

STOIC ETHICS AND ITS EVALUATION BY HEGEL

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ABSTRACT

The Stoic school of philosophy stands out mostly with its ethical doctrine. The most crucial theme in it is their distinction between ethically binding values and those considered to be neutral. What corresponds to this disjunction is a distribution of areas in which one should take responsibility and those in which should not. In this paper, as well as presenting and discussing this basic theme of Stoic ethics with a critical gaze, I will problematise Hegel's evaluation of it, as it is worked out in the Phenomenology of the Spirit. Then, I will question whether Hegel's claim that Stoic ethics was unduly inward-looking is tenable given the Stoic insistence on the value of sociability.

Key Words: Stoic Ethics, Hegel, Sociability, Inwardness, Epictetus.

STOACI ETİK VE HEGEL TARAFINDAN DEĞERLENDİRİLMESİ

ÖZ

Stoacı felsefe okulu en çok etik öğretisi ile öne çıkmaktadır. Buradaki en önemli tema etik olarak bağlayıcı olan ve nötr olarak görülen değerleri ayırmış olmalarıdır. Bu ayrım karşılık gelen şey ise kişinin sorumluluk alması ve almaması gereken alanların dağıtılmış olmasıdır. Bu yazıda, Stoacı etiğin bu temel temasını eleştirel bir gözle sunmanın ve tartışmanın yanı sıra, Tinin Görüngübilimi'nde işlendiği şekilde, Hegel'in bunu değerlendirmesini sorunsallaştıracağım. Daha sonra, Hegel'in Stoacı etiğin gereğinden fazla içe dönük olduğu iddiasının, Stoacıların sosyallik değerine vurguları dikkate alındığında, tutarlı olup olmadığını sorgulayacağım.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Stoacı Etik, Hegel, Sosyallik, İçedönüklük, Epictetus.

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Introduction

From its foundation to its last figures, Stoic philosophy covers an extended period of time – almost half a millennium. Despite this longevity and a vast array of differing thoughts of each philosopher of the school, one can still point to a school of philosophy having some common features. In this paper, I will firstly be unpacking these basic tenets of Stoic philosophy (mainly in the field of ethics), and secondly presenting its critique by Hegel. Lastly, I will be addressing the question whether Hegel’s evaluation of the Stoics does justice to them satisfactorily, or whether the seemingly contentious take of Hegel is due to a fundamental rift within the school itself.

Stoic Philosophy: Historical Background

By convention, Stoic philosophy is studied under three periods: i) early Stoicism: among its most notable representatives are Zeno of Citium, the founder of the school, and Chrysippus, the great systematiser of Stoicism; ii) middle Stoicism: the Platonising stage; and iii) late Stoicism: the Roman Imperial Period, represented by Seneca, Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius.¹ This most well-known school of the Hellenistic and Roman eras would be called the ‘Zenonians’, before its name famously became the Stoics, named after their meeting place, i.e. the Painted Stoa.²

It was first the early Stoics who divided philosophy into three basic parts: logic, physics, and ethics.³ Accordingly, in the field of logic the early Stoics developed an empiricist epistemology. Their physical doctrine was materialistic, according to which a divinely-ordered universe was pervaded by an active force, which has causal power and corporeal existence. Lastly, in the most famous branch, ethics, they were heavily reliant on Socratic and Cynic philosophies, though deviating from them on some topics.⁴

¹ David Sedley, “The School, from Zeno to Arius Didymus,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, ed. Brad Inwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 7.

² Sedley, “The School,” 10.

³ Eduard Zeller, *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy*, trans. L. R. Palmer (New York: Dover Publications, 1980), 211. Zeller states that this division was in fact of the Academic origin.

⁴ Sedley, “The School,” 12-3; Zeller, *Outlines*, 212-219.

