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“It’s Not Going to Be Okay”: Stoic Wisdom for a Difficult World

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Résumé de l'article

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"It's Not Going to Be Okay": Stoic Wisdom for a Difficult World

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This paper opens with a family anecdote in which my future mother in-law, when asked what wise advice she would offer undergraduate university students, replied, "I would tell them it's not going to be okay." Can we learn to keep engaging with the world despite its inevitable disappointments? I propose that Stoic philosophy, by "orienting" our "attention" and "courage," can help us navigate the troubled post-COVID world we share. To help make this more concrete, I describe a critical moment I observed in which a maskless shopper insulted fellow patrons in a grocery store for wearing a mask. I then develop the Stoic themes of acknowledgement (a commitment to the facts) and affinity (reaching out to others to build community). In the conclusion I return to the "maskless shopper" incident to consider how my two Stoic themes might help open a dialogue with this person. After discussing the limitations to such an undertaking, given the surge in populism over the last decade, I conclude with the appropriately tough-minded Stoic proposition that despite the obstacles, we must keep trying.

Introduction

On a crisp fall day before the pandemic, I was having dinner with my future wife's family. Since they are Dutch, I was trying to make a good impression on "Oma" and "Opa." They were curious about what exactly a philosopher of education does. Since my impromptu answer, "I draw upon the Western philosophical tradition to address educational problems," did not really seem to land, I continued by asking them if they had any wisdom to share with today's university students that might help them navigate life's rough waters. Oma paused, and then said slowly, "I would tell them it's not going to be okay." After the laughter around the table subsided, I jokingly asked them who was more optimistic. Oma put her hand up immediately, and I realized she was being serious.

At first glance, it may appear that seeing the gloomier details of life would inevitably be depressing. A second, look, however, results in a peculiar but important question: what if the genuinely good things in life are not only *not* inhibited by a hefty dose of lucidity, but actually require it? It may sound odd, for example, but I first became interested in philosophy out of grief. My maternal grandfather died of a sudden heart-attack when I was 12 years old. Since I loved him dearly, I was struck by a wave of sadness and confusion that I had not felt before. Since my parents recognized early that their son was precocious and sensitive, they had filled a bookcase with *The Harvard Classics*. I remember vividly that around this time I encountered an essay there by Hunt (1909) entitled "Deaths of Little Children." The opening line is emblazoned on my heart: "A Grecian philosopher being asked why he wept for the death of his son, since the sorrow was in vain, replied, 'I weep on that account.' And his answer became his wisdom" (p. 285).

The students in our bachelor of education after-degree program usually describe my pedagogical stance with some combination of the words "sensitive" and "realistic." They get this accurate impression because I try to tell them the truth about teaching, sometimes even dramatized and illustrated by my own pedagogical failures. Yet I also try to be careful not to make them so anxious they cannot think. There is an essay I share with them every year by Miller (1999) that helps in this regard. In its first paragraph, he honestly and straight-forwardly admits, "I want to acknowledge that your work as an educator will be difficult; there's no question about it," but then two sentences later he follows up with the consoling, "On the other hand, I don't want to discourage you" (p. 189). My students and I do our best to figure out what sort of teacher shows up facing the "difficult" aspects of teaching without being "discouraged" by them.

Of course, it is hard not to be inspired by the lofty idea that Plato was probably right: philosophy in its pure version can inform how we live. To ground this conception a bit, however, and make it grittier and thereby more useable in the context of education, is the idea that one of the ways philosophy can accomplish this is by changing us, by orienting us differently. A slight educational "turning," in other words, while perhaps modest, nonetheless can be an essential part of the life well lived. In his book *What Is Orientation?*, Stegmaier (2019) opens with the definition that "orientation – in simple and everyday terms – is the *achievement of finding one's way*" (p. 5, emphasis in original). Later he has a section entitled "The Basic Attitude of Orientation: Attention and Courage" (p. 32).

