

TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGY AS PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

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In this paper I look to the ancient Stoics in order to determine what a fullfledged phenomenological ethics could be said to consist in.

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*That which by your wisdom you have attained
to, shall abide without decay, for ever.*

*St. Paul to Seneca*¹

The question of ethics

In addition to being a phenomenologist, can one also be a Confucian? A Stoic? A Pyrrhonist? Perhaps even a Christian? I believe that that is indeed possible (and that it is in fact possible to be all five), but that is not what I want to argue in this paper, even though it is what motivates me to write it. My concern is with ethics and, more particularly, with what a properly phenomenological ethics might be said to look like.

Phenomenology is basically a descriptive enterprise, and its main themes have been perceiving and thinking – willing and doing much less so. Paul Ricoeur sought to widen things out and to go beyond a phenomenology of perception when early in his career he set himself the task of applying Husserlian eidetic analysis to the theme of the voluntary and the involuntary. Like Ricoeur, a number of other leading phenomenologists were concerned with

ethical topics, but they rarely dealt with ethics in a systematic way. Levinas, it is true, was an ethical thinker through and through, but in turning to ethics he also distanced himself from phenomenology. The same is true to a greater or lesser degree of a number of more recent “continental” philosophers.

If, however, one is not prepared to abandon the insights and accomplishments of classical phenomenology (under which heading I include existential as well as transcendental phenomenology), the question is whether there can be an ethics that any committed phenomenologist could subscribe to. I believe that there can be such an ethics and that, moreover, this ethics

¹ *Though now known to be apocryphal, the correspondence between St. Paul and Seneca contributed to the favorable reception that the Christian world accorded to pagan Stoicism.*

already exists – and has existed for well over two thousand years. When it comes to ethics, there is no need to reinvent the wheel. The thesis I wish to put forward is that the ancient Stoics laid out an ethical system that, as something approaching an ethics of pure practical reason, is prototypically phenomenological.

Stoicism as practical philosophy

Greco-Roman philosophy differs significantly from the way philosophy is generally conceived of today, especially in the Anglophone world. For the ancients, philosophy was not, as is unfortunately the case today in some quarters, an arid, purely academic discipline which shuns issues having to do with the conduct of life and is dedicated solely to logical-theoretical issues. For the Stoics, as was the case with the Epicureans and Pyrrhonists as well, philosophy was essentially a “design for living,” and the philosopher in their eyes was someone who was versed in the essential art, the art of being authentically human, the art of living and of dying. The whole purpose of pursuing knowledge and engaging in philosophy, the Stoics maintained, is to bring about a transformation in one’s life. As the greatest of the Stoics writing in Latin, Seneca the Younger, stated in his *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*, “Philosophy moulds and builds the personality, orders one’s life, regulates one’s conduct, shows one what one should do and what one should leave undone, sits at the helm and keeps one on the correct course as one is tossed about in perilous seas. Without it no one can lead a life free of fear or worry” (XVI). Philosophy for the ancients (“the philosophical art”) was, in a word, a spiritual exercise, a kind of “economy of the soul,” a practical attempt – aided by reason and language – to lead a life of noble virtue. The great iconic figure for the Stoics in this regard was, of course, Socrates.

As that outstanding historian of ancient thought, Pierre Hadot, has pointed out, the philosophical/meditative exercises of

Greco-Roman antiquity (so superbly exemplified by the *Meditations* of the emperor-philosopher, Marcus Aurelius) were “designed to ensure progress toward the ideal of wisdom, exercises of reason that will be, for the soul, analogous to the athlete’s training or to the application of a medical cure.” Cicero (whose accounts of Stoicism are among the earliest to have survived) was summing up Stoic teachings when he said that just as medicine is the art of healing the body, so likewise is philosophy the art of healing the mind, the medicine of the soul: “*Animi medicum philosophia*” (*Tusculan Disputations* III, 5-6). The distinctive feature of these exercises or *meditationes* is that they were, precisely, *exercises of reason*, the essential component of which was philosophical ratiocination and conceptual thinking (*logismos dianoia*). They were ones that “can only be carried out by means of an operation which is, at the same time, both intellectual and ethical,” operations that consisted “in examining oneself in a dialogue, a *logos* or a process of reasoning which one develops either with someone else or with oneself”².