It is generally accepted that, in all these three areas, the early period was the most fecund one. Thus, when we look at the Roman period, an almost exclusive focus on the problems of ethics stands out to the detriment of logic and physics. On top of this narrowing down of the scope of the preoccupation, the vigour of the earliest times was watered down by a sort of eclecticism, most notably through the influence of Platonism, and then of early Christianity. Nevertheless, there can also be said to be in the late period a development of ethical doctrines, enrichment in the discussions, albeit on a narrower basis.⁵

Psychological and Ethical Doctrines of the Stoics

Underlying the Stoic ethics is its doctrine of moral psychology and epistemology, to which we now return to better grasp the former. According to the empiricist epistemology of the Stoics, impressions, engendered by the external world, constitute the bedrock of the process of knowing. The main difference between the impressions of rational and non-rational animals is that only the former's impressions can be associated with the *axiomata*, namely rational elements couched in the structure of propositions.⁶

In the second stage comes the evaluation of these impressions, which can be carried out only by rational human beings. It is the case for non-rational animals and pre-rational children that the moment they receive an impression they react to it immediately and without doubting the veracity of the impression under question. 'Assent' (*sunkatathesis*) is the ability that adult humans have upon receiving an impression from the outside. Therefore, without promptly reacting to the sense data they receive from the impression, they firstly question the truthfulness of it. If they deem it to be true, they can react accordingly; if not, that impression would be regarded as untrue.⁷

Approving the content of an impression means that one has a belief about it. This belief can be called either opinion (*doxa*) or knowledge. A *doxa* can be false, true, or cataleptic; knowledge, on the other hand, can be found

⁵ Christopher Gill, "The School in the Roman Imperial Period," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, ed. Brad Inwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 33.

⁶ Tad Brennan, "Stoic Moral Psychology," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, ed. Brad Inwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 260.

⁷ Brennan, "Stoic Moral Psychology," 262.

only in the case of a Stoic sage, and results from an assent to cataleptic impressions.⁸

The other facet of our discussion centres on the Stoic values. Only virtues (*aretai*) are good, and can bring happiness (*eudaimonia*); on the other hand, only vices (*kakia*) are bad, and bring about unhappiness (*kakodaimonia*). The values standing in between are termed indifferents (*adiaphora*), the lack of which are in no way an impediment to happiness. The Stoics further divided the indifferent elements into two classes: preferred (*proegmena*) indifferents, which are conditionally choiceworthy (*axia*), and dispreferred (apoproegmena) indifferents, which are conditionally unchoiceworthy (*apaxia*).⁹ The indifferents have only selective value (*axiaeklektike*) in that if one has it in the present, the reaction to it should be entirely indifferent. However, if it is missing at the moment, pursuing an indifferent such as health could have a planning value for the future. One of the most vital points of the Stoics here is that when it comes to indifferent things such as wealth, honour, and comfort, most of us generally mistake them for virtues.¹⁰

The fundamental notion of the Stoic psychology is the impulse (*horme*), which characterises the motion of the soul towards an action, and hence contains an element of belief. It is to be noted that for the Stoics an impulse is the necessary and sufficient prerequisite for action.¹¹ In other words, in order for impulses to engender action, nothing else is needed, since they are inherently practical and include evaluative content.¹²

The most discussed class of impulses are called passions (*pathe*). A false attribution of goodness or badness to what is in fact an indifferent results in passion, which has to the Stoics four main types: desire (the fallacious ascription of goodness to a future state), fear (the fallacious ascription of badness to a future state), pleasure (the fallacious ascription of goodness to a present state), and pain (the fallacious ascription of badness to a present state). All other *pathe* are regarded as belonging to one of these four categories.¹³

⁸ Brennan, “Stoic Moral Psychology,” 263.

⁹ William O. Stephens, *Stoic Ethics: Epictetus and Happiness as Freedom*. (London and New York: Continuum, 2007), 1-2.

¹⁰ Brennan, “Stoic Moral Psychology,” 263-4.

¹¹ Brennan, “Stoic Moral Psychology,” 265-6.

¹² Brennan, “Stoic Moral Psychology,” 280.

¹³ Brennan, “Stoic Moral Psychology,” 269-70.

