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## "All or Nothing: for Stoicism"

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To paraphrase a particularly pompous character from a Trollop novel: When I speak of classical moral philosophy I mean Hellenistic moral philosophy, and by Hellenistic moral philosophy I mean stoic ethics. SO:

1) My topic here will be stoicism, and the prospects for making it once again a systematic moral philosophy to be reckoned with.

I restrict my remarks to stoicism in this way for two very good reasons: It is the classical moral philosophy I know best, and it is the only one I care about reviving. It is not the only one I care about *studying*. It is just the only one I care about **for living my life**, and hence, the only one I care about when it comes to persuading other people to take it seriously for their lives, and the only one I care about when it comes to thinking about practical applications.

2) It is hopeless to try to revive a moral theory -- any moral theory -- from the intellectual distance achieved by "looking backward" to the remote past, even to a past that one romanticizes into a Golden Age. A sense of ironic detachment and superiority is implicit in such a project, and that is enough to undermine the effort to revive the theory -- to make serious use of it in the sense of incorporating it into one's own ethical theory or daily life.

3) Of course, one can incorporate classical moral theory into one's **professional work** in ethical theory without making serious use of it in that sense. (And despite my age, and the fact that I have spent my career teaching in undergraduate departments, I do not underestimate the seriousness with which graduate students today are forced into the "professional" appropriation of this or that theory. When I was on the circuit reading various parts of the manuscript that was to become my Reciprocity book, a particularly intense graduate student at another university accosted me after my talk and said simply (in sorrow and disgust), "What you say may be true, but I don't see how I can get article off of it.")

4) But the professional appropriation of a classical moral theory -- even the widespread appropriation of it in this way -- is very unlikely to do anything to revive the theory as something that has practical consequences for people's lives generally, or even as something that has significant theoretical consequences. This is so because the professional appropriation of a theory -- making it something that graduate students and tenure candidates can get articles off of -- solves only problems that the profession, at a given moment, defines as intellectually interesting. These may or may not correspond to anything that has practical or theoretical applications for people in general, *or for philosophers*.

5) What I am interested in is making serious use of stoic moral theory -- that is, in using it to build an ethical theory I am willing to accept and defend, philosophically, and to build an account of the good life that I am willing to commit myself to living out. That is, after all, what moral philosophy is finally about.

6) Now one can make serious use of an ancient moral theory -- one can revive it -- either in whole or in fragments. That is, one can commit oneself to *being* some version of a stoic in ethics (for example), or one can simply incorporate scattered parts of stoic moral theory into something which is not (overall) a form of stoicism at all.

Stoicism, however, is a systematic moral theory, and it is especially difficult to incorporate mere fragments of it in anything else. It comes very close to being something one must either take whole or not at all, and in fact it seems to me to be plausible only insofar as one takes it whole. *Pace*, Cicero.

The reverse is true of other classical moral theories. Taking Platonism, or Aristotelianism, or Epicureanism, or Skepticism whole and making practical applications of them is an appalling prospect -- doomed either by their inescapable parochialism about the boundaries of the moral community, or (in some cases) an insupportably restricted and hierarchical view of moral excellence, or (in other cases) a self-defeating pessimism about moral change, a faulty developmental psychology, or reliance on an empirically indefensible notion of fixed character

traits. And so on. For these theories, it is taking fragments of them that is most plausible and attractive.

7) Unfortunately, I think the probability of reviving **any** classical moral theory by incorporating fragments of it into something else is just about zero. The considerations that lead me to this dismal view are roughly these.

a) No moral theory will be taken seriously (in terms of commitment) by contemporary philosophers unless a critical mass of its assumptions and doctrines are already deeply entrenched in the pretheoretical background. This is so because the way we test our ethical theories these days seems inevitably to reduce to some form of intuitionism, or at best a method for achieving reflective equilibrium between a theory and our considered moral judgments -- where "considered moral judgments" are, roughly, those elements of the pre-theoretical background which seem acceptable (endorsable) on reflection. A moral theory without (a critical mass of) points of contact in the pre-theoretical of background will thus be rejected out of hand.

b) Thus if we give up on taking a given classical theory whole, and try instead to get attention for fragments of it (fragments ripped out of their theoretical context), those fragments had better be part of the pre-theoretical background. If they are not, the fragments will suffer from having no necessary role to play in the theory building process. Being only fragments, they will not themselves amount to a theory to be tested; being absent from the pre-theoretical background or the category of considered moral judgments, they will not by themselves constitute something to test a theory against (they will seem too odd, to unmotivated); and, being so fragmentary, and severed from support either by a theoretical context or considered moral judgments, they are not likely (an understatement) to be included in any modern moral theory just for ad hoc reasons. So the fragments we pick will have to be fragments already in our repertoire, so to speak.

c) But modern moral philosophy is characterized by two great theoretical engines -- consequentialism (of which utilitarianism is a branch) and deontology, or what Gewirth calls antecedentalism (of which both natural rights theory and various versions of Kantian moral theory are branches). These theoretical engines, like modern Western political systems, are ruthlessly imperialistic, whether they intend to be or not. They want to organize and consume all the resources -- all of the food for theoretical thought.

d) So what is the prospect for reviving an ancient moral theory by offering up juicy fragments of it to these voracious theories? I submit that any such fragments -- especially ones that are deeply entrenched in our pre-theoretical background, but which consequentialists or deontologists have hitherto ignored or underplayed -- are simply going to be ingested by them, and if possible, digested into fuel that will increase the power of consequentialism or deontology at the expense of classical moral philosophy. (And we need not wonder what will happen to the fragments that these theories find indigestible.)

As evidence for this, reflect on what has happened to the critique of modern moral philosophy offered by Bernard Williams and others -- a critique that brings to our attention important fragments of an Aristotelian ethical theory. We now have endless articles about how both Kantians and utilitarians can form profound personal attachments, visit people in the hospital for the right reasons, and not think too much when saving their spouses from drowning. Young philosophers making careers for themselves get lots of articles out of this, but none of it helps to revive classical moral philosophy as anything more than a source of pointers to neglected parts of the pre-theoretical background.

e) But actually, of course, fragmentists about classical philosophy can hardly complain about this, since they are not in the business of offering any theoretical competition for consequentialism or deontology. So when they get the dismissive wave that says, in effect, "Thanks for the tip about friendship. Come back when you have something else that good," they are just going to have to swallow hard and take it. Classical moral philosophy, under those circumstances, is likely to make only a transient impact. That does not amount to a revival -- though I suppose it does constitute a practical application that might have lasting effects, soon to be disassociated from their source.

8) That sort of practical application -- of stoicism, at least -- is not very inspiring. We can do better by taking it whole. That is, by trying to conceive something in the stoic tradition that constitutes a genuine alternative to both consequentialism and deontology. Let us think about the prospects for doing that.