The rational or dialogical character of this kind of *examinatio conscientiae* or self-examination is what, as Hadot notes, distinguishes them from the meditative exercises of Eastern spirituality: “Unlike the Buddhist meditation practices of the Far East, Greco-Roman philosophical meditation is not linked to a corporeal attitude but is a purely rational, imaginative, or intuitive exercise that can take varied forms”³. If both Eastern and Stoic meditation can be said to have much the same goal, viz., the achieving of peace of mind, *tranquillitas animi*, they nonetheless differ in the techniques they employ to this end: Eastern meditation (Yoga, Buddhism, Qi Gong, etc., etc.) typically involves corporeal

² Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* (Harvard, 1998), 74.

³ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford, 1995), 59.

exercises (body postures and respiratory techniques) as a means for controlling the mind and the flow of consciousness, whereas Stoic meditation is typically (though not exclusively) a matter of rational analysis and dialogue. Although people will no doubt find one of these techniques more personally or temperamentally congenial than the other, neither can be said to be better than the other. They are simply, as it were, two different (but not utterly dissimilar) “ideal types” of self-training or “care for the soul”, *cura animi*.

A case in point is that of a modern professor of philosophy, William B. Irvine. Looking to find a better way of living, of living joyfully, Irvine turned at one point to Zen Buddhism but then discovered – the great merits of Buddhist meditation notwithstanding – that Stoicism was better suited to his analytical nature than Buddhism was. And less physically demanding:

A Zen Buddhist will have to meditate, a practice that is both time-consuming and (in some of its forms) physically and mentally challenging. The practice of Stoicism, in contrast, doesn't require us to set aside blocks of time in which to “do Stoicism.” It does require us periodically to reflect on our life, but these periods of reflection can generally be squeezed into odd moments of the day, such as when we are stuck in traffic or – this was Seneca's recommendation – when we are lying in bed waiting for sleep to come⁴.

For Irvine, the cost of practicing Stoicism was (as he puts it) less than that of practicing Buddhist-style meditation; it did not, for one thing, require that he try “to sit for hours with

an empty mind” (248) – no easy task, it must be allowed by any one who has attempted it⁵.

The *exercitia spiritualia* of the Stoics are thus ones that are carried on by means of language and “inner discourse” – and the keeping of personal “notebooks” or *hupomnemata* – and that are directed towards the development of self-control and the building of character. *Know thyself*: As a kind of “examination of conscience,” these are exercises that embody Socrates' belief that the unexamined life is not worth living and that are, therefore, as relevant today as they were in antiquity. Stoicism, as *philosophia practica*, is a philosophy that transcends time and that is capable of speaking to any one, at any time, who is floundering about in life and wants to become a better and happier person. This is something that Benjamin Franklin discovered when, as he relates in his *Autobiography*, he “conceiv'd the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection” and to this end devised and imposed on himself strenuous exercises so as to “acquire the *habitude*” of living a life of virtue. As the Stoics ever insisted, mere good intentions count for nothing; everything depends on the sustained *effort* we put into the task of becoming better persons. Or as Franklin said, invoking the name of Socrates: “the mere speculative conviction that it was our interest to be completely virtuous, was not sufficient to prevent our slipping; and that the contrary habits must be broken, and good ones acquired and established, before we can have any dependence on a steady, uniform rectitude of conduct.” Franklin's *regimen mentis*, his program of self-cultivation and “constant vigilance” maintained by means of score-keeping notebooks, was, like the Stoic exercises of old, an askesis or ascetics of the self

⁴ W. Irvine, *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy* (Oxford, 2008), 12. In his *On Anger* (III, 36, 1), Seneca, in speaking of the need to examine one's conscience every day, mentions his teacher Sextius who, at bedtime, would ask himself, “What ailment of yours have you cured today? What failing have you resisted? Where can you show improvement?”

⁵ For a detailed discussion of Buddhist meditation practices (*gom*, in Tibetan), see Yongey Mingyar Rinpoche, *The Joy of Living* (Three Rivers Press, 2007). While one can practice Buddhist-style meditation without having a detailed knowledge of Buddhist philosophy, this is not true of Stoic meditation, which always requires a frequent recurrence to the basic principles (*theorema* or *dogmata*) of the Stoic philosophy.

aimed at developing the *Art of Virtue* (the title of a book Franklin wanted to write but never managed to complete)⁶.

The Stoic eudemonian ethics of virtue

A key tenet of the Stoics, which they upheld in opposition to the Epicurean pursuit of pleasure, is that virtue is its own reward. The Stoic concept of *aretè* or *virtus*, it should perhaps be noted, had none of the moralizing connotations that the words “virtue” or “virtuous” have today. “Virtue” for them simply meant “excellence.” The person of noble virtue is the one who has managed to become what a human being *should* be: a being that is not a slave to its passions but is self-directing and self-responsible, having mastered the art of transforming *logos* into *ethos*, reason into a mode of being.

