

What does Stoic ethics have to contribute to modern moral philosophy?

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Since the 1980s at least, renewed attention to Aristotle (for instance, by Anscombe, MacIntyre and Williams) has led to a revival of virtue ethics (and to a lesser extent eudaimonism), alongside more established modes of modern moral philosophy, notably, Kantian and Utilitarian. Stoic ethics has not figured much in this revival, even though for about five centuries in Antiquity (3rd cent. BC to 2nd cent AD), Stoicism was regarded as the main rival to Platonic or Aristotelian forms of ethics. What could greater attention to Stoicism contribute to current debate in modern moral philosophy?

In this talk I aim to encapsulate what I see as the most striking and distinctive features of Stoic ethics. This consists, on the one hand, in an innovative and systematic version of axiology (theory of value), centred on the distinction between good and 'indifferents'. This is closely integrated with a specific form of ethical naturalism. This involves, in part, the systematic deployment of the idea of 'nature' within the value-theory. It also consists in the attempt to correlate the understanding of ethics with that of 'nature', in a number of senses, including human psychology and the place of humanity within nature as a whole.

On the basis of this account, I maintain that Stoic ethics can offer an alternative, perhaps preferable, to Aristotle, as a template for modern versions of virtue ethics (more precisely, for modern forms of virtue ethics combined with eudaimonism and ethical naturalism). I also suggest that certain features of Stoicism, especially their accounts of the virtue-happiness relationship and of social ethics, offer the basis of fruitful engagement with other style of modern moral theory (including Kantian and Utilitarian). Finally, I claim that Stoic ethics can offer suggestive parallels for modern moral theories in their moves to address topics such as human psychology and the place of humanity in the environment in a more 'naturalistic' way than has been normal for those theories.