The sobering starting point here is that frequently we are at least a little "lost" in this world. Yet philosophy can contribute to our efforts of forging a direction worth going in and help us better notice and appreciate what might and should matter on the journey. This would also involve finding the strength to try to make things better for our fellow travellers, alas without any guarantees. Post-pandemic, I believe, this is just the "orientation" we need.

Clearly my interest in Stoicism as a philosophical school has not just been academic. It came into my life early without me really recognizing and labelling it as such as I struggled with loss. It continues to teach me how to better manage my inner life and thereby inch toward virtue in a large, complex, and frequently disappointing world. I should add that the version of Stoicism I endorse and explore here is distinctly modern. As Becker (2017) explains, this means recognizing that while its theology and cosmology have been replaced by scientific advances, Stoicism remains interesting and relevant today because of its insights towards describing a robust sense of a flourishing life. In this vein, I also agree with Stephens (2020) that in achieving this today, "Stoicism is better understood as a living, organic body of interrelated ideas located in conceptual space" (p. 25).

It is unfortunate that Stoicism has not garnered more attention from philosophers of education, but those who have examined it find it eminently worthwhile. For example, Gill (2003) opens his contribution to *A Companion to the Philosophy of Education* by claiming that "the Stoics produced an original and powerful set of ideas on human development, the acquisition of knowledge (especially knowledge of the good), and types of value, and these ideas are of continuing significance for modern students of the philosophy of education" (p. 25). And in the conclusion to her contribution to the first volume of the more recently published *A History of Western Philosophy of Education* series, Larivée (2021) insists that "[m]any Stoic themes resonate with contemporary culture" (p. 228) and that the time is ripe for a fresh account of Stoicism that would be interesting and relevant to philosophers of education today. Even more recently, Schrag (2023) compliments the intellectual accessibility and everyday utility of Stoicism when he says, "it is first and foremost a practical philosophy" (p. 57).

Allow me to share a concrete example that better shows what I am driving at here and that I will return to at the end. During the pandemic, social media was flooded with images and stories that could dismay or inspire us. For me, the terrified and desperate look on the faces of elderly patients in care facilities, cut off from families due to quarantine, was simply heartbreaking, while the evenings when people publicly expressed their support of healthcare workers through singing or banging on pots became an important reminder that I needed that all was not lost.

Yet there is one incident that stands out to me and that I feel encapsulates where we are right now as a society. On a grey fall day at the height of the pandemic, I was watching a newsfeed in which a

smartphone was capturing an aisle in a grocery store. Two store employees were talking with a man who wasn't wearing a mask. He was gesturing with his arms and kept raising his voice as they politely yet firmly insisted that he had to put on a mask to shop in the store. He suddenly took several steps forward, pointed at other masked customers, and started yelling, "Sheople! Sheople!" I am embarrassed to admit being quite critical of him at this moment, and some version of "what an idiot!" came into my head. He then loudly declared to the person holding the smartphone, "I am a Wolf!" Thankfully, he left the store soon thereafter without anyone getting hurt, but clearly the whole incident was upsetting for everyone involved.

I feel that the philosophy of education has a vital role to play in helping us "find our way" right now by informing both our attention and our courage in this post-pandemic world we share. Drawing on insights from contemporary Stoicism, I shall argue that there are two inter-related themes that philosophers of education can develop during this disorienting time: *acknowledgement* and *affinity*. In what follows, I devote a section to each, while in the conclusion I revisit the "maskless shopper" moment to hopefully draw the analysis together and offer some final thoughts.