Similarly, moral decision-making for the Stoics differed markedly from the way modern “ethicists,” obsessed with devising algorithms for solving practical dilemmas, tend to conceive of it: as a kind of dispassionate calculus or “computing” of the relative merits or demerits of this or that action (cf. the runaway trolley car example often appealed to by some philosophers). Ethics is, to be sure, concerned with actions, with what we chose to do in any given situation, but Stoic ethics was not concerned with actions *per se*. As an ethics centered on the notion of virtue, a virtuous mode of *being*, Stoic ethics was “teleological” and was concerned with actions *to the degree that what we do contributes, or not, to our becoming the kind of person we ought to be*. Which is to say: a person who, by training him or herself to follow the rule of right reason, is

able to live a well-ordered life and to be of good and noble character. Thus, for the Stoics ethics was not simply a means for assessing the moral acceptability or appropriateness (*kathekon*) of this or that act but was (as it was for Socrates) the means for discovering for oneself the overall form of life that is best for one.

Spinoza was speaking from a Stoic point of view when he said that that is “good” which enables us to flourish and to become more truly ourselves and “bad” is that which hinders us from doing so (see *Ethica* IV, Preface). Or as William James, a reader of Epictetus, put it, the ethical problem confronting a person “is less what act he shall now choose to do, than what being he shall now resolve to become”⁷. For the Stoics, to decide, in any given situation, what one ought to do, one needs always to envision how this or that act fits into the life-story one is attempting to fashion for oneself. (“I am fashioning myself, attempting to raise myself to the height of a lofty ideal”⁸.) It’s all a matter of setting the right priorities and of leading an orderly life. Wisdom is, indeed, nothing other than knowing how to bring order to one’s desires and one’s aversions – *sapientia est ordinare* – so that, by this means, one may be freed to become the kind of person one ought to be. The Stoic “art of virtue” is the art of becoming-human (*humanus*).

The art of virtue is, indeed, precisely that, an *art* in the classical sense of the term. Some arts, as Seneca said, provide for life, some adorn it, and others direct it. Philosophy is the “directing” art *par excellence*. The Stoic “art of living” is not simply a matter of doing what “feels” is right but is a *discipline* in the full sense of the word, i. e., an intellectually guided praxis informed

⁶ Franklin’s self-disciplining exercises were of the exact same sort as the ones that Epictetus recommended to his students in *Discourses* II, 18. The continuing relevance of Stoicism as a philosophy of life is also attested to by the numerous web sites devoted to it, in particular those of The Stoic Foundation and The Stoic Registry (“home of the Stoic community”).

⁷ W. James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols. (Dover, 1956), 1:288.

⁸ Seneca, *On the Happy Life*, 24.

by certain fundamental *principles of reason*. It is not possible, Epictetus said, underlining the unity of theory and practice, to do things well if our practices are not in harmony with sound philosophical theory. Everything the Stoics had to say about ethical matters was, accordingly, based on a very specific ontology. This was one which maintained that what makes humans human is that they are that sort of being which possesses the *logos* (reason/language). Man is the *animal rationale*, the reasoning, speaking, self-interpreting, self-defining animal. When, therefore, the Stoics spoke, as they customarily did, of the importance of living “in accordance with Nature,” *secundum naturam*, what they meant was that to live a life that is properly human is to live a life that is in accordance with reason, the in-born, hegemonic or guiding faculty in man – “the best part of oneself,” as Seneca called it (*Epistulae morales*, XXIII). The most important task that, as rational animals, humans are faced with is that of getting their thinking straight (this is why the study of logic was so important for the Stoics). “The art of reasoning,” Epictetus said, “is indispensable”⁹.

To live a life of virtue – a life that conforms to the right ordering (*ratio, logos*) of things that is discernable by philosophical insight or what the Stoics called *suneidesis* – is to live a properly human life. It is to live an authentic life, a life of self-fulfillment, which is to say: a life of “freedom and happiness” (*eleutheria kai eudaimonia*). Freedom is the indispensable basis of the moral life and the key to true happiness and, as such, is the highest of all earthly goods, as Epictetus knew full well, having himself experienced first-hand the profound indignity that comes from being a slave to another human being. Freedom consists, not (as moderns have so often proclaimed) in being able to dictate or control the external circumstances of one’s life – “freedom from necessity” – but, as Epictetus said, in not being subservient to them. “Some