Contrary to the (non-rational) non-sages, who are in possession of passions, for the Stoics, the (rational) sage has only good emotions (*eupatheiai*). They result from assigning the values of goodness or badness only to virtues and vices, respectively. Good emotions have three main types: joy (*chara*), the impulse towards a virtue one has in the present, instead of pleasure; volition (*boulesis*), the impulse towards a future virtue, instead of desire; and caution (*eulabeia*), the impulse towards a future vice, instead of fear. Since the Stoic sage is devoid of any painful state within itself, there is no equivalent of pain in the list of good emotions.¹⁴

As E. Zeller states, given that both rational and irrational impulses reside in us, the Stoic virtue essentially consists in not succumbing to the irrational ones, and also clinging to the rational ones. To this end of *apathia* (i.e. being immune from corrosive impulses), not the moderate path of taming emotions, but a total eradication of them is to be aimed at.¹⁵

Stoic Morality

According to the earlier Stoics, ontology and ethics intermingle, so that the latter is said to be interested only in what exists. Only those existing things can be classified as good (e.g. wisdom, moderation, justice, courage, etc.), bad (e.g. intemperance, injustice, cowardice, etc.), or indifferent (e.g. life and death, wealth and poverty, health and sickness, etc.). What is noteworthy here is that by couching these ethical values in ontological terms, the Stoics construe them as physical, namely the qualities of the concrete bodies of the earthly life.¹⁶

The most well-known assertion of the Stoic ethics is that for human beings the ultimate goal in life is ‘living consistently (*homologoumenos*)’. What is specifically meant by this phrase is still a topic of scholarly debate. Yet, one could say that living *homologoumenos* is nothing other than living in accordance with reason. That is, the goal of life must be having a rational attitude towards life, embodied in human traits such as wisdom, harmony, and resourcefulness. In another account given by Diogenes Laertius, Zeno is reported to have maintained, by qualifying the phrase above, that the goal is ‘living consistently with nature’. Despite the fact that the compatibility of

¹⁴ Brennan, “Stoic Moral Psychology,” 270-1.

¹⁵ Zeller, *Outlines*, 220.

¹⁶ Malcolm Schofield, “Stoic Ethics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, ed. Brad Inwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 239-40.

these two views is questioned, there is no problem in stating that the two are complementary. In other words, one could claim that for the Stoic one can live consistently (only) on the condition that one lives in accordance with nature.¹⁷

The specification of the exact meaning of nature in this formula is in order. Taken at face value, Zeno’s conception of nature might simply mean human nature, given that in talking about ethics human behaviour is to be under scrutiny. However, restricting the concept of nature only to this sense would be incorrect. The prescription to live according to nature refers to the obligation that one is to live by paying heed to life as a whole, or nature in general.¹⁸

For the early Stoics, living in accordance with nature was inseparably connected with the requirement that one must know the workings of nature. That is one of the reasons why, contrary to the Roman Stoics, the earlier ones were devoted to the study of physics and epistemology in addition to ethics.¹⁹ This interdependence of the three fields later fell into oblivion, a phenomenon which may be attributable to the ‘too much practical’ lives of the Roman authors.

Another important school of the Hellenistic Age was the Epicureans. Although the Stoics and the Epicureans were not at variance with each other on many points in ethics, as to the first impulse of living beings, they were in disagreement. For the Epicureans, our first and deep-seated impulse was pleasure, whilst for the Stoics this was self-preservation. The latter regarded pleasure as a mere by-product, which cannot be the bedrock of ethics. Seneca gives the example of a baby, who is at pains to walk on its two feet, despite the concomitant pain of trying to do so.²⁰ In brief, the Stoics insisted that only those things which contribute to one’s self-preservation (*oikeosis*) and happiness (*eudaimonia*) can have a positive value for us.²¹

After presenting the outlines of Stoic ethics, we can now proceed to Hegel’s evaluation of it, which he carries out in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.²² Related to this discussion, we will also have a look at Epictetus’ ethical thought in general to grasp Hegel’s point.

¹⁷ Schofield, “Stoic Ethics,” 241-2.

