**Against Stoicism and, by the way, against Greek ethics**

**Abstract : Stoicism, as an example of Ancient Greek ethics is criticised, along with some of the assumptions of Ancient Greek ethics. Stoicism has become quite widespread as a popular moral philosophy. Here the classical form of Stoicism is debunked and a well-known contemporary version of it is criticised as offering a too limited view of the ethical life.**

For some strange reason, we are prone to look back to the Ancient Greeks and Romans for moral guidance. We find their other philosophical views very dated, such as their metaphysics and natural philosophy, but remain attracted to their ethical views. One thinks of what is known as virtue ethics, the idea that a right action is one that tends to be done by a virtuous person. The influence here is Aristotle’s *Nichomachaen Ethics.* To be fair, a lot of this interest remains largely academic, and there is limited general awareness of virtue ethics. On a more popular level, there is a lot of interest now in Stoicism, a slightly later Graeco-Roman theory, although still a type of virtue ethics. Little books about Stoicism, some of them even entitled *The Little Book of Stoicism* like Jonas Salzgeber’s, and books with titles like ‘*How to use Stoic Philosophy to Find Inner Peace and Happiness’* (Jason Hemlock)are widely found, encouraging us to be not just stoical, as Granny did (“Come on, lad. It’s not so bad!”) but Stoical, which is rather different. Stoicism is also praised for its psychological insights and claimed as a background to some contemporary therapeutic methods in psychology, such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy

But today you can’t easily defend *classical* Stoicism, as it depends on some strong metaphysical claims about our place in a divinely created intrinsically purposeful world. So, if you don’t want that, you have to strip the ethical and homiletic part of Stoicism away from the metaphysics, which is what is done by fairly cautious, sophisticated modern Stoics like Lawrence Becker *(A New Stoicism)*, Donald Robinson (*Stoicism and the Art of Happiness)* and William Irvine (*A Guide to the Good Life : The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy)*. In this way, Stoicism becomes essentially an ethical position. But how attractive is it? Unfortunately, at least in the hands of its largely patriarchal and chauvinistic Graeco-Roman originals, it looks morally highly dubious. But in general, going back to the Greeks and Romans for ethical uplift presumably gets you only so far. To what extent do we really want to take moral lessons from slave-owners?

A brief history : Classical Stoicism was founded by the Greek Cypriot, Zeno of Citium (334 – 262 BCE), who was hugely influenced by Socrates. Zeno founded a Stoic school in Athens, but none of his writings survive. On his death, the school was led by Cleanthes (331-232 BCE), whose output was huge but hardly anything has survived, apart from his famous hymn to Zeus. On his death leadership passed to Chrysippus (279–206 BCE) who again wrote a great deal that has not survived. Because little if anything remains of the writings of these philosophers, popular and modern perceptions of Stoicism are based almost entirely – and perhaps misleadingly- on the impressions given by three later Roman Stoics whose works have survived: Seneca (4-65 AD), Epictetus (55–135 AD) and Marcus Aurelius (121– 180 AD), as well as commentaries by the likes of Cicero (106-43 BC).

Epictetus sets the tone here with a number of bold claims about the nature of the world and about ethics. He sees the cosmos as a divinely created and unified Whole in which everything has a natural and appropriate place and purpose. He sees it as created because he sees it as designed and evidence of a wide-ranging divine reason. These claims are in line with the metaphysical position of earlier Greek Stoics like Chrysippus. For example, says Epictetus, we see designed purposefulness in, say, sexual matters. We are rhetorically asked, for instance, ‘What about the desire of the male for sex with the female, and their ability to use the organs constructed for that purpose – don’t they proclaim their creator, too?’. This kind of thing feeds into the central Stoical idea that to live rightly is to live in accordance with nature, a position usually referred to as ethical naturalism.

But the problems this raises are legion and well-known. Contemporary, academic Stoics, like Becker – more of whom later - have sought to mitigate this bare naturalism, but popularising contemporary Stoics have no such reservations, Jonas Saltzgeber happily asserting that ‘To be virtuous, then, is to live as nature designed us to live’. But we all know where this kind of thing leads. Epictetus’ gushing about the design of male and female sex organs quickly becomes Marcus Aurelius condemning gay sex. Aurelius, like any good Roman *man*, values ‘manliness’ and prides himself at one point on ‘putting a stop to homosexual love of young men’. It also leads him to an admiration of ‘the pattern of a household governed by the paterfamilias’ and the appeal of a ‘submissive, loving and unaffected’ wife.

Not merely gays and unsubmissive women are at risk before the Stoical tide, but the beast must gallop also. Epictetus points out that ‘nature has created the animals that are born for service ready for our use’. This outlook, springing from the widespread Ancient Greek idea that only humans have serious cognitive capacity, is clearly at odds with contemporary interest in widening our moral circle to include animals and perhaps even non-sentient living things. The Classical Stoical defence of ‘Nature’ has, ironically, the consequence of largely corrupting one’s view of nature, of tempting us to forget that we share a natural continuum, with the chimp, the fish and the tree. Heat-waves and floods are steadily gathering to remind us of this. We will then very much need our stoicism, if not our Stoicism.

Also at the heart of Stoic homiletics – and central perhaps to the popular idea of what being stoical (small s) is - is the idea that one really shouldn’t get worked up about what one cannot change. In Becker’s ‘Stoical logic’ this becomes an Axiom of Futility, to the effect that no rational agent should attempt the impossible. One is encouraged to bow calmly before the inevitable, and not rage against it.

