

STOIC-SCEPTICISM

The Adult's Philosophy

REG NAULTY

THE CLAIM HERE is that as most people grow older, some form of stoic-scepticism is the philosophy they come to take for granted. This tendency appears to be universal; it is the upshot of their experience of life.

What, then, is stoic-scepticism? The stoic component has it that we shouldn't expect too much from life, and the sceptical component has it that there is no point in believing in much. It won't get you anywhere.

What kind of thing shouldn't we expect too much of? Happiness. Why not? There isn't too much to be had. At that point, stoicism passes directly into scepticism. But why do they think there is not much happiness to be had? They've never had much, nor have the people they have known.

There is an obvious rejoinder here. Perhaps they just haven't met the right people. That naturally invites a challenge. Who are they? Well, they certainly exist. If you don't know any, you are mixing with the wrong people, or they're scarce in the places you've been.

In any case, the existence of happy people is enough to show that stoicism is unnecessary. The idea that it is is common enough to deserve a name: the fallacy of misplaced stoicism. However, we do have to place stoicism somewhere. Some stoicism is necessary for a sane life. No one gets everything they want, and death is part of life. But that still leaves plenty of room for happiness.

That raises the question of how much happiness it is reasonable to hope for. In Giuseppe di Lampedusa's novel *The Leopard*, the dying prince famously calculated that in his life he had lived, 'really lived', a total of about two or three years. The other seventy had been

painful or boring.

In contrast, in real life, Alexander Solzhenitsyn found a fellow inmate of his Soviet forced labour camp, a Baptist, who was happy there. And many people, in more fortunate circumstances than that, have found happiness in children, grandchildren, friends, work, play, music, books, places *etc.* It is hard to avoid the conclusion that di Lampedusa's prince is a grump.

Many people would have shared these happinesses, but settle down into some form of stoicism. At the end of the day, not enough happiness has endured. If the problem is as deep seated as it seems to be, surely people, many people, would have found a solution. I suggest that they have, partially at least. Helping other people enriches life somehow. It cheapens it to call it a warm, inner glow. Life is made more satisfying for the giver and receiver.

That seems to be the road taken by many, and it brings them within reach of a metaphysical experience. Buddha, who seems to have been sceptical about the chances for a happy life, recommended compassion. The compassion lessens the need for stoicism, in some cases more, in others, less. In some, it goes as far as a metaphysical experience, which, as it happens, finds one of its best expressions in the work of that old sceptic, Montaigne: 'In the friendship of which I speak, our souls mingle and blend with one another so completely that they effaced the seam that joined them and it cannot be found again.'

Is there a scepticism ameliorator which works the way compassion does for stoicism? Solzhenitsyn asked the Baptist why he was happy in such a miserable place. 'Prayer, re-

plied the Baptist. Solzhenitsyn said that he had tried it and it hadn't worked. The Baptist responded that he hadn't tried it enough. Did it work for him then? It may have, but in another way. Solzhenitsyn became a staunch believer. Prayer deepens our spiritual life. It can function as a scepticism ameliorator, just as it had as a stoicism ameliorator for the Baptist. Just as friendship had a metaphysical experience at the end of it, prayer has a metaphysical experience at the end of it, though in this case, since this union is with God, it is a religious experience.

At this point, a sceptical question may be asked, though it is unlikely to be asked by the one who has had the experience. 'What has inner experience to do with the vast galaxies wheeling in space, and the cosmic picture revealed by science? Isn't God supposed to be the mind behind those, too?' Here, the world of feeling must appeal to the world of intellect. Paul Davies claim that the universe is just too clever to be an accident, is rather convincing. After all, it is hard to believe that this wonderful world is just a fluke.

The Dawkins forces, of course, maintain that the living world provides no evidence for God, since that can be explained by natural selection. But the physical world, apart from the living world, still illustrates Davies' claim. And if the religious experience goes as far as one's whole being somehow becoming a movement of divine love, then the experience comes charged with the numinous character-



Reg Naulty, formerly of Charles Sturt University, Riverina, has been writing about Spirituality for over thirty years. He is also a published poet. He now lives in Canberra

istics of majesty and fascination, which strongly suggest an origin beyond nature, which reinforces Davies argument.

I claimed above that the motive for scepticism is simply the conviction that believing won't get you anywhere. Where did they want to get to? They wanted to get a good job, to become prosperous, to have money to spend on the people and things they liked. That is commendable enough, but perhaps they expected too much from it. Perhaps they didn't spend enough effort on the things which are eternal. 'The world is too much with us.' If they had been less skeptical about spiritual goods earlier, there would have been less need for stoicism later.

I conclude that scepticism is avoidable, and so is stoicism, except in the qualified form mentioned above, namely, for the inescapable disappointments and illnesses of life. Ultimate stoicism is rendered unnecessary by the Providential care of God.

Only through believing [...] does faith grow and become stronger; there is no other possibility for possessing certitude with regard to one's life apart from self-abandonment, in a continuous crescendo, into the hands of a love that seems to grow constantly because it has its origin in God.

—*Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter Porta Fidei, introducing the Year of Faith, n. 7.*