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Marcus Aurelius and non-tragic living

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MARCUS AURELIUS AND NON-TRAGIC LIVING[1]

The focus of the article is the recurring appeal in Marcus Aurelius' Meditations to live non-tragically. This appeal presents an original usage of the theatrical metaphor for life rooted in stoicism. The usage is based on the opposition of proper (oikeios) and alien (xenos) which can be understood within the framework of the Stoic theory of appropriation (oikeiosis) and particularly the Chrysippean differentiation between appropriation and alienation (DL VII, 85). An alienated person, carried away by passions and surprised by events, is perceived as alienated from nature, an actor of life's tragedy. On the contrary, the one who acts rightly is presented as an actor of non-tragic theatre who at the same time unifies themself with the universal cause and nature and distances themself from passions and usual roles distributed in life.

Key words: Marcus Aurelius; Meditations; appropriation; passion; person; non-tragic living

The theatrical metaphor for life belongs to standard philosophical and literary imagery. Among the later Stoics, it was used especially by Epictetus, whose lectures abound in the image of life as theatre and living as playing one's role. As Epictetus' teachings were identified as one of the main influences present in *Meditations,*[2] the use of theatrical elements in the text is not surprising. However, although the interest in the theatrical metaphor is shared both by Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, the concept of non-tragic

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[2] *Meditations* contain direct quotes from Epictetus, see e.g. XI, 34 of *Meditations*, and the Epictetan terminology is used frequently. Among other things, for example the division between what depends on us and what does not is used, see e.g. VI, 41, VIII, 7, IX, 40 of *Meditations*.

theatre created in *Meditations* seems to present a different way of address-
ing the ethical problems of role, acting and person.

The notion of non-tragic living arises from the opposition *oikeion-xenon*,
proper and alien, frequently used in the text. The key to the interpretation
of this opposition and consequently of the notion of non-tragic living is the
Stoic theory of *oikeiosis* which allows understanding the balance between
the proper and the alien, appropriation and alienation. Examination of the
concept of appropriation and its opposite in *Meditations* reveals the subject
of negation as tragic, that is the tragic way of life is labelled as ethically
problematic and should be therefore avoided.

Oikeiosis

The theory of *oikeiosis* or appropriation presents the Stoic model of the
ethical development of the individual. The process of appropriation has as
a result the delimitation of an individual, society and their relationships and
as such creates the basis for proper actions.[3] Commentators mostly agree
upon dividing the process into two major phases[4] – in the first phase, an
individual becomes familiar to themself, their physical functions and lim-
its. The primary motive for action is self-preservation. In the second phase,
they realize that they form part of the bigger whole of reasonable creatures
and they become capable of reasonable actions for the good of society.

When Diogenes Laertius (D.L. VII, 85) explains the principle of appro-
priation, he begins with Chrysippus' argument which should prove that in
every living being, appropriation is the first to take place. Chrysippus ar-
gues that, there is either appropriation (*oikeiosis*) or alienation (*allotriosis*).
Since it is, according to Chrysippus, impossible for any creature to be alien
to itself, it is, on the contrary, proper and appropriated to itself from the

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[3]   The main sources for *oikeiosis* are Diogenes Laertius, Cicero's *De Finibus,* Seneca's
        letter 121 and fragments of Stoic philosopher Hierocles who lived in the 2ⁿᵈ century
        CE. Cf. D.L. VII, 84–89, Cic. *Fin.* III, 16–31, for Hierocles' *Elements of Ethics* and
        other works see Ramelli (2009).

[4]   The division of appropriation is to be found in Gill (2013: p. xxxviii) who uses terms
        individual-social in the commentary on Marcus Aurelius; Ramelli (2009: p. lix) who
        interprets Hierocles' account of appropriation in terms of preservative-deontological;
        Engberg-Pedersen (1990: p. 122) whose analysis is centred on Cicero (*Fin.* III, 16–21)
        and who uses terms objective-subjective. Annas (1993: pp. 270–4) and Reydams-
        Schils (2012: p. 438) distinguish personal and social appropriation and show that they
        go hand in hand.

beginning. Becoming oneself and reflecting upon it thus happen by way of appropriation, and not on the basis of alienation or distancing.

Proper and alien

The theory of *oikeiosis* is never treated systematically in *Meditations*, which is also true for Epictetus and his lectures. However, the opposition of *oikeion* and *xenon* is deeply rooted in this theory. The whole semantic field of *oikeios* is used by Marcus Aurelius to show natural or proper ways of the world and to show that it is according to these ways that one should live. Things in the world are shown as essentially not surprising, in many chapters this is expressed by the adjective *oikeios*, especially in the following three forms of argumentation.