¹⁸ Schofield, “Stoic Ethics,” 244.

¹⁹ Zeller, *Outlines*, 219.

²⁰ Schofield, “Stoic Ethics,” 246-7.

²¹ Zeller, *Outlines*, 219.

²² G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Hegel's Critique of the Stoics: Inwardness without Concrete Life

Before delving into the main discussion, we should look at the context of Hegel's discussion in the *Phenomenology*. The *Phenomenology of Spirit* is an investigation of the development of consciousness from its most simple form to the complete one,²³ which is treated under the headings, 'consciousness,' 'self-consciousness,' 'reason,' and 'spirit,' respectively. Hegel's discussion of Stoicism is located in the chapter dealing with self-consciousness.²⁴

The first leg of the journey of consciousness in the form of self-consciousness deals with the master and slave relationship. According to Hegel's narrative, after the dissolution of the master-slave relation, the slave continues its developmental journey on the way to 'Absolute Knowing'. As Hegel's speculative 'method' claims, what is implicitly present within the consciousness of the slave must have become explicit within the Stoic consciousness. Accordingly, through its work, namely moulding things external to itself by means of his consciousness, the slave implicitly sees himself in these objects. At the same time, it continues to regard objects as other than itself. According to Hegel, in the new form of consciousness, called Stoicism, this implicit awareness turns out to be an explicit one. In other words, the new shape called 'thought' is openly aware of the fact that its own rational structures are present within the objects. In fine, as S. Houlgate states, "whereas the slave relates to *another object* in which it finds itself embodied, thought relates principally to *itself* and its *own* concepts in the objects it finds before it."²⁵

It is thanks to the consciousness of the slave that the Stoic consciousness becomes aware of the importance of thought in its dealings with the external world. Without the labour of the slave, such a realisation would not have been possible.²⁶ From this one could gather that what Hegel means here is a historical transition, suggestive of the late Roman era in which the slaves of the empire become firstly Stoics and then Christians (considering the affinity of the latter with the former). All such connotations

²³ For the general aim of the work under question, cf. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, Preface.

²⁴ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 121-2.

²⁵ Stephen Houlgate, *An Introduction to Hegel: Freedom, Truth and History* (New Jersey: Blackwell, 2005), 71.

²⁶ Robert Stern, *Hegel and the Phenomenology of Spirit* (London: Routledge, 2002), 88.

withstanding, the transition Hegel describes is completely logical, that is, according to the immanent, dialectical development of consciousness.²⁷

What we have seen above is the upside of Stoicism in relation to the slavish consciousness. The downside of it is its excessive reliance on thinking. Hegel's characterisation of Stoicism is as follows: “[In Stoicism] consciousness is a being that *thinks*, and that consciousness holds something to be essentially important, or true and good only in so far as it *thinks* it to be such.”²⁸ In the Preface, the task of the *Phenomenology* is presented as comprehending the truth both as substance and subject, that is, overcoming the separation between the object and the subject.²⁹ Accordingly, Stoicism with its reliance on thinking tips the balance in favour of the latter, and disregards the significance of the former. That is why Hegel asserts that Stoicism is only a partial truth “lacking the fullness of life”, and not engaged with “the living reality of freedom itself.”³⁰ This partiality lies in its one-sided recognition of the subject-object identity, since it remains too much embedded within its inward life.³¹

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To better grasp this criticism of Hegel, it must be clear which period of Stoicism he had in mind. Even though in his discussion Hegel seems to talk about the Stoics in general, what he in fact problematises is the Roman Stoics. There are two places in the text that support this view. Firstly, when he says “whether on the throne or in chains [...] [consciousness's] aim is to be free,” he most probably means Marcus Aurelius (a Roman Emperor), and Epictetus (a liberated slave), respectively.³² Hence, one could state that Hegel's criticism of the Stoics is specifically levelled against the late Stoics, such as Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius.³³

The second textual evidence is Hegel's conviction that “Stoicism could only appear on the scene in a time of universal fear and bondage, but also a time of universal culture.”³⁴ Accordingly, the undue dedication to thinking and inward life to the detriment of concrete life must have been due to the excessive dominion of the Roman State. Found themselves within the oppressive social life of the empire, the likes of Epictetus and Seneca must

²⁷Houlgate, *Introduction to Hegel*, 71; Stern, *Hegel and the Phenomenology*, 85-6.

