

Stoicism and arguments against primitivism

Interesting Start

Oct 5, 2022

I used to be a primitivist for about a year, and I still agree with many of the arguments. Modern life is clearly incompatible with our human biology; we are killing the planet; we live largely unfulfilled lives and it seems like things are getting worse and worse.

But then I discovered Stoicism and I largely reconsidered my primitivist beliefs. Here are some of my newfound arguments against primitivism. Any constructive criticism or debate is welcome.

One of the tenets of Stoicism is that we should live according to our ideal human nature. This doesn't mean "live in a tribe," this means "live up to your fullest potential." Just as an acorn grows up to be a strong oak tree, Stoics argue that we and our species should grow up to be the best versions of ourselves that we can be. Like it or not, despite the consequences of civilization and industrialization, we have developed so many amazing technologies and accomplished so much. Who's to say that we won't fix the problems currently plaguing the human race?

Also, let's get real — we aren't going back. Realistically, wouldn't it make more sense to work to make the world a better place as it is now, instead of destroying it? If we end up destroying ourselves, that's not up to us. But until that happens we can be good to one another, help others, and live the best lives we can while we're here.

Stoicism also argues that "things" are not good or bad, they're just things, and it's our judgments and our use of things that makes them "good" or "bad." For instance, a rifle can be used to kill another man for the purposes of robbing him (bad) or to kill a deer for the purposes of feeding your family (good). But in and of itself, a rifle is objectively neutral. It's just an object. All of the industrial inventions that we have today cannot be considered objectively good or bad — rather, their value is in how we use them. Why can't we use technology for good instead of outright rejecting it?

To sum up, I do believe living a life close to nature (wild nature, not the Stoic idea of nature) is ideal for our species, since we haven't evolved enough to adapt to modern society. And I do believe in reducing our reliance on modern technologies and conveniences. But like it or not, we live in this modern world and we might as well make the best of it instead of rebelling against it and breaking off from society. Realistically, I think the best outcome for the human race would be to balance technology and wild nature somehow. Even if that doesn't happen (I know it's naive, because our politicians only care about power and greed), we can still apply that to our own lives, can't we?

P.S. This is an interesting article on "living according to nature" from the Stoicism subreddit:

What does it mean to live in accordance with nature?

by Cleomedes

The ancient Greek conception of nature was different than the modern one. The Greek word commonly translated as “nature,” φύσις/physics, is derived from the Greek verb φύειν, meaning “to grow,” referring either to the origin of something (that from which it grew), the process of growth itself, or the full completion of growth (maturity).

Its first use in the context of philosophy was by the pre-Socratics, roughly 300 years before the founding of the Stoic school. Greek city states were making the transition from being governed by priest/kings who used traditional creation myths to legitimize their rule to governments following a variety of different systems. The pre-Socratics were often advocates of one or another of these alternate forms of government, and wrote accounts often titled “Περὶ Φύσεως,” “On Nature”. (See this wikipedia page for examples.) These described alternate creation stories in which the universe was something that grew, rather than being something that was created, undermining the legitimacy of the priest/kings.

Later, the Sophists contrasted φύσις/physics (nature) with νόμος/nómos (law/custom/tradition) as different, competing influences on human behavior. Unlike the pre-Socratics, the “nature” being referred to was the nature of a human being, rather than that of the universe as a whole. (See this IEP entry for more.)

Aristotle later used the concept of nature extensively in his description of mechanics. According to Aristotle, a thing followed its nature when it was growing or changing because of what it was — because of its own characteristics — rather than due to what was being done to it. For example, when an oak tree grows from an acorn, it is following its nature, but when a carpenter cuts it into lumber and builds a bed with it, it is not.

Finally, the Cynics used the same physics/nomos contrast as the Sophists, but unlike the Sophists, they saw the φύσις/physics (nature) of a human as fundamentally good, and νόμος/nómos (law/custom/tradition) as fundamentally bad, and advocated following nature only and rejecting law and culture entirely.

The Stoics, strongly influenced by the Cynics, advocated following nature (but do not seem to have assumed that nomos was universally bad). So, in the sense meant by the Stoics, a human following nature meant reaching full, flourishing maturity (note the connection with εὐδαιμονία/eudaimonia), or perhaps a mixture of that and something like the modern idea of self-actualization. Vice, they thought, is caused by bad external influences or immaturity. Following nature is the same as being virtuous, which is being a fully mature, flourishing rational being, while being vicious is the same as being childish, sick, or injured. The intuition for what is mature and what is not seems similar to that assumed by modern English idioms like “He was the adult in the room.” or “He was acting childishly.”

In addition to the Cynic use of “nature” to refer to the nature of a human being, the Stoics also adopted the pre-Socratic application of the word “Nature” to apply to the universe as a whole. Recall (from this question) that the Stoics regarded the universe itself as God, an “animate substance endowed with sensation.” Unlike a human being, who (due to bad influences) can act contrary to his or her nature, the universe itself

has no external influences, and so is inherently in accordance with Nature. Later Stoics sometimes, therefore, used Logos, Nature, and Zeus interchangeably.

So what, exactly, did the Stoics think this “Nature” was like? Murray’s lecture provides a useful account:

What is Goodness? What is this thing which is the only object worth living for?

