

Welcome Julia!

Post by “Julia” of May 4, 2024 at 8:33 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[...] I find [that Vox Stoica link] to be very inaccurate as to Epicurus but very typical of Stoic interpretations [...]

While I do agree with you, I cannot help but have sympathies for the creator of this “overview and explanation” (as he calls it), because those very inaccuracies were what made Epicureanism appealing to me *then* – they made it seem like I might find even more quasi-Stoic material down this road, which, due to the high Google rank of this site (and its sister sites, like newepicurean.com, the podcast, et cetera) thankfully I did not. *Now*, the more that I relearn and have a chance to get my head set back straight, the less those inaccuracies are appealing. To put it differently, those inaccurate representations helped lure me astray from the path of a Stoic – “lure”, because if I would have been conscious of what awaits me, that notion would inevitably have elicited a dry, cold chuckle accompanied by a dismissive hand gesture.

You see, to succeed within the setting I found myself in, to be victimized dreadfully for the majority of my existence, yet remain dead set on someday emerging the victor, I was hell-bent on being harder than the life I had to lead; if I wasn't already as empty inside as Stoicism is, I certainly wanted to be, so we were quite the match, and its theistic, platonic aspects, moronic bordering on malicious as they are, served as an anchor in a microcosm characterised by arbitrariness and powerlessness in the face of pain. Mind you, hedonic calculus did not fail me at all, but, being surrounded by Western culture, it lead me straight to Stoicism:

As a child, I knew to endure and prevail, such that someday I will get to see the bright side of life. Thus, I chose to toughen up to make it. I wanted to hold nothing dear to my heart, so nobody can pull its strings. I wanted to be a robot, because robots are strong and don't have feelings. I wanted to be like those steely heroes of popular culture, who succeed against all odds. I learned to keep to myself, to keep my mouth shut, to go through the motions, no matter what, no questions asked. When faced with suicidal ideation, I knew that was for cowards -- but Stoics are brave. When faced with illegal transgressions of my rights as a human or my boundaries as a person, I knew that was unjust – and when plagued by the emotional need for justice to be restored, I trusted in fate; everyone else would only let me down, anyway. During all this time, during many years, I needed a reason to fulfill my duties, to keep up discipline, to exceed expectations. However, the burden to perform at that level under such circumstances for so long would have been too much for me, being an isolated minor; would have been too much for me to see through in terms of the delayed gratification implied by my innate hedonic calculus. By instead embracing fate and the pursuit of virtue as a goal in itself, the gratification

became immediate. That Stoic delusion allowed me to short-circuit my wires enough to keep me going, to keep me on track. For years and years, my mantra was: "Just one more day. I can do it one more day." And so I did, again and again and again.

Eventually, my life *did* change, and suddenly, everything was great! Only...after so many years, the first half of what hedonic calculus had meant for me - "toughen up" - was all that remained in my psyche. I had forgotten the remainder - "in order to enjoy the bright side". This was not an immediate problem: I had the guide rails of society, exams to pass, rent to pay, and so I simply kept performing. When things happened to get too easy, I made them harder for myself. Adversity was all I knew, so too much normal life, too little stress, too much freedom made me tense and uneasy, like a captive animal being warily suspicious of the wild. Granted, I was still dead inside, but things were going objectively well for me. I thought this is it, I thought I had made it.

A few years down that road, I happened to date someone kind and caring, who wasn't quite satisfied with my universal four-season answer to the question of how I feel: "I'm fine." In an effort to embrace the challenge and perform well, I learned, ever so slowly, to recognise and name feelings. Thus, "good" and "bad" became the first words I relearned after having so thoroughly been drowned in the anaesthetic of Stoic mentality. While certainly well-intentioned, this unsupervised visit to the recovery room soon led me to unravel in anguish as the numbness subsided. My career came to an unscheduled full stop, and I found myself with nothing to do - nothing to *fulfill* - such that, without an external definition of the mould and pattern I portrayed, the emptiness that was I imploded in on itself.

I never recovered. Years of experts, their diagnostics, evaluations and reports. Countless hours spent with therapists - trauma therapists, behavioral therapists, occupational therapists, even speech therapists as my childhood impairments resurfaced. When before nighttime meant pitch-black empty darkness, as I began to dream again, it meant nightmares. When before daytime meant robotically functioning with vigilant readiness, as I began to reconstitute as an actual person, it meant PTSD. This prescription drug, that prescription drug. Sports. Art. Music. Travel. I never recovered.

