

[DOI: 10.20472/AHC.2018.003.003](https://doi.org/10.20472/AHC.2018.003.003)

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THE PRAGMATIC APPROACH IN STOICISM

Abstract:

Most of the ancient philosophies were actively and seriously involved in solving the riddles of Nature. Much owing to this a few centuries rolled on in understanding the world around us than within. One might think that it was mainly from the period of Socrates that we clearly observe philosophers openly toiling to take on the enigmatic human nature as a focal point and enduring to solve the problems which were continually troubling all. Some of the philosophers preferred to rely mostly on religions in vogue to answer back common man's authentic questions. Some of them went to the extent of declaring or labeling persons who doubted the very existence of God and further his justifying nature, as 'Atheists'. However many had unflinchingly stood by the scientific temper which eventually was not tolerable to the enthusiastic adherents of Theology. Using freely uncommon and rich vocabulary or subject jargons, sticking to the religious sentiments was one of the main weapons. Stoicism although belonging to approximately Third century BC had a very clear vision about the human existence and its predicament. Therefore it could dare to deviate from the overtly practiced idealism and seek a path that would be quite accommodative and true to the then existing reality. Therefore one finds a clear pragmatic approach in Stoic outlook which is usable for all. It could stand firmly by embracing the unalloyed reality to guide the humanity that had been enmeshed by depression, misery, anguish, and feeling of the meaninglessness of life. Unfortunately, even in the modern world, the problems continue with same intensity although scientific development has definitely surpassed our levels of expectations. Stoicism takes into account the basic psychology of human nature and then proposes only those guidelines which are feasible for everyone. It has avoided the temptation of clinging itself to some popular age-old philosophy or criticizing the existing ones. It has established its own firm roots to withstand the onslaught of the vagaries of life. The paper attempts to bring forth the main tenets of Stoic philosophy and its utility in the present part of the world without underestimating other philosophies.

Keywords:

Stoicism, Pragmatic approach, Chief postulates

Introduction

Pursuit of happiness had been and continues to be a human trait as every age has witnessed the enormous struggle for it. Understanding human nature and subsequently proposing new psychological view has been a routine practice. Discarding, though partially any earlier proposed theory or philosophy to excel is not new. There is indeed a societal reason for it. Society is always in a flux and as thermodynamically it is a proven fact that the existing world is completely entropic with an increasing mode. Challenges for any rung of the society is compulsory and so the problems related seem to be insurmountable. Many solutions have been available but most of them are filled with high sounding ideas with loud claim and also borrowed type of repeated. When so many psychological theories and philosophical outlooks are available or rather getting added decade wise why humanity is still groping in dark and not at all complacent is a big question. One of the best recourses would be to make a fresh beginning without any prejudice against any philosophy. For that matter stoics emphasis is to embrace the reality although sometimes it may not be a very pleasant activity. With all due regards to the religious sentiments let us accept the fact that this world is not the best designed or its fabrication has been hurriedly carried out. Therefore there had been so many voids which cannot be easily cemented. For ages the negativities or vices had been dominating over the much publicized virtues.

Under these circumstances just as society is divided into different strata on the basis of economic front and some of the society's sentiments, Nature too cannot do proper justice. Only proven physical realities can be with assured of their functioning. Probably much owing to this economists and sociologists think happiness and comfort are induced by external factors. Psychologists also feel the same to a great extent and try to unravel it in the structure and function of the brain. Modern psychiatry lays much emphasis on the healthiness of the mind. From the scientific point of view neurochemistry brings the focus to chemical reactions within the brain. This shows that we are still hunting for a workable philosophy or our stance has to be strong enough to absorb unpredictable variations in Nature, surroundings and personal life too. As Bertrand Russell puts it,

"The man who acquires easily things for which he feels only a very moderate desire concludes that the attainment of desire does not bring happiness. If he is of a philosophical disposition, he concludes that human life is essentially wretched, since the man who has all he wants is still unhappy. He forgets that to be without some of the things you want is an indispensable part of happiness."¹

