

STOIC SIMPLICITY: THE PURSUIT OF VIRTUE

[STOACI SADELİK: BİR ERDEM ARAYIŞI]

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ABSTRACT

I intend to explicate the phenomenon of simplicity insofar as it is constitutive of an agent's character, and also to argue that it is a cardinal (though often underappreciated) virtue – every bit as fundamental to a well-lived and admirable life as is wisdom, compassion, fortitude, or any of the more commonly acknowledged praiseworthy qualities. Simplicity, as I will use the term, refers to a disposition in favor of the rational governance of desire and aversion and, in particular, the renunciation of pretense. The simple person eschews interests rooted in concern about how he (or she) may be perceived or regarded by other persons. Simplicity, in short, is a rational restriction of one's interests to the sphere of one's direct, unmediated control (as understood by the Roman Stoics) – and a correlative disregard for matters lying *beyond* that sphere (especially matters such as one's "image" or reputation).

Keywords: simplicity, Stoic simplicity, virtue.

ÖZET

Amacım bir bireyin kişiliğini oluşturan özelliklerden yalnızca biri olan sadelik olgusunu yorumlamak ve bunun çoğu zaman önemsenmese de bir erdem olduğunu tartışmaktır. İyi yaşanılmış ve hayranlık uyandıran bir yaşama temel olan sadelik aslında bilgelik, merhamet, metanet ya da genellikle takdire değer olarak kabul edilen özelliklerden biridir. Sadelik, kullanacağım şekliyle, arzu ve hoşnutsuzluğun ve özellikle de gösterişi bırakmanın rasyonel yönetiminden yana bir duruşa işaret etmektedir. Erkek ya da kadın olsun sade bir kişi diğerleri tarafından nasıl algılanabileceğiyle ilgili endişelerden kaçınır. Kısaca sadelik, bir kimsenin ilgisinin direkt ve Romalı Stoacıların anladığı şekilde aracısız kontrol zemininin ötesindeki konulara ilişkin (özellikle bir kimsenin "imajı" ya da itibarı) akılcı kısıtlamalarını içermektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: sadelik, Stoacı sadelik, erdem.

“The simple person is a person without pretensions, unconcerned with himself, his image or his reputation; he doesn’t calculate, has no secrets, and acts without guile, ulterior motives, agendas, or plans. (1996, p. 155)
-André Comte-Sponville

“For the Stoic, then, doing philosophy meant practicing how to ‘live’: that is how to live freely...in that we give up desiring that which does not depend on us and is beyond our control...”
(1995, p. 86)
-Pierre Hadot

“Seek not good from without; seek it within yourselves, or you will never find it.”
(1944, Ch. 25)
-Epictetus

Simplicity is, I shall argue, an indispensable element of the virtuous character. The term “simplicity,” and the concept to which it refers, are contextually malleable and indicate different facets of our attitudes, beliefs, practices, theories, designs, etc. depending upon the specific interest at issue. As the Comte-Sponville epigraph at the head of this paper indicates, however, there is a conception of simplicity as a character trait and disposition primarily regarding one’s values, intentions, and behavioral tendencies. I intend to address the phenomenon of simplicity insofar as it is constitutive of one’s character, and also to argue that it is a cardinal (though often underappreciated) virtue – every bit as fundamental to a well-lived life as is wisdom, compassion, or fortitude. Simplicity, as I will use the term, refers to a disposition in favor of the rational governance of desire and aversion and, in particular, the renunciation of pretense. The simple person eschews interests rooted in concern about the perceptions and attitudes of other persons. Simplicity, in short, is a rational restriction of one’s interests to the sphere of one’s direct, unmediated control – and a correlative disregard for matters lying *beyond* that sphere (especially one’s “image” or reputation). Historical figures as diverse as the Buddha, Epicurus, Socrates, Diogenes, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Saint Francis, and E. F. Schumacher have

advocated the cultivation of simplicity as a morally and/or prudentially indispensable component of an admirable life. In his contemporary classic, *Voluntary Simplicity*, Duane Elgin (1993) elucidates the core concept of simplicity as it pertains to the art of living:

To live more simply is to live more purposefully and with a minimum of needless distraction. The particular expression of simplicity is a personal matter. We each know where our lives are unnecessarily complicated. We are all painfully aware of the clutter and pretense that weigh upon us and make our passage through the world more cumbersome and awkward...Simplicity of living means meeting life face-to-face. It means confronting life clearly, without unnecessary distractions. It means being direct and honest in relationships of all kinds. (1993, pp. 24-25)

As an homage to part of the ancient groundwork of this contemporary ethos, I will present and defend the Roman Stoic conception, analysis, and explication of simplicity as a central element of the virtuous character and of a life plan engendering serenity, calm, and equanimity.

