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*The Stoic philosopher is one who lives a life
guided by reason, contemplation, and aretē.*

“Some Reflections about Stoic Ethics at Work”

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The Stoic, like any other man, by the mere fact of being human, takes part in several social circles at a time: family, work, neighborhood, country, et cetera. This necessarily involves the assumption of certain obligations that must be met in order to enable the smooth functioning of the larger community to which he belongs. Among all the social realms in which the Stoic is immersed, one of the most important is undoubtedly his job and his labor relationships. It is at work where the Stoic spends much of his time, and it is where, in one way or another, he serves his fellow workers and all of society.

The fundamental attitude of a Stoic should be constant attention, *prosoche*. It implies a continuous monitoring of his guiding principle, *hegemonikon*, in order to make sure that it works properly at all times and places, and above all that it is always aligned with the Universal Reason, or *Logos*. It is within this guiding principle where true good and evil reside, and it is this and only this area of the Universe which is entirely within his power. Also, the Stoic must train himself to avoid making wrong value-judgments over those things which do not depend on him, the so called “indifferents”. And the way to achieve such a high level of self-control is by practicing a constant discipline over the only three realms in which he is completely free, his thoughts and judgments, his desires and aversions, and his impulses to act.

All considered, the work sphere appears to us as one of the most important areas in the Stoic's life. It is where he will face some of his most challenging relationships and where he will have many chances of failure. Nevertheless, the Stoic should never consider his work as something dangerous or threatening to his beliefs, but instead it should be seen an excellent playing field to test the strength of his convictions. After all, Stoicism is not just a theoretical philosophy, but something to be practiced throughout life.

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Everyday, we spend eight or even more hours at work. During that time, we are exposed to a continuous bombardment of stimuli, many of them unwanted. Noises, images, smells, etc. make their way through us

every minute, making multiples impressions on our soul that we cannot control. However, instead of taking them as what they are—just an impression of the physical world, neither good nor bad—we tend to make a value judgment and qualify them as something good or evil. And after that, we give our assent to them. As Stoics, we must fight this tendency and avoid making an erroneous value-judgment before given our assent to the impressions. The Stoic must contemplate the impression in its nakedness, and give his assent to nothing else than what it truly is.

Here are some examples:

- Nine o'clock in the morning: The phone rings. I pick up the receiver and the boss is on the line. He speaks to me in an excited, loud voice. He is talking of something that should have been done yesterday and is still undone. His tone sounds angry. Instead of evaluating this impression as something bad, as a threat, I should see it in its nakedness: "My boss is angry and wants to see the work done right now. That's all. Nothing else. He can't hurt me as long as I don't see myself hurt."
- Twenty past eleven: Two members of my team enter my office. They explain the progress they have made with a task they have been doing during the last two weeks. As soon as they give their explanations, I realize that they misunderstood the goal of the task from the beginning. They have used two weeks of work and accomplished absolutely nothing. Instead of saying to myself: "Oh, this is something terrible! You wasted two weeks for nothing! We won't be able to recover the loss!" I should say, "There has been a misunderstanding. That's all. Let's focus and see how can we fix the problem." The misunderstanding we had belongs to the past, and therefore it can't hurt me.
- Half past one in the afternoon: There is an important meeting at work. A "big fish" has arrived from the Directorate-General to explain the details of a new policy to be established shortly. After his long speech, when asked, I give my opinion and speak about the problems that this new policy will bring. Suddenly, a colleague starts talking about how good this new policy will be. He clearly avoids mentioning the problems and speaks of false advantages, giving a lot of incorrect data about an illusory efficiency that the new policy will bring. Instead of seeing him as a bad person, I will say to myself, "Here we have someone who lies without regard for the most elemental truth in order to gain the boss's favor. That's all. Nothing bad happens to me. Even if the liar succeeds in his attempt to deceive the boss, even if the "big fish" starts considering me as less effective than my colleague, nothing terrible happens to me. The opinions of the others are not up to me, they are not my business."

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All jobs are, in essence, goal oriented. We work in order to attain some result, some change in the external world. When we achieve our goal, we feel happy; when we don't, we feel frustrated. Most people apply this simple rule regardless of how much effort they put into the task. When they invest little effort and get great results... Excellent! They feel happy! On the other hand, if they invest a great effort and get little results...Oh! Then, they get frustrated, unhappy. They feel the Universe has been unfair to them.

