Stoicism and Virtue: The Intrinsic Relationship

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Abstract: Stoicism provides the practical wisdom of happiness to the modern people. Stoicism can also provide us with the essential source of moral power for the virtues. Both the private virtues and the public virtues are deeply rooted into the Stoicism principles that the moral agents have the ultimate moral freedom of choosing, regardless of the changes of the outer circumstances. To effectively build the virtues, we need to effectively distinguish between what is up to us and what is not up to us. Stoicism has greatly enlightened the development of virtue ethics from two fundamental aspects. On the one hand, Stoicism tells us that we need to make the best use of what is in our own power so that we can truly live the fully virtuous life. On the other hand, Stoicism lets us know that we need to accept what inevitably will happen to us with dignity and a peaceful mind. The Stoicism has also emphasized the importance and value of the freedom of moral choice, which means the innate and firm soul force that can exercise the practical wisdom of life, regardless of the changes of outer circumstances.

Keywords: Stoicism, Virtue, Happiness

1. Introduction

Virtues reflect life and life is the source of virtues. People act it as life, before they apprehend them as virtues. All theories concerning virtues have one predominant aim, namely, to help people find the eventual secrets or principles of happiness. In spite of the endless efforts of the modern people to pursue their desired happiness, they are now still so far from the road to happiness and so disillusioned at the myths of the blessings of science and technology that they are now turning their attention back to the traditional ethical wisdom, such as Stoicism, for the practical wisdom of happiness. The most abstract wisdom regarding happiness tends to be the most practical and the most universal truth concerning happiness is also the most personal.

The crisis of modernity has, undoubtedly, damaged and even ruined man's original oneness or harmony with nature and the inner universe of the heart. The moral aloneness and the deep sense of isolation have also led to the prevalent identity crisis. Both the sense of being and the sense of belonging have been gone with the wind. It is commonly acknowledged that" The social history of man started with his emerging from a state of oneness with the natural world to an awareness of himself as an entity separate from surrounding nature and men".[1] The process of being physically and mentally separated from the traditional cultures is also the process of being individuals and becoming independent. As a consequence of the breakdown of the traditional values, the social morality on the whole, or the civil virtues, have largely been marginalized and the private virtues have become increasingly significant.

In the sphere of virtue ethics, men need, not only to check the desires to some extent, but also to liberate the desires in some degree. Without a doubt, Stoicism can provide us with the essential source of moral power for the virtues. In some sense, Stoicism has supplied us with the eternal philosophically based wisdom with regard to the most significant and fundamental problems confronting mankind. With the modern society getting increasingly complicated and complex, we indeed need to be equipped with"the Stoic view of how to confront pain, disaster, and death without loss of peace of mind" [2] so that we can truly build and cultivate the genuine and lasting virtues that serve as basic foundation of our sustainable happiness.

2. The Art of Living: Virtue Based on Stoicism

After mankind had entered the age of modernity or modernization, morality theory inevitably moved into a new emphasis: private or personal virtues. The emphasis of virtue ethics is the practical and personal life of the specific

individual. It focuses its attention on the moral self-improvement and perfection rather than the moral rules of the society. Instead of working out the systematic and comprehensive moral picture for the perfect and whole society and manipulatively or consciously fitting individuals into the enormous social machine, as Confucius and Plato had done, the modern educational experts on virtue education have done their utmost to lead the young people to concentrate their attention on consistently developing their personal virtues, such as temperance, tolerance, integrity, so that they can eventually live the virtuously good life and become the virtuous people. After all, being a virtuous person by doing the virtuous things, consistently and willingly, is, in some sense, the greatest contribution that an individual can make to the successful building of the harmonious world or the harmonious society.

As the historian Lecky observes," Stoicism became the religion of the educated classes. It furnished the principles of virtue, colored the noblest literature of the time, and guided all the developments of moral enthusiasm."[3] When faced with the inevitable doubts, uncertainties, fears and challenges of life, we need to have the great virtuous wisdom to navigate across the ups and downs or the vicissitudes of life. In some sense, by providing the virtues with the profound philosophical basis, Stoicism has served as the"instructor and guide of souls at every stage of their earthly pilgrimage".[4] Virtues are not supposed to be merely the pretty toys that amount to the endless pursuit of abstract moral rules that have little to do with the personal fates or the complicated but specific moral situations. Virtue is a kind of great wisdom that can guide us towards the virtuous and good life that we truly desire.

