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The Last Interview: Social Oikeiosis

An Interview with Lawrence Becker

The following interview took place via email over a period of about one month last Fall. The subject of the interview was prompted by a concern that many Stoics may be unaware of our responsibility for the well-being of all members of society. It was decided that Professor Lawrence Becker would be the ideal source for explaining that responsibility. In addition, after the interview there are a few words about the alt-right's current embrace of Stoicism.

In Memoriam: Lawrence C. Becker, 79, of Roanoke, Virginia, USA, died on Thursday, 22 NOV 18 from a heart attack. Professor Becker was an inspiration to many contemporary Stoics for his pioneering scholarship in our ancient tradition. He was a member of the Stoic Registry, an Academic Fellow of the College of Stoic Philosophers, Kenan Professor Emeritus of the College of William and Mary, and a Fellow of Hollins University. It is with great respect and gratitude that we salute his life and contribution to the teachings of the Stoa.

I sent the final draft of our interview to Professor Becker on the 19th of November. He passed away three days later, Thanksgiving Day, and was unable to approve or edit what we had discussed. I take full responsibility for the opinions expressed herein, but it is important to note that none of his responses to my questions were edited in any way and are reproduced exactly as received.

The Professor:

Lawrence C. Becker was Professor Emeritus of the Department of Philosophy, College of William and Mary and an academic Fellow of the College of Stoic Philosophers (FCSP). Professor Becker's answers to the interviewer will be in plain font.

The Interviewer:

Erik Wiegardt is the scholar of the College of Stoic Philosophers (2008), president of the New Stoa educational nonprofit, and editor of the eJournal, "The Stoic Philosopher." Wiegardt's questions for the Professor will be italicized.

The Interview

Interviewer: *Thank you for agreeing to this interview, Professor Becker. We are honored to have you with us.*

From my experience in emailing and speaking with Stoics over the past 5 or 6 years, it appears there is a disproportionately high number of far-right conservatives in our community. It's as if moderation is no longer a viable political option. In some discussions there has been the suggestion that Stoics are really only responsible for their own virtue practice, and the so-called progressive ideas and attitudes of the more liberal members of society are either irrelevant or antithetical to the Stoic point of view. In your view is this a correct reading of Stoic ethics, either past or present?

Professor Becker: I didn't know that. And, I am a little bit surprised to hear about it, for the same reasons that I would be surprised if the opposite were the case and there were a preponderance of members from the left or the far left. The Stoics were, after all, cosmopolitans. They had a systematic philosophy under continuous development, and appeared to welcome members from all walks of life. And as for whether "the so-called progressive ideas and attitudes of the more liberal members of society are either irrelevant or antithetical to the Stoic point of view,"... my first reaction is to remind everyone that Zeno wrote a much discussed work about the ideal form of a Republic which apparently had some very progressive and liberal views in it. My second reaction is just to call attention to the fact many of the Stoics we know about were writers, teachers, and politically engaged enough to send emissaries to Rome, and along with other philosophers, to get themselves in trouble with the authorities.

From what you have said, some people are arguing what I take to be a version of ethical egoism, which with respect to the Stoics misses three things: first, that they insisted in their cradle argument that human beings were not primarily and fundamentally egoistic because very early on they develop a form of social oikeiosis; *second*, though we cannot control other people's virtue, that doesn't mean that we can treat them viciously ourselves and still claim to be pursuing virtue ourselves; and third, in order to make progress toward virtue, we need a reasonably hospitable physical and social environment that is multi-generational. All of these things argue against any form of radical individualism.

So again, I'm surprised. Can you say more?

Interviewer: *Without pointing fingers or naming names, I think my impressions of this began in noting responses to current events in social media, such as Facebook. I left FB earlier this year, but before I left I asked a number of members of the Stoic community their political preference and was surprised to learn that they were invariably libertarians or tea party populists. I know I do not have an accurate or fair sampling of the many Stoics in the world, but it caused me to wonder why virtually all the comments I read on FB were in support of conservative causes. I even noted more than one Stoic strongly supporting Donald Trump and his policies, despite his low moral character, propensity for falsehood, and xenophobia.*

Can you discuss social oikeiosis as it pertains to the contemporary political scene? Generally, would a Stoic be expected to agree with US President Ronald Reagan's maxim that government is not the solution, it's the problem? Specifically, would a Stoic be able to support a national health care program, a government plan, or are we to encourage self-reliance and the free market above all? Is either choice related to our political point of view?

Professor Becker. I think Stoics would have disagreements among themselves about many political issues today, just as they did in the past, apparently. But I do think they took social oikeiosis seriously – even though they recognized variations among human beings in how strongly it was felt and expressed. It was one of the major differences they had with the Epicureans, for example. So to the extent that human beings follow the “natural” path of incorporating other people’s welfare into their own, as if it were their own, I think it would be difficult for them to just accept at face value the judgment that “government is not the solution, it’s the problem.” Surely they would want to qualify that by extracting the concession that government (and social organization in general) is sometimes necessary to solve coordination, cooperation, and conflict problems. Sometimes such problems arise because we have not gone as far as we need to go – and are naturally motivated to go – in incorporating the welfare of others into our own. Recall Hierocles’ Ethics, and his insistence that we try to move to the point that we incorporate all human beings into our concerns, even though most of them might be far from the hot center of our self-interest.