Acknowledgement

In a short essay entitled "Rethinking Humanity," physicist Carlo Rovelli (2021) writes, "This crisis, I think, has been a lesson in humility; it has revealed our fragility" (p. 30). While I agree with this characterization, it is also important to point out that learning such a "lesson" has been demanding, on both a personal and a societal level. Sadly, the crisis also revealed that plenty of people were ignorant and ready to be defensive and angry. One of the core insights from Stoic writers is that the standard for what counts as knowledge, derived from sensation, is what they called "cataleptic," which translates into "grasping" (Holowchak, 2008, p. 64). Can a proposition "grasp" reality in a way in which the Stoic can have confidence in it? Putting aside for a moment the interesting Sceptical critique, Holowchak goes so far as to claim that "virtue for the Stoics is a matter of being cataleptically disposed to the cosmos and everything in it" (Holowchak, 2008, p. 22). It is essential, in other words, to acknowledge reality by being crystal clear about the relevant features of our human situation. However, what appeared to be shallow water has hidden depths. For starters, notice that I use the word "acknowledge" here rather than the more widely used "acceptance of," since the latter has fallen out of favour.

The context and reason for this semantic shift is interesting. Robertson (2010) writes, "It is important to emphasize that both Aaron Beck and Albert Ellis, often regarded as the main pioneers of CBT [cognitive behavioral therapy], have stressed the role of Stoicism as a philosophical precursor of their respective approaches" (p. 5). So far, so good. However, in one of the key training manuals of rational emotive behaviour therapy (first proposed and then developed by Ellis), the authors explain that, "[i]n our use of the term 'acceptance,' we do not think people have to approve or agree with the negative aspects of themselves and/or their lives," and that instead "[w]e emphasize the acknowledgement of their reality" (Digiuseppe et al., 2014, p. 46). Apparently, it was the way "acceptance" connoted "approval" and "agreement" that left people unsatisfied. It is indeed hard to imagine anyone being able to "accept" in this sense one of life's starker realities (such as the death of a loved one). The authors go so far as to add, "It probably would have been more beneficial if the field of psychotherapy used the term 'acknowledgement' instead of 'acceptance'" (Digiuseppe et al., 2014, p. 46).

But what exactly does "acknowledgement" involve here? Presumably it is the capacity to "face reality," and while it does not involve "acceptance" or "approval," there is still something very hard about it. It turns out there is also something very consequential about it from a psychological point of view. In the final chapter of *Going Sane*, the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips (2005) insists that "sanity is lived according to acknowledgements" (p. 187). Phillips goes on to offer that "life is moved more by luck than by judgment," and human beings are "animals who are often unconscious of what they want" (p.188), as the sort of acknowledgements he thinks essential to being "sane." All this implies that "insanity" would involve trying to live without such acknowledgements, to exert control, in other words, where none was possible,

or at best just a measure of influence. Here is where recognizing the broader Stoic understanding of the importance of acknowledgment becomes helpful.

"According to the Stoics," writes Sellars (2019), "a good, happy life is one that is in harmony with nature." Sellars further explains that "this involves both the thought that we should live harmoniously with the external natural world (Nature with a capital 'N') and in harmony with our own human nature" (p. 11). Other writers on Stoicism agree with how important this remains. "Distilled to their bare minimum," writes Pigliucci (2017), one of the three core "Stoic principles" is "Follow nature" (p. 204).

Of course, this raises the question of what exactly this "harmony," with regards to both "Nature" and "nature," involves. Holowchak helpfully writes, "the Stoic notion of a life in agreement with Nature may reasonably and simply be interpreted as a commitment to 'follow the facts,' wherever they may lead" (p. 80). Becker (2017) provides a robust explanation of what this entails:

> Following nature means following the facts. It means getting the facts about the physical and social world we inhabit, and the facts about our situation in it – our own powers, relationships, limitations, possibilities, motives, intentions, and endeavours – before we deliberate about normative matters. It means facing those facts – accepting them for exactly what they are, no more and no less – before we draw normative conclusions from them. It means doing ethics from the facts – constructing normative propositions a posteriori. It means adjusting those normative propositions to fit changes in the facts, and accepting those adjustments for exactly what they are – no more and no less. And it means living within the facts – within the realm of actual rather than hypothetical norms. (p. 46)

I have quoted Becker at length here since this is the best summary of "following the facts" I have come across. Notice first how wide-ranging the demand is: how many different types of facts need to be assembled and addressed. Second, note how the "normative," presumably meaning the constructing of guiding norms or standards, only happens as a second-order activity. Third, it is revealing that "living within the facts" becomes itself a norm of sorts that can help us manage reality or "the actual."