- Everything happens as it happens, because it is natural, which means in accordance with nature. Therefore, to be surprised at what happens would be foolish and unwise (e.g. IX, 37, X, 36).

- The basic characteristic of every single thing is that it ceases to exist, that is, that it is subject to change. For from the point of view of the cosmos, the matter stays, it does not disappear, but it changes its shape. Cosmos itself thus stays the same, while the changes of its parts renew it (e.g. IV, 15, IV, 36, V, 13, VI, 15, VII, 25, VIII, 50, IX, 27).

- To these thoughts, finally, one should add that the cosmos periodically perishes in the conflagration. However, it always comes again into existence and always in the same form. Whatever direction, past or future, we look in, we see the gaping abyss of the endless repetition (e.g. II, 14, VI, 37, IX, 35, XI, 1, 2,).

The adjective *oikeios* in *Meditations* can be understood, firstly, as natural, as following from Nature and in accordance with reason, secondly, as familiar, as is for example everything that happens, has happened and will happen, and thirdly, as proper to a certain being or a thing, proper to their discreet nature. While the first and the second meaning arise from seeing the world as a whole, the third meaning is linked primarily to the point of view of individual parts. Individual parts necessarily meet and sometimes conflict, nevertheless, all of them are parts of a unique whole.

The meaning of *oikeios* is linked to the usage of the adjective *philos* and the verb *phileo* in *Meditations*. In chapter X, 21 Marcus Aurelius writes that

events like to happen; it follows that human beings should like everything that befalls them, and welcome it with affection. The reason for this is that events have been always allotted, they are woven by fate specifically for a particular human being.

> [1] *Is it not a way we have of speaking, to say, this or that likes to hap-pen?* (X,21)[5]

> [2] *… to delight in and welcome what befalls and what is being spun for him by destiny.* (III, 16)

Apart from welcoming the events, affection or liking should be extended to homogeneous beings, [3] *for Nature made them dear* (IX, 27) to us. The expressions *philos* and *phileo* thus combine the feeling of physical kinship, the awareness of the bounds of fate and affection as a good feeling according to the Stoic theory of passions (*eupatheiai*).[6] Good feeling can also be linked to the second phase of the appropriation where the natural affection for others plays the key role in the regulation of action.

What is denoted by *xenos* is the exact opposite of that which is denoted by *oikeios*.[7] *Xenos* is typically the one that is surprised (XII, 1). Yet, as Marcus Aurelius frequently asserts, the natural way for the man is to be affected by events that can affect a man, e.g. with stupidity or with mortality. Therefore, there is never any reason to wonder (VI, 25, VII, 26, VIII, 14, X,

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5   All translations come from Haines (1930). In this case, the translation is modified.

6   LS 65 F. Affection towards others is denoted in *Meditations* also by *eumeneia* (III, 4, III, 12, IV, 25, V, 5, VI, 30, 47, VII, 3, 26, 52, 63, VIII, 5, IX, 11, 42, X, 4, 12, XI, 9, 13, 18), *praotes* (VII, 63, IX, 42, XI, 9, XI, 8)*, philostorgia* (II, 5, VI, 30, XI, 18), *hemerotes* (III, 11, XI, 8). Epictetus too does not present a theoretical overview of appropriation, but he is rather more interested in the practical questions. Salles argues that the problem of natural affection (*philostorgia*) is to be treated in the framework of the theory of appropriation. See Salles (2012: pp. 95–121) and Arr. *Epict.* I, 19 and II, 22.

7   Horst (2013: p. 94) explains the opposition proper-alien according to Epictetus: what is not up to us is alien to us, and it is necessary to see it as *adiaphoron*, valueless with regard to virtue. According to her, appropriation is a process during which we learn to deal with the other (*Fremde*), to have the right attitude towards it, to appropriate it. She stresses that appropriation isn't a question of understanding, but rather one of handling (*Bewältigung*). However, her interpretation allows for the assertion that the alien is here first and becomes proper only by the work of appropriation. This would undermine Chrysippus' argument from D.L. VII, 85. Moreover, Ramelli (2014: pp. 116–140) notes that this step was taken only by the Christians in that they distanced the body from the soul.

7, XII, 13). In the most general sense, whoever is surprised by the course of events is alien, *xenos*, because he is alienated from nature.

Surprise leads to disquiet and imbalance, that is – to bad shape of soul. It can cause bad usage of impressions and birth of passions (*pathe*), which are understood by the Stoics as bad or uncertain judgements (LS 65 C). From the physical point of view, the passions are described as excessive movements that unnaturally contract the soul.[8] If somebody gets carried away by passion, they do wrong, they make mistakes or errors (*hamartema*, LS 65 M).

