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The Misery of Choice: Two Ancient Perspectives

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In what follows I offer two brief notes on the relationship between choice and suffering in ancient philosophy. The first is devoted to the Stoic philosopher Epictetus; the second is concerned with the Pyrrhonian scepticism that we find in the works of Sextus Empiricus. In both the Stoic and Pyrrhonian philosophies we shall see arguments for the claim that the way to avoid suffering is to avoid making choices.

1. Epictetus

In his *Discourses* the Stoic philosopher Epictetus argues – along orthodox Stoic lines – that all of our actions are based upon the assents that we give to impressions that we receive. I have an impression of a youth grabbing an old lady by the arm. This impression (*phantasia*) is presented to my rational faculty in propositional form as “a youth is attacking an old lady.” I give assent to this proposition and this act of assent (*sunkatathesis*) creates in me a belief that the youth is attacking the old lady. The belief spurs me to action and I intervene, only to find out that in fact the youth is helping the lady cross the road. In this case I have made a mistake. I have assented to a false impression.

The epistemological challenge is to have some way of knowing which impressions we should assent to and which we should reject. If, as the Stoics claim, all of our knowledge ultimately derives from impressions, then it seems that we do not have access to a non-empirical criterion against which our empirical impressions could be judged. The standard Stoic response to this challenge is to claim that some impressions – what we might call adequate impressions (*phantasia katalêptikê*) – carry within themselves a stamp of authenticity that makes their accuracy indisputable. Thus Epictetus suggests that in the middle of the day we should try to deny the impression “it is daytime” or to assent to the impression “it is night-time.”¹ We cannot deny the impression “it is daytime” because this impression is adequate – it is so strong and overpowering that it simply *demand*s our assent.

This case is quite different from our first example. The impression “a youth is attacking an old lady” contains within it an implicit value judgement. The impression is not merely that a youth is holding a lady’s arm but rather that something terrible is happening – that the lady is being attacked. Epictetus discussed these sorts of cases in the fifth book of his *Discourses*, which unfortunately is now lost. However, we do have an account of this text by the Latin writer Aulus Gellius.

Gellius recounts the following story.² He was once making a journey by sea in the company of a Stoic philosopher. During the voyage they encountered a storm, a storm that became increasingly violent. As the storm worsened and the passengers became increasingly afraid, Gellius turned to the Stoic philosopher to see how this wise man was keeping his composure during this moment of danger. However, he was disappointed with what he saw, for the Stoic philosopher appeared to be just as terrified as everyone else on board; so much for Stoic philosophy as an antidote for unwelcome emotions such as fear. After the storm had passed, Gellius turned to the Stoic philosopher and asked him why he seemed so afraid given that, as an adherent of Stoicism, he presumably claimed to be indifferent to all external circumstances and to have overcome his emotions. In response, the Stoic philosopher proceeded to take out of his

bag a copy of the (now lost) fifth book of Epictetus' *Discourses* and pointed out to Gellius a passage that he thought would explain his apparent fear.

According to Gellius' account, the passage from Epictetus argued that the impressions we receive that present external objects to us are not within our control. We do not have the power to choose them; instead they force themselves upon us. However, we do have the power to choose whether to assent to these impressions or not. But in a situation like the storm at sea, the mind of even the Stoic sage will be disturbed by the sudden impressions it receives against its will. In an interesting discussion of Gellius' account, Augustine glosses this point by saying that it is as if the resulting passion is just too quick for the mind.³ However, although the Stoic philosopher might be briefly overcome by the force of the sudden impression, he will not give his assent to the impression. Instead, he will stand firm, reject the impression that something terrible is happening and affirm that in fact nothing bad has occurred. In contrast, the other passengers will just unthinkingly assent to the impression that something terrible is indeed happening. It was by referring Gellius to an account of this sort in Epictetus that the Stoic philosopher tried to explain his apparent fear during the storm. Although the philosopher may have momentarily been overcome by what looked like fear as the impression suddenly forced itself upon his mind, he did not give his assent to that impression once he had the chance to consider it properly. Consequently he did not form a genuine emotion of fear but rather simply experienced what the Stoics called a "first movement."⁴