Of course, this in no way assumes that this will be easy or uncontroversial. "What field of study takes 'the world' as its object?" asks Judith Butler (2022, p. 17) in her recent book *What World Is This? A Pandemic Phenomenology*, and she answers by saying, "As someone trained in philosophy, I am drawn back to phenomenology, or perhaps compelled to draw it forward in order to understand the phenomenon of the pandemic as exhibiting a sense of world, or a world that is given to us in part through the senses" (ibid.). The "world," in other words, in any of its relevant "senses," reveals itself to us through our lived experience. In the postscript, entitled "Transformations," she makes the rather Stoic point that "my contention is that grievability already operates in life as a characteristic attributed to living creatures, those who walk around knowing that their lives, or those they love, may well vanish at any moment, and without a proper mark or protest" (p. 101).

What to do in the face of such "grievability"? "Time together in a common task is transformative," claims Stengel (2018, p. 135), adding, "This may seem crazy in a world where we don't seem to share facts, but 'facts' are themselves artifacts of time spent together in a common effort" (2018, p. 135). Sadly, the pandemic has exposed how hard it is to get people to "share facts," which means that what should be regarded as "common tasks" and "common efforts" become undermined to the vanishing point of near impossibility.

Post-pandemic, in other words, we need to recognize that it is essential that we work together to acknowledge reality by "facing the facts," and that we see them as deriving from a "common effort" to cope with and build a better world. In some sense every generation has had to grapple with this problem. In *Man's Search for Himself*, for example, May (2009) recounts a moment in which "[a] little girl coming home from school after a lecture on how to defend one's self against the atom bomb, asked her parent, 'Mother, can't we move someplace where there isn't any sky?'" (p. 45). May interprets what he describes as "this child's terrifying but revealing question" (p. 45) as symptomatic of an alienating anxiety. From a Stoic standpoint, the important lesson is that when we "acknowledge reality" we must bear the combination of

the "terrifying" and the "revealing." During the pandemic, one could imagine a child asking their parent, "Mother, can't we move someplace where there isn't any air?" Of course, both questions must be answered in the negative, since the sky and the air cannot be avoided. The question remains, how we are going to live together in a world with nuclear weapons and contagious and deadly viruses?

Affinity

One fairly common criticism of Stoicism is that while it is strong on individual agency it is weak on political theory. Yet, as Reydams-Schils (2005) claims in the introduction to *The Roman Stoics*, later Stoics "successfully established a connection between a philosophical ideal and ordinary, everyday-life circumstances, and between a community shaped by Stoic wisdom and society as it is" (p. 1). The core Stoic recommendation for the development of community is "oikeiôsis," which Robertson (2013) says, "literally means bringing something or someone into your household" (p. 101). And while it can be translated as "appropriation," it can also be translated as "affinity," and it is revealing here that "[t]he Stoic philosopher Hierocles described psychological practices for expanding *oikeiôsis*, our sense of 'affinity' for others. He says our relationships can be represented as a series of concentric circles, radiating out from ourselves" (p. 147). The Stoic task here is to tighten the wider circles closer to the centre, so that more and more people are included as fellow human beings deserving of our respect and even sympathy.

