

Is Patriotism Crazy? How the Stoics Think We Should Relate to Cosmos and Country

Patriotism is, importantly, an emotion, and for the Stoics, all emotions are crazy.¹ That is, insofar as patriotism is an attitude characterized by love for one's compatriots and country, where this love is the ordinary love of passion and emotional attachment, patriotism is, for the Stoics, crazy.² This is not because the Stoics cannot accommodate a special concern for one's compatriots and country. But they cannot approve of this kind of love—a kind of love that the Stoics find irrational—as a basis for one's actions. Special concern with one's compatriots and country must be based on other considerations, namely on the fact that one stands in a particular relationship to one's country and fellow-citizens, and that the role of citizen is a normatively relevant role. A rational replacement of patriotism, namely, an attitude that reflects the *role* of citizen of one particular state, is a component of Stoic cosmopolitanism. I shall try to give an account of this rational

¹ I am not aiming to define patriotism, which obviously would be a difficult task. I assume that there are many sides to patriotism, and many versions of patriotism. My argument depends on the following premise: on many versions of patriotism, patriotism *includes* (but is not in its entirety constituted by) love of country and love of compatriots. These loves, so my premise, are a source of reasons, desires, and concerns. A patriot might be motivated to perform heroic deeds, to work for the advancement of her country, and so on. She makes her relationship to her country and compatriots a component of one's life: some of her activities reflect this. This notion of patriotism is intended to be (roughly speaking) our ordinary notion. It is intended to capture something in the attitudes of people who see themselves as patriots, and some of the ways in which we speak about patriotism and appeal to patriotism.

² My sketch of Stoic cosmopolitanism differs in a number of ways from Martha Nussbaum's well-known account in "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism," *Boston Review* 19 (1994). While I agree with Nussbaum's main point, that the Stoics think we should see ourselves first and foremost as citizens of the world, I differ in many other respects. For example, I think the Stoic claim that the world is one physical entity with us as parts is not a metaphor, but an integral aspect of their theory; also, I start from the idea that the Stoics think emotions are irrational, which Nussbaum does not. Quite generally, I reconstruct Stoic theory in the hopes of emphasizing *differences* to Kantian and other modern conceptions in moral philosophy, thus pointing to the distinctiveness of the Stoic position. Accordingly, I do not rephrase Stoic ethics in terms of morality, identities, and so on.

patriotism. But first, I must sketch the outlines of Stoic cosmopolitanism.³

I. Stoic Cosmopolitanism

(1) For the Stoics, **human beings** are functional fellow-parts of nature. That is, human beings are not bearers of value, as the Biblical traditions and modern constitutions have it. Human beings are natural entities among other natural entities. This premise has extensive consequences. It means that human beings are located at a given place and have, as a physical fact, closer relations to some than to others. It also means that every human being is in principle related to everyone else, just as every part of a complicated system is interrelated with every other part.

(2) Reason prefers the things that contribute to a life that is natural for human beings. That is, whatever keeps our physical constitution and cognitive faculties intact, is valuable for us. The standard list of **values**, accordingly, includes life, health, wealth, and well-functioning cognitive faculties. The list of so-called disvalues includes death, illness, poverty, and impediments to one's cognitive faculties.

(3) **Deliberation** deals with values and disvalues, that is, things like health and wealth and illness and poverty. In any given situation, the perfect agent deliberates with a view

³ The texts that are relevant to this paper are not always easy to access; many are in Long and Sedley's collection *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (chapters 65-60, 65, and 67). Since this is a short presentation, I am citing only very few passages. For a detailed discussion of the Stoic theory, see my book *Law, Reason, and the Cosmic City: Political Philosophy in the Early Stoa* (Oxford 2008); for a shorter discussion of how the concerns of others figure in ideal deliberation see my paper "Stoic Cosmopolitanism and Ideal Deliberation" (MS, <http://www.katjavogt.com/pdf/katja_vogt_cosmopolitanism.pdf>). My discussion in this paper is mostly about early Stoic political thought. However, I assume that Seneca is in many ways an orthodox Stoic; accordingly, I sometimes refer to his arguments. I am *not* including Marcus Aurelius into this discussion, because I think that his writings depart in relevant ways from the classical Stoic theory.

to these values—as they figure in her life, and in the life of everyone else.