As for whether a Stoic could support a national health care program, it would depend on the circumstances. I know that sounds like weaseling, but we have to recognize that the endorsement of a given modern institution is connected to a lot of things (like offering aid to people starving in remote countries, which is not even possible without modern forms of communication and transportation, not to mention surpluses). And before the development of modern medicine – including anesthesia, antiseptics, antibiotics and so forth – it is an open question how much there is to be gained from even large local hospitals let alone a national healthcare program. But what I think would be ruled out by the Stoics would be forms of individualistic isolation in which we are not even alert to the possibilities of helping each other stay healthy, and on the path to virtue. I do not believe the Stoics could endorse any political point of view in which we deliberately isolate ourselves from the welfare of others.

Interviewer. *Yes, I certainly agree. Regarding the second part of your original response, I don't think the Stoics I know would treat others “viciously,” but would be more likely to treat others indifferently—as in, their welfare is their concern and theirs alone, just as my welfare is mine and mine alone.*

Professor Becker. I use the term “viciously” here just to mean acting from a vice rather than from a virtue. And I think treating others indifferently “as in their welfare is their concern and theirs alone, just as my welfare is mine and mine alone” is a vice insofar as it ignores the natural virtue of mutual concern produced by social oikeiosis. Surely it is the case that the health, virtue, and welfare of others is a preferred indifferent for people who are on the path to stoic Virtue with a V – that is, a form of life in which all the various subdivisions of the virtues of justice, courage, temperance, and wisdom are coordinated and expressed in a coherent set of actions in which the virtues dominate the expression of vices.

And by the way, perhaps we should pursue the thought that each person is responsible for his or her own virtue, and not others’.

Interviewer. *Regarding the third part of your answer, why is it necessary to have “a reasonably hospitable physical and social environment that is multi-generational” in order to make progress towards virtue? Don't we claim that even a slave, such as Epictetus, can be a Stoic, and in fact Stoicism would be the perfect philosophy for a slave? Seneca suggested that Cato the Younger was as close to a sage as any Stoic, and yet we know that he was one of the first to personally support the army sent to destroy the slave rebellion led by Spartacus.*

Professor Becker. Epictetus did live in a multi-generational, reasonably hospitable, physical and social environment. In his life as a slave, he was cared for as a child, educated, and not so mistreated that he could not go on living not only a productive life but a life on the path to Stoic Virtue. Without that, he would not have been the Epictetus we know. That is true of all human beings. Without habilitative care from others, infants and very young just die. But without the ability to receive and use the care of others, by self-habilitation, we also die very young. And without a life-sustaining physical environment we die. These needs for habilitation go on throughout our lives in various forms. Maybe for short periods we can live just by self-habilitation alone. But I'm not sure how far we can get along the path to stoic virtue. (See my book *Habilitation, Health, And Agency: A Framework for Basic Justice*. It's in the Stoic tradition, I think.)

Interviewer. *Thank you Professor Becker. Your insights and scholarship are a great resource for the Stoic community. It should also be mentioned that I read Habilitation, Health, And Agency: A Framework for Basic Justice and found it to be an excellent book that I can highly recommend.]*

Alt-right Stoics

Shortly after Professor Becker and I completed our interview I came across this article in the Washington Post, entitled “Guess who's championing Homer? Radical online conservatives,” by Donna Zuckerberg, a classics scholar and editor in chief of the online classics publication, Eidolon.¹ I sent a copy of this article to the professor and explained that I planned to use it as an addendum to the interview.

The first three-fourths of this article discusses how the alt-right has embraced the ancient Greeks as the founders of their identity. They argue that ancient Mediterranean culture and philosophy rightly counters the “white genocide” promoted by liberals on college campuses. The ideals of Sparta are especially prevalent in their writings. According to Zuckerberg, the computer password of former White House adviser Steve Bannon was “Sparta.” Ancient Greeks have been adopted by the alt-right “with the aim of praising whiteness and masculinity — and justifying the privileged place that white males enjoy in society.”

But again, what does this have to do with Stoics? Quoting Zuckerberg, “One of the most insidious and disturbing examples of classical appropriation by the alt-right is its embrace of Stoicism...” To her

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/guess-whos-championing-homer-radical-online-conservatives/2018/11/02/af3a49f6-dd40-11e8-85df-7a6b4d25cfbb_story.html?utm_term=.cc4cb2e62efc

credit she concisely and correctly states the difference between what the alt-right claims to inherit from our philosophy versus what Stoicism really teaches. She puts it this way:

Today, the adjective “stoic” is most commonly used to describe people who don’t show what they’re feeling, instead keeping their emotions under tight control. Ancient Stoics, though, were less interested in the display of emotions than in understanding what causes them. The Stoics aspired to live rationally, which meant accepting that each person could exert complete control over their own behavior. Emotions, they thought, were usually a result of irrationally believing that somebody else’s actions, or other outside forces, determined one’s psychological reaction.

The alt-right's embrace of our philosophy is given as a defense of their reactionary conservatism. Many influential writers of that community exhort their followers to adopt the tough-guy Stoic image of moral and emotional superiority to women and people of color. *The Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius and the *Enchiridion* of Epictetus commonly appear on their reading lists. However, Stoics who really understand our philosophy understand social oikeiosis and know that we are not and cannot become a haven for those who would demean, abuse, or dismiss others in order to elevate themselves and their kind.

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