

Valueless Virtue in Modern Stoicism

Post by “Matt” of January 10, 2019 at 8:48 AM

If you were to ask me what my main issue is with “MoStoicism” The answer would have to be the “virtue for the sake virtue” dilemma that appears throughout the Modern philosophy.

As opposed to a historical Traditional Stoicism, which is much closer to a theistic religion, many Modern Stoics tend to view their philosophy devoid of the trademark pantheistic Providence.

This is an ENORMOUS issue.

Why? Your virtue is your own.

Rather than virtue being dictated by a Universal standard, virtue becomes subjective and relative to the individual.

Self-denial and detachment to achieve Stoic sage-hood becomes entirely circular. Who says you are courageous? Who says you are just? Who says you are wise? You do. There is a piece missing from the equation.

According to many MoSto’s, there is no Providential mind and nothing further after death in this materialist universe. So what’s the point of virtue from this perspective?

Can you achieve ataraxia and aponia from self-derived virtue and mental detachment?

I would say no.

In an entirely non-providential universe, the Epicureans have it right. If there is no deity and no afterlife, then seeking pleasure would be highest good, because nothing else exists in its place. Modern Stoics, according to their own world view, are wasting time not seeking after pleasure as the highest good. They delude themselves by believing virtue has worth. But in reality virtue without providence is utterly worthless.

Post by “Godfrey” of January 10, 2019 at 3:20 PM

Another way to say the same thing: if virtue is subjective and relative to the individual, how does an individual measure virtue? Through the senses, pain and pleasure, and the anticipations.

Post by “Matt” of January 10, 2019 at 3:26 PM

It's an interesting position most Modern Stoics take. I've asked them in the past how it all works within their tailored system and the answer always comes off as a jumble.

Post by “Cassius” of January 10, 2019 at 3:58 PM

As you know LD I totally agree, and if I don't watch myself I will say something I shouldn't 😊
OK let me go so far as to say that MOSTO seems to be in many respects a British phenomena, and It irritates me greatly think that the peoples I am most closely related to (and perhaps you? 😊) can't do better than to see how ludicrous their position makes them.

Having recently been pointed to the Ninon De'Ecoles material, and the correspondence she had with St. Evremond (I will come back and correct spellings) I am now forced to confess that I see a pattern. For centuries now the French have totally outclassed the English in their study and understanding of Epicurus. Somehow "stiff upper lip" and being French seem totally impossible to join together in one picture, and in that respect they run rings around are English ancestors.

Ok so my addition to this thread is not very scholarly and probably not helpful, but after ten years of studying Epicurus I am still looking for the day when I meet the first Brit who I think has really internalized what it means to follow Epicurean philosophy. The Brits and most of their MoSto people seem to be naturally-born Stoics in the worst sense of that word. They have taken the worst of Stoicism (the ascetic attitude) and ripped from it the intellectual foundation (the theistic/deterministic worldview) and come up with a result to which I bet my life the ancient Stoics would be mortified to have their name attached.

Post by “Matt” of January 10, 2019 at 4:09 PM

I absolutely believe that the ancient Stoics would have been completely put off by the Modern group. I know there is a modern Traditional movement out there that attempts to reclaim the original philosophy by keeping the original doctrines intact, but it is a far smaller group.

Post by “Cassius” of January 10, 2019 at 6:04 PM

Yes I have seen their material, but I can't recall any names or pages, and they see the same issues that we see.

Post by “Matt” of January 10, 2019 at 6:12 PM

I think Chris Fisher is a top proponent of Traditional Stoicism in the US. His group is very small. He definitely criticizes the MoSto mainstream group.

Post by “Cassius” of January 10, 2019 at 6:27 PM

Yes that is the name I remember. I thought his work was very consistent in what I've read - must better than the standard modern Stoic material.

Post by “Condorcet” of January 14, 2019 at 4:25 PM

This discussion of "valueless virtue" brought to mind Cassius' excellent piece "The Real Troika" (Jul 7, 2015).

In it Cassius takes justifiable exception to the media's claim that a "troika" (European Commission; European Central Bank and the IMF) is creating the crisis. Instead he asserts the real troika contributing to the crisis is ; 1) that "god" is sovereign so "all things work together for the good"; 2) that "virtue" is the goal rather than the means of a virtuous life.

And third, that the "troika" is founded on the "false social ideal that abstractions such as the 'group' have interests" superior to the "happiness of each individual."