(4) But why does the perfect agent concern herself with **others**? That is, why shouldn't she just think about what is valuable to *her*? The Stoic answer comes in two steps, the first of which is an account of natural development. The Stoics argue that human infants are born with two impulses: the impulse to preserve their lives (for example, screaming when hungry), and the impulse of affiliation with close family members.⁴ These first impulses are relevant to our acquiring something like self-perception. When we feel a pain in our hand, we realize that *this is our hand*, and, for example, pull back the hand from the source of pain, while at the same time coming to see it as part of us and as to-be-preserved. The impulse of affiliation with others is similar: in coming to have a conception of ourselves, and our way of being in the world, we experience others as belonging to us (or us as belonging to others); their concerns are intimately tied to our concerns. These initial impulses are merely a starting-point. They are not how a perfect agent should relate to the world. But they are the biological roots of a connection that is central to Stoic ethics: the ways in which we relate to value is immediately tied up with affiliation with others. This term—affiliation (*oikeiôsis*)—is one of the core concepts of Stoic philosophy.

In a second step, progressive learning transforms the first impulses into the right attitudes of an adult rational being. The Stoics think that our motivations flow directly from our

⁴ This is a complicated point: the Stoics say one is born with the first impulses of self-preservation and love for one's children, and then go on to develop our attitudes further. Obviously, no infant can love his or her children. As I argue in (2008), the texts are best interpreted as saying that, from the very beginning, one has close associations with one's nearest family-members. Love for one's children can then still play—later on—the role of a particularly deep-rooted attitude of care.

thoughts. If one has knowledge, one's actions shall reflect this knowledge. The perfect agent knows that the world is a large natural system with interrelated parts, who belong together. She comprehends that she is a fellow-part, genuinely belonging together with the other parts of a whole. She extends her sense of affiliation to everyone in the world.

(5) Does Stoic cosmopolitanism demand impartiality? The simple answer is 'no.' Why not, if the concerns of everyone ought to matter to one's deliberations? As we saw, the ideal attitude toward others is an affective disposition, rather than a disaffected stance. Modern impartiality, whether utilitarian or Kantian, is quite different. Morality here aims to supersede our affections, which are considered to be inevitably partial. We should adopt an impartial perspective, because otherwise we shall neglect those for whom we happen to care less. From the point of view of the Stoics, the demand for impartiality is misguided. If they used the term 'moral,' they would say that it is wrong to think that the moral point of view is an impartial point of view. This proposal, they would argue, misses out on the importance of affective relations with others, the importance of actually seeing oneself as connected with them. In neglecting the affective and attitudinal side of correct action, it loses sight of key facts, facts which are at the same time physical and normative. Think of the interrelationship between parts of a complex and non-uniform physical whole: not every part stands in the same relationship with every other part. Rather, every two parts stand in a particular relationship. For example, a woman stands in a different relationship to her child on the one hand, and her neighbor on the other. Also, relationships between geographically distant parts differ. For example, a military commander at the headquarters stands in some particular relationship with the soldiers in

each unit under his command. A researcher in a medical clinic stands in some relationship with every patient around the world that can be helped by the procedure she develops. When we ask ourselves what we ought to do, we must think about our particular relationship with those who are affected by our actions, and we must consider the role we have in this relationship—as mother, neighbor, general, doctor, and so on. In contemporary terminology, this proposal might be described as the view that all obligations are special obligations.⁵ From the point of view of Stoic ethics, there is no divide between what is owed to everyone, with whom we (as modern ethics often supposes) stand in some neutral or non-existing relation, and what is owed via special obligations to some particularly close people. We are in relevant ways related to everyone.

(6) The Stoics define the good as that which benefits. That is, a good action **benefits** the agent and/or others. To see what this amounts to, compare it to utilitarian and Kantian cosmopolitanism. Let's assume that utilitarians think that one should act so as to benefit everyone, as much and as many as possible. Utilitarianism holds that the things the Stoics consider valuable are actually good and of benefit. That is, it is assumed that such things

⁵ Thus formulated, this thesis looks paradoxical: a relationship with everyone simply is not a *special* relationship. However, the Stoics argue that indeed all of our interactions take place within relationships. Insofar as each fellow-part of the world is related to each other fellow-part in a particular way, each relationship is special. That is, the idea of a relationship with everyone does not envisage that this is a 'neutral' relationship (one that can be had with everyone because the sense in which it is a relationship is weak), so that we would stand in the *same* relationship with everyone. If that was so, then indeed it might not make sense to think in terms of a relationship at all, because this very notion implies that there has to be something *special* or *particular*. The modern idea that we are unrelated to most people, and only have a few friends, some family-members, and hopefully no enemies, is a deeply different starting-point for an ethical theory. Among contemporary ethicists, Sam Scheffler comes perhaps closest to exploring the topics relevant to this aspect of ancient ethics. In developing a Relationship Conception of Morality, he discusses whether the notion of a relationship with everyone is plausible, and how relationships figure quite generally in our ethical lives.

as having access to health-care, having something to eat and drink, and so on, are of benefit. This seems plausible, and the Stoic view, which denies it, is considered a paradox. The paradox is this: perfect deliberation aims at things of value; but its goodness does not lie in the actual achievement of the valuable things. Rather, its goodness lies in deliberating perfectly with respect to all these things. That is, an action counts as good or beneficial if the agent has considered everything of value and disvalue, even if it does not succeed in securing the valuable things. (This means, for example, that the Stoic notion of benefit has no conceptual link with maximization.)