This example illustrates nicely the nature of the relationship between impressions and assents. However, like the example involving the youth and the old lady, it differs in an important way from the example "it is daytime." In the case of the storm at sea something else has happened before we receive the proposition. If we were on the boat with Gellius, then what we would actually receive by way of impression would be an image of a huge wave about to crash over our heads. But in Gellius' discussion it is clear that the propositions that are being assented to or rejected are not of the form "there is a wave above my head" but rather "there is a wave above my head *and this is something terrible.*" It is something like this second proposition that the terrified passengers have assented to, and it is something like this that the Stoic philosopher has been briefly overcome by, even if he will later refuse to assent to it. But of course the Stoic philosopher will happily assent to the former proposition "there is a wave above my head."

So, we need to add a further stage to the process of assent. First, there is a perception of an external event or state of affairs, such as a wave above our heads. Second, there is (in some instances) an almost involuntary and seemingly unconscious value judgement that is made about the content of the perception, such as "this is terrible." Third, there is the presentation to the conscious mind of an impression in the form of a proposition that is composed of *both* the perceptual data received from outside *and* the unconscious value judgement. Finally, there is the act of assent or rejection of the impression.

In usual accounts of epistemology the principal concern is with determining what is and is not reliable as a source of knowledge. The concern is with the reliability of the senses, for instance. Thus examples

are usually fairly mundane, such as whether there is really a table in front of me or not. But real life is rarely so uninteresting. The example from Gellius is important because it shows how acts of assent to the senses are intimately bound up with the value judgements that we make about the information we receive from the senses. People regularly assent to propositions about events that include implicit value judgements: “his death was a terrible thing”; “I wish that had not happened”; “the interview did not go well.” But for the Stoics every external event is, strictly speaking, a matter of indifference; they can never be inherently good or bad. So, whenever anyone assents to an impression of an external state of affairs that contains within it some form of value judgement, they are making an epistemological mistake. Marcus Aurelius makes this point, using the phrase “first impressions” to refer to a perception before an unconscious value judgement has been added to it:

Do not say more to yourself than the first impressions report. You have been told that someone speaks evil of you. This is what you have been told; you have not been told that you are injured. I see that the little child is ill; this is what I see, but that he is in danger I do not see. In this way, then, abide always by first impressions and add nothing of your own from within.⁵

Whenever we are faced with an impression that contains a value judgement we should reject that impression as false.

Unfortunately, most human beings are not as wise as they might be. The ideal Stoic sage will never mistakenly assent to an impression containing an erroneous value judgement but, as the Stoics often proclaim, the sage is a very rare creature indeed. The bulk of humankind regularly assent to false impressions. These assents create beliefs and those beliefs determine our actions. It should be noted here that the Stoics are Socratic intellectualists who reject weakness of will; if you believe something then you necessarily act in accordance with that belief. The real decision or choice, then, happens not at the moment of action but earlier – at the moment of assent to an impression.

Epictetus uses this account of actions and assents to assess the canonical works of Greek literature – the great tragedies and the Homeric epics. In contrast to those who would argue that the human condition is inherently tragic (the early Nietzsche, for instance), Epictetus suggests that these stories are merely the products of faulty assents by imperfect characters. Speaking of the *Iliad*, Epictetus writes:

Do such great and dreadful deeds have this as their origin, then, sense-impressions? This and no other. The *Iliad* consists of nothing but impressions, and the use of those impressions. An impression prompted Paris to carry off the wife of Menelaus. An impression prompted Helen to follow him. If, then, an impression has caused Menelaus to feel that it was an advantage to be robbed of such a wife, what would have happened? Not only the *Iliad* would have been lost, but the *Odyssey* too.⁶

The actions of the Homeric heroes and of the characters that we find in the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles are merely the products of faulty assents

– faulty cognitive choices. Their suffering is a direct consequence of these choices.

