

Epictetus' Stoicism versus John Stuart Mill's Utilitarianism

Both philosophies share a common thread because both were influenced by hedonism in one form or another. Concerning both philosophies, I will give a brief overview of what they are and of a few other philosophers that influenced the ones I aforementioned in my heading.

Stoicism is a branch of philosophy, that many would argue, came into being as a response to hedonism. Since hedonism generally sees pleasure as good and pain as evil, stoicism was in contrast to how both pain and pleasure were dealt with. A famous champion of stoicism was the slave Epictetus who chose to espouse stoic teachings and ideas into his own life. Epictetus lived his life as a slave and is famously quoted as saying "bear and forbear" to deal with his harsh circumstances. So the argument people could make is that stoicism was essentially a by-product of Epictetus' circumstances and that he would have to go that route or necessarily die from the suffering he had in life (This idea could be argued in reverse to Marcus Aurelius, who I discuss below).

Marcus Aurelius' circumstances though were quite different, at least mostly; after reaching the age of 40 he became emperor of Rome. He too espoused stoicism as the way to confront life. Marcus didn't go through physical suffering as did Epictetus, but rather emotional suffering since rumors were spread about his wife having many lovers in his absence (Marcus was absent mainly due to his many military engagements as emperor). Nonetheless he chose to stand by his wife in the face of all of the rumors; a personal example of leading the stoic life.

At the core of stoicism is to not complain about the things we don't have control over, instead be proficient with the things that are in our control—such as our own minds. Also, feelings can be mastered through the mastery of thoughts. Their vision of serenity was to make right with the World Reason. This line of thinking is believed by the stoics to reduce stress and anxiety. On stoicism Epictetus stated, “Remember that thou art an actor in a play, of such a kind as the author may choose: if short, a short one; if long, a long one: if he wishes you to act the part of a poor man, see that you act the part naturally: if the part of a lame man, of a magistrate, of a private person (do the same). For this is your duty, to act well the part that was given to you; but to select the part belongs to another.” I believe this statement alone doesn't necessarily mean Epictetus thought everything was due to fate. Stoicism, in large part, is believed to engender the idea that everything follows a predesigned pattern.

A huge piece of stoicism lends itself to the disinterested rational will: to not have any personal attachment or motive and to be objective. One of example of this is how “Marcus Aurelius was disinterested when he promoted the men accused of being his wife's lovers,” as stated in *Archetypes of Wisdom* by Douglas J. Soccio. The problem of stoicism is that it *can* lead to idleness and to the idea that whatever action we take is predetermined anyway so “why bother?”

Moreover, utilitarianism, as I described earlier, was also influenced by hedonism. More specifically, as filtered through the lens of John Stuart Mill, it was epicurean hedonism that influenced what utilitarianism came to be. Epicurean hedonism is considered the “refined” version of hedonism by focusing on the quality of the pleasure over the intensity of it. So I can draw the conclusion that John Stuart Mill is to

utilitarianism as the epicureans were to hedonism—Mill refined it (utilitarianism). Unlike stoics, Mill and others that followed utilitarianism philosophy classified pleasures and stressed the importance of them. Mill classifies pleasures into higher and lower categories. The higher category he gives is the “refined pleasures” one and he asserts that humans, superior to animals, require more to be happy because humans possess higher mental faculties. Mill believes that most of us naturally aspire to the “higher pleasures” instead of being seduced by the “lower pleasures”.

To quote John Stuart Mill,

“It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.” (This quote I feel strangely indifferent to)

I would argue that majority of people tend to choose the “lower pleasures” because it is easier. Lower pleasures such as the ones that are temporary and don’t add any real value to our lives. Even when someone has the knowledge of the “higher pleasures” they tend to succumb to the “lower pleasures”. Stoics I believe wouldn’t care about classifying pleasures, but instead they would choose not to seek pain or pleasure. At least from this standpoint, stoicism seems to be the better avenue to take. The idea of being stoic seems to breed contentment in light of all of the diverse circumstances people fall under. None better to illustrate this point are the lives of the two main philosophers mentioned in the book *Archetypes of Wisdom*, Epictetus and Aurelius.

Even though both had starkly different lives they held onto stoicism with the same level of perseverance.

A very stoic quote from Epictetus further illustrates this,

“Let it make no difference to thee whether thou art cold or warm, if thou art doing thy duty; and whether thou art drowsy or satisfied with sleep; and whether ill-spoken of or praised; and whether dying or doing something else. For it is one of the acts of life, the act by which we die: it is sufficient then in this act also to do well what we have in hand.” I can see how this type of philosophy, when applied in its fullness, can help a slave like Epictetus get through the melancholy he endured.

Albeit, I agree with what Mill concludes about unhappiness being directly caused primarily by selfishness. I also agree that we should do what we can to reform our character. Stoics I think would agree with this concept as well since character is something molded from within us. So I think both philosophies, based on this discussion topic, polish the other in various aspects. Another complimentary thing from both branches of philosophy is that they both imbue an underlying sense of optimism. Ultimately Mill was an optimist since he believed that most people could live happy if they applied reason and good will to their lives.

The problem (not inherent in itself) of utilitarianism is the idea of doing the “greater good” for the “greatest number of people”. This can lead to atrocities because a large group of people may perform a horrible act in order to achieve what they perceive as “the greater good”. One cliché example of this is to reference the Nazis and the holocaust. What Hitler believed to be the “greater good” for the “greatest number of people” brought on the deaths of millions of Jews. I believe this in no way puts Mill or

his philosophy at fault. What people choose to do with the knowledge they possess or lack is ultimately their choice (even when pressured with the loss of their own life).

The potential problem of stoicism is that people may not see progress a worthwhile endeavor since they can simply endure whatever comes their way. This problem I don't see as inherent but it could give way to individuals not pursuing any goals but rather let life happen to them. This in turn would potentially lead a society into an economical downslide.

I must conclude that I strongly believe everyone has undergone hardship in various ways. It is true that people go through more suffering than others; suffering that involves emotional problems, mental stress, or physical duress. Struggle does not discriminate against someone based on their race, class, gender et cetera. The one thing that can help anyone regardless of these things is to adopt a stoic attitude while looking for the good they can reflect in others. While there may be some exceptions to this simplistic idea I have given, I believe it can be a wise thread to bring balance and bring to our lives what we are seeking—such as contentment or happiness.

While I believe there is much to be learned from both branches of philosophy, I have gleaned from my studies that stoicism has more to offer to individuals due in part from its wise simplicity. It espouses the importance of how we are the masters of how we think about something and therefore feel about something also. As an example: someone may cut me off in traffic but I realize I'm the arbiter of my feelings toward that person's action. I can as easily get angry at them as I can just shrug it off altogether.

To reiterate the stoic theme I give this simple quote by Epictetus,

“Show me a man who though sick is happy, who though in danger is happy, and I’ll show you a Stoic.”