VIRTUE AS CORNERSTONE

The Stoic lifestyle is, at root, the single-minded pursuit of virtue – conceived as life lived in accordance with reason and with a minimum of disingenuous affectation. Virtue is, to some extent at least, an absence of vice. The agent that is innocent of vicious ulterior motives, guile, a hidden agenda, etc., will be largely trustworthy – if for no other reason than disinterest in some of the most common compulsions to mischief. The simple character is devoid of dissimulation, posturing and, perhaps most importantly, the desire to appear to be more accomplished and more impressive, either in the eyes of others or in one's own estimation, than is actually the case. In fact, simplicity entails a disregard for appearances *tout court*. Appearances, reputation, and social status are detachable from virtue, wisdom, and the project of

living a rational, authentic life. Virtue is not founded upon popularity, wealth, or political power. If Socrates was wise, neither the disapprobation of large segments of the Athenian population nor his relative lack of wealth and political power could make him less so. The Cynic, Diogenes, was deemed a madman by many of his contemporaries. This assessment may or may not have had its merits, but the assessment itself did not imbue the homeless, impoverished Diogenes with either vice or virtue. The wise look to themselves for the rectification of their character, and the satisfaction attained thereby, whereas the unenlightened allow their contentment to depend upon the evaluation of others and/or various circumstances unfolding beyond their control (e.g. wealth, power, reputation, etc.). Epictetus uses a stark illustration to distinguish those areas upon which the external world can impinge from those that are psychologically and emotionally beyond its reach:

But someone takes me by the collar, and drags me to the forum; and then all the rest cry out, "Philosopher, what good do your principles do you? See you are being dragged to prison; see, you are going to lose your head!" And, pray, what rule of philosophy could I contrive, that when a stronger than myself lays hold on my collar, I should not be dragged; or that, when ten men pull me at once, and throw me into prison, I should not be thrown there? But have I learned nothing then? I have learned to know, whatever happens, that *if it concerns not my moral purpose, it is nothing to me**. (Epictetus, 1944, Ch. 29)

So, Epictetus informs us that our "moral purpose" (i.e. living a virtuous life in conformity with reason) should be our overriding concern and guiding interest. Our moral purpose is in no way dependent upon the cooperation of other persons, the external world or, indeed, even the obedience or complicity of the body itself. Even a man paralyzed from the neck down can discipline himself to accept his physiological condition with grace and courage, as opposed to bemoaning his disability and cursing his fate. Only the application of rigorous mental discipline is necessary for living a

* Emphasis added.

rationaly governed life in the face of any challenges that may, and inevitably will, arise. Those who are emotionally mature, direct their concern and mental energy to the project of self-rectification and the strengthening of their resolve, as opposed to wasting their limited capacities on needlessly complex schemes designed to appeal to the powerful, appease the masses, or attain the material stuff of ephemeral worldly advantage. The Stoic prizes virtue above any external commodity and does not conflate the former with the latter.

SIMPLICITY AND MATERIAL WEALTH

The Stoic conception of simplicity should not be presumed to *necessitate* poverty regarding one's material possessions or an absence of political and economic power. Though Stoicism comports nicely with voluntary poverty and political disengagement, it should be noted that these conditions are not prerequisites of Stoic simplicity, nor are they necessary consequences of adopting the Stoic lifestyle. Both Seneca and Marcus Aurelius lived lives of considerable wealth and power while professing adherence to and, by most accounts, living in accordance with, root Stoic values. Provided that one does not sacrifice one's virtue or abrogate one's obligation to pursue correct "moral purpose" in the course of any particular attainment, then external accoutrements such as wealth, power, fame, physical health, etc. are simply to be regarded with detached indifference and governed with sensible stewardship for as long as they are subject to one's management. When any of these indifferent ephemera pass away (and they all will), the passage should be regarded with detached equanimity and recognized as a simple, natural, and inevitable instance of returning that which is not truly one's own to the dispensations of the external world that briefly endows one with some material advantage or other. Much as one takes care of a rented home or a hotel room with respect for the rightful owner's property, until that property is to be returned and relinquished without distress, similarly one should consider one's own home, body, loved ones, wealth, etc. as mere transient phenomena briefly on loan and subject to reclamation at any moment. Nothing that is not subject to one's own exertion of will ought to be regarded as essential to the