things are under our control, while others are not under our control,” Epictetus stated in the opening line of the *Encheiridion*. The crucial thing is to know the difference between what is “up to us” and what is “not up to us” and to learn how, accordingly, to exercise our faculty of free choice (*prohairesis*) so as to achieve active control *over ourselves* in relation to our environment, altering in this way the course of our personal history in the light of what, by reason of philosophical insight, we believe we *ought to be*. Descartes was following Stoic teachings when he said that, given the fact that nothing is more entirely in our power than our own thinking, the important thing is to seek to conquer or control one’s own self rather than externals and fortune (see *Discours de la méthode* III, Troisième maxime). The spiritual exercises of Stoicism aimed at achieving self-mastery are the means by which one can turn adversity to advantage in such a way as to lead a life free from undue worry, “indifferent to Fortune.” For when all is said and done, it is not, as Epictetus pointed out, enunciating the core teaching of Stoicism, “the things themselves that disturb men, but their judgments about these things” (*Encheiridion*, 5).

Freedom exists, Epictetus said, only in the act of willing to be free: “If you will, you are free” (*Discourses* I, 17, 28). One of the basic “precepts” of Stoicism is that we are free only to the degree that we choose to be free. And it is through the exercise of our free-will or moral purpose (*prohairesis*) – which is “free by nature from hindrances and constraint” (I, 17, 21) – that we make our lives over into ones that are genuinely worth living. Self-reliance or what Seneca called *per se sufficientia* is the key to leading a virtuous life, and virtue itself is a matter of the self-empowerment (*enkrateia*) that comes from paying critical attention (*prosochē*) to the way one is going about living one’s life – i. e., mindfully or in a haze of obliviousness.

Virtue in this sense is the key to *happiness*. Again, “happiness” (*eudaimonia*) must not be understood in the sense it tends to have today.

⁹ This is the title of *Discourses* I, 17.

Happiness for the Stoics was not a rosy, feel-good state of mind, nor was a happy life a life filled to the brim with bovine pleasures. Indeed, as Cicero said, the more a person drains the cup of pleasure wherever offered, the greater will be his thirst and the more wretched will he be (*Tusculan Disputations* V, 20). The general consensus of the ancients was that, unlike pleasure, happiness or well-being (“flourishing”) can never be had if one aims at it directly. Genuine well-being only comes from leading a life that is dedicated to the pursuit of virtue, and virtue always involves a disciplining or moderation of one’s passions and desires in such a way as to achieve mastery over oneself. The self-empowered life, the life lived in accordance with one’s “moral purpose,” is the only kind of life that merits being called happy. “A good character [i.e., virtue],” Seneca said, “is the only guarantee of everlasting, carefree happiness” (*Epistulae morales*, XXVII). Michel de Montaigne, sometimes referred to as “the French Seneca,” most likely had Seneca in mind when he said that the satisfaction that comes from striving to follow one’s moral conscience – the voice of universal reason in one, as the Stoics viewed it – is “the only satisfaction that never fails us” (*Essais* III, 2). The “Sage of Königsberg,” Immanuel Kant, was also following in the footsteps of the great Stoics when he said that the only thing that demonstrates our worthiness to be happy is the degree to which we seek to fulfill the duties we owe to ourselves as rational beings.

Phenomenology’s ethical imperatives

The life of man on earth, Marcus Aurelius said, is a pilgrim’s journey and a warfare. This is also the view of the human situation – the *communi hominum condicione*, as Cicero called it – that one finds in much of the existential literature of the last century. Man is “thrown” into the world, and he must struggle mightily to find meaning in the obscurity which surrounds him on all sides. Human existence is not a mere *factum*

brutum, something this is simply “given,” a *fait accompli*; it is a having-to-be, a task that must be conscientiously assumed and whose outcome is uncertain. One’s existence is never a simple state-of-affairs but is always a *becoming*, a striving to realize one’s ownmost possibilities, and is thus something that in the end is either won or lost. Everything depends on how we *resolve* to be and on how we carry through on our acts of resolve.

Even though one would have to look far and wide to find anything like a full-blown treatise on moral philosophy in the literature, what one might call the *primacy of the ethical* permeates all of existential phenomenology. The “existentialists” may not have been given to spelling out in detail the kind of moral exercises that are necessary in order to lead a good life in the way that Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius did, but a great many of the ethical concerns one encounters in the Stoic philosophy are also ones that reappear in their writings (even when, as in the case of Heidegger, they claimed to be doing “science” and not ethics).

