single fear representing the sum of all our fears: that of our own annihilation or, in the Christian tradition, that of eternal damnation by the Living God.

Certainly, having undergone his ordeal, Max in *Fearless* becomes completely unencumbered by mundane anxieties. He no longer cares about fitting in, offending someone, or abiding by social conventions. He happily dances with fellow survivor Carla in a crowded shopping mall, completely indifferent to the disapproving looks of passersby, after

having insisted on taking her to “buy presents for the dead” (his father and her son, who was killed in the plane crash) (*F*, 1:21:05–1:24:55). He walks calmly into a building site marked “entry prohibited,” and ventures with even strides across a busy, multilane highway. Just as if he were a consummate Stoic, Max evinces no desire for the fame offered him by media stories of his extraordinary conduct during the crash, nor any need for recognition of his supererogatory selflessness.<sup>9</sup> Max bolts from a pack of journalists that descends upon his house the day after his return home, keen to dub him the “good Samaritan.” “I didn’t save anyone,” he tells the crowd of microphones thrust in his face. “The pilots saved us” (*F*, 24:40).

On the basis of his remarkable freedom from any fear, Max displays other singular virtues. We gradually discover the extent of his courage and unflappable presence of mind in the immediate aftermath of the crash through the views of other survivors. Max had freed others from the wreckage by calling them to “follow me . . . come this way . . . come towards the light.” But at the same time, as one survivor recalls, “He sounded so normal” (*F*, 55:20).

Max now speaks briefly, truthfully, and to the point with everyone he encounters. He has not become callous, although Laura comes to accuse him of callousness. He is now simply unconcerned to stand on ceremony. Having faced his own imminent end, Max is deeply committed to the importance of confronting and savoring reality as it is. From now on, he “does not want to lie.” Indeed, at one point he bawls, “I can’t lie!” to the family lawyer, who wants Max (for the financial gain of his wife and son) to admit to a terror he simply did not feel in the moments immediately preceding the catastrophe (*F*, 16:00–16:30).

Above all, Max is capable of the most extraordinary, selfless generosity toward Carla, with whom he strikes up a friendship based on what Max describes at one point as “an overwhelming feeling of love.” Instantly discerning the extent of her grief, Max confides to her his own traumatic loss of his father as a boy, then accompanies her to church. Gradually, he gives her the confidence to leave her bedroom and reengage with the world. In one of the film’s most dramatic moments, Max risks his own life by driving his car full speed into a brick wall in order to *show* Carla directly the impossibility that she could have held on to her baby, “Bubble,” in the plane crash. In this way, Max frees her from her debilitating grief and guilt, enabling her finally to “live on planet earth for a while,” as she puts it to him (*F*, 1:26:10–1:31:40).

Immanuel Kant specifies that sublimity comes from a presentation so

large or so dynamic that it cripples the imagination's synthetic capacities.<sup>10</sup> In that light, there is something ethically sublime about Max's persona in the period after the crash. His break with ordinary social convention and the normal motivational patterns of vulnerable human selves seems complete. He is almost like a modern Antigone—that Sophoclean character who says “no!” to any compromise on her desire to bury her brother, come what may<sup>11</sup>—and we find something uncannily fascinating about Max's fearlessness for almost the entire film. “So what are you telling me, there's no God, but there's you?” Carla finds herself asking (*F*, 42:55), after Max has calmly declaimed that “people live and die for no reason,” but “*this does not matter.*” All remains well, and he “doesn't know why . . . but you're safe with me” (*F*, 43:50).<sup>12</sup>

I want to introduce some considerations to frame my interpretation of the film with regard to Max's effective apotheosis in *Fearless*, not from the Western messianic heritage with which we might be tempted to frame his character but from classical pagan thought.

“Without always acknowledging it, all Greek philosophy makes its sages God's equals,” Albert Camus commented in his youthful study of later antique thought.<sup>13</sup> Camus identifies what recent works by classicists Pierre Hadot (“FS,” “MB”) and Julia Annas (“SAP”) have singled out as one of the key distinguishing markers of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. This marker is a focus (foreign to anything comparable in later Western philosophy but with deep parallels in Eastern traditions) on imagining the figure of the sage, a fully enlightened human being. “We know that, in all the schools, one would discourse on the conduct of the sage in the important circumstances of human life,” Hadot comments. “Must he engage in politics? Should he marry? Can he be vexed?” (“FS,” p. 238). When Aristotle wants to discuss the content of “first philosophy” in the famous first book of the *Metaphysics*, for instance, he does so by introducing the figure of the sage: a kind of epistemic “overman” who would know the first principles of the most difficult, eternal things (“FS,” pp. 237–38). Xenophon writing his *Memorabilia* of Socrates, like Plato writing his *Apology* or the portrait of Socrates in the *Symposium*: all aim to present the *atopos* philosopher—so strange from the perspective of conventional social ideals, then and now—as a superlative ethical ideal.