instantiation of life in accordance with proper moral purpose. Virtue is internal to the sphere of the agent's direct control. It is a matter of choice and discipline. Any "externals" are, therefore, "indifferent" with respect to pursuit of the good life.

Though wealth does not preclude the simple life advocated by Stoicism, ill-gotten gain and material sustenance via compromised values are certainly corrosive to virtue and contrary to the embodiment of correct moral purpose. Money has its admirable uses, but all too often, we are tempted to sacrifice our decency or allow a contamination of our character in order to obtain wealth that does not contribute to a life well lived. Stoic simplicity is, among other things, a refusal to accept complication and compromise in exchange for material gain. Socrates, a Stoic hero and moral exemplar, argues at his trial that most of his fellow Athenians irrationally value wealth, fame, and power more highly than virtue and wisdom – adding to their own decadence, as well as accelerating the decline of Athenian culture. From this error, all sorts of misfortune and misbehavior ensue, and Socrates seeks to awaken his fellow citizens to this inveterate and irrational tendency:

I shall go on saying, in my usual way, My very good friend, you are an Athenian and belong to a city which is the greatest and most famous in the world for its wisdom and strength. Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honor, and give no attention or thought to truth and understanding and the perfection of your soul?

And if any of you disputes this and professes to care about these things, I shall not at once let him go or leave him. No, I shall question him and examine him and test him; and if it appears that in spite of his profession he has made no real progress toward goodness, I shall reprove him for neglecting what is of supreme importance, and giving his attention to trivialities. (Apology, 29d-30a, p. 15-16)

Not even the threat of execution can dissuade Socrates from the dogged pursuit of wisdom and virtue. He knows that the jury and the hemlock cannot harm that which

is inseparable from and constitutive of what Socrates refers to as his “soul”. No one can force indecency, cowardice, or any other vice upon a virtuous man. The only person that one has the power to diminish, degrade, or devalue, is oneself. One’s character is, therefore, the only proper object of one’s most devout efforts to progress toward “perfection”. In this respect, each of us is master of himself – provided that he takes the trouble and makes the effort necessary to develop robust mental discipline.

STOIC FREEDOM AND INTERPERSONAL AFFAIRS

The Stoic’s simple life cannot be realized without liberation from those constraints and complications that tend to generate needless stress and discontent, or to invite degradation. The desire for admiration, fame, or social status almost unavoidably entails compromise intended to please those upon whom such matters are dependent. Epictetus warns that this is a form of enslavement to values that may be incompatible with the pursuit of wisdom and virtue. In *A Guide to the Good Life: the Ancient Art of Stoic Joy*, William Irvine (2009) succinctly articulates this element of Stoic counsel:

Stoics value their freedom, and they are therefore reluctant to do anything that will give others power over them. But if we seek social status, we give people power over us: We have to do things calculated to make them admire us, and we have to refrain from doing things that will trigger their disfavor. Epictetus therefore advises us not to seek social status, since if we make it our goal to please others, we will no longer be free to please ourselves. We will, he says, have enslaved ourselves. (2009, p. 167)

There is hardly a more pervasive instigation of needless complexity regarding the human condition than the urge to please other people (not to mention the psychological and emotional consequences of failures to satisfy that urge). No one can legitimately claim to be free while relinquishing his contentment to the passing interests and fickle tastes of those he hopes to impress. One cannot live simply and

also seek the approval of persons who are obsessed with money, possessions, fame, power, status, and the other familiar objects of perennial worldly obsession – all of which necessitate some degree of guile, calculation, or pretense. It is also impossible to “be oneself,” provided that one embraces Stoic values, while aiming to appeal to those who reject those values and embrace the general aspirations of the acquisitive and compulsively envious masses. We must begin to weave Shakespeare’s tangled web of deception when we set out to win acclaim by concealing unpopular interests, such as the attainment of virtue, wisdom, and self-discipline, or when we feign interest in common desiderata such as wealth, fame, power, and social status.