One such ethical theme, an over-riding one, is that of *authentic existence*. From what I said above about how for existential phenomenology human existence is something that can be either won or lost, it follows that the basic existential-ontological (i.e., phenomenological) characteristic of human beings is that their mode of being is either authentic or inauthentic. One exists authentically when one chooses to heed the voice of one’s conscience (“the teaching you,” as Seneca called it) and faces up to the need to take responsibility for one’s own way of being. One exists inauthentically when one represses what one’s conscience is saying to oneself (which is always “Guilty!”) and attempts to escape from one’s “dreadful freedom” and the obligation of having to make difficult choices. Indeed, the failure to choose is itself a choice, the choice to live a life of “bad faith.”

To a greater or lesser degree, of course, humans live in a state of inauthenticity, in a willful denial of their freedom-to-be. This is what the

Stoics called *stultitia*, foolishness or mindlessness. *Tanta stultitia mortalium est*, as Seneca said in a line that Shakespeare transcribed as “Lord, what fools these mortals be.” The fundamental distinction the Stoics drew between foolishness and wisdom finds its parallel in the phenomenological distinction between inauthentic and authentic modes of being-human. What Heidegger called *Alltäglichkeit*, blindly following the crowd and living the anonymous life of *das Man*, Seneca characterized as “wander[ing] at large, having no guide and following only the din and jarring cries of men calling us in different directions.” In order to live authentically, Seneca said, “we should not, like sheep, follow the herd of creatures in front of us, making our way where others go, not where we ought to go.... We will regain our health, if only we distance ourselves from the crowd” (*On the Happy Life*, 1).

If Marcus Aurelius said that life is a warfare, it is because foolishness or inauthenticity is, phenomenologically speaking, the most salient trait about human beings. Proximally and for the most part, humans live in a state of “fallenness,” as Heidegger said, and it is only by means of a willed and sustained attempt at controlling their innate folly that humans can rise to the level of being authentically human. For the Stoics all of life was one great test.

How does one go about living authentically? Although the Stoics had a great deal more to say on this subject than did the leading phenomenologists, what the latter did have to say is very much in line with the Stoic position. “In general, if you want to do something [to improve yourself], make a habit of it,” Epictetus exhorted students in his “school for sick souls” (*Discourses* II, 18). Or as Seneca reminded his friend Lucilius, “You have to persevere and fortify your pertinence until the will to good becomes a disposition to good” (*Epistulae morales*, XVI). It is exactly the same message that America’s first home-grown phenomenologist, William James, sought to convey to his Harvard undergraduates when he proposed

the following “practical maxim, relative to these habits of the will”:

Keep the faculty of effort alive in you by a little gratuitous exercise every day. That is, be systematically ascetic or heroic in little unnecessary points, do every day or two something for no other reason than that you would rather not do it, so that when the hour of dire need draws nigh, it may find you not unnerved and untrained to stand the test (Principles, 1:126).

As both James (who, as an American, was more practically oriented than many of his European counterparts) and the Stoics knew perfectly well, effective willing always requires sustained practice, recurrent *effort*. Just as one lands oneself in an inauthentic mode of being by, as James said, so many separate acts or omissions, so also it is in a like manner that one is able to break out of a “fallen” mode of being, i.e., incrementally, in a series of measured steps wherein one makes the on-going effort to take advantage of every opportunity to act in a meritorious manner.

If it is true, as existential thinkers say, that we are in large part what we make ourselves to be, it is through the creation of *habits* that we do so. The notion of *habitus* (a built-up, abiding disposition to act in a certain way) is absolutely central to phenomenology. Just as what Merleau-Ponty called the “cultivation of habit” is the means by which the lived body learns to inhabit the physical world and to expand its motor capabilities, so also is it the means by which the personal subject learns to comport itself in the moral-cultural world and to achieve an ever more meaningful life. It is, in short, through the creation of habitualities that one “sculpts” one’s own being (or, as Marcus Aurelius said, dyes one’s soul a new color) and fashions one’s *character*. (Unlike some modern moralities of “self-actualization,” the fashioning or *paideia* of the self that Stoicism speaks of is not some kind of self-centered, dandyish aesthetics of the self; it is an arduous undertaking that calls for an overcoming of the natural self and that must be

guided by universal moral principles or *decreta*.) A recurrent theme in existential phenomenology in this regard is that mere “sentimentalism” (as James called it) will not get anyone anywhere and is, in fact, a surefire recipe for perdition. In the final analysis, ethics is concerned first and foremost with the building of character and is all a matter, as James said, of keeping “the foot unflinchingly on the arduous path” (*Principles*, 1:288). The “existential hero” is the person who lives “strivingly”¹⁰.