The evident function of this interest in the figure of the sage, in the context of classical eudemonistic ethics, lay in picturing a counterfactual “ethical paradigm” (“FS,” p. 238; “SAP,” pp. 11–12, 13–15). The sage was an imaginary human embodiment of all the virtues and/or forms of knowledge that enable human beings to live contented, fulfilled lives.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, despite their theoretical and ethical differences, Camus is right to observe that the ancient philosophical schools converged in describing the sage as almost, or truly, divine. “[Evil] must inevitably haunt human life,” Plato’s Socrates tells us in the *Theaetetus*: “That is why a man should make all haste to escape from earth into heaven; and escape means becoming as like God as possible; and a man becomes like god when he becomes just and pure, with understanding” (Plato, *Theaetetus*, in “SAP,” p. 14). Both Annas and Hadot stress how the sage, in all the schools, was represented as decisively transcending ordinary, prephilosophical modes of thinking and acting, as Max does in *Fearless*.<sup>15</sup>

Through philosophical reflection and forms of bodily and mental asceticism,<sup>16</sup> the idealized sage was a man who had completely internalized an outlook “revaluing all values,” to borrow a phrase; for instance, by placing the virtue of his own psyche, in the Stoic conception, above all external goods (money, fame, a good name, power) that our societies tell us are necessary parts of the good life.<sup>17</sup>

In particular, the Greek philosophical schools concur that the best form of human life, as exemplified by Socrates at his trial (“Anytus and Meletus may kill me, but the good man cannot be harmed”), is characterized by a kind of psychic invulnerability or self-sufficiency. “The sage on this picture is the ideal of tranquility and calm,” Annas explains,

being untroubled by the cares that trouble most people because he has achieved a perspective from which he is above them. He has achieved self-sufficiency in being virtuous, and so neither rejoices nor grieves the way we do, since he is not needy in the way that we are. . . . (“SAP,” p. 15)

This lack of those “lacks,” needs, and anxieties people feel who assent to the ideas that they imperatively *need* romantic love, property, fame, or social success marks off the sage, for the ancients, as godlike. In Yglesias’s or Weir’s terms, the sage is “fearless”: the Stoics used to say *tharralēōthēs*, having “the *epistēmē* by which we are sure nothing terrible can happen to us.”<sup>18</sup> And this means, before all else, that like Max Klein in *Fearless*, s/he is unmoved by the fear of her/his own death: a fear in which the Hellenistic schools recognized people’s deepest, most haunting anxiety, underlying all our more particular, anxiety-inducing concerns with accumulating wealth, connections, publications, whatever (*TD*, pp. 192–201).

The sage, by contrast, understands death as a release from mortal troubles, as natural an event (and as far beyond our volitional control)



as birth, and reasonably as little to be feared or lamented.<sup>19</sup> “He who has learned how to die, has unlearned slavery,” Seneca advises Lucilius in the *Letters*, capturing a principal operative idea.<sup>20</sup> A person who has completely accepted the alienability of all the goods of this life cannot be coerced, even by the cruellest tyrant. For, like Max Klein in *Fearless*, he simply has nothing more to fear losing that might persuade him to betray his principles or goals.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, we see here the existential force of the ancient schools’ shared advice to pupils to undertake regular exercises of *memento mori*: so as to “have died in our heads,” in Max’s suggestive formulation to Carla (*F*, 43:40). Although later critics like Montaigne, Bacon, and Spinoza would charge exactly this, the *memento mori* was not intended as an exercise in morbid life denial.<sup>22</sup> As in the Epicurean Horace’s famous *carpe diem*, to recall mortality (outside of the Platonic tradition) was instead enjoined as a way to *enhance* philosophers’ appreciation of the things of this life, shorn of illusory wishes that they (or we) could somehow endure forever.

Pierre Hadot in particular has written on the transformed, idealized mode of perception that the ancient philosophers imagined for true sages, drawing on categories from modern aesthetics and phenomenology.<sup>23</sup> Peter Weir’s (and Jeff Bridges’s) remarkable portrayal of Max Klein in *Fearless* strikingly echoes the key features of Hadot’s analysis. Through the course the film, Max attains a new contemplative appreciation of the sheer *presence* of the world: “the taste and touch and beauty of life,” as he puts it to Laura (*F*, 1:08:50). It is as if Max were now sensing everything he had previously taken for granted “like for the first time, quickly thrown down without a warning,” as Lucretius put it:<sup>24</sup> ripe, red strawberries (*F*, 12:00–12:15); the joyous Spanish music Max comes upon while spinning his rental car’s radio dial as he drives to Los Angeles (*F*, 8:40–9:31); dust, wetted by a drop of saliva, that he rubs pensively between his fingers while gazing at the Californian desert (*F*, 7:00–7:30); even the angular cityscape of San Francisco, denuded of everything human, as Max gazes upon it from a deserted suburban overpass he has illegally accessed (*F*, 26:20–26:50).