²⁸Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 121.

²⁹Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 10.

³⁰Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 122.

³¹Houlgate, *Introduction to Hegel*, 72.

³²Stern, *Hegel and the Phenomenology*, 85.

³³Robert C. Solomon, *In the Spirit of Hegel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 459.

³⁴Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 121.

have found solace in immersing themselves to the solitary activity of thinking.³⁵ Although, as stated earlier, Hegel's project is not a historiography of the schools of thought, this reference to the historical context of Stoicism rings true.

Apprehending Hegel's sketchy³⁶ appraisal of the Stoics becomes possible when we see the exact reference. Hegel's remark that the Stoics were too much reliant on the inward life does not do justice to the earlier representatives of the school, who saw the study of nature as an integral part of their philosophy, as discussed above. However, a brief look at the teachings of Epictetus, who was one of the most important figures of the late period, could show us that Hegel's criticism turns out to be tenable and insightful when directed against the Roman Stoics.

Epictetus of Hierapolis (c. A.D. 50-138) was a student of another Stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus, and had a thorough knowledge of the early Stoicism. Nevertheless, his focus was on ethics, and he held that our happiness depends on "our will, the use of our ideas" alone.³⁷ On that score, his ethical doctrine is regarded as a precursor to the modern notion of will.³⁸ M. Foucault states that the theme of the care of the self (the *epimeleia heautou*; the *cura sui*) constitutes the bulk of Epictetus' ethical thought.³⁹ This is attested by the fact that, by contrast to Seneca, and M. Aurelius, who were in many regards not up to what they taught, Epictetus was insistent on realising his doctrine in concrete life.

Epictetus' positing virtue as the goal of life, and as the necessary and sufficient condition of happiness was a Socratic theme that was also shared by the Cynics. Such a position stipulates that a certain state of the soul is the only and necessary route to *eudaimonia*. The rival camp was the Aristotelian

³⁵ Franco Chiereghin, "Freedom and Thought: Stoicism, Skepticism, and Unhappy Consciousness," in *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Kenneth R. Westphal (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 59-60.

³⁶ As Solomon detects, Hegel seems not to have been well informed as regards the Stoic philosophy. He seems to have relied on Sextus Empiricus' reading of the Stoics, whose account was not always fair to them (Solomon, *In the Spirit of Hegel*, 459). Another instance of this situation is that, in his mature work, the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel makes merely one direct reference to Stoic thought, which has been found controversial for the scholars. For the problematic remark and its explanation, see G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 122, 418.

³⁷ Zeller, *Outlines*, 270.

³⁸ Gill, "The School in the Roman Period," 47.

³⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: Volume 3 of The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 47.

stance that considered virtue as well as external goods (i.e. the things that the Stoics termed the indifferents) necessary for a happy life.⁴⁰

The bedrock of the ethical thought of Epictetus is that whereas some things are up to us, some things are not up to us. The first category includes impulse (*horme*), the use of impressions, and aversion (*ekklisis*) – all of them are carried out by means of one’s reason (*logos*). Among the things that are not up to us are our possessions, children, body, reputation, and so forth. He does not maintain that over the latter we have no control, but rather, that since they are not always under our control, one cannot rely on them to attain a virtuous and happy life.⁴¹

Epictetus’s conception of *prohairesis*, the volition or will, which sifts through impressions to see whether they are rational or not, can be equated with one’s self.⁴² Accordingly, only *prohairesis* values are unconditionally good.⁴³ This process of elimination is called *diakrisis*, which could manifest one’s true power and hence freedom.⁴⁴