No themes are more important to phenomenology than the ones we have seen are central to Stoicism: freedom (or autonomy) and self-responsibility. This is true, not only of existential phenomenology, but of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology as well. Husserl may have been a mathematician by training, and theoretical, logical-epistemological issues may figure most prominently in his writings, but he was by no means oblivious to “the ethical.” Although he voiced strong misgivings about the way Heidegger had sought to “existentialize” phenomenology, it is as if he were attempting to claim as his own Heidegger’s existential-ethical concerns when in the conclusion to his *Cartesian Meditations* he stated that to transcendental, constitutive phenomenology properly belong all the “higher,” “ethico-religious” problems: “*all the problems of accidental factuality [facticity], of death, of fate, of the possibility of a ‘genuine’ [authentic] human life...the problem of the ‘meaning’ of history.*”

One of the most moving aspects of Husserl’s “Vienna Lecture” is the way he speaks there of the importance of the will and of mankind’s need to assume full responsibility for itself through a “heroism of reason.” For Husserl,

philosophy was more than just the theoretical pursuit of objective or intellectual knowledge; it was at its core a moral undertaking engaging the whole person, a matter of self-reflection, self-understanding, and self-cultivation. Philosophical reason, Husserl declared in “Philosophy as Mankind’s Self-Reflection; the Self-Realization of Reason,” “is precisely that which man qua man, in his innermost being, is aiming for, that which alone can satisfy him, make him ‘blessed’...[B]eing human is teleological being and an ought-to-be”¹¹. Remarks like these could have come straight out of the writings of the Stoics. Consider, for instance, these further remarks of Husserl:

Reason is the specific characteristic of man, as a being living in personal activities and habitualities. This life, as personal life, is a constant becoming through a constant intentionality of development. What becomes, in this life, is the person himself. His being is forever becoming...

Human personal life proceeds in stages of self-reflection and self-responsibility from isolated occasional acts of this form to the point of seizing in consciousness the idea of autonomy, the idea of a resolve of the will to shape one’s whole personal life into the synthetic unity of a life of universal self-responsibility and, correlatively, to shape oneself into the true “I,” the free, autonomous “I” which seeks to realize his innate reason, the striving to be true to himself, to be able to remain identical with himself as a reasonable “I” (Crisis, 338).

When one is able to remain identical with oneself as a reasonable “I,” one is living, as the Stoics said, in a properly *harmonious* mode of being, “in accordance with nature.” This sort of personal integrity or “wholeness” was for them the key to happiness and joy in living – themes to which, under the influence of the bleak and somber reflections of Kierkegaard, existential

¹⁰ *The important thing, the Stoics said, is not that we should have achieved a state of perfect virtue but that we should continually strive to be better. Cf. Seneca (On the Happy Life, 17): “I am not wise, and...I shall never be so. And so demand of me, not that I should be equal to the best, but that I should be better than the wicked: I am satisfied if each day I make some reduction in the number of my vices and find fault with my mistakes”.*

¹¹ E. Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Northwestern 1970: 341).

phenomenology has paid far too little attention.

Husserl also remarks in the above mentioned text on how “individual-personal reason” can “come to ever more perfect realization only as communal-personal reason and vice versa.” Conscious life, he says, is “a life which is not individually isolable but is internally communalized” (336). This was, of course, a major theme of the Stoics and one that is especially in evidence in Marcus Aurelius who, as emperor, was keenly aware of his duties to his fellow citizens and who (despite his often being annoyed by the stupidity and treachery of his fellow humans) dedicated himself wholeheartedly to the service of humanity. As beings who share in the *logos* that is common to all, human beings are communal beings, each one of whom is responsible for the well-being of all others. “Universal Nature,” Marcus says time and again, in one form or another, “has constituted rational beings for the sake of one another” (IX, 1). Sartre was saying nothing new when, as a phenomenologist, he declared that when as individuals we will our own freedom we discover that it depends entirely on the freedom of all others.

On the way to a phenomenology of the virtuous life

Phenomenology is a form of transcendental analysis, and phenomenological truth is, as Heidegger said, *veritas transcendentalis* (*Being & Time*, sec. 7C). For the sake of the present discussion, I shall use the term “transcendental” as a rough synonym for “non-naturalistic,” following the lead of Husserl whose defense of transcendentalism went hand-in-hand with his critique of naturalism. A transcendental, non-naturalistic inquiry, Husserl said in his “Vienna Lecture,” is one that aims at “a universal and pure humanistic science,” that seeks to formulate “a theory of the essence of spirit purely as spirit,” and that pursues “what is uncondition-

ally universal, by way of elements and laws” specific to the spiritual sphere (see *Crisis*, 273). It is one that has nothing merely empiricistic about it and that, accordingly, can lay claim to universal validity.