The new *prosôchê* or attentiveness to the world is not exclusively contemplative or theoretical, either. Max is simply no longer concerned to interpret others’ behavior with a view to his own egoistic hopes and fears. He now evinces a remarkable ability to empathetically read people and recognize their motivations, undistorted by his own projective anticipations. He discerns immediately that the man who sits next to him on

the flight back to San Francisco is the airline “psych” sent to assess him. Max effortlessly sees through the machinations of the family lawyer, keen only to make a dollar from the catastrophe (*F*, 14:20–16:30). In one of the film’s more moving scenes, Max shows himself uniquely capable of reaching his friend Jeff’s grieving widow, embracing her unreservedly as she falls weeping to the ground, repeating to her: “He loved you . . . He loved you. . . . You made him happy” (*F*, 22:00–22:50). In these ways, Max Klein presents us, in film, with a perfect exemplification of what Hadot describes as the this-worldly and other-worldly “duality” of the perfected sage:

Above all, it seems to me that this figure of the sage is . . . the necessary expression of the tension, polarity, [or] duality . . . inherent in the human condition. On the one hand, . . . man has need, in order to support his condition, of being inserted in the tissue of social and political organisation. . . . But this sphere of the quotidian does not entirely shelter him: it is confronted inevitably by what we can call the inexpressible. . . . To become aware of the self and of the existence of the world is a revelation which ruptures the security of the habitual and the quotidian. . . . The sage will . . . be the man capable of living on the two planes, perfectly adapted to the quotidian, like Pyrrho, and nevertheless plunged [*plongé*] in the cosmos; devoted to the service of men, and nevertheless perfectly free in his interior life; fully conscious and yet at peace; forgetting nothing of what is unique and essential. . . . It is this ideal that the philosopher must try to realize. (“FS,” p. 254)

Notwithstanding these first appearances we have seen, however, *Fearless* challenges this philosophical ideal.

## II

Max is not an angel. He’s a man. He can’t survive up there.  
—Laura Klein, *Fearless*

I now want to focus on the duality or tension in the ideal of the sage: Hadot’s idea that wisdom “is that state in which a man is at the same time essentially human and more than [*au-dessus*] human” (“FS,” p. 239). I argue that *Fearless*, by its end, represents a powerful narrative critique of the classical ethical ideal of the sage as this kind of superhuman figure, “as if the essence of being human consisted in being more than oneself”

(“FS,” p. 239). To set up Weir’s ethical argument in *Fearless*, accordingly, I will situate the film in terms of a different philosophical lineage. This lineage proposes, contrary to the ancient schools, that the best life for human beings is one that embraces our vulnerability, accepting in advance that “in order to be a man, we must refuse to be a God.”<sup>25</sup>

A key figure in this lineage is the sixteenth-century skeptical humanist Michel de Montaigne. A renaissance figure if ever there was one, Montaigne was intimately familiar with the ancient idealizations of god-like sages, led by Socrates and Cato the Younger, the two Stoic heroes par excellence. “A man discerns in the soul of these two great men and their imitators,” Montaigne muses in “Of Cruelty,”

so perfect a habitude to virtue, that it was turned to a complexion . . . , the very essence of their soul, its natural and ordinary habit; . . . the vicious passions that spring in us can find no entrance into them; the force and vigour of their soul stifle and extinguish irregular desires, so soon as they begin to stir. . . . (CEM, p. 310)

Nevertheless, Montaigne’s *Essays* also contain an increasingly strong criticism of this ancient cultural ideal, which becomes fully clear in the thirteen essays added (as book 3) in 1592. In passages describing the skeptical sage Pyrrho, Montaigne gently observes how this “god among men” remained acutely aware, despite all his virtues, of how “it is . . . very hard altogether to despoil and shake off man” (CEM, p. 533). Montaigne instead delights in stories telling that the same Pyrrho, a stay-at-home who tended hogs, was “sometimes found in his house bitterly scolding with his sister.” The latter was wont to observe how often her brother fell short of the pure *ataraxia* he philosophically extolled: “‘What!’ said he, ‘must this silly woman also serve as a witness to my rules?’” (CEM, p. 533). As for Socrates’s ability, so admired by the Stoics, “to meet death with an ordinary countenance, to grow acquainted with it, and to sport with it,” Montaigne finds this ideal “too high and too difficult” for the ordinary run of people. Instead, he suggests that some peculiarity of Cato’s and Socrates’s individual natures<sup>26</sup> must have enabled them to experience “extraordinary pleasure and manly voluptuousness” in their supererogatory actions (CEM, p. 309). “These transcendental humours affright me, like high and inaccessible places,” Montaigne famously writes in his concluding 1592 manifesto, “Of Experience,”

and nothing is hard for me to digest in the life of Socrates but his ecstasies and communication with demons; nothing so human in Plato as that for which they say he was called divine; and of our sciences, those seem to be the most terrestrial and low that are highest mounted. (*CEM*, pp. 856–57)<sup>27</sup>