According to Sellars (2006), although the origin of the notion "cosmopolites," translated as "citizen of the cosmos," is rightfully attributed to Diogenes the Cynic (p. 129), the Stoics also contributed greatly to what would become "a political theory of cosmopolitanism" (p. 129). Although this theory has been shaped by many thinkers and traditions since the Stoics, at its most basic, Appiah (2006) explains, "[t]he formulation was meant to be paradoxical, and reflected the general Cynic skepticism toward custom and tradition" (p. xiv). In other words, the local characteristics of one's own culture were not to be taken as universal, but as contingent yet still preferred options within a larger world. Appiah elucidates further:

> So there are two strands that intertwine in the notion of cosmopolitanism. One is the idea that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship. The other is that we take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance. (p. xv)

The strain, here, of course, is that "there will be times when these two ideals – universal concern and respect for legitimate difference – clash" (p. xv).

Since the turn of the millennium, one could argue that whether self-consciously cosmopolitan or not, many philosophers of education have been trying to deal with exactly this "clash," to show how it is possible to have an education that exhibits both "universal concern" and "respect for legitimate difference." Certainly, those who explicitly use the term "cosmopolitan" in their work have done so. In his 2009 presidential address to the Philosophy of Education Society, entitled "Walking with Diogenes: Cosmopolitan Accents in Philosophy and Education," Hansen (2010) names "the ancient idea of cosmopolitanism, which originates, in part, in images of solidarity or oneness with the whole of the world, or, indeed with all of creation" (p. 1). His key argument is that "it holds the promise of illuminating significances in educational work wherever it takes place today" (p. 1).

This is a large claim, and he further clarifies, "a cosmopolitan prism can call attention to substantiating features of the relation between teachers, students, and curriculum that often remain in the shadows" (p. 1). As he develops his argument through an imaginary walk with Diogenes, his conclusion is that "teachers and students can work out the meaning, if not in so many words, of reflective openness to the world fused with reflective loyalty to the local" (p. 9). Notice the relationship between "reflective openness" to the wider world and "reflective loyalty" to what is closer to hand. Is there anything else to be

said about how these might be "worked out"? Hansen concludes, "I would hope that, in walking with Diogenes, we might find ourselves practicing a mode of discipline: that is, learning to look, again and again, at the manifold ways of life before our eyes, and to be on the lookout for signs of cosmopolitan relation" (p. 260).

Being both "open" and "loyal" while striving to be "disciplined" in "learning to look" for "signs of cosmopolitan relation" sounds demanding and never ending as we live out our lives in the world with others. In that very annual conference, Waks (2010) presented an essay entitled "Cosmopolitan Education and its Discontents," in which he opens by saying, "I argue that cosmopolitan educators and their critics have been working at cross purposes, and I indicate common tasks to which both groups can contribute" (p. 253). Waks describes the "clash" of cosmopolitanism in slightly different terms: "The thesis about justice is that the notion of justice applies to the entire human community," in that "all humans are equally considered to be bearers of universal, moral, political and social rights" (p. 253). He continues: "The cosmopolitan thesis about culture holds that individuals can successfully shape life plans and shoulder moral responsibilities by drawing from diverse cultural values and practices" (p. 253). The point is that neither thesis is to gain ascendancy. Instead, they are to coexist, and not even within the tension of a duality. In the final section, "Beyond the Untenable Dualism of Universal and Particular," Waks recommends "disentanglement," which he describes as "a complex, long-term project of intellectual and practical world-building via experiments in philosophy, educational theory, and associative living in schools and communities" (p. 260). Of course, while Hansen's "discipline" and Waks's "disentanglement" might point us in the right direction, it remains to be seen what this actually looks like on the ground with real people.

Conclusion

In his chapter on Stoicism from his book on ancient philosophy, Cooper (2012) claims that the Stoic is in what he calls "a delicate and an awkward position" (p. 180). The "delicacy" here is that the Stoic faces the facts, including the limitations of what she can control, while "awkwardly" striving to live a good life with others. To return to the "maskless shopper" incident, if one of us happened to be walking by in the grocery store when the name-calling started, and the "maskless shopper" was open to sitting down and talking to a "Sheople" such as us, calmly and politely, how might the conversation go? I ask this question while recognizing how great an achievement this would be under the circumstances. After all, even if a physical altercation could be avoided, our invitation might still be met with the man still telling us where to go and what we might do when we got there.