To support this perspective Cassius asks "are the interests of the Greeks the same as those of Italians or Germans or Spaniards or the Irish?" Here I would answer "Yes" because within these groups we all pursue our common interests in health, safety, security, happiness.

I agree when Cassius asserts "individuals have individual interests." When he rightly shows how "group think" represses individuality. Recall Orwell's INGSOC.

When I consider individual interests versus common interests I believe we share far more common interests and that these persist in spite of "group think."

Donald Brown's Human Universals reveal that we share hundreds of human traits; our "humanity" underlying our cultural and political systems. I am also reminded of Abraham Maslow's list of what we need to be fully realized individuals (physiological needs, safety, belonging etc). (Almost as soon as Maslow published this theory critics renamed the list an "hierarchy." This misdirected attention from the benefits of the theory to our pursuit of happiness. Maslow's clear statements that the list was not an hierarchy are still ignored.)

I like to ponder what happens when we follow Epicurus' suggestion that we consider, "both the ultimate end and all clear sensory evidence, to which we refer our opinions; for otherwise everything will be full of uncertainty and confusion"? Principle Doctrines -22.

Cassius reveals how the EC, ECB IMF "troika" misdirects attention from the "clear sensory evidence" that we have far more in common than the few who inhabit international institutions and sow "uncertainty and confusion" among us. The work of Donald Brown and Abraham Maslow add to the "clear sensory evidence."

Post by "Cassius" of January 14, 2019 at 5:19 PM

Thanks Condorcet and good to hear from you. I haven't changed my views much since then, and I continue to think of this in terms of an alternative to what I understand to be the false choice set up by most people.

I still think of this in terms of the attempt to make us choose between chaos and divine order. I think Epicurus points accurately to the universe being operational through the properties of the elements, which are in fact neither "chaotic" in the sense of truly random, nor ordered by a master-mind divine creator.

In the same way, as you say, people are human and their passions follow much the same river - the river has banks, and virtually everyone lives within those banks. But within the banks of the river there's a huge diversity of preferences, and different groups are going to form their own currents and desire to move in different directions within the banks, generally going in the same direction, but powerfully wanting to take different paths to get there.

So at one and the same time different currents can separate themselves and find their own passions with each other, while all the different currents still stay within the banks of the river.

We don't need to choose between radical libertarian individualism and totalitarian authority that suppresses all individual feeling.

There's always going to be some friction, apparently, as currents scrape against each other and as individuals desire to move from one current to another, but the big picture seems to me that it's wrong to totally take sides and think that only the libertarian and authoritarian extremes are possible.

(It's been a long day here and I may have strayed off topic but I think I am addressing your comment.)

Post by “Condorcet” of January 16, 2019 at 6:47 PM

Thanks very much Cassius! I can't always timely return to this wonderful site so please don't feel you have to respond immediately especially if you have had a long day.

C-Paragraph 2, I still think of this in terms...

Me - Right, well-said!

C- Paragraph 3, In the same way ...

Me - Yes and it's the human “aspect” I want to stay with for a minute. Brown's list of human universals labels hundreds of behaviors that define “human” experience more individually than “passions.” Group formation is inevitable like the grouping around Epicureanism but individuals still express hundreds of common attributes independently of the group.
https://listography.com/ink/people/don...uman_universals

Still Brown's list is not complete, the brief preface to the list on the Listography site mentions some important human concepts that are omitted or understated. Nevertheless I think Brown's human universals help identify many of the “currents” in the river metaphor.

Continuing with the metaphor, I considered what the stream bed might be and I think it is “pleasure.” Earlier I mentioned Maslow's theory, that the motivation for satisfying our needs is to “self-actualize.” While Brown lists attributes Maslow lists needs; physiological, safety, belonging and love, social needs, esteem.

Maslow believed “self-actualization” is an inherent goal and psychological and emotional problems arise when that goal is thwarted when needs are unmet. Interestingly Maslow describes how self-actualized people are “strife-free”.

While there is no specific order to satisfying needs, the physiological needs cannot be denied for very long. Perhaps satisfying needs has much to do with where the stream flows.

C - Paragraph 3 cont'd ...the river has banks...

Me -To me this passage suggests that our responses to our anticipations define our currents within the flow.

C - Paragraph 4, So at one and the same time...

Me - Yes and I see the "banks" in the metaphor as the people and institutions that constantly propose the false choices and create much of the "friction" preventing free flow.