Based on the moral elements of Stoicism, virtues help us to be more appreciative of the practical value of the good life. There is a close connection between virtue ethics and Stoicism because both of them emphasize the life code that insists on the moral agents' living the virtuous life, which embrace the eternal virtues that are essential to the happiness of mankind, such as courage, discipline, temperance, and fortitude.

The art of life, definitely, includes an admirable serenity and tranquility, which enable us to contemplate the realistic but imperfect modern life from without.

2.1. Stoicism: Distinguishing Between What Is Up to Us and What Is Not Up to Us

Undoubtedly, the overwhelming emphasis of Stoic is upon ethics, namely, upon this fundamental question: How can we, as an individual, live a good and peaceful life, in spite of the inevitable vicissitudes of the world beyond the horizon of mind? Even though the Stoics aimed at happiness, they never expected that the truly lasting happiness could be found in the external world or in the possession of the external fame or wealth, which was not entirely up to us.

Generally speaking, there are two kinds of virtues. The first kind of virtue can be called the positive virtues, which provide us with the necessary mental and spiritual capacity to pursue the virtuous life. These positive virtues include courage,

confidence, diligence, faith and so on. The other kind of virtues can be called negative virtues, such as temperance, discipline, self-control, tolerance, which, instead of motivating us to do something meaningful, remind us of the importance of not to do the morally bad things that can distract us from living the virtuous life with the peaceful mind.

According to the Stoics,"the chief end of man, and highest good, is happiness", and happiness is attained by" living according to Nature"." The Natural life, in fact, is the life controlled by reason; and such a life is briefly described as virtue". "It is this meaning of virtue which explains the Stoic dogma that virtue is the only good, and happiness consists exclusively in virtue."[5] The fundamental reason why virtue is regarded as the only and highest good is simply because the so-called goods are never the good and the highest good is virtuously controlled by ourselves. The external things, no matter how many people regard them good, are never the highest good, because they are not up to ourselves, but are subjected to various external factors.

2.2. The Power of Reason in Shaping Both Virtue and Stoicism

Without the power of reason, we would not know what things are determined by our own power and what are not. As Marcus says in his Meditations, we need to "accept without resentment whatever may befall", because the external things, such as wealth, social status, fame and even life or death are just "things indifferent".[6]

The power of reason enables the modern people to rationalize their way out of the overwhelming anxiety and the sense of being morally empty caused by the greed and too much desire to conquer. By nature, a person can be a saint and sage. Put it another way, deeply rooted into the heart, every individual was planted a seed of greatness and virtue when he was born. But the life of reality that is full of temptations and distractions can easily corrupt the pure soul of every person if he is not equipped with the power of reason based on virtues. It is just because of the existence of virtues that people can learn to be content with what they have. The modern generation is the generation that can not turn back. We must rediscover the source of the power of virtue that is based on the solid rationality. Both the virtue ethics and Stoicism are concerned with making the present world morally better and more harmonious by helping the individuals to become virtuous.

2.3. Fully Realize the Happy and Virtuous Life in the Realistic Reality World

As Epictetus said, "To make the best of what is in our own power, and take the rest as it naturally happen."[7] Happiness does not lie in controlling everything or acquiring everything, but in coming to terms with the imperfect reality. According to Stoicism, in spite of the fact that man is thrown into the flawed and imperfect reality world, we still have the ultimate freedom to choose to make full use of what is available to us. Owing to the moral and virtuous freedom, the moral agent can still consciously choose to liberate and emancipate himself or

herself from the imperfect things that will inevitably happen. In other words, the moral agents can not choose what things will happen to him, but he can choose how he looks at or interprets the things that have happened to him. The power of the soul, or the power of virtue alone is sufficient for the entire fulfillment of individual happiness. "[8] It is true that the Cynics were more concerned to emphasize the negative side of the sage's well-being, its independence of bodily health and strength, beauty, pleasure, wealth, good birth, good fame; while the Stoics brought into more prominence its positive side, the magnanimous confidence, the tranquility undisturbed by grief, the joy and cheer of the spirit, which inseparably attended the possession of wisdom." Happiness, at least, to some extent, can be independent of the outer conditions. By strengthening the power of the inner virtues, man can overcome and even despise the satisfaction of the vulgar desires. To seek the realistic happiness that is deeply rooted in the soil of the reality, man can not depend on the satisfaction of the physical desires. The truly virtuous agent will not be misled or tempted to believe that the happiness is in the hands of others or that the happiness is largely evaluated by the outer standard. No matter how imperfect the reality is, we can always have the moral freedom to choose the perfect soul or virtue, which is the genuine basis of the lasting happiness.

