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Stoic Ecopedagogy



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This entry is both a critical analysis of Freirean ecopedagogy from a modern Stoic perspective and an innovative proposal to integrate elements of the two frameworks in order to create Stoic ecopedagogy. Stoicism is an ancient Greek/Roman school of life that has evolved into a modern movement, whereby adherents apply ancient principles to modern living, both in the personal and, increasingly, the political sphere. The conceptual bridges between Stoicism and Freirean ecopedagogy permit a cross-examination of the two frameworks and a re-reading of socio-environmental justice. The result is an integrated approach that serves for the promotion of a sustainable message built on an educative literacy and a dialogue, which goes beyond serving the superficial values or interests of one group at the cost of all others.

At the same time, there are some aspects of Freirean ideas (both original and re-envisioned) that non-practitioners may find conceptually conflicting, or at least in need of clarity. Accordingly, we identify, through a modern Stoic lens, where virtue ethics and a deeper philosophical

grounding can provide Freirean ecopedagogy's theoretical underpinnings with a supportive framework for a more effective countering of the scrutiny that comes from more conservative educational theories. We also evaluate where, and to what extent, ecopedagogy can provide Stoicism with some of the tools and methods required to deal with practical twenty-first century problems that the ancients could not have envisaged. In sum, we identify where ecopedagogy can support contemporary Stoics in revisiting some of the deep social prejudices and misinformed assumptions that continue to fuel extreme nationalism, gender, and social inequality, instead of the ancient Stoic vision of a worldwide cosmopolitan citizenship.

All Stoics, both ancient and modern, were/are called to focus on the question of what constitutes excellent human behavior (*arete*). Stoicism thus necessarily entails the instructing and social development of individuals. For Stoics, education should lead to virtue, and in doing so facilitate a holistic sense of wellbeing (*eudaimonia*). In turn, human flourishing creates an opportunity for societal transformation, through the manifestation of the four Stoic virtues of courage, justice, self-control, and wisdom. For Freirean ecopedagogues, the educational process holds a similar potentiality, although given its emphasis on a fuller expression of democracy, as a means to promote global citizenship and political social transformation, it manifests itself differently.

Stoics and Freirean ecopedagogues alike recognize that education, in and of itself, does not automatically result in societal progress or acts aligned with sustainable development. Indeed, if the classroom environment and the moral trajectory of those exposed to a particular philosophical and pedagogical framework are left unexamined then education (as with any other institution) can reinforce existing societal norms and behavior. This is because the type and quality of education taught and received will influence, positively and negatively, a person's reasoning, virtues, and value system. Sometimes, all these can create conscious or inadvertent support for environmental, geopolitical, and socioeconomic injustice or unwise decision making. Hence the need for both philosophical and pedagogical mechanisms that critically evaluate how, what, and why something is learned or being taught.

Stoicism, as a personal philosophy, has since its conception (in approximately 300 BCE) been used as a mechanism for dealing with an one's anger, sadness, or coping ability when faced with both the positive and negative aspects of the human experience, e.g., illness, death, wealth, and social status. Given that ancient Stoics unyieldingly advocated for the propagation of thoughts and actions that recognize and respond to the world for what it is, it is of no accident that "stoicism" in its uncapitalized form implies an absence of feelings or indifference. In addition, Stoicism provided the predominant philosophical basis for Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), a psychosocial intervention that encourages a patient to reconfigure their thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes away from depressive or anxious states and into more conducive ones for problem solving and emotional regulation (Robertson 2010).

The personal emphasis of Stoicism does not exclude it from being used to advance the state of societal affairs or contribute to a Freirean discourse on eco-pedagogy for sustainable development. Certainly, the aforementioned qualities brought out in CBT sessions for personal improvement can be used to rein in populist policies and polarized debates that feed off and respond to heightened emotions rather than fact

checks and solutions grounded in reality. What separates Stoic-based interventions from their Freirean alternatives is the former's limited consideration regarding the impact that societal structures, political ideologies, or physical characteristics may have on a person's ability to progress towards virtue and, by way of extension, flourish.

Within a Stoic framework, each rational agent is the master of their own beliefs, intentions, and desires. This means that the concept of oppression, so integral to Freirean thought, is more or less absent. Furthermore, oppression under a Stoic paradigm is considered impossible (at least in the robust sense) because in accepting one's oppression one must also admit that their capacity to flourish is beyond their control, which breaks with the Stoic premise that one's virtue is determined only by their own thoughts and actions. Indeed, as Seneca states in *Letter 33.3*: "We Stoics are not subjects of a despot: each of us lays claim to his own freedom." In which case, the sole-exception to the absence of the Freirean oppressor and oppressed relationship is the notion that a Stoic can only oppress him/herself. This is something Freire, drawing from Frantz Fanon, would not have agreed with. Instead, he viewed oppression as being caused by power dynamics and the oppressor as being housed within and by the "people" whom, fearful of freedom, fatalistically transfer the responsibility for their oppressed state to those who have power over them (Freire 1968, Chap. 4).