Epictetus is all too aware that the vast majority of humankind fall well below the rational standard embodied in the ideal sage and so are bound to assent to false impressions. His advice is that we exercise extreme caution when making assents to impressions. If there is any room for doubt whatsoever, then we should withhold our assent and suspend judgement. The way in which we can avoid the suffering depicted in the great tragedies and epics is to stop making choices in the form of assents when faced with value-laden impressions.

2. Sextus Empiricus

Although Epictetus is a broadly orthodox Stoic, his epistemological caution and advocacy of suspending judgement highlight a sceptical thread within his philosophy. While Epictetus' advocacy of the suspension of judgement is pragmatic advice for those of us who are prone to make false assents, other ancient philosophers proposed the suspension of judgement as a systematic response to all epistemological claims. Moreover, these other ancient philosophers suggested that a consistent suspension of judgement would lead to a life of complete tranquillity and well-being. For them, a life totally devoid of choice would lead to a life totally free from suffering.

These other ancient philosophers were the Pyrrhonians, followers of Pyrrho of Elis.⁷ Pyrrho himself wrote nothing but we are fortunate enough to have a number of works by a later Pyrrhonian philosopher, Sextus Empiricus, which provide us with a detailed account of Pyrrhonian scepticism. The most important of these works by Sextus is the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*.⁸ In the *Outlines*, Sextus offers a series of arguments designed to undermine the claims to knowledge made by other, dogmatic, philosophers.⁹ In the realm of ethics, for instance, Sextus proposes a number of arguments against the claims of dogmatic ethicists and, in particular, against the claim that certain things are good or bad by nature.¹⁰ In order to do this he adopts two strategies. His first is to place side by side the conflicting opinions of the dogmatists concerning what is and is not said to be good.¹¹ This unresolvable disagreement, he argues, should lead any impartial observer to suspend their judgement (*epochê*). His second strategy is to propose arguments in favour of positions opposed to the specific claims of the dogmatists in order to counterbalance the positive arguments made by them, thereby creating a state of equipollence (*isostheneia*). Faced with equally plausible arguments on both sides, Sextus suggests that the rational response will again be to suspend judgement (*epochê*) or, to be more precise, he suggests that when faced with such balanced arguments one will simply *find oneself* in a state of *epochê*. One does not choose *epochê* – rather, it simply *happens* as a consequence of being unable to choose between equally convincing arguments.¹²

The Pyrrhonian sceptic, then, is not a negative dogmatist – someone who claims that they do *not* have knowledge. The Pyrrhonian makes no claims whatsoever about anything. Rather, a Pyrrhonian is one who considers conflicting arguments on a particular topic and finds himself or herself in a state of equipollence without choosing to be so. The Pyrrhonian

makes no choices at all and holds no beliefs at all. Not surprisingly, many have wondered whether it is possible to live as a Pyrrhonian sceptic.¹³ In fact, the Pyrrhonians suggested not only that one could live as a sceptic but also that the life of the sceptic would be one of complete tranquillity (*ataraxia*) and happiness (*eudaimonia*). The Pyrrhonian life without choice is a life without suffering.

Sextus and other Pyrrhonians conceived sceptical philosophy as a pursuit directed towards the cultivation of tranquillity (*ataraxia*) or, to be more precise, a pursuit inspired by “the hope of becoming tranquil.”¹⁴ They claimed that the repeated experience of suspended judgement (*epochê*) would bring untroubledness or tranquillity (*ataraxia*).¹⁵ This, they suggested, could not be worked towards in any direct sense, but rather would be the inevitable consequence of one’s consistent suspension of judgement. It would be something that would simply happen to the sceptic.¹⁶ Sextus illustrates the way in which tranquillity comes to the sceptic only when he *gives up* searching for it with an anecdote about the famous painter Apelles. It is said that Apelles was trying to paint a picture of a horse and wanted to represent the lather on the horse’s mouth. He was unable to achieve the desired effect, gave up, and threw his sponge at the painting in disgust. When the sponge hit the painting it produced a perfect representation of the lather of the horse’s mouth.¹⁷ In just the same way, Sextus suggests, the sceptic achieves tranquillity as soon as he gives up his search and suspends judgement (*epochê*). Once he does this, it appears of its own accord.¹⁸