Can Stoic ethics be said to be a transcendental discipline in this sense, i. e., one dealing with “the essence of spirit purely as spirit” and which, as such, is of universal validity? I would maintain that Stoic ethics can indeed be taken to be “unconditionally universal” in a properly transcendental sense – even though there are certain naturalistic aspects to the overall Stoic philosophy in the way it was worked out by its early Greek proponents. The problem lies not with Stoic *ethics* but with the “*logic*” (epistemology) and “*physics*” (metaphysics) with which it was generally bound up. In order to appreciate the transcendental validity of Stoic ethics, it would, I submit, suffice to bracket off these adventitious, naturalistic elements.

Consider, for instance, Stoic epistemology, which was thoroughly empiricistic in nature. In line with their objectivistic metaphysics, the early Greek Stoics (Chrysippus in particular) maintained that only material bodies – things that, as Plato would say, can be touched or squeezed in one’s hands – exist and that meanings and ideal objects, as such, do not (they have only a “non-existent” mode of being as “sayables” or *lekta*). The ancient Stoics, it must be said, had a very narrow – pedestrian, one might say – concept of *reality* or *being*. They were nominalists who believed that the only things that can properly be said to exist are individual objects that, as parts of a nature existing in-itself, are capable of exerting causal efficacy. Perception for them was simply a mechanical matter of “grasping” or “gripping” these objects (*katalepsis*, as they termed it). Having a representation of an object amounts to no more than that object’s making an impression – an imprint, quite literally – on the soul, in exactly the same way that a signet-ring makes an impression on wax. This physicalistic, causalistic way of viewing things is, of course, non-phenomenological

in the extreme and is quite simply “absurd” (as Husserl would say). When, in accordance with their naïve realism, the Stoics attempted to say what makes for an “adequate impression,” they fell back on a simplistic correspondence theory of truth – the conformity of what is “inside” with what is “outside.” That proto-phenomenologist and master critic of all forms of dogmatism, Sextus Empiricus – who believed that one ought to stick with what he called *ta phainomena* and avoid speculating as to what might be their non-appearing “causes” – had no trouble demonstrating the “inconceivability” of the Stoic epistemology (see, for instance, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* II, 70ff).

The interesting to note is that, their epistemology and metaphysics notwithstanding¹², the Stoics were keen observers of humankind. It is only when they felt the need to “prove” the rightness of their ethical philosophy of life by grounding it in a cosmo-theoretical metaphysics that they came up short. Even though the Stoics knew perfectly well that, as they said, “Nothing is but what thinking makes it so,” they failed to see that, as Husserl said, the only truly absolute ground of things is transcendental subjectivity. *Animus est omnia*. Were one to adopt what Sextus called the “suspensive way of thought” and apply the Pyrrhonian *epochè* to the metaphysical-epistemological speculations of the Stoics so as to bracket them out or set them aside, it would, I submit, become

immediately apparent that, when they sought simply to describe the life of consciousness – the consciousness we have both of ourselves and of the great, wide world in which we find ourselves – the Stoics were as objective and faithful to “the things themselves” as any phenomenologist could be. They were, in fact, not only masters of eidetic description – who attempted to describe as faithfully as possible the essence or *ousia* of that which appears to consciousness – but were also quite adept at practicing a lived form of the phenomenological reduction, the philosophical life being for them a life lived in a lucid and joyful awareness of what Epictetus (*Discourses* II, 14) called the wondrous “fair” that is the world (this is what, speaking of the reduction, Husserl’s late assistant, Eugen Fink, called “an immeasurable astonishment over the mysteriousness of...the being of the world itself,” the pure phenomenality of the world)¹³. In their meticulous analyses or descriptions of the phenomenal realm of human reality (their *Daseinanalytik*, one might say), the Stoics were, in short, excellent phenomenologists whose insightfulness remains undiminished by the passage of time.