So I gave up. I gave *in*; in to the tempting bait that if Stoicism propped me up once, it would prop me up twice - and who needs feelings, anyway?!

Having grown up around military installations, I reached for biographies of members of the special forces, who quite universally embody many aspects of modern Stoicism, and, it seemed to me, did on a continuous basis what I failed to do: They did their duty, they functioned, performed. Consuming that material was repugnant and agreeable at the same time - it was repulsive, yet soothing - it was anaesthetic, but also analgesic. I went ahead, getting simultaneously worse and better, getting more capable and less human with each step again. The solid ground of empty spaces - my familiar territory. So I soon looked for an audiobook version of Marcus Aurelius' Meditations - you know - to listen to at breakfast, lunch and dinner, to listen to in bed, to rush things a little.

Now you will understand why it is that I have sympathies for the poor Stoic soul, who so duteously recorded that marvelously inaccurate “overview and explanation” of Epicureanism – who knows what might have happened to me, had he labelled his accidental signpost to The Garden more accurately. What I still failed to set forth is how, at long last, Epicureanism manages to expertly stitch together those two disjointed, ostensibly mutually exclusive perspectives visible in the fractured kaleidoscope of my mind: feelings and functioning.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it does so by expressly making the case for pleasure; by expressly stating the full equation of hedonic calculus, unapologetically, unreservedly including the second half of it: Do unpleasant things *for more pleasure in return – and do pleasant things as ends in themselves*. The wisdom of a child. Such a simple truth, yet so very hard to recapture once escaped. Pleasure, being a feeling, is inherently axiomatic and readily operationalized; “happiness”, “flourishing”, “meaningfulness” are all vague, veiled, and nebulous, cannot be readily translated into action, aren't workable principles.

Having gained some self-awareness in therapy, I knew for a long time that I no longer delayed gratification; I didn't know how to anymore. Instead of embracing a task, I'd force myself through it. Instead of preparing a reward, I'd self-soothe meanwhile or recover later. Having gained some self-awareness in therapy, I knew for a long time that I no longer played; I didn't know how to anymore. Instead of *playing* cards, I *engineered* my success in them. Instead of simply enjoying a walk in nature, I exercised mindfulness. Instead of spontaneous humour, I crafted jokes. These peculiarities were known, yet during all those years, *nobody had ever mentioned pleasure to me*.

I recently went for a walk. Was I mindfully present in the moment? Possibly. Did I remain meditatively aware, yet amicably indifferent of my thoughts and impulses? Perhaps. What I do know with certainty is that it was pleasurable. A rich pleasure is what it was, plain and simple. I recently went for a walk for the first time in three decades.

I recently made myself happy. Did I follow one of the prescribed behaviours? Possibly. Did I use any of the self-regulation techniques I had been taught? Perhaps. What I do know with certainty is that it was pleasurable. A rich pleasure is what it was, not self-care, not self-compassion. I recently made myself happy for the first time in three decades.

Elated by the revelation of pleasure, that forgotten concept I was much estranged from, I tried to do things for a reward afterwards, to delay gratification, et voilà, that too worked again, because I was reasonably happy to begin with – happy, not stressed, pressured or tense –, and could anticipate pleasure in return – pleasure, not soothing or recovery.

Next, I realised there were compelling answers to all the big questions – Where do we come from? Where do we go? What about existential dread? Why struggle? Why not live in a box? Is life suffering? If so, why not end it? If it isn't, why not end it? What's the point? – *which were rooted in observation, in proper reasoning*. Finally, here it was: a philosophy that is firmly based on what is perceptible, sensible, and true. That was quite an unexpected game changer, and with it everything just fell into place.

Soon after, I ended therapy, quit prescription drugs, and resumed what I set out to do as a child: to see the bright side of life. Now that I finally have a drop-in replacement for the motivational void left behind by the evaporated dictates of virtue ethics and coercion, now that I finally have an answer to the question of "Why? What for?", now that I have a sensible reason to act virtuously, to have discipline, now that I can finally get out of bed in the morning and start a task with ease again, now that I am regaining control of my life, I am regaining agency, and at last, for the first time in three decades, I am genuinely empowered and free.

I am recovering.

I can feel it.