3. The Eventual and Ultimate Moral Freedom: The Fundamental Basis of Virtue

Virtue is not an abiding possession or a permanent disposition for those who have cultivated and embraced it. Virtue is based on the moral freedom to choose or the good, free, and moral will. The freedom of moral choice means the innate and firm soul force that can exercise the practical wisdom of life, regardless of the changes of outer circumstances.

As Epictetus said," I must die: and must I die groaning too? Be fettered. Must it be lamenting too? Exiled. Can anyone prevent me, then, from going with a smile and good cheer and serenity? Betray the secret. I will not betray it; for this is in my own power. Then I will fetter you. What are you saying, man? Fetter me? You will fetter my leg; but not even Zeus himself can get the better of my choice. I will cast you into prison. My wretched body, rather. I will behead you. Did I ever tell you, that I alone had a head that can not be cut off? These are the things that philosophers ought to study; it is these that they should write about each day; and it is in these that they should exercise themselves."[9] Since virtue resides in the moral freedom of the moral agents, the moral agents can guarantee that the ultimate happiness of his life is eventually up to himself. Therefore, he is able to overcome the sense of anxiety and helplessness caused by the dehumanizing aspect of the alienated modern society. The moral freedom can essentially help us to overcome the deceptiveness of the world of senses, which is filled with all kinds of false promises of happiness or temptations that can easily distract the modern people from the virtuous living.

"In our particular world in which conformity is the great destroyer of selfhood, in our society in which fitting the pattern tends to be accepted as the norm, and being well-liked is the alleged ticket to salvation",[10] the moral freedom to choose according to our good free will is what matters most in maintaining our individual identity.

3.1. Cherishing the Moral Freedom: Virtue Being the Foundation

In spite of the many side effects, the breakdown of the traditional virtue systems and the traditional value system in the modern society has profoundly engendered man's deep sense of being isolated and helpless. With the coming of the cherished moral freedom in the fundamental sense, comes the deep feeling of being deserted and discarded. In a word, man is thrown into the immense world of moral choices without being mentally and virtuously prepared.

"Phylogenetically, too, the history of man can be characterized as a process of growing individuation and growing freedom."[11] The moral freedom does not only mean the corresponding rights, but also mean the moral obligations. On the one hand, the modern people are excited about the valuable moral freedom, on the other hand, they are so full of fears and anxieties about being morally free that they are tempted to give up the freedom by spoiling and even harming themselves. Involuntarily, they are busy doing this and that just to escape the overwhelming state of facing only himself. They constantly pursue the successes and achievements to get the social recognition, consequently, they become the hollow or soulless men. Virtues are the necessary foundation of moral freedom. Not only does the virtues provide the moral agents with the moral wisdom, but also they provide them with the virtuous choosing capacity. It is a glorious fact that although man is only a part of nature, he is morally motivated to transcend the nature. This noble moral freedom of choice has constituted the essence of the divine dimension of the human nature.

3.2. The Moral Freedom to and the Freedom from

While the capacity of human reason is limited, the capacity of human virtue is virtually unlimited. Stoicism has, in some sense, defended the integral dignity of virtues. There are two fundamental kinds of virtues, generally speaking, the positive virtues and the negative virtues. The positive virtues tend to be the natural virtues or the inborn virtues, such as the virtue of benevolence or the virtue of compassion. The negative virtues tend to be artificial virtues, such as the virtue of justice and fairness. The positive virtues focus on what we morally can do to enhance the overall happiness of mankind and the negative virtues focus on what should not be done to us so that our inner harmony will be kept and our inner happiness will not be negatively affected.

There was a time, when virtue theory, or the theory concerning virtue and virtuous life, was commonly regarded as the essence of the moral philosophy. The overwhelming

emphasis of Stoic philosophy upon ethics is a good case in point that can vividly illustrate the tremendous significance that the virtue manifests.

In contrast with the vulgar way of pursuing happiness by the unending and greedy possessing of wealth or fame, the Stoics sought happiness through the great wisdom of not possessing. That means we have the higher freedom of not having or not being affected than the freedom of having or possessing. Instead of choosing to break down the barriers of happiness, we can consciously choose to go round them or go beyond them by virtuously having a much higher soul horizon.

According to Stoicism, freedom, is more than the power to control what we can control and the power to change what we can change. The nobler freedom is the "freedom from", that is to say, the freedom from being emotionally disturbed by what inevitably will happen. In this sense, virtue, from the Stoicism point of view, also means the elegant and graceful moral acceptance of what is not up to us or what is beyond our conscious control.