Montaigne's critique of the ancient representations of superhuman sages, however, goes beyond an urbane skepticism about the possibility of such men existing, short of an idiosyncratic few. As David Schaeffer has shown, Montaigne, in his key essays on cruelty, virtue, and moderation, also calls into question the desirability of such ideals: indeed, "how imperceptibly near to madness are the effects of a supreme and extraordinary virtue" (*CEM*, p. 363).<sup>28</sup> The famous essayist populates his reflections with examples of people acting cruelly and inhumanely, not from the excesses of their untutored, animal passions (the classical ethical critique) but in their fond presumption of being the bearers of higher transcendent mandates. Writing in the age of France's ongoing strife of Protestant against Catholic, Montaigne's "Of Moderation" singles out what he wryly calls "the belief universally embraced in all religions that we gratify heaven and nature by committing massacre and homicide" (*CEM*, pp. 130, 149).<sup>29</sup>

Montaigne then would not be surprised at one feature that soon emerges in *Fearless*, as Max assumes his messianic, postcrash mandate of saving everybody involved: Max's extraordinary bond with survivor Carla, which comes at an increasingly direct cost to Max's all-too-mundane marriage. He also loses all ability to relate to those who have not recently squared off against their own imminent deaths. The same inability applies to the child Byron's posttraumatic need to be around Max constantly. Being with Byron gradually alienates Max from Jonah, his only son. For Laura, Max's categorical opposition to all lying or socially decorous dissemblances soon comes to seem less a virtue than a joyless pathology: "crazy truth-telling, like a robot" (*F*, 49:10).<sup>30</sup> After cruelly chastising his son with guests present, Max proceeds to affirm to his wife that his sage-like invulnerability extends to being perfectly indifferent to losing—or ruining—their marriage, with all that that would also imply for their son: "I'm not scared to end our marriage" (*F*, 1:15:50).

At this point I take up the second, more recent philosophical critic of the classical ideal of the invulnerable man (and the gender is perhaps significant, in the film at least). Martha Nussbaum's 1994 work on the Hellenistic and Roman philosophers, *The Therapy of Desire*, represents a remarkable and sympathetic reconstruction of the later ancient thinkers'

therapeutic conceptions of philosophy as a *medicina animi*. Nevertheless, like Montaigne before her, she also questions both the possibility and the normative *desirability* of the Stoic, Epicurean, or Pyrrhonian valorization of lives lived apparently invulnerable to fear or *fortuna*: “above the things that happen to good and evil men alike” (*SV*, p. 170).

Ancient Hellenistic and Roman thought for Nussbaum, as for Annas and Hadot, is characterized by a deep tension. On the one hand, there is the ancient philosophical schools’ doctrinal insistence that the best human life is one lived in accordance with (human) nature. On the other hand is their repeated insistence that the sage is nevertheless as much above ordinary humanity as humanity’s highest instantiation (*TD*, p. 497). Even in the great Epicurean poet Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura*, as she documents, we witness not simply a definitive statement of the ancient materialistic criticism of religion and call to accept a disenchanted universe. We also read Lucretius’s increasingly unqualified paeans to Epicurus himself as “god-like” (proem to book 3),<sup>31</sup> “a god, a god indeed” (proem to book 5).<sup>32</sup> Epicurus is a far greater beneficiary to human beings than Ceres and Bacchus, who delivered only bodily goods, whereas the philosopher delivers spiritual sustenance. He is a truer hero than Hercules, who only vanquished external monsters, rather than the inner sources of human misery.<sup>33</sup>

In a telling sentence, Nussbaum reflects that, in light of this gradual apotheosis of Epicurus in Lucretius’s poem,

we begin to suspect that instead of taking on the task of making us not hate who and where we are, [Hellenistic philosophy] has taken on the easier task of shifting the ground of our religious otherworldly longing, until it finds a home in this-worldly detachment. . . . (*TD*, p. 217)

In this light, outbidding Epicurus and echoing Montaigne, Nussbaum proposes in the *Therapy of Desire* the need to cure us of any philosophical aspiration “to rise above mortality altogether and to make ourselves into gods,” even by the pursuit of disenchanting philosophy (*TD*, p. 217). For her, too, the words of Montaigne’s penultimate paragraph of the *Essais* ring true:

’Tis an absolute and, as it were, a divine perfection, for a man to know how loyally to enjoy his being. We seek other conditions, since we do not understand the use of our own; and go out of ourselves, because we know not how there to reside. . . . (*CEM*, p. 857)

Indeed, like Montaigne, Nussbaum suspects that behind ancient valorizations of fearlessness lurks an all-too-human fear of mortal fragility. Take the famous criticism of our bodily pleasures by Lucretius (and before him Aristotle or Plato) for being remedial or contrastive—that is, predicated on prior, more or less urgent needs, whose repletion they crown. Nussbaum suggests this philosophical critique reflects a resistance to accepting the cyclical, temporal rhythms that inescapably characterize our embodied, natural lives (*TD*, pp. 218–23).

Again, despite deep sympathy for Seneca in particular (one of Montaigne’s favorites amongst the ancients), Nussbaum wonders about the Stoic designation of most of the concerns that non-Stoics fear and desire as “indifferent things” (*ta adiaphora*). How can such a lofty indifference, as she sees it, sit with the Stoics’ admirable concern for justice? How also, given the Roman Stoics’ claims to be able to alleviate psychical distress, does their sense that what most people fear and desire is truly “indifferent,” ethically speaking, leave room for any genuinely therapeutic concern for others’ well-being, untainted by paternalism? (*TD*, p. 431). Like critics beginning in the Stoics’ own time, Nussbaum charges the Stoics with an “alarming degree of detachment”: one that protests a good deal too much against our mortal vulnerabilities (*TD*, p. 431).