As Stoics, we should know that most of the time things and events have more than one cause. They are the result of a complex network of causes ordered by the universal *Logos*, which we cannot control. Men's actions have an important role in this network of causes and effects, but the role of each individual is minuscule.

Of course, we need to always have some goals in mind in order to act. Our actions are and must be goal oriented. Also, we have to put all the effort we are capable of in getting these goals done. We are responsible for the choice of the target and for the effort invested, but this is where our work ends. The outcome is not up to us. It is very easy to fall into the trap of wanting to see our goals accomplished. But we must always keep in mind that this accomplishment depends of many causes, most of which are not up to us.

As a Stoic, I should always desire noble goals which are according to Nature, do my best in order to accomplish them, and welcome every outcome that may happen. "Lead me Zeus, lead me Destiny, to the goal I was long ago assigned. And I will follow without hesitation. Even should I resist, in a spirit of perversity, I will have to follow nonetheless." (*Enchiridion*, Chapter 53).

Again, a couple of examples:

- Thirty past two: Lunch break. While I start eating, I switch on the TV in order to see the news. They are talking about something that happened yesterday whose details I know quite well because of my job. The journalist makes a harsh criticism about the "poor service" given by my department to the citizens, accusing us of being lazy, inefficient, and reckless. What is worse, the journalist in the TV studios gets in contact with a colleague who is in the street interviewing people who are passing by about my department's performance. Most of them give strong criticism about us without knowing a single fact under discussion. The rest of interviewees happily engage in an endless chain of insults.

How should I feel? I can feel myself unfairly treated and miserable because of their responses, or I can accept the situation as it comes. As a Stoic, I know that the opinions of others are not up to me. I also know that when exposed to something which doesn't depend on me, I won't be able to change the situation. Instead of feeling sad and miserable for how things are in the present, let's do like Chrysippus's dog and trot happily behind the cart of Destiny. Government's Civil Service has always been criticized and probably always will be. If it has to serve as society's scapegoat, let's leave it like that.

- Four o'clock in the afternoon: After one year of work, the great moment arrives. Lots of time and effort invested in a promising project. A team of ten members doing their best, deeply committed to the same goal. Everybody seems to agree that our project is by far the best, but when the evaluation committee's decision arrives... Oh my God! The Chairman of the Board, who seems to have his head in the clouds that day, turns down our project without giving any reason and gives the funds to the impromptu project of a rival team. Disappointment, frustration and profound unhappiness take hold of us. Everyone insults the Committee. By some unknown reason, maybe because of our Christian education or maybe because of having seen too many movies, all of us believe in some kind of "Celestial Justice" according to which the "good guy" must always win and the "bad guy" should always lose.

If there had been a Stoic on the team, he may have said to the others that things are not always like that. He may say that there is another way to look at the facts, different from the limited human perspective. A sort of "vision from above", a universal perspective under which all the events, even the most apparently unfair, match in the last analysis. From that perspective, everything makes sense, even if it doesn't make sense for the common human standards. We cannot get what we desire, but we can learn to desire what we get, if we get used to looking to the facts from the universal perspective of Nature.

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Most people go to work mainly in search of two targets. The first, in order to earn their living. The second, in order to obtain self-realization. Of course, the former is much more urgent than the latter, but it doesn't make the later less important. There are tons of studies and evidences that support this statement. Since the Maslow's *Theory of the Pyramidal Hierarchy of Human Needs*, to the numerous studies that confirm the futility of increasing salaries in order to provide the workers with greater satisfaction. Above a certain level, higher salaries don't make us happier. We look for something else, something that psychologists call, *self-realization*.

But...What constitutes self-realization? Although we don't find any reference to the term in the Stoic literature, maybe Stoicism has something to say about that. The beginning of Stoic ethics starts from the idea of self-preservation, *Oikeosis*. Every animal, including the human-animal, is provided by Nature with a strong instinct of self preservation. This impulse leads them to search and select everything that is convenient for their physical constitution: food, drink, clothes, health, shelter, et cetera. This is the Natural order for all living things.

