

Response to Pain; Positive Thinking ? Comparision with Cynics and (modern) Stoics

Post by “Don” of August 24, 2022 at 12:20 AM

Okay, for the sake of curiosity, I'm going to try and pull out some excerpts that intrigued/bothered me in the article. I'm not reading ahead so if I react to something the author clarifies later, I'll admit that. Bear with me if you like. If you're looking for well-crafted, thought-out prose, you won't find it here. I fully realize this post went way too long. Just sayin' All quotes are from there unless otherwise noted:

Quote

This talk was given at Stoicon in Toronto on October 14, 2017. The topic of the conference was “Stoicism in the Workplace.”

Right of the bat, I'm expecting a less-than-reliable portrayal of Epicurus and his philosophy. Go on...

Quote

- unmoved apathetic calm
- impassive serene unflappable
- tranquil unfeeling placid
- unsentimental unemotional unruffled

If you are like me and like my students, you can easily identify several of these words as negative words that you would not want to hear applied to yourself. Others are more complimentary; some might even be neutral. But the point of interest here is that if you make the effort to strip away the positive or negative valence of these words, all of them mean pretty much the same thing: they describe a person who doesn't respond emotionally in situations where many people would.

Okay, this annoys me and seems to be a strawman argument. There's a reason we have different words in English. Each may be similar but there are shades of meaning that are important. Otherwise, we wouldn't bother with different words! The author's point of "if you make the effort to strip away the positive or negative valence of these words" is counterproductive and disingenuous. They're basically saying "if you make the effort to strip away the definitions of these words and let me substitute my own watered down meaning." By Zeus, I'm not even past the first paragraph.

Quote

bringing oneself closer to the dispassionate life

If the author is trying to say Epicureanism is a "dispassionate life," I will not be onboard with that. In fact, Diogenes Laertius relates that "(Epicurean) Sages are greatly affected by the pathē (i.e., more so than other people) but this doesn't hinder their progress to wisdom."

Quote

We're going to need some terminology. Our word "emotion" is a class term, it names the category whose members are anger, grief, fear, delight, eagerness, and whatever else we think is of that kind. If we look for equivalent words in Greek as spoken in the fourth century BCE, we find two possibilities. One is pathos, 'a way of being affected'; corresponding to the Latin word affectus. The other is tarachē, 'a disturbance', for which the Latin equivalent is perturbatio. I do not intend to make any distinction between these two terms. Some authors favor one or the other, but the meaning is the same, or at least near enough to allow for the comparisons I'll be making here.

Okay, gritting teeth again. There's a reason there were different words! So, there's a reason that "some authors favor one or the other"! Is the author going to equate apatheia with ataraxia? I can see it coming. Go on...

Quote

The same goes for two related words that alternate in the record for the Greek philosophies we'll be looking at. From pathos was derived the term apatheia, the a-prefix indicating a lack or absence. That one I'll usually translate "impassivity." And similarly, the word tarachē gets an a prefix and becomes ataraxia, which I'll usually translate "non-disturbedness". Either way, we have a word tied to the idea of a life without emotion, without yet specifying what exactly such a life might be.

AND there it is! I would not define ataraxia as "the idea of a life without emotion"! Isn't joy an emotion? Is the author ruling out feeling joy later on?

Quote

Crantor's consolation must have said, as most of these pieces do, "it's OK to cry for a while, anyone would"—but then he turns philosopher and adds,

I cannot by any means agree with those who extol some kind of impassivity (apatheia). Such a thing is neither possible nor beneficial. I do not wish to be ill, but if I am, and if some part of my body is to be cut open or even amputated, let me feel it. This absence of pain comes at a high price: it means being numb in body, and in mind scarcely

human. — Crantor, quoted by Cicero, Tusc. Disp. 3.10

It's actually Tusc. Disp. Book 3.6 not 10. And I'm always skeptical of someone saying "X must have said" when we don't have any access to X. Here's the full context of that citation...

[Cicero's Tusculan Disputations, On the Nature of the Gods, On the Commonwealth](#)

Quote from Cicero in Tusculan Disputations 3.6

Crantor, who was one of the most distinguished men that our Academy has ever produced, say this amiss: "I am by no means of their opinion who talk so much in praise of I know not what insensibility, which neither can exist, nor ought to exist". "I would choose," says he, "never to be ill; but should I be so, still I should choose to retain my sensation, whether there was to be an amputation or any other separation of anything from my body. For that insensibility cannot be but at the expense of some unnatural ferocity of mind, or stupor of body." But let us consider whether to talk in this manner be not allowing that we are weak, and yielding to our softness. Notwithstanding, let us be hardy enough, not only to lop off every arm of our miseries, but even to pluck up every fibre of their roots. Yet still something, perhaps, may be left behind, so deep does folly strike its roots: but whatever may be left it will be no more than is necessary. But let us be persuaded of this, that unless the mind be in a sound state, which philosophy alone can effect, there can be no end of our miseries. Wherefore, as we began, let us submit ourselves to it for a cure; we shall be cured if we choose to be. I shall advance something further. I shall not treat of grief alone, though that indeed is the principal thing; but, as I originally proposed, of every perturbation of the mind, as I termed it; disorder, as the Greeks call it: and first, with your leave, I shall treat it in the manner of the Stoics, whose method is to reduce their arguments into a very small space; afterward I shall enlarge more in my own way.

I'll admit I skipped the Cynics section.

Now, the author begins to paint Epicurus with the "emotionless" brush.

Quote

The goal of Democritus's ethics was a good state of mind, *euthumia*, defined as "a calm and stable existence, not disturbed by any fear or superstition or any other emotion" (Diogenes Laertius 9.45)

Okay, so *euthumia* was Democritus's *telos* or goal, not Epicurus's. And did not Epicurus call Democritus the *Lerocritus* (the nonsense-monger)? That said I'm curious about the author's citation of Democritus in DL IX.45:

Quote from Diogenes Laertius IX.45 on Democritus

[45] All things happen by virtue of necessity, the vortex being the cause of the creation of all things, and this he calls necessity. The end of action is tranquillity, which is not identical with pleasure, as some by a false interpretation have understood, but a state in which the soul continues calm and strong, undisturbed by any fear or superstition or any other emotion. This he calls well-being and many other names. The qualities of things exist merely by convention ; in nature there is nothing but atoms and void space. These, then, are his opinions.

The author makes mention of Epicurus's nautical and water-based metaphors, which I do find interesting. Tell you what, it's getting late. I'm going to hold off commenting on the remainder of the article until tomorrow... Stay tuned.