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Instituto de Estudios Clásicos “Lucio Anneo Séneca”

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Axiological Confusion and Its Causes

edited by

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Axiological Confusion and Its Causes. Introduction

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Reading our daily news, many of us may experience a sense of bafflement. Bafflement that patent lies can become a matter of serious debate and fervent protestations; that so many of us are willing to forsake their health and sanity as followers of zany conspiracy theories. One might even wonder at the miraculous inertia of humankind as a whole in view of global danger and destruction. What is our problem?

Similar questions occupied the two great schools of Hellenistic ‘dogmatic’ philosophy, the Stoics and the Epicureans. Rejecting a psychological dualism according to which humans are driven off course by their innate irrationality, they had to explain why beings endowed with rationality could turn out so unable to look after themselves. Both Epicureans and Stoics regarded all relevant knowledge as evident by nature and as accessible to everyone. They posit innate or naturally acquired and uniform true preconceptions and a cognitive mechanism by which occurrent facts can be known with evident certainty, in particular facts concerning the well-being of a human agent. Why, then, would people not take what was best for them and make so many bad choices? Although gifted with such unerring sensors for what is good and what not, almost all humans develop into beings incapable of discerning apparent from actual values reliably. Whence this axiological confusion?

The papers in this volume present answers to this conundrum from a range of perspectives that together combine an up-to-date overview of the *status quaestionis* with new proposals concerning the range of our sources, their interpretation - both literary and philosophical - and the historical contexts of the debate.

The first three papers unfold Epicurean accounts. DAVID KONSTAN discusses the cognitive processes that lead human reason to produce errors of which other animals are incapable. Adducing a new edition of fragments from Epicurus’ *Peri phuseôs* and recent interpretations of Aristotle’s conception of *phantasia* as both always based on sense perception and as motivating through pleasure, he suggests a new interpretation of the role of *phantasia* and the ‘projection of *phantasia*’ (*phantastikê epibolê*).

Contrary to the current consensus of scholars, he argues that according to Epicurus, too, *phantasiai* in the mind do not require direct new input but can also be «received from memory (or stored up images)». The process of *epibolē*, then, is not a directing of attentional focus but literally a projection of the *phantasia* the mind has received from its own memory back to the sensory organ for testing it against the patterns (*tupoi*) stored there from prior perceptions.

After this appraisal of Epicurean epistemology, LUCIANA REPICI closes in on the key question of this volume, why people instructed with such reliable criteria guiding them to perfect happiness still would choose to be dissatisfied and insecure. In a manner well suited to Epicurean atomistic, that is, mechanistic physics, she frames the question as a problem of variation, why - given the same circumstances - one individual would prefer self-harm and another would not. She identifies and discusses two basic approaches: (i) accounting for voluntary choice by positing free volition and spontaneous atomic motion and (ii) identifying involuntary drivers of bad choice, such as bodily condition or emotional tension. Repici stresses the intensity of the debate both within and outside the schools and the importance of genres of communication, not least of all in form of maxims. The paper ends with a synopsis, «quasi una sorta di decalogo» (20), of solutions, which illustrates the close connection between theoretical analysis and practical advice, and thus the cognitive sophistication of Epicurean therapy.

JULIE GIOVACCHINI widens the scope to the political sphere. She provides a close reading of Hermarchus' fragmentary account of the formation of communities, which elucidates the brief remarks of his friend and teacher Epicurus on the topic available to us in the *Maxims*. The paper thus enhances our understanding of the function Epicureans saw for education and legislation as a remedy to axiological confusion on the social scale. While they hoped to guide and heal everyone with their insights, they also thought that not everyone was equally capable to receive the message. Accordingly, Giovacchini shows, there is a role for the legislator, different from that of an educator, to support those unable to understand what justice is and how it furthers their own interests. Laws serve to complement what is lacking in citizen's mental capacities, if need be, by force and deterrence.

With the rest of the contributions we follow the debate in and around the Stoic school from its beginnings to second-century Imperial Rome. The first of these is RENÉ BROUWER's magisterial overview of the Early Stoics' accounts of *diastrophē*, a theory of 'double perversion', which is that school's ontogenetic explanation for axiological confusion. At the same time, Brouwer contextualizes this theory within the contemporary debates about human nature and, most notably, the controversy between Stoics and Epicureans concerning the value of pleasure. It was against

Epicurean hedonism, Brouwer argues, that Stoics posited «persuasiveness of things» as one of the causes disturbing a healthy human development.