A comparable, Nussbaumian-type diagnosis of an underlying, undesirable disavowal of finitude also underlies Yglesias’s and Weir’s presentations of Max Klein’s seemingly beatific persona in *Fearless*, at least by the end of the story’s second half. Weir inserts a set of clues into his film from early on that indicate, just as Nussbaum’s *Therapy of Desire* suggests, Max’s remarkable “invulnerability” is the flipside, in his case, of a deeply traumatized subjectivity. First of all, far from coming to a more lucid appreciation of things after the crash, Max just as often expresses his traumatized subjectivity by way of the extraordinary, manic conviction *that he cannot die*. When Laura asks him why he did not telephone her after the crash, instead driving to Los Angeles, he replies: “I thought I was dead” (*F*, 23:20). He tells Carla that she is safe with him *because they are already dead*—before correcting himself that he only meant that they “have died in their heads,” unlike the people they see busily filing past (*F*, 44:10–45:15).

Second, Max’s sage-like ataraxia in light of the reality of his social obligations begins to lapse over time, and look less like virtue than a species of ethical collapse. As the length of time after the crash grows, Max feels more and more driven to actively, dangerously re-create situations (in a bizarre species of what Hadot calls *exercices spirituels*<sup>34</sup>) that reawaken his

fear of death. Rather than create a stable new *securitas* (inner security), Max needs to reconquer and reanimate his sense of invulnerability. Laura, speaking from below, as it were, again puts it best: “Every day you have to stand on top of a roof or stand in front of a train so you can lose your fear—is that it?” (*F*, 1:07:20–30).<sup>35</sup> After conceding ruefully to Jeff’s widow’s wish that he not tell the whole truth to her insurance company, Max climbs onto the railing of the San Francisco skyscraper where the insurance agency is located. He climbs the ledge, wrestling with, then overcoming, his vertigo before standing cruciform over the city, dancing and laughing maniacally as his horrified wife comes upon the scene (*F*, 1:03:30–1:06:25). As Laura again notes, it is possible that Max at some level meant his liberating demonstration to Carla of the impossibility of her holding onto Bubble (by crashing his car head-on into the wall) to bring an end to his own life also (*F*, 1:35:50–1:38:14).

*Fearless* very strongly suggests by the end that Max’s posttraumatic quasi-invulnerability is increasingly tied to a growing desire for death: to leave behind his mortal attachments, rather than *carpe diem*. Just as Nussbaum or Montaigne might suggest (and Plato famously announces in the *Phaedo* [29c–39e]) in Max’s case also, the film suggests that to approach the condition of a sage seems uncannily akin to preparing to die. When Laura is finally able to steal into his attic study to see what Max has been working on up there in the months since the crash, she finds a sequence of mandala-like paintings, with centers of pure light or darkness. The sequence culminates in Hieronymus Bosch’s *Ascent into the Empyrean*, with this commentary: “The soul comes to the end of its long journey and, naked and alone, draws near to the divine” (*F*, 1:43:45–1:44:40).



Hieronymus Bosch, *Ascent into the Empyrean or Highest Heaven*, the subject of Max's nocturnal meditations in *Fearless*<sup>36</sup>

Max is troubled, whenever he sleeps, by recurrent dreams—through which Weir gradually makes us privy to the full horror of the crash. In these dreams, Max's unconscious mind compulsively circles around the absolute moment of “coming toward the light.” This is the same ambiguous directive Max had proffered the other survivors in the cornfield after the crash (*F*, 55:20).

The formal structuring of Weir's film strongly supports this interpretation, which sees the action of the film unfolding between the accident and Max overcoming his posttraumatic sense of invulnerability. Like a psychoanalytic process of staged anamnesis, the entire diegetic action transpires between the actual crash and Max's apocalyptic, complete recollection of the crash at the film's close. In retrospect, this end seems to make every character trait Max has evinced during the film be predicated not on a higher philosophical awareness but on repressing this last, traumatic truth. That which one cannot remember, one compulsively comes to repeat.<sup>37</sup>

As the film transpires, in fact—and as I have indicated—the character whom *Fearless* presents as the more sympathetic, and simply more human, ethical ideal is not Max but Laura, powerfully portrayed by Isabella Rossellini.



Earlier on, viewers have been alerted to the one weak spot in Max's new psychic armor represented by his wife, their marriage, and his parental role. After delivering a kind of faux Epicurean lecture to the praying Carla about the absence of larger purpose in the world, Carla silences him by asking something he seems not to have considered: "So there's no reason to love? . . . there's no reason to love?" (*F*, 41:45). When Max tells her that they are safe since "they died in their heads" during the crash, Carla shoots back at him that she did not die in her head in the crash. In those last moments, she was thinking only of her child (*F*, 44:20). In the first of Max's flashback dreams, Weir has the camera shot pass from Max's beatific face to Carla's crying baby (*F*, 32:20–32). The shot can be read as suggesting that we are witnessing two opposing ways toward, or perhaps two polarities of, what is ultimately valuable in human life.