Drawing together the two themes I discussed here, our task from a Stoic standpoint would be to talk things over with the man with the goal of "acknowledging" the facts of our shared existence, while drawing him into our cosmopolitan circle of "affinity" in which we see commonality while preserving difference. Our conversation, in other words, would be partly epistemological, and partly political. What is essential is that we find a way to genuinely communicate.

Of course, I am not saying that the philosophy of education has the resources to resolve this situation. In *Education as Dialogue*, Kazepides (2010) insists that "the prerequisites of education are also the prerequisites of dialogue" (p. 5). A page later, however, he makes the startling claim that "not enough attention has been paid to the nature, principles, difficulties, and appropriate conditions of dialogue" (p. 6). Not to end on a sour note (then again, the Stoic must "acknowledge" such things), but there is one further element that complicates this situation and really needs to be addressed at this point: the recent surge in populism.

While populism is, of course, a contested concept that can be approached from a range of perspectives, one influential definition runs: "a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6). Of course, in the thought experiment I described above, we have to be careful

about assigning the "maskless shopper" any political views at all, though it is certainly possible (even likely?) that he harbours populist sympathies.

In his essay on populism and cosmopolitanism, Ingram (2017) explains why from a certain perspective the two ideas are in a relationship of "ostensible antagonism" (p. 647). The first reason is that "the popular identity can never be universal or all-inclusive," while the second is that "populism has to sustain the popular identity it proposes by opposing some 'other' – in the first instance elites who dominate, exploit, or otherwise betray 'the people,' but often outsiders who threaten them as well" (p. 647). As philosophers of education, how likely is it that the "maskless shopper" would perceive us "outsiders" who do not understand his everyday concerns?

I fear that populism threatens this ambition right from the start, adding a layer of haze to an already unclear situation. In a symposium in *Educational Theory* three years ago entitled "Democracy in Crisis and Education," the guest editors, Shuffelton and Stemhagen, write "these articles' thorough analyses remind us that democracy has always been a precarious and imperfect project" (2020, pp. 685–686).

And yet it is also a "project" with real consequences: "there is one principal lesson to be learned from this pandemic" writes Bufacchi (2021) in *Everything Must Change*, and it is that "politics is not only important, but essential, and often the main difference between life and death" (p. 8). Different people will advance different proposals for what political changes are necessary before the next crisis hits, but it is how we relate to one another as we live through dialogue that will ultimately count.

In a short essay entitled "Rethinking Responsibility," Browne (2021) has a beautiful line in which she insists that "a shared responsibility that looks forward as well as back and is grounded in the connectedness of humanity, in that we are all contributing to the background conditions of each other's prospects" (p. 201) is what is essential. And so, we are sitting with the "maskless shopper," and let us assume no one is yelling and the conversation is basically civil for the moment. What next? How do we discuss the "facts" that point to the world we share, while tightening our "circles" to be more inclusive, and dare I say, compassionate? Can we validate the "maskless shopper" as a person while respectfully and firmly pointing out where we disagree? He may, of course, be more or less taken with populist appeals, even more or less just interested enough to keep talking. But to try to keep the dialogue open, we must.

After all, what are the alternatives? In a remarkable essay entitled "Educational Temptations at the End of the World," Warnick (2023) courageously asks, "What does education look like at the end of the world?" (p. 1). Of course, this is an expanded, global sense of Oma's "it's not going to be okay." Yet it is worth highlighting, despite Warnick's concern about the potential "passivity" (p. 7) of Stoicism, that the Stoic themes of *acknowledgment* and *affinity* can help provide students with what Warnick describes as "tools and perspectives that might be useful as they live under difficult circumstances" (p. 11). Perhaps this is the most we can ask of teaching and learning in the troubled future to come.

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