However, in the case of men, because we are *rational* animals, our instinct of self preservation is not only limited to guarantee our physical existence, but also takes care of our rational health. Moreover, the more we develop our rational faculty, the more we find ourselves compelled by our instinct of self-preservation to take care not only of ourselves, but also of our family and friends first, our countrymen later, and the rest of humankind at the end. This is why we feel good when we help others, even if we don't know them, because we are giving satisfaction to the expanded instinct of self-preservation. And accordingly, we can say that we attain self-realization when we help others in any way, when we find ourselves useful for the rest of our fellow citizen, and when we cooperate with the rest of the humankind. We are fulfilling our expanded instinct of self-preservation.

Nonetheless, while we clearly see the implications of the instinct of self-preservation at the first levels, we often have more difficulties in distinguishing the influence of this same instinct at a more developed level. When we are at work, the goal of earning a living appears to us as something urgent and self-evident, but the goal of obtaining self-realization by the means of being useful to others often remains under the level of consciousness. We believe that if we won the lottery, if we became rich, we would never go back to work. We seldom realize that if that happened tomorrow, we would not become automatically happy unless we found another way of getting ourselves self-realized, of being helpful to others.

When at work, the Stoic should keep always in mind that he is working in order to give satisfaction to his instinct of self-preservation, not only in its narrower sense but also in its broader sense. We go to work to earn money, but also to attain self-realization, to be useful to others. I work to fulfill my role in the society, to contribute to its good functioning. And in doing so, I attain self-realization, happiness.

If we don't keep this always in mind, it is very easy to get confused in the harshness of everyday work. There are many circumstances that may distract our attention: the possibility of seeing ourselves freed from a tedious task, a promise of a particular prize, a possible promotion, an economic incentive. Any of these things can work as a veil that makes us incapable of distinguishing where the real good lies. We must keep the highest attention in order to direct our actions towards the supreme goal of serving the others, fulfilling our role within society. We are part of it, and what is good for the totality is good for us.

Some examples of all these at work:

- Ten minutes past six: There is a new boring task that must be done, but not necessarily by me. In fact, it is not my responsibility. It's not urgent, but it could be solved right now with little effort. Maybe in an hour. If it's delayed until tomorrow, perhaps the thing will get complicated and maybe my colleague, who is not in the office now, will need two or three days to resolve the task. I say to myself, "it is clearly his responsibility, not mine." Then, when I am on the verge of putting the task aside, I think again, "Wait! You are a Stoic! You are not isolated, you are part of something bigger. You must contribute to the same ends of the organization you belong to. Like the hands and feet which cooperate to the good functioning of the body. When your right hand is busy, your left hand doesn't leave the work of the right hand undone. Better or worse, the left hand does his best and do the task of the right hand on behalf of the whole body. Therefore... there are no excuses. Do the boring task right now! You will have helped your colleague, but also your organization and yourself as well."

- Eight o'clock in the evening: My boss calls me again. He wants me to write down a useless report in order to give satisfaction to an authority he is meeting tomorrow. The report must be finished within two hours. Both my boss and I know perfectly well that neither he nor the authority is really interested in the reality behind the report, but of course my boss doesn't care for that. He only wants to make a good impression on the authority, and the report is only a means to that end. If I want to write a nice and accurate report in such a short time, I will need the help of a member of my team, who is now engaged in another task. I can release him from that task, which is much more useful for the society than this stupid report, and order him to give me a hand. Before doing that, I ask myself, "How do I better serve society, by letting that guy finish what he is doing or by having him write a nice, accurate, and useless report? Of course, the first option is the correct one. Let's complete this silly report by myself as well as I can, and let that guy finishing what he is doing. I may not give satisfaction to my boss, but I will have better served society!"

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Attention, always attention. This should be our inner attitude throughout the day and most especially during the working hours: constant surveillance over our judgments, always welcoming whatever happens, and doing our best in the service of others. Nothing more and nothing less. A hard task indeed, a never ending process that will take us a lifetime. But the prize well is worth the effort. By following this path, we Stoics attain virtue and find ourselves completely aligned with Nature, which is the only road to true happiness.

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