Yet Laura, as much as Carla, represents this kind of unconditional, fiercely devoted *philia* as the story fully unfolds. In the end, as her name suggests, she is her own kind of victor. Having been initially overjoyed to see her husband home safe after the disaster, Laura is left, throughout most of the film, to stand helplessly by as Max becomes more disengaged from her and their son, instead spending more and more time with Carla, Byron, or in his attic office. When she enjoins Max, in arguably the most decisive exchange in *Fearless*, to "let me in" "to whatever you've found," Max tells her bluntly, "You can't," adding that he has no desire to "make sense" of his experience to her (*F*, 1:09:00–30). Nevertheless, Laura's love for Max never fails, alongside her love for their son. They have lived together for sixteen years, and "sixteen *great* years," as she rebukes him sternly. "Even when I hate you, I know I love you" (*F*, 1:07:30–55).

As Max unwinds, Laura describes her situation as its own kind of existential plane crash, as if *her* fearlessness in the face of this emotional catastrophe is what we are being prompted to admire. "I am going to survive this," she finally affirms to Max. "I can't fight for you anymore. If you want to destroy yourself, I can't stop you. I hope you make it" (*F*, 1:09:40–1:10:02). To Carla, she similarly affirms that, although she now wonders whether her marriage to Max may already be over, she will endure whatever she must for the sake of her son.

And so, after being injured physically by driving his car into the wall to free Carla emotionally, Max is finally drawn to accept that, as Laura puts it, "Max is not an angel. He's a man. He can't survive up there" (*F*, 1:38:00–10). While he is in the hospital after this second crash,

with Christ-like scarring across his brow, Carla visits Max in order to say good-bye. She warns him that, unable to save everyone, he needs to relearn to take care of himself. When Max returns home forlornly with Laura, arguably the most poignant moment in the tale transpires in the Kleins' kitchen. In this most domestic of settings, at this decisive time in his trajectory, Max at last acknowledges his human fragility. "I want you to save me," the man-become-sage now tells his wife (*F*, 1:47:40-45).

Before Laura can reply, their lawyer interrupts, bearing flowers and food to celebrate their legal win in the case against Intercity Air. As Laura goes to fetch champagne glasses, Max slowly takes out a strawberry from the basket and places it in his mouth, either wondering whether he has "still got it" or wanting compulsively to tempt death yet again (*F*, 1:48:45-57). In any case, his allergy to strawberries has now returned, a loaded metonym for his fragility. The "forbidden fruit" that Max's fearlessness had allowed him miraculously to savor now chokes him, just as when he was a boy. As Max passes out, his breathing stopped, we relive with him the entirety of the crash, accompanied in the film by the spiraling first movement of Górecki's *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*. And this time, as Max walks toward the mesmeric light, framed by the sides of the crashed airline, only Laura's fearful voice calls him back ("No! Max! Max!").

Max spits out the strawberry, drawing in a deep draft of air. Weir pictures him, from above, rolling on the ground embracing Laura, mouthing "I'm alive," the two of them weeping and laughing in joy (*F*, 1:55:05-55).<sup>38</sup> In a telling phrase we can borrow directly from Martha Nussbaum's critique of the classical ideal of the sage in *The Therapy of Desire*, only now has Max "yielded to human life" (*TD*, p. 275).

Roll the credits; end of film.

### III

I have now made the case announced at the beginning of this essay. The novel and film *Fearless*, as I have presented them, represent a narrative staging of some of the deepest concerns we face as finite, vulnerable selves, inescapably faced with the Socratic question: what is the best way of living? The story allows us to see and consider three responses to our own mortal vulnerability to accident, disaster, and other "acts of god" (as with Max and Carla), and the breakdown of our deepest relationships with other human beings (as with Carla and Laura).

On the one hand, in the first half of the story, the figure of Max powerfully stages for us the deep attractions of the ancient ideal of the sage. Here we see, powerfully pictured before us, a man who, by overcoming his deepest fears, is powerfully reopened to “the taste and touch and beauty of life” in ways mostly lost to those of us caught up in mundane rounds of egoistic and social concerns (*F*, 1:08:50). Yet, as I demonstrated above, through showing us what happens to Max Klein in the weeks and months that follow, *Fearless* should be read or seen as a forceful critique of this ideal of the fearless, invulnerable sage. It stages in narrative form an analysis presented by two different philosophers, centuries apart, Michel de Montaigne and Martha Nussbaum. To the extent that Max can be seen to fall from his posttraumatic grace because of, not despite, his newly embraced captivation with a superhuman invulnerability, the film represents a philosophical case that (in Montaigne’s words again) “the fairest lives . . . are those which regularly accommodate themselves to the common and human model without miracle, without extravagance” (*CEM*, p. 857).<sup>39</sup>

In this light, I suggested, the character who finally wins the ethical “laurel” in *Fearless* is not Max but his wife, Laura. She does so precisely because she is not invulnerably above those mundanities that Max, in his posttraumatic state, sees as beneath his concern. Instead, her ethical stance is shaped by her passionate attachments to her husband and her son, come what may.<sup>40</sup> Arguably the best lines in the film are given to her, at the moment when she asks her husband to “let me be a part of it”—i.e., his newly awakened sense of life and world. “I know what you’ve found is special,” she tells Max, “whatever it is and wherever it takes you. But there must be some way of living with it so it makes sense” (*F*, 1:09:45).