Compare Kantian cosmopolitanism. Suppose that here, a duty to help others is an important starting-point. Help, of course, should benefit its recipient. But the goodness of the action does not lie in the benefit that it achieves for others; rather, it lies in the fact that the agent is motivated by her duty, and by recognizing the moral force of the fact that others are persons. The Stoic paradox—that the goodness of an action does not reside in securing the valuable things—has something in common with this Kantian conception. For the Stoics and for Kant, the *attitudes* of the agent are central. For example, if the doctor does everything in her power to heal a patient, and the illness proves nevertheless incurable, the doctor still acted, in Kant's language, according to her duty to help others. In Stoic terms, the doctor's action was good and it was of benefit, because what really matters is that it was an instance of someone deliberating perfectly about the concerns of others, in accordance with her role and relationship to them. This is in itself a kind of contribution to the goodness of the world—it is a good thing that there are such actions and motivations, and the world is improved by their presence.

II. Irrational Patriotism

In my introduction, I said that the Stoics cannot accommodate patriotism first and foremost because they cannot approve the kind of love that characterizes patriotism. Before I sketch the rationally reformed patriotism that can be, and in my view is, a component of Stoic cosmopolitanism, I must say more about irrational patriotism.

Whatever else patriotism is, I think that—according to our ordinary notion of it—patriotism includes love of country, and love for one's compatriots. The object of love in love of country can vary: some love their mountains, some love their language, some love their constitution. With respect to love for one's fellow-citizens, some patriots might claim that they simply are the best—the bravest, smartest, most inventive, most fun—people in the world. Others might not particularly like their compatriots one on one, but be prepared to fight for them if need be. And so on. So, I shall not assume that there is only one kind of patriotic love. But from the point of view of the Stoics, the common denominator of all these loves is that they are irrational. What does this mean?

These kinds of love are irrational in the same way in which, for the Stoics, romantic love (as we call it) is irrational. The person who is in love is crazed. This is the topic of Plato's *Symposium*, a text that is well-known to the Stoics, but also, in a more extreme version, in Euripides' *Medea*. The lover feels almost sick when her beloved does not show up for a date. She suffers when she does not feel loved back. She sees her beloved in an unrealistically positive light. The rest of the world fades into the background. For her, it

is almost as if the world hardly existed, families and old friends are neglected—so much are her thoughts concerned with her lover. The Stoics think that ordinary love, just as much as other emotions, is a kind of madness. It is irrational because it affects our capacities for calm and rational thought, makes the world appear different than it is, and propels us into impulsive actions, many of which are excessive and ultimately destructive.

It is one of the most famous Stoic theses that the wise person has no emotions. This is the general claim, and the claim that she does not feel ordinary love specifies it with respect to one particular kind of emotion. But the wise person is not envisaged as affectively neutral. Rather, the Stoics think that for most emotions, there are rational counterparts. Caution, for example, is the rational version of fear. The cautious person is someone who sees a tiger approach, understands how dangerous her situation is, and is calm enough to consider which course of action is most likely to get her out of it. The fearful person is someone who sees a tiger approach, thinks that this is *absolutely terrible*, and acts in a panic, with a high likelihood of thus becoming the tiger's next meal. Ordinary love is like fear, an irrational movement of the mind, where one acts before thinking.

This is why patriotism, as ordinarily understood, cannot fit into Stoic cosmopolitanism. The Stoics would describe it as an irrational devotion to one's country, which makes one do crazy things; it impedes one's capacity to think calmly about good courses of action. The Stoics might choose as their example a country gearing up for war. In such a time, the Stoics would say, love for country is invoked, and the more it is stirred up, the less

people are able to think calmly about such questions as whether they really should go to war; what would be good strategies to win a war; and so on. As lovers, they overestimate their compatriots, and think of them as more powerful and resourceful than they really are. The rest of the world recedes and is seen only in a blurred vision. As a mere shadow of itself, the enemy looks coarser and weaker than he really is. This is one of the recurrent themes of Greek literature: that when the Greek armies, who talk themselves into thinking that the Persians are barely civilized, finally meet up with their enemies from the East, reality hits hard—they suddenly see a perfectly organized, well-run, and well-trained army; and they are under-prepared.⁶ The Stoics would say this is stupid. A rational person does not get herself into such situations. Thus, the first premise regarding the Stoic stance on patriotism must be that ordinary patriotism is irrational, because it involves an irrational kind of love.