All ancient and modern Stoic thinkers were/are obliged by the philosophy's principles to contribute to the vision of cosmopolitanism. They must recognize that they can be neither oppressors nor victims. This does not imply that Stoicism refutes the existence of socioeconomic or environmental marginalization. Neither does it signify that the Stoic cosmopolitan ideal constitutes the Freirean utopia that occurs upon the destruction of oppressive systems. However, it does mean that some aspects of classic Marxist ideology, for example, read as strange and conflicted. To explain, since so much of our identities involve chance, and any rational agent can flourish no matter what social class they happen to be stationed in, one's class

does not hinder their ability to attain eudaimonia, unless they believe it to be so. On the other hand, since much of one's socioeconomic status is dependent on the lucky accident of birth, it follows that both one's initial wealth and one's ability to accumulate it is not particularly under an agent's control. Consequently, the issue, as Freire would agree, is not poverty or lack of resources, but rather our attitudes and actions that celebrate the rich or demonise the poor. In other words, Stoics view money as an external factor that has no bearing on one's character; a person can be wealthy, yet morally bankrupt, poor yet morally well-off. Furthermore, given that wealth (or the lack thereof) is neither something to praise or consider blameworthy, there exists no historical guilt or generational sin, concepts which would also be beyond one's control. Thus, neither wealth nor the wealthy should be shunned or desired any more than poverty or those that find themselves impoverished.

This does not mean that Stoics should ignore, or refuse to acknowledge, those present injustices that have been shown by Freireans and other academics, to stem from historical events and their modern-day narrative. Rather, in line with this recognition, Stoics must think carefully about how their personal experiences and social position determine what they perceive to be worth progressing towards. They would also be following Stoic principles in questioning the origin of their wealth and acting in ways which make best use of their privileges to promote the four Stoic virtues. A grave injustice (vice) is done indeed if the most vulnerable are prevented by an economic system from accessing those societal services that every human being requires to meet their material needs, so not to live in undesirable conditions. Hence, under a Stoic-influenced educational framework, the student and teacher must, as in Freirean ecopedagogy, investigate and ground their beliefs in the nature of reality, including those facts that determine an individual's physical existence and mental representation of the world. Equally, education for transformation would need to explore how societal structures influence agency to better establish whether a given person's, State's, or corporation's

wealth is being used to benefit society (by promoting the personal and collective manifestation of the four Stoic virtues) or for its detriment (promoting their polar opposites, the vices). Once this decision has been made, one can then act to bring about the necessary changes. Progressive political action rooted in Stoic thought is not without historic precedent. In fact, as discussed by Plutarch in *The Life of Kleomenes* (2.2), the philosophy's principles influenced the Kleomenean reforms of Sparta. This process, involving educational system innovation, land reform, cancelation of debts, and a restructuring of immigration policy and practice, represents a clear cut example of Stoicism's involvement in the political arena and its usefulness in supporting policies that promote collective wellbeing.

Significantly, and by the luck of history, most Stoics were part of the philosophical tradition of the Roman Empire and not the "barbarians." It would have been interesting to have had Stoic texts originating from the other side of the battle. This is where Freirean ideas can provide important contributions to modern Stoicism, precisely because they can shift the perspective to the disenfranchised in a way few existing ancient Stoic texts elaborate upon, since the majority of the later Stoic works were written by those of the educated and upper social classes. The ability to facilitate and amplify the voice of the less dominant is where, in our opinion, the scope and critical tools used in critical ecopedagogies excel.

For Freirean ecopedagogues, there is not just one body of knowledge or one correct way of schooling or educating. In fact, special care is taken to ensure that local wisdom or ways of doing things are not de-valued or diminished, which can happen even under the guise of sustainable development (Misiaszek 2018). Under their framework, Truth is ascertained through rigorous and critical reading and re-reading of environmental and socioenvironmental politics (i.e., the external influences that hold an effect upon individuals and societies' actions). The resulting dialogue helps in the identification of geopolitical hegemones that prevent an individual from accessing resources or being given permission to travel, for example. Arguably, this deeper awareness can aid

Stoics in understanding the nature of modern social perceptions and how they may affect a student's and teacher's progress towards eudaimonia.