The next two contributions take us to the Roman era. CHRISTELLE VEILLARD, an expert on Middle Stoics, draws on insights from her recent edition of the fragments of Hecato (who lived around 100 BCE) to assess this philosopher's contribution to Cicero's *De officiis* and point out evidence for a new role for love, both of self and of other, and thus emotionality in Hecato's thought. A pioneer of casuistry, he seems to have focused on the question of how abstract principles can be lived in everyday contexts without crushing practical parameters under the weight of an absolute value, virtue. His solution, Veillard suggests, is mutual beneficence, loving cooperation to spread the good throughout the world.

Continuing his work on the sources for Posidonius' thought on the origin of human civilization, GIOVANNI ZAGO re-examines, emends and enriches our frustratingly short array of sources for Posidonius' views on *diastrophē*, by expertly connecting this ontogenetic question (treated in the field of ethics and theory of the emotions) with the philosopher's account of human phylogensis and history. Zago claims that Posidonius explained the decline of humankind from an original Golden Age under the leadership of sages with the *diastrophē* of those sages' successors and the communities they ruled. Conversely, Zago argues, Posidonius seems to have thought it possible that Golden Ages could occur any time and anywhere, provided there is a leader of virtue in the full sense and a population at least capable to realize the goodness of their leader and thus willing to follow him. Envisaging such changes in both directions requires not only a theory of moral corruption but also a conviction that moral progress is real and, with it, virtue too, and this is exactly what Posidonius believed, according to Zago's reinterpretation of the relevant fragments and a hitherto overlooked testimony in Seneca's *Epistulae morales*.

While Seneca appeared as an important source for Posidonius in Zago's paper, FRANCESCA ROMANA BERNO reads Seneca's *Epistula moralis* 50 as a testimony for the Roman philosopher's views in their own right. In a subtle intra- and inter-textual exploration, she greatly enriches our understanding of the example of Harpaste, a mentally disabled slave of Seneca's who is unable to recognize her own blindness, as an allegory for every person's lack of self-knowledge. Like Posidonius, Seneca believed in moral progress and repeatedly wonders why such progress appears to be so difficult. Berno's reading and commentary on this letter underscores one of the causes he identified: the inability to acknowledge one's own limits. The fool Harpaste, it turns out, is wiser than the highly educated men making fun of her. She is at least willing to ask for help.

With the last two papers we move on from the first to the second century CE, and to perspectives on Stoicism and philosophy from outside the school. MARCELO D. BOERI revisits the critique the famous physician Galen levelled against Stoic accounts of human development and thus also the causes of *diastrophē*. Embracing psychological dualism and a Platonist tripartite model of the soul, Galen rejected the idea that children are born fundamentally good, i.e. by nature disposed positively toward what is good directly from birth. Boeri argues that Galen, too, acknowledges some such fundamental goodness when he admits that with the growth of rationality children acquire a concept and an attraction toward what is good. In order to make his argument, Boeri elucidates the importance of the Stoic theory of *oikeiōsis* («familiarization») for explaining both axiological confusion and the possibility of having the right values in the first place. In agreement with recent discussions of how exactly to understand the development of reason and concept formation, Boeri provides evidence for a familiarization with the good in two stages, a pre-rational stage and a later stage of rational concept building. It is at the latter stage that moral reasoning and, together with it, error can occur.

The final paper, by CATALINA BALMACEDA, illustrates how the philosophical discourse on axiological confusion may be reflected in the analysis of human motivations by a historian like Tacitus. In the account of the *Historiae* she identifies a vicious circle of fear breeding distrust and disloyalty, which again exacerbate fear and distrust in both collectives and individuals, with the result that everyone, from emperor to soldiers, became unable to recognize their own good. It is against this backdrop of all-pervasive disorientation, Balmaceda argues, that Tacitus highlights a few examples of unwavering moral judgment, whose consistency could serve as models for overcoming the self-defeating tendencies that did not only harm morally confused individuals themselves but also Rome as a whole.

With this collection of papers, we hope to have provided valuable impulses for thinking about issues of more than antiquarian concern. To support this discussion and to complement the mosaic of single contributions, there is a bibliography of essential readings at the end of this volume compiled from recommendations by all authors.

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