In *Meditations*, passions are directly treated as errors with reference to a lost work of Theophrastus (II, 10).[9] Marcus Aurelius connects passions, erroneous actions and an agent to create a notion comparable to Theophrastus᾽ notion of character:[10] an insolent person is a person whose soul continues to stay in a bad shape, in the shape of insolence,[11] and continually produces insolent actions caused by this insolence. Similarly, somebody seized by jealousy becomes a jealous person. Such a character thus appears to be an alienation from the nature of the human being, the exact opposite of appropriation.

According to *Meditations* and conforming to the Stoic doctrine, these errors, however, are natural phenomena in the whole of nature and it would be unnatural to be astonished by them. Therefore, one cannot be surprised at the existence of insolent people, because it is impossible that they shouldn᾽t exist.[12] Nor can one be surprised that, since they exist, they act insolently, in

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8   It is important to stress that passions do not arise from an irrational principle in the soul or from a part opposite to the rational part, but exactly from the one and only rational soul that is subject to an unnatural contraction (L 65 A, G).

9   The relationship of chapter II, 10 to Theophrastus' work on characters is uncertain. Communis opinio stands that the allusion is to another, not preserved work. See Gill (2013: p. 94).

10 In his Characters, Theophrastus classifies character flaws (*pathema*) according to species (*kata genos*). He goes from the definition of the flaw to the description of the agent and their activity. These activities are named in the list of verbs, infinitives mostly (ἄρξομαι πρῶτον ἀπὸ τῆς εἰρωνείας καὶ ὁριοῦμαι αὐτήν, εἶθ᾽ οὕτως τὸν εἴρωνα διέξειμι, ποῖός τίς ἐστι καὶ εἰς τίνα τρόπον κατενήνεκται Thphr. *Char. Intro.* 5). The Stoics also made lists of virtues and vices which were divided into four basic types and series of subtypes (LS 65 B). An interesting observation is made by Meijer (1981: pp. 217–262) that Theophrastus᾽ Characters are inspired by the New Comedy.

11 Even in the old Stoa one can find the notion of soul so hardened in error that it is beyond admonition, e.g. concerning Epicureans (LS 65 A). Common errors, on the contrary, are marked by unsteadiness unlike virtue. Virtue is understood as firm and harmonious reason (LS 61 B).

12 See Chrysippus' assertion that vices cannot be eradicated and that it wouldn᾽t even be desirable, because they function as an opposite to virtue (LS 61 R).

the same manner as ignoramuses act ignorantly. It would be, again, an error, this time on our part, because whoever is amazed, or even gets angry, acts against nature.

> [4] *When thou art offended by shamelessness in any one, put this que-*
> *stion at once to thyself: Can it be then that shameless men should not*
> *exist in the world? It can not be. Then ask not for what can not be.*
> *For this man in question also is one of the shameless ones that must*
> *needs exist in the world. ... Where is the harm or the strangeness in*
> *the boor acting like a boor? See whether thou art not thyself the more*
> *to blame in not expecting that he could act thus wrongly.* (IX, 42)[13]

Non-tragic living

In *Meditations*, in chapters VII, 3 and X, 27 life is compared to drama, in chapter XI, 6 the world is seen as the bigger stage in comparison to the small stage of theatre. However, as can be completed from other chapters (e.g. III, 7 and 8) life should not be lived as a tragedy. To play well on the stage of life is to play non-tragically:

> [5] *Neither tragedian, nor harlot.* (V, 28)

The sense of the non-tragic can be explained against the background of the above mentioned opposition of *oikeion-xenon*. The non-tragic way of life consists of non-alienation from nature, which is the same as appropriation (*oikeiosis*) to the reasonable nature of the world and of the human being, and has three components: not being surprised by the world, being patient and balanced and not giving in to passions. However, although the concept of non-tragic living corresponds in the most general sense to living according to nature, i.e. non-alienated living, several particular features arise specifically in the theatrical context.

The claim for non-tragic living appears frequently along with the great names of the past. As all events were and will always be the same, all the heroes of the past were engulfed by the course of time and all the heroes of the future will be engulfed as well. It is always the same stage where the play is always repeated. Therefore, it would be an error to identify oneself with a name as if it were something special, or even with one's role in life. As Marcus Aurelius says, not to be caesarified (VI, 30), not to play the

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13   See also VI, 54, XI, 9.

emperor according to the role models of the great emperors, if they played along, not to consider oneself exceptional when one happens to be an Alexander or an Augustus. Even an emperor is no more and no less than a reasonable being, a human being. Even Alexander perished and is forgotten, and after every conflagration plays his part: again and again an Alexander rules and dies.