Just as there is no incompatibility between Stoic simplicity and material wealth or power, similarly there is no necessary tension between Stoic simplicity and virtuous engagement in interpersonal relations or active participation in socio-political affairs (should one choose this course of endeavor). Marcus Aurelius was, after all, simultaneously a devoted Stoic practitioner, a husband, a father, and Emperor of the greatest socio-economic and military power on the planet at the time. The philosopher king’s simplicity is exhibited in his recognition that most of the world’s affairs are beyond the control even of Rome’s throne. He understood clearly that his position afforded him no power to determine anything beyond his own will, attitudes, desires, and other mental states. Even Caesar faces illness, aging, disloyalty, frustration, and death. Even Caesar is subject to nature and the winds and vicissitudes of fate. He knew himself to be no more than a man and, in the final analysis, no more capable of controlling external states of affairs than anyone else (appearances to the contrary notwithstanding). Commands may be disobeyed or misunderstood, legions may fail, and treachery may reach into the very pinnacle of power (the Emperor was well aware that more than one of his predecessors had met an untimely end at the hands of a trusted retinue). He understood the business of a man (*any man*) to be relatively simple (though not at all *easy*) and straightforward. In his *Meditations*, he reminds himself:

A man should habituate himself to such a way of thinking that if suddenly asked, ‘what is in your mind at this minute?’ he could respond frankly and without hesitation; thus proving that all thoughts were simple and kindly...He does not forget the brotherhood of all rational beings, nor that a concern for every man is proper to humanity; and he knows that it is not the world’s opinions he should follow...and the approval of such men, who do not even stand well in their own eyes, has no value for him. (Epictetus, 1944, 4)

Even if he lives in a palace, a man’s sphere of direct influence extends no further than the reach of his will and assumes only those dimensions to which rigorous training may expand the perimeter of self-discipline:

Letting go all else, cling to the following few truths. Remember that man lives only in the present, in this fleeting instant: all the rest of his life is either past and gone, or not yet revealed. This mortal life is a little thing, lived in a little corner of the earth; and little, too, is the longest fame to come – dependent as it is on a succession of fast-perishing little men who have no knowledge even of their own selves, much less of one long dead and gone. (Epictetus, 1944, 10)

How many rulers of men display the capacity to recognize and embrace their own insignificance in the great and flowing course of events? The most influential man in the world calls his life “a little thing,” conceives the Roman Empire as but “a little corner of the earth,” and disdains fame as reliant upon the interests of “fast-perishing little men” – little men no different, ultimately, from himself. We see that a kind of modesty and contempt for self-aggrandizement is part of the Stoic conception of simplicity. Marcus Aurelius understands that he is no more significant than any other man, and claims no special standing merely because the fates have seen fit to place him in a position of terrestrial authority. One suspects that he would have written the same words had he been a shepherd, slave, merchant, or mid-level government functionary. Epictetus knew the slave’s life from the first person perspective, but expressed much the same attitude regarding the fundamentals of the human condition,

as did the Stoic who became Emperor. Such distinctions are simply irrelevant to one's proper conduct as a man and as a Stoic practitioner. Life is simplified by a consistent and devout focus upon those "few truths" of which the simple, wise man (be he slave or Emperor) assiduously reminds himself.

CONCLUSION

The Roman Stoics valued virtue and sought freedom from all-too-common vices, such as pretense, greed, and indiscipline. The often-underappreciated virtue of simplicity is central to the Stoic conception of the well-lived life. A simple life is devoid of needless and unhealthy obsession with elements of the external world that lie beyond the agent's control. In particular, embracing simplicity entails a rationally governed indifference to social status as well as to the opinions and attitudes of others, thus providing liberation from common anxieties and ignoble efforts to attain fame, fortune, or material advantage. The Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, admired the former slave, Epictetus, and, in his *Meditations*, expressed gratitude for the latter's wise counsel. Both were simple men, but the attainment and perfection of Stoic simplicity was (and remains) no simple matter.

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