When one considers this division between what is up to us and not up to us introduced by Epictetus, one could understand Hegel’s remark that the Stoics were detached from the concrete life, namely they were unduly inward-oriented. Such a conception of freedom, which sees all worldly affairs as unnecessary to virtue, could be best described as a negative freedom. According to this conception, genuine freedom lies in escaping the vicissitudes of life and taking shelter in the inward life of abstract thought. Furthermore, if the goal of ethics is, as Epictetus firmly believes, to apply the doctrine, fleeing the external world would prove the teaching fruitless and abortive. In other words, for Hegel, the gravest mistake in Epictetus’s absolute disjunction lies in its denial of most of the aspects of life just because they cannot be (completely) controlled.⁴⁵

Instead of such an Epicurean stance, from a Hegelian perspective, one must strike a harmonious and productive balance between one’s self and the world. The aversion to making concrete what is simply an abstract thought neglects to recognise “the need to reconcile ourselves with the world, to limit ourselves and to commit ourselves to some specific situation in life.”⁴⁶ In

⁴⁰ William O. Stephens, *Stoic Ethics*, 1.

⁴¹ William O. Stephens, *Stoic Ethics*, 7-8.

⁴² William O. Stephens, *Stoic Ethics*, 16-25.

⁴³ William O. Stephens, *Stoic Ethics*, 8.

⁴⁴ Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 64.

⁴⁵ Solomon, *In the Spirit of Hegel*, 460-1.

⁴⁶ Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 200.

other words, from a Hegelian perspective, the goal to be achieved is a midway path between an inward-looking way of life and an excessively outward-oriented one.

A Critical Question About Hegel’s Critique

Despite Epictetus’ dismissal of the worldly affairs of life as impediment to happiness and virtue, as well as Hegel’s insightful criticism of it, there is one important aspect of the Stoic ethics that does not fit this picture. Believing the universe to be governed by reason, and all human beings as participants of this rational order, the Stoic sage regards itself to be deeply bound up with the rest of the world. From such a standpoint, it was easy for the Stoics to conclude that everyone has duties towards their fellow human beings. As Zeller points out, for the Stoics “[t]he communal instinct is...implanted in human nature, which demands the two qualities, justice and love of one’s fellow-men which are the fundamental conditions of a community.”⁴⁷

Secondly, Epictetus’ life itself attests to this high regard for sociability. He was the head of a school, whose aim was to instruct his students as regards the rules of the care of the self, the exercise of self-mastery.⁴⁸ It is clear to infer from this fact that if he were to preach complete isolation from social life, he would not have led such a life of a spiritual teacher. Moreover, it could be argued that Epictetus’ teaching centred on the question how to “form oneself as an ethical subject in the entire sphere of social, political, and civic activities.”⁴⁹ Another example is that, contrary to the Epicureans and the Cynics, the Stoics approved of marriage, since, they reasoned, matrimonial bond was natural.⁵⁰ Last but not least is their espousal of cosmopolitanism, according to which one is connected with all other human beings. The importance of this connection is so vital as to surpass one’s bond even with one’s nation.⁵¹

Given this emphasis on the irreducible role of sociability on the part of the Stoics, Hegel’s criticism – that they embraced isolation, flight from the concrete life with its sufferings and troubles – might seem wide of the mark. Yet, the fault seems not to lie with Hegel, whose assertions are based on the

⁴⁷ Zeller, *Outlines*, 224.

⁴⁸ Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 52.

⁴⁹ Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 94.

⁵⁰ Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 154-5.

⁵¹ Zeller, *Outlines*, 224.

disjunction between the inner and external life of human beings, posited by Epictetus himself. Rather, once we recognise the existence of two contradictory views at the heart of the late Stoics, it could be seen that they are at a loss to answer the question whether one’s relation with the external life is intrinsic to ethical problems or not. On the one hand, one’s worldly affairs are deemed to be redundant and even adverseto virtue, since they are not under our control; on the other, this uncontrollable sphere of outer life is appreciated so much that sociability is seen as an inherent feature of all of us. To my mind, Hegel’s critical evaluation of the Roman Stoics was consistent and tenable to the extent that they advocated the former; inasmuch as they sided with the latter, Hegel and the Stoics seem to have much in common.

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