What, for instance, Seneca had to say in his *On Anger* about this particularly negative emotion and the means for dealing with it in a productive, self-enhancing (rather than self-diminishing) manner is something the validity of which modern psychology has only recently got around to (re)discovering. Whether they are aware of it or not, cognitive-behavioral psychologists are for their part following in the footsteps of Epictetus: people suffer because of their erroneous (“maladaptive”) beliefs. And what the relatively new discipline of “positive psychology” (“the psychology of what makes life worth living”) has to say about happiness was thoroughly foreshadowed by the great

¹² The Stoic’s metaphysical belief in universal determinism (Fate, *heimarmenè*) conflicts with their insistence on free-will and personal responsibility and caused insurmountable difficulties for them. Stoics like Chrysippus were able to reconcile freedom and fate only by means of convoluted, hair-splitting logical arguments that no one else (Cicero and the Academics in particular) found the least bit convincing. The phenomenological fact of the matter is that our lived experience as *agents* is a self-evident truth that renders nugatory any form of metaphysical determinism. To say that acts of the will are motivated in this way or that (which, of course, they always are) does not in any way legitimate one in saying that they are caused. “[A]n act of consciousness can have no cause,” as Merleau-Ponty remarked in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 258n.

¹³ See E. Fink, “The Phenomenological Philosophy of E. Husserl and Contemporary Criticism” in R. O. Elveton, ed., *The Phenomenology of Husserl* (Quadrangle Books, 1970), 109.

Stoics. Unlike scientific-empirical conjectures, philosophical-transcendental truths, once discovered, remain true *sine die* – even when, in the light of changing circumstances, they may need to be refined and enlarged.

In conclusion, I must say that I can see no reason whatsoever why one should not apply the phenomenological reduction to the Stoic philosophy as a means for “purifying” it of its naturalistic elements. This is what, in the use he made of Stoicism, Cicero, an enlightened, moderate skeptic, did to a certain extent, and, as Diogenes Laertius tells us (VI, 103), the 3rd century BC Stoic, Ariston of Chios, sought to rid Stoicism of the theoretical-speculative disciplines of Logic and Physics. The late, Roman-era Stoics tended for their part to regard the epistemological and metaphysical aspects of the Stoic system as merely adjuncts to what they held to be the all-important branch of philosophy: Ethics, without which, as Socrates had insisted, one cannot live a life that is worth living. Stoicism is, above all else, a philosophy to live by.

The important thing, Epictetus said with the example of Socrates in mind, is not to have mastered the kind of theoretical issues having to do with logic and physics that Chrysippus wrote about at great length; the only thing that truly matters is “how you act in your choices and refusals, your desires and aversions, how you go at things, and apply yourself to them, and prepare yourself, whether you are acting in harmony with nature [reason] therein, or out of harmony with it” (*Discourses* I, 4, 14). Marcus Aurelius, for his part, congratulated himself for not having spent too much time studying logic or busying himself with “cosmic speculation” (I, 17, 9). And, later in the 16th and 17th centuries, various Neostoics, such as Pierre Charron, a disciple of Montaigne, sought to make of Stoic ethics a more perfect ethics by freeing it from all materialist and deterministic encumbrances.

The fact of the matter is that Stoicism is not a philosophy that was ever carved in stone. As Seneca typically declared, “I do not bind myself

to some particular one of the Stoic masters; I, too, have the right to form an opinion” (*On the Happy Life* III, 2). This is exactly the sort of thing that any good phenomenologist would (and must) say. Like phenomenology, Stoicism is a true *philosophia perennis* that is capable of adopting itself to new insights and new situations and that has all of its life still before it.

When they are brought together and made to interact, Stoicism is purified of its naturalistic trappings by means of the phenomenological reduction, while phenomenology, by absorbing the Stoic ethics of virtue, is made into a genuinely practical philosophy, a philosophy one can actually live by. The result is a phenomenology that is not only intellectually-transcendentally sound but also ethically-existentially relevant – a therapeutic of the soul and an indispensable guide for living an authentically human life, a life of freedom and happiness. A transcendental-practical philosophy of this sort could indeed be said to be, borrowing words from Neostoic Pierre Charron,

the true science of man, all the rest in comparison is vanity, or at least is not necessary or very useful: for it teaches us how to live well and die well, which is everything¹⁴.

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¹⁴ P. Charron, *De la sagesse* (1601, reprinted 1824), III, 269. For a full-fledged attempt to show the relevance of a reconfigured Stoicism for the elaboration of an existential-phenomenological ethics, see my *On Suffering: Philosophical Reflections on What It Means to be Human* (Les Érables, 2009; www.titlesondemand.ca).

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TRANSCENDENTALIOJI FENOMENOLOGIJA KAIP PRAKTINĖ FILOSOFIJA

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Straipsnyje peržvelgiamos antikinės Stojos mokyklos idėjos, siekiama pabrėžti, kas turėtų sudaryti visavertę fenomenologinę etiką.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: etika, stoicizmas, fenomenologija, dorybė, laisvė, laimė.

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