C - Paragraph 4 cont'd ...We don't need to choose between radical libertarian individualism and totalitarian authority that suppresses all individual feeling.

Me - I agree although I don't understand most political labels ("libertarian", "neocoon" etc), I do understand government labels like "totalitarian authority" !

C - There's always going to be some friction...wrong to totally take sides.

Me - Yes absolutely "wrong" and confusing and useless!

Thanks

Post by "Cassius" of January 16, 2019 at 7:45 PM

No problem about delayed responses - my life interferes with my philosophy time too!

However at times it's good to refocus in ways that just scrolling back over the thread doesn't fix.

In this case, I think you're probably thinking of some practical applications of these ideas that it would be good for us to pursue.

We started off talking about the dead end of valueless virtue. I think most of our discussion since then has revolved around how there are both "guard rails" or "banks" that lead generally in the same directions for everyone, but with a wide flow with lots of room for individuality within the banks.

One implication of this is to reinforce the conclusion that one size doesn't fit all in the field of ethics, but I bet you are thinking about other applications. What do you think?

Post by “Condorcet” of January 17, 2019 at 9:20 PM

Sure! And I'm assuming "these ideas" are referring to Maslow's theory of human development and Brown's list of human attributes held in common. I wasn't recommending them as a pursuit I just thought they were useful for providing detail to the metaphor.

For me their practical application is that, yet again, inquiry and science give us additional concepts and words that allow us to describe and discuss some of the elements in the metaphor. For example, I believe we can more completely consider what those "guard rails" and "banks" might be. (I find I may have "over focused" on the metaphor!)

I think the "guard rails" and "banks" are not really distinct from the "flow" that inevitably overruns and carves as it anticipates and discovers it's own way.

That we experience so much "one-size" has bothered me most of my life! It is such a pleasure to discover a perspective that confirms what I sensed and felt most of my life. From what little I understand of it Epicureanism is about the way things are and how to live with that truth virtuously.

I very much appreciate the time with you, Cassius!

Post by “Cassius” of January 18, 2019 at 6:53 AM

You are very welcome! Your comment calls to mind why I think it is so important not to underplay the role of Epicurean physics. We don't just start with abstractions and manipulate them, we start back at basics of elemental particles and void and the absence of an overall supernatural creator, and the absence of a center to the universe. Within such a universe how could it even be conceived that there would be "one size fits all" arrangements?

But the key to me was to help me break out of the "Either chaos or divine creator" alternative. These don't have to be the only alternatives, even though there is massive pressure to force us into one of those two paradigms. Some things are in fact determined and "necessary," while some others are not.

In this context I always remember the Rolfe Humphries wording of the passage from Book 1 of Lucretius about "what can be, and what cannot...."-

So his force,

His vital force of mind, a conqueror
Beyond the flaming ramparts of the world
Explored the vast immensities of space
With wit and wisdom, and came back to us
Triumphant, **bringing news of what can be**
And what cannot, limits and boundaries,
The borderline, the bench mark, set forever.
Religion, so, is trampled underfoot,
And by his victory we reach the stars.

Post by “Condorcet” of January 19, 2019 at 3:49 PM

Excellent! Thank you.

"...

bringing news of what can be
And what cannot, limits and boundaries,
The borderline, the bench mark, set forever.

FWIW for several years I have been trying to change public policy based on the FAITH that there are no limits to growth! The faithful say "we either grow or die."

"And by his victory we reach the stars."

You might enjoy this "Most Detailed Map of the Universe To date" -
<https://futurism.com/videos/detaile...80135&exid=2189>.

Post by “Cassius” of January 19, 2019 at 7:14 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/677-valueless-virtue-in-modern-stoicism/>

Wow that is a great video! Thanks!

Post by “Condorcet” of January 22, 2019 at 6:28 PM

You're welcome! During the last 4 years I have been learning the definition of "system" and how to apply "systems thinking." As always I can find what I am looking for on the web. I think this is one of the best explanatory sites <http://www.umsl.edu/~sauterv/analysis/bees/>.

I appreciate what the site says about our inability to "clearly perceive ourselves" in space, through time, and in "our relationships to what appear to be remote "objects, forces, people and events." Because it teaches us how to overcome "spatial blindness", "temporal blindness" and "relationship blindness", systems thinking routinely provides pragmatic ideas and deeper insights so critically needed today.