In particular, the Pyrrhonians appear to have believed that this tranquillity (*ataraxia*) was the only true path to well-being or happiness (*eudaimonia*).¹⁹ In other words, the sceptics, just as much as the Stoics or any other dogmatic philosophers, affirmed that philosophy – in this case the sceptical philosophical method of suspending judgement (*epochê*) – was the key to happiness, the key to living well. In particular, they characterized philosophy as a therapy for the soul, employing a medical analogy not dissimilar to those used by both Socrates and the Stoics:

Sceptics are philanthropic and wish to cure by argument, as far as they can, the conceit and rashness of the dogmatists. Just as doctors for bodily afflictions have remedies which differ in potency [...] so sceptics propound arguments which differ in strength.²⁰

The task of Pyrrhonian philosophy is to cure one of mental disturbance or suffering. The way in which it does this is by offering arguments that will counterbalance existing arguments that one finds convincing. Such arguments will be offered until one finds oneself in a state of equipollence. This will, in turn, lead one into a state of confusion and suspended judgement, though it is important to stress that one will not *choose* to suspend one’s judgement. Finally, this state of suspended judgement in which one finds oneself will lead one into a state of complete tranquillity. Only this Pyrrhonian way can free one from suffering – actively pursuing or choosing tranquillity is destined to fail. Only by giving up on choice, the Pyrrhonian suggests, can we escape mental suffering.

Endnotes

¹ Epictetus, *Discourses*. 1.28.3.

² Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*. 19.1.1-21.

³ Augustine, *The City of God*. 9.4.2.

⁴ On “first movements” see Sorabji, Richard *Emotion and Peace of Mind*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. 66-75.

⁵ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*. 8.49.

⁶ Epictetus, *Discourses*. 1.28.11-13.

⁷ On Pyrrho see Bett, Richard *Pyrrho, his Antecedents and his Legacy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.

⁸ In what follows I shall rely upon the translation by Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes under the title *Outlines of Scepticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.

⁹ The Greek term *dogmatikos* does not involve the pejorative tone associated with the English *dogmatist*. An ancient dogmatist was simply someone who held certain opinions or dogmas.

¹⁰ See *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. 3.168-238, esp. 3.179; 3.190; 3.235.

¹¹ See *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. 3.180-2.

¹² See Barnes, Jonathan “The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist” in Burnyeat, Myles and Michael Frede eds. *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997. 58-91, at 58-9.

¹³ See for instance Burnyeat, Myles “Can the Sceptic Live his Scepticism?” in Burnyeat and Frede, eds. 25-57.

¹⁴ Sextus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. 1.12, 1.25.

¹⁵ See *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. 1.26. The word *ataraxia* (from *tarachê*) means literally “undisturbed” or “untroubled.”

¹⁶ See *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. 1.26, 1.28. Barnes, “The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist” 59, emphasizes the causal nature of this sequence: investigation leads to opposed arguments, which leads to equipollence (*isostheneia*), which leads to suspension of judgement (*epochê*), which, in turn, leads to tranquillity (*ataraxia*).

¹⁷ See *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. 1.28. For an ancient account of Apelles see Pliny, *Natural History*. 35.79-97.

¹⁸ See Burnyeat, “Can the Sceptic Live his Scepticism?” 29.

¹⁹ See Burnyeat, “Can the Sceptic Live his Scepticism?” 30.

²⁰ Sextus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. 3.280. The latter part of this passage is Sextus’ apology for the varying quality of the arguments that he deploys.