The Stoics do not aim to replace passionate love with a disaffected stance. They aim to replace it with rational love, and they explicate rational love as a stance of well-wishing, aiming to be of benefit, and taking joy in the benefit of others. Many will feel that this is a boring substitute. Even if ordinary love makes us do crazy things, we still tend to think that it is among the best things in life. This is also Plato's position, who notes the madness of love, but identifies it as a creative power: rather than trying to calm it down, we ought

⁶ Montaigne thinks that this is the upshot of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. He invents a scene which in fact is not part of Thucydides' treatise: the Greek army climbs a hill, expecting to see the Persians as a chaotic and weakly hord once they are on top of the hill; but when the Persians are in full view, they are a stunning side of power and sophistication. This invention is, as I see it, part of Montaigne's strategy to display himself as a *non*-scholarly author, who is running through his thoughts—where these thoughts however are shaped and populated by the many things taken in during his extensive reading in the past. I think that Montaigne makes the following (correct) point. If one distills the core of quite a lot of Greek writing into one scene in one's mind, then it is this scene. The Greeks who talk themselves into thinking that the Persians are decadent and weak encounter a powerful and well-organized army, someone whom it takes years to defeat, if at all (whether at Troy, or some other place in later wars).

to direct it at truly worthwhile objects; then, love is the force behind heroic deeds, achievements in the sciences and arts, and so on. The Stoic response is that there is no rational madness. There are no objects that call for a crazed, passionate devotion. We shall have to choose between rationality and irrationality. Essentially, a kind of friendship replaces passionate love in the life of a rational person.⁷

III. Rational Patriotism

Assume that we grant the Stoics this step (and for our present purposes, we need not agree with them on romantic love, which arguably even the Stoics concede is a somewhat special case; we only need to agree that a rational attitude of well-wishing and benefitting is better than blind passion for one's country). How then does this rational patriotism play out in the context of Stoic cosmopolitanism?

Rational patriotism fits into Stoic cosmopolitanism just as much as rational parental love, or rational devotion to one's research or to one's sports team. Recall that the Stoics think of every human being as a functional part of a whole, a biological entity that is connected in manifold ways with the other biological entities that make up the world. The natural facts that shape these relationships are normatively relevant. That is, insofar as one's children are related to one in a particular fashion, one owes particular things to one's children; insofar as one's neighbors are related to us in another way, one owes particular

⁷ What would the Stoics say to the point in Plato's *Symposium*, namely that passionate love can inspire virtue? Without passion for one's country and compatriots, are there going to be fewer heroic deeds? Don't we need passionate love in order to be driven to excellence (in order to be motivated to 'go beyond ourselves')? The Stoics would point to Socrates, as Plato has Alcibiades describe him in the *Symposium* (219d-221b). Socrates is not only outstanding in how he bears the physical exertion of war (marching through the snow, and so on); he performs truly heroic deeds (such as saving Alcibiades; being the last to retreat). He does all this in a sober-minded and unexcited state. This is what the Stoics may have in mind.

things to them; and so on. An agent's life is structured by manifold roles and relationships.⁸ Some reach to the other end of the world—say, the medical research that can help people in far away countries. Other relationships are narrowly local and short-lived, such as sitting next to someone on the subway. Being a fellow-citizen is one of many normatively relevant relationships.⁹ Insofar as it is, the perfect agent takes it into account in her deliberations. In some sense, this is all that rational patriotism amounts to: taking the particular relationship that one has to one's compatriots into account when deciding what to do. But we can add some detail by considering ideas about patriotism that today we might find relevant.

(1) On the Stoic account, the **borders of our state** do not aim to confine our perspective to our own state. Insofar as the perfect agent takes the concerns of everyone in the world into account, borders do not *limit* her concern for others. Rather, they help *determine* what precisely it is that the agent owes to those who live within the same borders as she does. For example, she may owe to them that she complies with the laws of this state.

(2) **Ethnicity and nationality** have no normative significance in rational patriotism.

What matters is that we happen to be part of a given country, thus having the opportunity to help shape things there, rather than somewhere else.

⁸ Epictetus says that, in trying to figure out what one should be doing, one must consider the various roles one has. In the first place, one is a human being; second, one is a citizen of the world and a part of it; third, one is someone's son and someone's sibling; fourth, one holds a specific job at a given place, is of a certain age, is or is not someone's father, and so on (*Discourses* 2.10.1-12).