Works of art like *Fearless* and the forms of transformative experience they represent may (and many certainly do) challenge and expand peoples’ habitual ways of seeing and being in the world. They awaken us to different dimensions of existence and perhaps to a new sense of wonder at our shared condition. But, if Rafael Yglesias, Peter Weir, Martha Nussbaum, and Michel de Montaigne have anything to tell us, it is of the need to reconcile any higher insights worthy of the name with the humblest realities of our lives. Only with that reconciliation will these truths disdain not to destroy us, like Rilke’s angels, but help us to live fully human lives.

1. *Fearless* (Burbank: Warner Brothers, 1993) will be referenced by the abbreviation *F*, followed by minute and second counts of the relevant shots.
2. Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); hereafter abbreviated *FG*.
3. To paraphrase the famous bon mot of Seneca, “Letter 53: On the Faults of the Spirit,” in *Moral Letters to Lucilius*, vol. 1, trans. Richard Mott Gummere, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917), p. 357.
4. Pierre Hadot, “La figure du sage dans l’antiquité Gréco-Latine,” in *Études de philosophie antique* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2010), pp. 233–58, hereafter abbreviated “FS” (my translation); Pierre Hadot, “L’homme antique et la nature,” in *Études de philosophie antique*, pp. 307–18 (my translation); Pierre Hadot, “Les modèles de bonheur proposés par les philosophes antiques,” in *Études de philosophie antique* pp. 327–40 (my translation), hereafter abbreviated “MB.”
5. Julia Annas, “The Sage in Ancient Philosophy,” in *Anthropine Sophia*, ed. F. Alesse et al. (Naples: Bibliopolis, 2008), pp. 1–17; hereafter abbreviated “SAP.”
6. Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); hereafter abbreviated *TD*.
7. Many survivors recall Max’s preternatural calm in the moments of tribulation as that of a kind of Christlike, savior figure, completely beyond the ordinary run of men and women. He was, seemingly, the only one not fearfully caught up in trying to save himself or lamenting the horrific fate being visited upon them all.
8. Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 15–17.
9. On the later Stoic devaluation of wanting one’s name remembered as irrational (given that a name is “nothing but a single word, as weak as an echo”), see Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 5.33, 7.21, 3.10, 9.30.
10. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Library of Classics, 1951), secs. 23–24, pp. 82–86.
11. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 7: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), pp. 243–326.
12. Max indeed inescapably evokes the idea of a messiah in Judeo-Christian culture: Weir makes Max’s car, in his self-sacrificing demonstration to Carla, collide with a graffiti-covered wall on which a single eye peers down from the center of a large heart crowned with barbed wire (*F*, 1:31).
13. Albert Camus, *Christian Metaphysics and Neoplatonism*, trans. Ronald Srigley (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), p. 54.
14. Three different schools converged on seeing Socrates as the preeminent living exemplar of a sage, and later Stoics revered Cato the Younger (“SAP,” pp. 13–14). Nevertheless, as Hadot comments, it can in this perspective hardly have mattered that such sages were “as rare as Phoenixes in Egypt,” in a Stoic formulation. The imagined

ideal was enough, since it could “exercise for [the students] an attraction, provoking in them enthusiasm and love, making them see the appeal of a better life and become aware of the perfection which [philosophy] exhorts them to attain” (“FS,” p. 245).

15. “This very rupture between the philosopher and the conduct of everyday life is strongly felt by non-philosophers. In the works of comic and satiric authors, philosophers were portrayed as bizarre, if not dangerous, characters. It is true, moreover, that throughout all of antiquity the number of charlatans who passed themselves off as philosophers must have been considerable, and Lucian, for example, freely exercised his wit at their expense. Jurists too considered philosophers a race apart” (Pierre Hadot, “Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy,” in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. M. Chase [London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996], p. 57).

16. See Pierre Hadot, “Spiritual Exercises,” in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, pp. 81–125.

17. Socrates’s defense in Plato’s *Apology* thus turns exactly around the claim that he has revalued values in this way: “go about doing nothing else than urging you, young and old, not to care [*epimeleisthai*] for your persons or your property [30b] more than for the perfection of your soul [*psychēs*] . . . and I tell you that virtue does not come from money, but from virtue comes money and all other good things to man, both to the individual and to the state” (Plato, *Apology*, 30a–b).

18. Stobaeus, in Margaret Graver, *Stoicism and Emotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 255; Christoph Jedan, *Stoic Virtues: Chrysippus and the Religious Character of Stoic Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 163–64, 169, hereafter abbreviated SV.

