

Natural versus Unnatural

Post by "Matt" of December 30, 2020 at 8:54 AM

It's been sometime since I've been exploring the philosophical cornucopia that is online...but recently I had a chance to visit some pages and groups of other philosophical schools.

One thing that becomes immediately noticeable is the line of questions that come from people looking for advice about living a certain type of life. The Stoics for example who advocate for living in accord with nature seem to be almost paralyzed by their philosophy. Paralyzed without constantly reviewing what the sages have to say about every possible situation in life.

Questions about "what's the proper virtuous way to react to something?" "Should I not date someone who isn't a stoic even though I'm in love?" "Should I drink coffee for the sake of pleasure?" Etc.

It seems to me that a philosophy that continually causes a person to second guess their behavior at every turn and choice that they make would seem to be the opposite of living in accord with nature. In fact, in my humble opinion, sounds more like bondage than freedom.

Conversely, we come to Epicurus who provides knowledge of the Canon for us. He leaves us with our senses and our own prudence to do what we know our natural desires are. He tells us there are unnatural desires, but let's us choose whether those desires are worth the pain or trouble to attain them. Our human nature, which already is in accord with nature by being firmly fixed on pleasurable experiences drives us.

So when we look at philosophies which claim to be living in accord with nature and those that seem to be extremely unnatural, it becomes very apparent when we see how the philosophy is applied to daily life.

Post by "Cassius" of December 30, 2020 at 11:02 AM

Yes I agree with that observation. The Stoics seem to be looking for "answers" as if every decision in life has a set standard answer and all they have to do is find the magic words or patterns to follow and all will be well.

To start from the perspective that there are in fact no standard answers and patterns is a very very different perspective. And it's not going to the opposite extreme of saying that everything

is chaotic and that there's no way to predict outcomes. Rather it's observing that nature works according to set principles (deriving from the elemental particles) and that those principles are not uniformly ordered by a divine being but rather by a context which can to a large extent be observed and intelligently navigated.

In trying to put all this together in my head I keep coming back to the need to be grounded in the basic nature of the universe but then after that to become a part of a community of "friends" (like-minded people) with whom you're regularly interacting to check your own observations plus to carry out the day to day activities of life among people with whom you enjoy interacting and whose presence helps you feel how life is worthwhile.

Post by "Matt" of December 30, 2020 at 1:48 PM

It's just interesting that that the argument that most Stoics make is that their philosophy is a "natural" philosophy in accord with the "mind" or "will" of the universe. Yet...their philosophy drives them to deny their emotions and feelings, embracing rationality and pursuing self-validated virtue. Especially in the case of the modern stoic who denies the idea of the providential logos (of which there is no evidence), their idea of virtue is entirely a human construct.

But seeing that the universe is not "rational" in the sense that it's perfected for the comfort and perpetuation of human life nor does the universe seem to be concerned in any way about human ideas of virtue. It would seem that the very basis of the philosophy is not in accord with reality and nature. It would seem that Stoicism is unnatural to me.

Post by "Cassius" of December 30, 2020 at 2:43 PM

Yes and that's the basis of Nietzsche's blast against them which I am sure you have seen:

<https://newepicurean.com/nietzsche-on-s...fraud-of-words/>

I suppose that's why the modern stoics try to back away from the ancient viewpoints, but in backing away from that foundation they are left with no foundation at all.

Post by "Joshua" of December 31, 2020 at 5:53 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1815-natural-versus-unnatural/>

And let us not for a moment suffer the confusion that this 'naturalness' is in any way related to Natural Law, a position that I regard as more unnatural than almost anything in philosophy. Nature furnishes the norm, but it does not furnish moral "Laws" for our mindless obedience!

Post by "Matt" of January 9, 2021 at 9:56 PM

Here's a perfect example of another stoic dilemma posted in a forum that made me shake my head today...

"Is it necessary for a Stoic to be constantly striving toward productive activity?"

I have had a particularly busy week and this morning I chose to sleep in. My plan for the day is a few small household chores, a little cooking, reading a bit of trashy horror and video games. Hardly lofty activities designed for self improvement.

However I really don't feel that constant activity is productive without the occasional break to recharge.

Does this approach meet the Stoic ideal or am I falling short?"

My response:

"Take rest; a field that has rested gives a bountiful crop." Ovid

"My Epicurean perspective would say that you need to listen to your body to the extent that you need rest. If you are burning the candle at both ends needlessly for no other purpose other than fulfilling a philosophical goal, I'd say you are not aligning yourself with nature at all."

Post by "Matt" of January 9, 2021 at 10:00 PM

Again, unnatural ideals...just for the sake of it. Totally contrary to nature.

Like a religion, Stoicism is paralyzing for its practitioners. This is akin to needing to perform daily prayers to hit the ideal performance level.

Post by “Charles” of January 9, 2021 at 10:44 PM

[Quote from Matt](#)

“Is it necessary for a Stoic to be constantly striving toward productive activity?”

Like a religion, Stoicism is paralyzing for its practitioners. This is akin to needing to perform daily prayers to hit the ideal performance level.

I've described (contemporary) Stoicism, and more accurately its current standing in regards to its adherents as a "a cult of perpetual self-improvement". Many in that crowd see nothing wrong with that statement despite picking up my pejorative intent. In my eyes, self-improvement or whatever sort of sharpening of your abilities that also encompasses must serve some end, or at the very least be aimed at a general purpose rather than itself for the sake of it.

Post by “Godfrey” of January 10, 2021 at 1:28 AM

Wouldn't that end or general purpose be pleasure? 🤔

Post by “Matt” of January 10, 2021 at 4:59 AM

In our worldview which aligns with nature it is pleasure. ☐ We are aligned with nature.

Isn't it nice to not have to constantly be asking “sage” advice as to whether we should be drinking coffee or taking naps? Such preposterous stuff. Stoicism is baffling.

Post by “Matt” of January 10, 2021 at 6:32 AM

And Charles absolutely! What is the “end” for the stoic practitioner? What is the goal of all this mental sharpening?

Not everyone ends up in a prisoner of war camp like Stockdale did. There are terribly tough times in life, but that does not negate the fact that there are an infinite number of possible pleasurable experiences in life. So to justify spending your life trying to repress your feelings and deny yourself pleasure to be able to deal “better” with tough times is preposterous.

Post by “Don” of January 10, 2021 at 11:34 AM

I'm sure many if not all of you saw this blog exchange a while ago between Wilson and Pigliucci but, if not, this seemed a good spot to repost:

<https://massimopigliucci.medium.com/guest-post-wro...sm-6f60ae1df232>

I don't agree with all of Wilson's characterizations of Epicureanism, but the back and forth between the two was at least entertaining after a fashion.

Post by “Cassius” of January 10, 2021 at 12:33 PM

I can't remember that I saw that -- thank you!