This approach gives rise to the well-known Stoical calmness in the face of death. Perhaps one of the appeals of Stoicism today, as orthodox religion slowly recedes, is its advice on how to face death. Oblivion beckons so one needs some way of meeting oblivion. The Stoic recommends not merely the calm, but the *gratified* acceptance of death. As Marcus Aurelius puts it, ‘one should pass through this tiny fragment of time in tune with nature, and leave it gladly, as an olive might fall when ripe’. This calmness in the face of the apparently unavoidable is allied to another central Stoical ethical claim, that nothing is actually good or bad in itself – even death. It all depends on how you look at it. Epictetus makes the point : ‘If we saw things differently we would act differently, in line with our different idea of what is right or wrong.’ This is the view that has fed into such psychotherapeutic techniques as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy.

A contemporary Stoic psychologist, like William Irvine, updates this particular insight in terms of what he calls ‘framing’. Whether things are cause for misery depends on how you ‘frame’ them. He gives the example of someone who is wronged and sees themself as a victim, so they become angry. Another person wronged sees themselves as a ‘target’ and so feels proud of how well they responded to being shot at. Irvine himself, told by his doctor he had, for health reasons, to give up driving, sculling and drinking took great pride in the workarounds he developed. For the challenge of giving up drinking he Stoically embraced homebrew hibiscus, which ‘looked like wine and had a nicely complex taste’. Problem solved.

But while this is perhaps one way of facing the inevitability of death, there is little reason to think, even if we set religion aside, that this is the only, or even, as the Stoics imply, the *best* way. Actually, the most contemporary response to death would be to treat it as a technological problem, as Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos appear to, and as those bold souls whose bodies and heads fill the cryogenic laboratories in California appear to. On this approach, one does not resign oneself to death as an inevitability, but sees it as a puzzle to be solved. To be fair, modern Stoics do try to accommodate this approach. Becker’s Axiom of Futility does not prevent one from attempting to deal with the impossible by showing that it is not in fact impossible. Such an option, of course, would have been inconceivable to Marcus Aurelius, although this only goes to show – against Stoicism - how fluid the concept of the ‘natural’ is.

One other interesting possibility, that Stoicism seems to find unintelligible, is that one does actually *rage* against death. One finds this attitude in certain poets. W.B. Yeats does it a little in *Sailing to Byzantium,* but the best-known example is perhaps Dylan Thomas’s *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night,* which opens

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Clearly, one may not be able to prevent death, but there seems no good reason why one should not *rage* as a result. While this might seem pointless, it can perhaps be seen as on a par with those who make what can seem like pointless political protests, like standing in the way of a government tank. Such an action is intelligible not merely because, though impractical, it might gain a certain amount of publicity. One might do it simply in order to preserve one’s integrity. Similarly, one might curse death, rather than resign to it like a plum falling off a tree. The action, as in Thomas’s case perhaps, could have a certain aesthetic value.

The contemporary Stoic position, exemplified by Lawrence Becker, is that there would be something *unhealthy* about raging against death, and they might point out in this context that it may be relevant that Thomas was a known drunk, not keen on homebrew hibiscus. But this would be to strike the ancient patriarchalist note a little too hard. Still, Becker roots his contemporary Stoicism firmly in the notion of pyschological health, painting a picture of ‘normal’ human development from the cradle towards the possession of what he calls ‘ideal agency’. A notion of ‘ideal’ Stoic agency - the Stoic ‘Sage’ - is imagined where one is largely calm and has no ‘retrospective regret or prospective alarm about things outside one’s control’. Allegedly vicious character traits such as ‘phobias, distrust, pessimism, depression’ are seen as impeding agency, and one is expected to seek ‘cooperation, reciprocity, conviviality and benevolent initiatives’. Virtue is seen in terms of wholly effective agency and viewed as the primary good for human beings.

The obvious objection to this is to imagine a figure whose life lacks Becker’s conception of psychological health and agency, but who we are not compelled to see as ethically flawed. Becker anticipates this objection by envisaging someone whose agency is flawed, who displays a certain ‘fragility’, what he calls a ‘tragic’ figure, who possesses exceptional gifts but seems to play them through incompetently. One might imagine a drunken Dylan Thomas, encouraging rage towards death, as such a figure. Are we bound to regard such a life as flawed?

Becker suggests that if we were faced with a person with vulnerability to a physically crippling illness and we could vaccinate them against it, surely it would be right to do so, and similarly, if we could vaccinate someone against a ‘crippling breakdown’ in their powers of agency, surely we would do that as well. As he puts it, rhetorically, ‘Is there some good reason for wanting people to be hurtable?’

But one can imagine a person whose life is characterised by a quite self-conscious vulnerability and weak sense of agency. One can imagine someone prone to depression and distrust, who lacks strong instincts towards cooperation and conviviality. To imply that such lives lack an ideal conception of ‘virtue’ so that one is led thereby to view such lives as ethically suspicious is to take the first steps along a rather dark path. The Ancient Greek conceptions of the virtuous person all seem to have a certain unappealing character. One thinks of the figures from pre-Socratic Greece that fed into Nietzsche’s conception of the *ubermensch.*  One thinks of the virtues that are lauded in the construction of Plato’s *Republic,* that prototype of the modern fascist state. One thinks of Aristotle’s self-regarding ‘great souled man’. Becker’s updated ideal Stoic agent fits in with this tradition, with its scientific intolerance of so-called human ‘failings’ and indecisions. But its vision itself fails because it will not permit us a world in which we can accept the moral integrity of a man who drinks too much and encourages us, in glorious verse, to rage against the inevitable. It fails because it would not be prepared to grant such a person the title of Sage.

Wordcount (inc. Abstract) : 2236