3.3. Self-Control: The Center of the Stoicism Ethics and Virtue

Man can not conquer the whole world, but man can conquer the world of his own mind. Man is not capable of controlling what happens to him, but he is morally capable of choosing to control his own attitude towards what happens to him. Pleasures and pains are two kinds of sovereign powers that can greatly influence our mindset and moral behaviors. Just as they can negatively affect our virtues or characters, they can also be employed to strengthen our morality, depending on whether we can control our attitudes towards our emotions. The truly virtuous people are the masters of their own emotions associated with what happen to them, and the vicious people are the slaves of their own emotions.

The doctrine of mean matters quite a lot in determining whether a trait is a virtue or not, according to the ethics of Aristotle. A mean means the proper and virtuous state of life between two extremes. For instance, the virtue of courage or bravery is commonly regarded as the mean between rashness and cowardice. To fully carry out the doctrine of mean, it is significant for the moral agents to have the virtue of self-control.

Behind the virtue of self-control is the power of reason or rationality." To a rational creature, only what is contrary to reason is unendurable: but everything rational he can endure.""Blows are not by nature unendurable. How so? See how the Spartans bear a whipping, after they have learned that it is a reasonable thing."[12] Similarly, virtues can never be separated from the power of reason or the power of rationality. It is just because of the existence of virtues that man can essentially become the true man. "Since in our birth we have these two elements mingled within us, a body in common with the animals, and reason and intelligence in common with gods, many of us incline towards the former kinship, miserable as it is and wholly mortal, and only some few to the divine and blessed one."[13] Without the conscious and active controlling of the negative side of human nature, or without

the virtue of self-control serving as the gate-keeper of the emotions and human desires, it would be virtually impossible for the virtuous agents to live the virtuous life consistently.

4. The Stoicism Doctrine of Happiness: Virtues Promise Happiness

While elaborating on happiness, we need to take the following essential and indispensable factors into consideration: an untroubled mind, the inner harmony, serenity, and above all, a peaceful and tranquil mind. All the above-mentioned key factors are closely linked with the foundation of virtues. Even though virtues promise happiness, the happiness promised by virtues is only the potential happiness, which needs to be attained by the virtuous actions and the virtuous living.

4.1. Virtuous Happiness: Being Both Free and Morally Connected

The economic activity and the wealth accumulated in the market economy, as well as the spreading of modern values such as equality, independence, freedom, love have enabled the modern people to reinforce their sense of individuality and uniqueness. However, the modern people have paid a high price for their individuality and freedom: the whole and traditional, moral link between him and the larger social contexts has been irrevocably broken, leading to the desperate sense of being lonely and helpless. The mental security based on the traditional moral community is gone with the wind and the sense of belonging to the whole happiness social mechanism has also disappeared." Solidarity with one's fellow men, or at least with the members of one's own class, was replaced by a cynical detached attitude; other individuals were looked upon as objects to be used and manipulated."The individual was absorbed by a passionate egocentricity , an insatiable greed for power and wealth." "His own self became as much an object of manipulation to him as other persons had become."[14]The most important contribution that Stoicism can make to the cultivation of virtues is that it can help the modern free but isolated individuals to rebuild their own inner harmony and the interpersonal harmony. Concerning the things that are within our power to alter or change, we are supposed to do our utmost to fulfill our missions and virtuously take our moral responsibility. With regard to the things that are beyond our own capacity, we are supposed to accept them with dignity and the peaceful mind.

4.2. Cosmopolitanism and Virtue

It is inevitable that the Stoics tend to extend the private virtues to the public virtues or even the universal virtues. No one is an independent island and no one is supposed to live like Robinson Crusoe. Therefore, every individual is also the citizen of the whole and general human community. It is because of the internal or external human connections that the human being, as an individual, is able to accomplish his identity and fulfill his essential function as a person in the

philosophical sense. Among the most significant contributions made to the virtue ethics by the Stoics, the conception of universal brotherhood and world citizen are undoubtedly worth mentioning. "As unequivocal as man's duty to himself is his duty to others. Since all men are manifestations of the one creative Mind-Fire, the doctrine of universal brotherhood played a leading part in the Stoic system."[15] Man was born to be the social creature. The self-love and the love for others are essentially not contradictory. On the contrary, they are complementary. By building the private virtues, such as temperance and tolerance, the virtuous agents will naturally develop the virtue wisdom and then extend it to more people.

The Stoic axiom that " the whole universe is an organized society; a civic community in which the divine and the human dwell together in a common citizenship"[16] constitutes one of the most significant cornerstones of the virtue theory.

Appendix

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