⁹ Cicero's discusses a range of different criteria in *On Duties* I.16.50 f. However, while his view is inspired by the Stoics, I think that he is at this point developing his own theory.

(3) Rational patriotism is **non-competitive**. A Stoic cosmopolitan will work toward the benefit of her particular state, voting for politicians who will improve laws, and so on. This is an important domain in her life, and it is guided by thought about what's valuable for her country and her compatriots. The Stoic patriot works to advance her country. But she is at the same time glad to see others do the same in their countries. Rational patriotism is an attitude of doing one's best where one happens to be located.

(4) The Stoics would argue that, while many people live at the same place all their lives, continuing a tradition that goes back many generations, history is also full of migrations, caused by a great variety of reasons. As a consequence, many people have significant ties with **several countries**, in antiquity and today. One's parents come from China, but one grows up in the US. Aristotle is born and raised in Macedonia, but has his career in Athens, once in a while temporarily expelled from the city due to newly inflamed hostilities between his two homes. Or consider a woman in the 19th century going to Switzerland in order to study medicine, because in her native country women cannot enroll in Medical School.¹⁰ From the point of view of the Stoics, it is a fact of life that many people live between two countries. If they do, they have normatively relevant relationships with both countries. For example, when Aristotle studies in Plato's Academy, he should not exploit this institution, secretly thinking that he shall use the knowledge he gains in order to plot a Macedonian attack against the Athenians. If someone has sufficient ties with two countries in order to be of benefit to two places rather than one, so much the better.

¹⁰ In the second half of the 19th century, female students from all over the world went to Switzerland in order to be able to study medicine.

(5) The Stoics would argue that the roles and the relationships that structure our lives can **cut across** each other. In a traditional life, lived at one place from beginning to end, the small communities one belongs to are encompassed by the larger communities one belongs to. For example, one's family lives in one's city, one's university is in one's state, and so on. In this case, what one does to the benefit of a smaller community translates into benefit for the country. But the Stoics would insist that, in many other lives, these communities cut across each other, with family in far-away places, training received in foreign countries, and so on. That is, in considering the relationships one stands in with others, one must often weigh them *against* each other. And here it matters that, in rational patriotism, one's relationship to one's country can only be one of several normative facts that must be considered—it is not an all-encompassing concern, of which one's duties in smaller communities are parts.

(6) Citizenship in one's country plays out between **two relata**. That is, rational patriotism, understood as a relationship, is not exclusively the willingness of a citizen to contribute something to the benefit of her country. The country must also be willing to accept her contribution. The Stoics think that, once we recognize that the world really is our home, we get better at dealing with an experience that is deplorably widespread: that our country does not appreciate us. Cosmopolitanism creates options: in seeking to be of benefit to others, we need not confine ourselves to the place where we happen to be located. Perhaps people at one place do not appreciate us—if so, we can turn elsewhere, aiming to be of benefit at some other place. These remarks come from Seneca (*Letter*

68.2), well-seasoned by a troubled but devoted relationship to his own country.

Throughout his writings, Seneca addresses the problem that one's help is not always wanted by one's compatriots.

Discussions of ordinary patriotism tend to forget that it is a two-way relationship. The question is not only what one can do for one's country. The question is also whether one's country appreciates what one is able to give. Think of the 19th century women who had to emigrate in order to study medicine. Assuming that the wish to become a medical doctor has something to do with wanting to help people, this is a case of help offered and refused by one's compatriots. There are many ways in which particular people or groups of people, and their talents, go unappreciated by states. At many times and in many places, people are kept out of certain professions due to their gender, ethnicity, religion, and so on, or have no or limited access to political office. Stoic cosmopolitanism is surprisingly modern in recognizing these issues as problems, and responding to them. Where one cannot change things for the better in one's own country, it is good to make a contribution elsewhere. The Stoics think that a good life is essentially one where one benefits some people, and it is a secondary concern who these people are.

IV. Conclusion

Now, what if you live in the greatest country, with the most beautiful mountains, loveliest people, best constitution, high-level health-care, amazing universities, and so on? The Stoics certainly think that this is rare luck, and that one should appreciate it, doing one's share to benefit this country. But even then, it is not enough to be a patriot. One must be a

patriot and cosmopolitan at the same time, and that is, a rational patriot. Why? Because otherwise one shall not go to the trouble of finding out what the concerns of people in other parts of the world are, and one would not understand that, even though one's relationship with them is more distant, it is still a relationship with normative significance. That is, even in the best case, patriotism can only be part of one's attitude.