Zeno seems to have been a little impatient of the question. We know quite well; everybody knows who is not blinded by passion or desire. Still, the school consented to analyze it. And the profound common sense and reasonableness of average Greek thought expressed the answer in its own characteristic way. Let us see in practice what we mean by “good.” Take a good bootmaker, a good father, a good musician, a good horse, a good chisel ; you will find that each one of them has some function to perform, some special work to do ; and a good one does the work well. Goodness is performing your function well. But when we say “well” we are still using the idea of goodness. What do we mean by doing it “well”? Here the Greek falls back on a scientific conception which had great influence in the fifth century b.c., and, somewhat transformed and differently named, has regained it in our own days. We call it “Evolution.” The Greeks called it Phusis, a word which we translate by “Nature,” but which seems to mean more exactly “growth,” or “the process of growth.” (See a paper by Professor J. L. Myres, “The Background of Greek Science,” University of California Chronicle, xvi, 4.) It is Phusis which gradually shapes or tries to shape every living thing into a more perfect form. It shapes the seed, by infinite and exact gradations, into the oak; the blind puppy into the good hunting dog; the savage tribe into the civilized city. If you analyze this process, you find that Phusis is shaping each thing towards the fulfilment of its own function—that is, towards the good. Of course Phusis some-times fails; some of the blind puppies die; some of the seeds never take root. Again, when the proper development has been reached, it is generally followed by decay; that, too, seems like a failure in the work of Phusis. I will not consider these objections now; they would take us too far afield, and we shall need a word about them later. Let us in the meantime accept this conception of a force very like that which most of us assume when we speak of evolution; especially, perhaps, it is like what Bergson calls *La Vie* or *L’Elan Vital* at the back of *L’Evolution Creatrice*, though to the Greeks it seemed still more personal and vivid; a force which is present in all the live world, and is always making things grow towards the fulfilment of their utmost capacity. We see now what goodness is; it is living or acting according to Phusis, working with Phusis in her eternal effort towards perfection. You will notice, of course, that the phrase means a good deal more than we usually mean by living “according to nature.” It

does not mean “living simply,” or “living like the natural man.” It means living according to the spirit which makes the world grow and progress.

This Phusis becomes in Stoicism the centre of much speculation and much effort at imaginative understanding. It is at work everywhere. It is like a soul, or a life-force, running through all matter as the “soul” or life of a man runs through all his limbs. It is the soul of the world. Now, it so happened that in Zeno’s time the natural sciences had made a great advance, especially Astronomy, Botany, and Natural History. This fact had made people familiar with the notion of natural law. Law was a principle which ran through all the movements of what they called the Kosmos, or “ordered world.” Thus Phusis, the life of the world, is, from another point of view, the Law of Nature ; it is the great chain of causation by which all events occur; for the Phusis which shapes things towards their end acts always by the laws of causation. Phusis is not a sort of arbitrary personal goddess, upsetting the natural order; Phusis is the natural order, and nothing happens without a cause.

A natural law, yet a natural law which is alive, which is itself life. It becomes indistinguishable from a purpose, the purpose of the great world-process. It is like a fore-seeing, fore-thinking power—Pronoia; our common word “Providence” is the Latin translation of this Pronoia, though of course its meaning has been rubbed down and cheapened in the process of the ages. As a principle of providence or forethought it comes to be regarded as God, the nearest approach to a definite personal God which is admitted by the austere logic of Stoicism. And, since it must be in some sense material, it is made of the finest material there is; it is made of fire, not ordinary fire, but what they called intellectual fire. A fire which is present in a warm, live man, and not in a cold, dead man; a fire which has consciousness and life, and is not subject to decay. This fire, Phusis, God, is in all creation.

We are led to a very definite and complete Pantheism. The Sceptic begins to make his usual objections. “God in worms?” he asks. “God in fleas and dung beetles?” And, as usual, the objector is made to feel sorry that he spoke. “Why not?” the Stoic answers; “cannot an earthworm serve God? Do you suppose that it is only a general who is a good soldier? Cannot the lowest private or camp attendant fight his best and give his life for his cause? Happy are you if you are serving God, and carrying out the great purpose as truly as such-and-such an earthworm?” That is the conception. All the world is working together. It is all one living whole, with one soul through it. And, as a matter of fact, no single part of it can either rejoice or suffer without all the rest being affected. The man who does not see that the good of every living creature is his good, the hurt of every living creature his hurt, is one who wilfully makes himself a kind of outlaw or

exile: he is blind, or a fool. So we are led up to the great doctrine of the later Stoics, the Συμπαθεία τῶν ὅλων, or Sympathy of the Whole; a grand conception, the truth of which is illustrated in the ethical world by the feelings of good men, and in the world of natural science... We moderns may be excused for feeling a little surprise... by the fact that the stars twinkle. It is because they are so sorry for us: as well they may be!

St. George William Joseph Stock's *A Little Book of Stoicism* also provides some insight:

It was assumed by the Greeks that the ways of nature were 'the ways of pleasantness,' and that 'all her paths' were 'peace.' This may seem to us a startling assumption, but that is because we do not mean by 'nature' the same thing as they did. We connect the term with the origin of a thing, they connected it rather with the end; by the 'natural state' we mean a state of savagery, they meant the highest civilization; we mean by a thing's nature what it is or has been, they meant what it ought to become under the most favorable conditions: not the sour crab, but the mellow glory of the Herperides, worthy to be guarded by a sleepless dragon, was to the Greeks the natural apple. Hence we find Aristotle maintaining that the State is a natural product, because it is evolved out of social relations which exist by nature. Nature indeed was a highly ambiguous term to the Greeks no less than ourselves, but in the sense with which we are now concerned the nature of anything as defined by the Peripatetics as 'the end of its becoming.' Another definition of theirs puts the matter still more clearly: What each thing is when its growth has been completed, that we declare to be the nature of each thing.

The Ted K Archive

Interesting Start
Stoicism and arguments against primitivism
Oct 5, 2022

<www.reddit.com/r/anarcho_primitivism>

www.thetedkarchive.com