Historical Background

Ancient Greco-Roman school which originated as Hellenistic philosophy-Stoicism-was founded by Zeno of Citium in Athens also known as Zenoism. Literally speaking the name is related to an open market place in Athens where the philosophers could frequent freely and maintain the tradition of gathering and tutoring the disciples. Stoicism grew in phases as Early, Middle and Late Stoa. In the modern age usually the propounders of this philosophy referred to particularly for the study of all shades, are Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, Seneca, Musonius etc. In all their writings there is clearly an effortful impetus on self-control for the followers. Life without emotions is unimaginable. Accepting the existing reality needs courage and obviously wisdom too. Anytime improvisation has definitely its own scope but then usually it meets with considerable limitations. Similarly free-will is essential and it encompasses sizeable area. Despite this we all face extremities of human moods which dominate and swing to positive and negative poles causing

constructive and destructive emotions. At times there could be an admixture of such propensities also. Stoicism always maintains its stance of pursuing happiness as the major aim of life but at the same time insists on sticking to the virtuous path of life. Therefore it can be safely concluded that it is ever tending towards Eudaimonia. It also lays a lot of emphasis on living with an unstudied manner. Simplicity is the shortest route granted by Nature to live happily. Unfortunately we fail to grasp it. The heavy luggage of unchecked desires makes us weak because we cannot transform them totally into a reality. Human beings are fortunate because they are endowed with the reasoning power. This faculty is utilized to carry rational thinking whereas the other living beings have only an instinctual way of judging and then responding or reacting. One needs to have in his custody the passions under control so that the functioning is totally on the righteous path. The opposite of this may lead to a total devastating state and would end up with no possibility of a recovery. External circumstances need not be bracketed into worthy and unworthy slots. Other way around a safe distance should be maintained. It is quite surprising that this practical judgement and wisdom was surmised way back in third to second century BC which is so befitting even today.

In defense of simple living, Diogenes observed that "the gods had given to men the means of living easily, but this had been put out of sight, because we require honeyed cakes, unguents and the like. Such is the madness of men, he said, that they choose to be miserable when they have it in their power to be content. The problem is bad men obey their lusts as servants obey their masters and because they cannot control their desires, they can never find contentment."²

Main Tenets

Most of the times it is difficult to lay down the postulates of a philosophy point wise particularly when it is either having a religious overtone or strong background and subsequently influence or is narrowed down to a selective stratum of the society. To a large extent many philosophies seem to be stuck up with or stemming out of a composite type of outlook that covers almost all aspects of life. On the other hand there are philosophies which are not subjected to only the academic fervour or religious sentiments. They seem to be pursuing absolutely a pragmatic approach which is usable for all. Stoicism is one such philosophy which has genuinely served humanity by giving guidance to the routine problems. It has avoided the lofty theoretical ideas which are impressive but in theory only. There has been clarity in the outline of this philosophy which even a layman can easily follow. One does not require any special training in philosophy subject or scholarship to grasp it. The chief emphasis is on practical wisdom so that the followers can easily combat with self-feelings and the challenging surroundings on daily basis. Every decade poses new problems or same problems in different forms. New situations are bound to arise because of socio-economic factors or abrupt upheavals. Stoicism recognizes this and therefore instead of sidetracking or dismissing deliberately provides solutions to certain psychological problems that the humanity has to encounter. Philosopher Lawrence Becker opines "Stoic ethics is a species of eudaimonism. Its central, organizing concern is about what we ought to do or be to live well-to flourish."³

Let us try to understand Stoicism in brief. There are certain realities which in fact provide a complete and clear guidance to us but we fail to accept. Living in agreement with the dictates of Nature is the wisest thing. As Socrates repeatedly stressed upon the famous Delphic maxim, "Know Thyself" Stoicism probably slightly elongates the same by adding "Know Surroundings or Nature too!" Needless to say the goal of everyone's life is happiness and therefore the negativities must be eliminated. Good can be understood or cognized by knowing bad also. In the

same vein things that can be repaired and those which are clearly irreparable should be impartially distinguished. The former may be concluded as possibly under our control while the latter are not. This of course is not a process involving merely a single step or to be performed only once to be judged. It is always for everyone an ongoing process. Therefore slowly one gets tuned up to this method and it leads to happiness with intelligence. Stoicism however cautions us. It is not to be taken as any instant result oriented practice to be carried on. It has to be our goal of life. By virtue of this at least one can be assured of living healthily. This would lead us to gain knowledge of self or rather self-limitations. It also suggests the stoical outlook towards life to be imbibed which means we have to live without confrontation with Nature or circumstances in which we are living.