19. The Stoics thus idealized Socrates’s complete equanimity at and after his trial (“Anytus and Meletus may kill me, but the good man cannot be harmed”) as the model for a philosophical death. But Cato’s serene consent to suicide rather than capture by Caesar (Plutarch, “Life of Cato the Younger,” in *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans VIII* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1919], pp. 400–7) also exemplifies this ideal.

20. “‘Think on death.’ In saying this, he [Epicurus] bids us think on freedom. He who has learned to die has unlearned slavery; he is above any external power, or, at any rate, he is beyond it. What terrors have prisons and bonds and bars for him? His way out is clear. There is only one chain which binds us to life, and that is the love of life. The chain may not be cast off, but it may be rubbed away, so that, when necessity shall demand, nothing may retard or hinder us from being ready to do at once that which at some time we are bound to do. Farewell.” Seneca, “Letter 26: On Old Age and Death,” in *Moral Letters to Lucilius*, vol. 1, pp. 191–92.

21. Seneca, “Letter 10: On Living to Oneself,” in *Moral Letters to Lucilius*, vol. 1, pp. 56–60; Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, p. 96.

22. Spinoza’s famous “a free man thinks on nothing less than death” (*Ethics*, book 4, prop. 67), is today well known; but Bacon had already argued, “Certainly the Stoics bestowed too much cost upon death and by their great preparations made it appear more fearful.” Francis Bacon, “Of Death,” in *Essays of Francis Bacon*, [authorama.com/essays-of-francis-bacon-3.html](http://authorama.com/essays-of-francis-bacon-3.html). See Michel de Montaigne, “Of Diversion,” in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971); hereafter abbreviated *CEM*. “This other lesson is too high and too difficult: ’tis for men

of the first form of knowledge purely to insist upon the thing, to consider and judge it; it appertains to one sole Socrates to meet death with an ordinary countenance, to grow acquainted with it, and to sport with it; he seeks no consolation out of the thing itself; dying appears to him a natural and indifferent accident; 'tis there that he fixes his sight and resolution, without looking elsewhere" (*CEM*, p. 632).

23. Notably in Pierre Hadot, "The Sage and the World," in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, pp. 251–63.

24. Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, book 2, line 1035.

25. Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), p. 306.

26. David Schaeffer, *The Political Philosophy of Montaigne* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 234.

27. "There is no desire more natural than that of knowledge," this essay begins, as if to set it up from the start in contest with and contrast to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Michel de Montaigne, "Of Experience," *CEM*, p. 815.

28. Schaeffer, *Political Philosophy of Montaigne*, pp. 227–50.

29. See Schaeffer, *Political Philosophy of Montaigne*, p. 206.

30. Notably, Max immediately, callously chooses to disclose to his wife that, after their first meeting, he feels for Carla an "overwhelming love. . . . I've never felt anything like it" (*F*, 46:40). One could argue that in such cases, honesty and the wish to disclose the whole truth ought, in a truly sage person, to be tempered by other real and important considerations, such as sensitivity to the feelings of others.

31. Lucretius, introduction to *Nature of Things*, book 3, trans. Cyril Bailey (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910). [oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2242#Lucretius\\_1496\\_114](http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2242#Lucretius_1496_114).

32. "For if we must speak as befits the majesty of the truth now known to us, then he was a god, yea a god, noble Memmius, who first found out that principle of life, which now is called wisdom, and who by his skill saved our life from high seas and thick darkness, and enclosed it in calm waters and bright light. His services to men are far greater than those of the gods and heroes of old" (Lucretius, *Nature of Things*, introduction, book 5. [oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2242#Lucretius\\_1496\\_196](http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2242#Lucretius_1496_196)).

33. See previous note.

34. See the *locus classicus* in Hadot, "Spiritual Exercises," in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, pp. 81–125.

35. Earlier in the film, fleeing the demands of the media eager to hear the "good Samaritan," Max almost suicidally walks across a busy, six-lane highway without changing stride; and on reaching the other side, bawls hysterically up at the sky: "You can't kill me! You want to kill me but you can't!" Clearly, his sense of fearlessness has wavered from the start: here it is awakened by the demands of the media.

36. From [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ascent\\_of\\_the\\_Blessed#/media/File:Hieronimus\\_Bosch\\_013.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ascent_of_the_Blessed#/media/File:Hieronimus_Bosch_013.jpg).

37. Sigmund Freud, “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis II),” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 12 (1911–1913), *The Case of Schreber, Papers on Technique and Other Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1914), pp. 145–56.

38. Max had initially, after the crash, expressed his wonder at surviving in the second person, whispering “you’re not dead” at his image in the mirror. Now, he is able to take new responsibility for his fragile self.

39. Compare, a little later, “the pretty inscription wherewith the Athenians honored the entry of Pompey into their city is conformable to my sense: ‘By so much are you a god, as you confess yourself a human being’” (*CEM*, p. 887).

40. I have not considered here the charge that the ardent defender of the philosophical ideal of the sage could make: that Max is not a fair test case, since he is so clearly the sufferer of an unusual form of posttraumatic distress, whose remarkable epiphany is not supported by philosophical reflection or an ordered regime of spiritual practices.