Freirean ecopedagogues have a much fuller body of critical scholarship and a tradition of invoking dialogue that looks at how social constructs, such as money and geographical borders, affect the environment and progress towards the attainment of sustainable development. In contrast, similar research undertaken through a Stoic lens is very much in its infancy. In fact, it was not until Whiting et al. (2018a) that the connection between the four Stoic virtues and sustainable development was made explicit. Consequently, ecopedagogues are, at present, much better positioned to contribute to the debate. They have spent a considerable amount of time identifying how the tendency to over-value private interests at the expense of the collective good is causing injustice in specific circumstances and among certain communities. They can point to where and how labor and economic systems built on a growth paradigm have sold people short – by disregarding or denying the existence of physical limits and social ties. In other words, Freireans have access to perspectives and a corresponding set of facts from which Stoics can infer an appropriate moral response. In absence of such observations, modern Stoics could well be in the same position as their predecessors who lacked both the means and conceptual framework required to evaluate their impact on the global environment. The merit in applying aspects of the critical ecopedagogical framework to Stoic thought is that it can reduce the prevalence of false teachings and misunderstandings, which would otherwise lead humankind to operate in line with an economic, sociopolitical or religious narrative/ideology rather than according to Nature (Whiting et al. 2018b). Indeed, once ecopedagogues have critically examined some of the aforementioned twenty-first century challenges, Stoic philosophy can convey the importance of expressing personal agency by making appropriate decisions on how we choose to live, including how we interact with the environment. For example, if we do not

want to live in a polluted planet then we need to change what we do and how we do it.

In order to propose a Stoic ecopedagogy, it is not enough to weave together critical lines of thought. Although both Freirean and Stoic ecopedagogies operate through a bottom-up approach, there remain certain tension points that need to be overcome and fashioned together into a coherent whole. One of the more subtle issues is that Freirean ecopedagogy operates out of a “rights-based” paradigm and focuses heavily on the championing/defending of an individual's or groups legal recognition and consequent protection. By contrast, Stoicism all but ignores individual rights and emphasizes personal and communal obligations. For a Stoic, these are built out of an understanding of the Greek concept of *oikeiosis* (appropriation), which describes the natural instinct humans and other living beings share in preserving and caring for, for their own sake, members of their own tribe. This is in turn made manifest under the Stoic ideal of cosmopolitanism. Adherence to the latter requires a person to address the quantifiable sense of inequality when it comes to access to material resources and education (a state that Freirean ecopedagogues and Marxists would identify as oppression). This is because just thoughts and acts correspond to a rational human being's moral duties, even if, as Stoics assert, the absence of such goods and services cannot, by definition, make one miserable. It also means that Stoic ecopedagogues and their students are compelled to comprehend the effect of sociopolitical structures on an individual's agency, not because of some legal infringement or out of a feeling of anger or distress, but rather because they recognize that human beings have responsibilities to themselves, to each other, and the community as a whole. Freire (1968) touches upon these aspects when remarking on what he sees as the spirit of struggle, courage, capacity for love, or daring required by the revolutionary leaders of Cuba who were willing to sacrifice themselves for the “people.”

Another challenge in operating a Stoic ecopedagogical framework is that the philosophy is not prescriptive in that, aside from the virtues

and vices, the appropriateness of an act or intention is dependent on the circumstance from which it arises. This means that preferred ways of conveying information and ideas in one culture may not be desired or useful in another, even if the virtues are agreed upon. Once again, Freireans could certainly help in the practicalities of this transition. For one thing, like Stoics, their framework, although politicized, is not prescriptive. For another, they have experience in breaking away from the dominant Western model of education to include a wider range of viewpoints and values. They also have an acuter understanding of how modern history influences present thought and the structures that maintain such thinking. Such knowledge would facilitate Stoic actions to promote a global harmony rooted in the local ways of doing things.

With the right support, Stoic ecopedagogy can replicate the conditions of the ancient Stoic places of learning – the *Stoa*, or the painted porch of the marketplace – where all people, slave and free, male and female, native and foreigner, could come together to partake in an educational process that would support them in their progress towards eudaimonia. It can also open up Stoic teaching (which has most often been applied to personal endeavors) into dialogue and acts that recognize

the importance of sustainable development and our role as a species to occupy the safe space that balances the needs of non-humans with that of our own. Lastly, it can aid Freirean ecopedagogy in re-assessing some of its philosophical inconsistencies for a more streamlined response to the challenges facing education for social transformation.

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