> [6] *Go to now and tell me of Alexander and Philip and Demetrius of Phalerum. Whether they realized the will of nature and schooled themselves thereto, is their concern. But if they played the tragedy-hero, no one has condemned me to copy them.* (IX, 29)

These reflections might be nourished also by the imperial rhetoric for which the danger of surrendering to a passion and a person was characteristic. The imperial rhetoric developed the notion of *persona* and made it one of its key concepts. *Persona* or *prosopopoiea* was a rhetorical figure that could have a limited range in the framework of one speech (e.g. the Athenian laws speaking in Plato᾽s *Crito*), but it was also a choice to be made for the whole speech, and even the whole rhetorical career. *Persona* thus became the personal manner of speaking of the orator that was performed whenever he spoke. Such a role wasn᾽t just a mask, but it had to be a real living performance, comparable to the modern method of Stanislavsky.

Quintilian points out that the chosen role must be truly experienced and felt – if an orator tries to persuade somebody of pain, the orator himself has to experience the pain, he has to feel it (Quint. *Inst.* VI, 2, 34–36). Seneca the Elder says that even the physical appearance formed a part of the created *persona*. He also gives several examples of orators who chose an extreme *persona* for their performances, became completely absorbed by it and went insane.[14] The *persona* of the imperial rhetoric was thus a dramatic role and even more than a role as it showed the dangers of the psychological personality in its excess, over the abyss of madness.

The refusal to play tragedy is the refusal to identify oneself with a given role. Gill (2012: p. 185) notes that Marcus Aurelius is interested more in ethical agency than in psychological personality, and it is possible to go even further: psychological personality is something against which we have to be on guard, not only because it leads one to make errors, but also because such an error can become a permanent passion which is impossible to

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14   Dross (2004–5: pp. 273–290) emphasizes the fact that it was desirable to actually believe in the truthfulness of what one presents as true. For the notion of *persona* in *Controversiae* see Guérin (2009).

get rid of. The demand for non-tragic living consists in turning away from the rhetorical *persona* to an ethical agency, from a hero to somebody, to an individual, a reasonable human being, nothing more and nothing less. Performing the non-tragic living thus signifies that one does not merge with a passion (i.e. one doesn't become a shameless person, an angry person etc.), that one does not identify oneself with a role he or she plays (e.g. an emperor) or with a name he or she bears (e.g. Marcus Verus).

A human being should carry out the functions of the human being as a bee carries out the functions of the bee, without a name, provided only by names of virtues (V, 6, X, 8). In this way, the human being may become an expression of virtue, which serves as an example to others. The name of such a person, e.g. Antoninus, then designates not a psychological entity, but a virtue. It can be developed by a cognomen, a name of virtue, e.g. Antoninus Pius. This cognomen expresses the fact that the human being became living virtue, virtue in action (VI, 48).[15]

The performance of non-tragic living is also characterized by the fact that it can end anytime. No given or expected number of acts has to be played, no unities have to be observed. The only important thing is not to be surprised, again, not to be alienated from nature.[16] Even when a player is interrupted after only three verses, they should take their bow and walk away, because the play is over.

> [7] – *But I have not played my five acts, but only three. – Very possibly, but in life three acts count as a full play. For he that is responsible for thy composition originally and thy dissolution now, decides when it is complete. But thou art responsible for neither. Depart then with a good grace, for he also that dismisses thee is gracious.* (XII, 36)

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[15]   The first book of *Meditations* can be read as a Stoic catalogue of virtues, *imagines maiorum*, combining the Roman tradition and Stoic philosophy. Cf. LS 66 D where Cicero talks of others as of *simulacra virtutis*. A similar direction was taken by Rey-dams-Schils (2005: p. 77) as she interprets the first book of *Meditations* as "*a curious reversal of a testament*". For an interpretation of the mixture of Roman and Stoic element in the notion of piousness in *Meditations* see Pià-Comella (2011).

[16]   The comparison with Bertold Brecht's epic theatre comes to one's mind. Brecht defines his theatre as non-aristotelian. The non-aristotelian theatre can be understood also as non-tragic. However, the cornerstone of its theory and praxis is the distancing effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*). The so-called epic, non-aristotelian theatre consists in revealing that what is considered as natural is in fact produced by man. Therefore it is in our power to influence our conditions, because things are not naturally as they are, they were made so and we can change them. This conclusion is quite opposite to the Stoic tenets. Cf. Brecht (1967).

Conclusion

The reading of the chapters where the notion of non-tragic living appears showed that it can be explained by the opposition between proper and alien based on the Stoic theory of appropriation. Such a non-tragic life consists in not being alienated from the whole of Nature and in accepting the events and one's fate. It also includes not being alienated from one's nature as a human being, not only from Nature as a whole, but from particular human nature that is characterized by reasonableness. Possible elements of alienation are excessive identification with passions and performed persona, which includes not only one's role in life, but also the proper name. Finally, to live non-tragically means to accept one's humanity with everything it entails, including mortality.

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