It is clear that Stoicism recommends acceptance of reality as the only way to lead to complacency. It goes further to speak about the nature of soul. With its limitations and our own uncontrolled way of dealing with reality, Stoics have concluded that Soul is restless. This is also because of our craving for the one which is transient. For example we seek fame, good fortune, emotions, wealth and so on but end up with frustration. Stoics do not recommend life free from emotions but rather expect the followers to banish negative or destructive emotions. These qualities take us away from happiness and virtuous path. As a metaphysician Schopenhauer who relates himself to Kant thinks Pessimism follows from the very nature of Will. Further he expresses, "All willing arises from want and so from deficiency and so from suffering. The satisfaction of a wish ends it, yet for one wish that is satisfied there remain at least ten that are denied. Further, the desire that lasts long, and demands are infinite....we can never having lasting happiness or peace."⁴

Stoicism might give us an impression that it strongly recommends pacifist outlook. To the contrary it lays much importance on dealing the world with intelligence. There are many instances wherein our paying attention thoroughly is not at all desirable. The negativities do attract us but further on they do continue to upset us. Others behaviour, response, and viewpoints may not be agreeable to our way of thinking always. Rarely we have to respond vigorously. Majority times it is better to admit the social fatalism, so that nothing can surprise or irritate us. It is therefore not at all sensible to wish or expect others behaviour to be remodeled to suit our temperament. There are bound to be always deviations from the standard or accredited Ethics in society. Therefore to forestall all the possible onslaught of the destructive emotions it is better to hold on to the quasi-pacifist viewpoint. Approach of stoical thinking in fact has numerous shades and that is why some of the psychologists feel that it has hedonic adaptation. In general a large percentage of humanity seems to be uneasy and therefore very easily lose interest in all the pursued aims. The moment we achieve what we want it ceases to be an Ideal. We do not find consistency in our attachment to the desired object once it is in our custody. Rather the one which was earlier imagined as a perfect source of happiness or comfort looks like a picture of boredom. The same thing happens in our relationships also. Epictetus says, "Of things that are, some are good and some are bad and some are indifferent: the good then are virtues, and the things which precipitate in virtues; and the evil things the opposite; and the indifferent things are wealth, health, reputation."⁵

Conclusion

No behavioural science can be considered as totally satisfying and faultless from all angles. Philosophies too have the same fate. They do initially work efficiently but later fail to continue the intensity for getting the desirable results. Actually both Eastern and Western philosophies have strived hard to develop a philosophy which could accommodate all the required shades.

Unfortunately this approach has ended into contradictions, severe limitations, drawbacks and even escapism. Unless we have continuation in our efforts to not only achieve but also retain the projected principles, no philosophy can promise solace. Stoicism lays a large impetus on tranquility. It advises its followers to stop the race for fame and fortune. We need to be very wary in choosing our associates. There has to be a well drawn plan to handle vices or negativities in life like insults, grief, despondency, ill-temperament, old age problems etc. Managing relations is an art and therefore nothing should be taken for granted. No set of principles shall work forever. A revision is definitely required. In brief Stoicism expects the primary function is to be considered as rationality only."That is why Stoic Sage will continually attend to the source of virtue,his voluntary judgements and actions, which renders him unusually self-possessed in any given situation. One of the 'healthy passions' cultivated in stoicism, is called eulabeia, meaning 'caution' or 'discretion' can also be seen as a form of mindfulness."⁶ Scores of philosophies have emerged in past and also in recent years but only a few notable are frequently referred to for seeking guidance to lead life successfully. Many of the philosophies had been beyond the level of comprehension of a common man because they fail to provide practical applications. Nonetheless they definitely have contributed to the academics of the subject. However when put to the test of validity in the actual mart of life most of them miserably fail and seem to be absolutely futile. It should be acknowledged as a proven fact even with regard to many scientific theories or approaches. Early philosophers indeed strived hard and ingeniously to reveal variety shades of Nature and its secrets. Later on somehow much emphasis had been laid down upon human life and its intricacies or problems. Most of the behavioral sciences restricted themselves to a narrow arena owing to which they sounded to be pursuing extremities and condemning the other contemporary streams of thought. Stoicism has accepted the physical or existing facts of life and has managed to maintain a balanced outlook providing a track leading to contentment and happiness without bringing in complex ways of dealing with the problems of life for the humanity as a whole. Therefore it can lead to complacency in true sense.

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