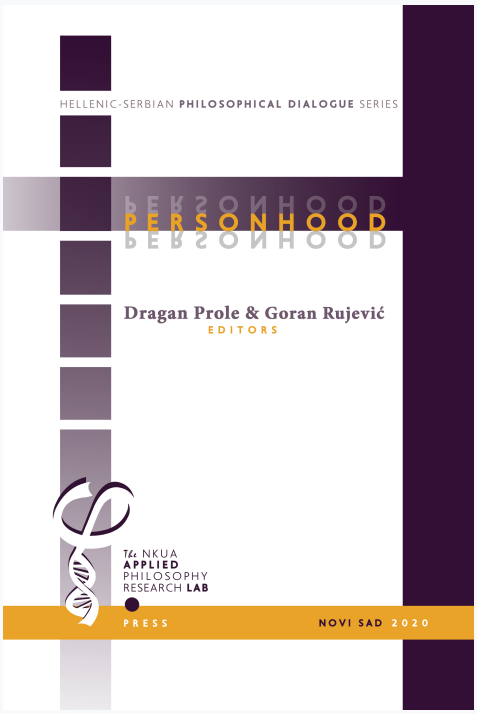
NKUA Applied Philosophy Research Lab Press



Chapter

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Personhood

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doi: 10.12681/aprlp.49.923

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Self, Personality and Consciousness: Could Hellenistic Philosophical Approaches Have a Place in Modern Neuroscientific Research?

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Abstract: The philosophers of the Hellenistic period devoted more attention to the foundations of knowledge than to knowledge itself, shifting the philosophical concern to the study of the individual and bringing the notion of the 'self' and the interrelated concepts of personality and consciousness under the spotlight. Both Epicurean and Stoic philosophers established a materially oriented system; animus and hegemonikon, correspondingly representing the seats of consciousness for the two schools, are the faculties that govern the human actions by ascribing personalised mental representation to the stimuli received by the sense organs. Today, neurosciences investigate the material substrate of consciousness and study its manifestations in the brain activities. Human consciousness, as approached by the Hellenistic philosophical theories seems relevant within the modern inquiries of what is the 'self,' of how the individual becomes aware of his sensory world or of the relation between emotion and intellect.
Keywords: Stoics; Epicureans; psyche; consciousness; self; mind; neural; brain.

Consciousness has been at the centre of interest throughout the evolution of philosophy, epitomized today in what is widely known as "the mystery of the brain." Consciousness is a complex function that allows a person to mentally be aware of the situation in which

doi: https://doi.org/10.12681/aprlp.49.923

he is at a certain point of time with the help of knowledge of his personality as well as to take hold of an idea of his future status.

Etymologically and conceptually there is a connection between the notions of consciousness and conscience. The Latin origin of the terms is 'conscientia,' whose etymology has been complex but it seems to be a translation of the Greek term 'syneidesis' which means the knowledge that one shares with oneself.[1] Today, the two terms are used in a different meaning; conscience "denotes the activity or the ever-vigilant readiness of a faculty of internal moral feeling or judgment," while consciousness "denotes the content as well as the activity of an ongoing and at bottom involuntary psychological reflection encompassing all of our actual experience."[2]

Being at the interplay between mental content and physical substrates, consciousness is at the core of what has been known as the Mind-Body problem. It is philosophically approached from one of the two standpoints; on the one hand, mind can be considered a bodily construct, conceived in terms of physiology and, on the other hand, mind is a subjective, "introspectable" element.

The distinctive importance of the Hellenistic philosophies in the frame of the present-day interdisciplinary study of the mind and its processes lies in the fact that, historically, it is the period when the study of consciousness and mindfulness, of introspection, of awareness of the functions of the self, actually commenced. This shift in the concern of philosophers from knowledge itself to the possibility of knowledge and the means by which truth may be discovered, has been characterized as an epistemological turn.[3]

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[1] Udo Thiel, *The Early Modern Subject: Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 8.

[2] Michel Weber, and Anderson Weekes, *Process Approaches to Consciousness in Psychology, Neuroscience, and Philosophy of Mind* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2009), 76.

[3] Jacques Brunschwig, "Introduction: The Beginnings of Hellenistic Epis-

The Stoic's view on the transcendence of cosmos within a human is profound. While, at first, they had adopted the Cynics' indifference against the goods of the external world, in fact the Sage's self-sufficiency (*αυτάρκεια*) becoming an indelible feature of their ethical doctrine, they quickly managed to moderate the Cynics' radical naturalism and to underscore the unity and self-efficiency (*αυτοτέλεια*) of the individual soul. Personality becomes a deterministic principle.

As Brad Inwood has written, "there was never a monolithic ideal of life for the Stoics."[4] This can also be understood by the set of moral rules, the so-called 'kathekonta,' which serve as a guideline – for those who are not yet wise – to behave appropriately and righteously under some typical circumstances. The caveat, however, is that these rules cannot be uniformly applied to any occasion. The difference of the ideal Sage is that the virtuous actions are not the result of following inflexible rules but are optimised by the particularities of the unique personality of the agent in action.

Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* are written in a dialogic discourse, for private use as deliberations of a man with himself. The individual is called to reflect by himself in order to be free from perturbations. Similarly, Lucretius employs meditative elements in his work *De rerum natura*. The meditative exercises should result in "an attitude of mind."[5]

The virtuous character acquires a protagonistic role in moral decision-making processes, reflecting the increased interest in the individual. Richard Sorabji discusses the role of identity or

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temology," in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, eds. Keimpe Algra, Jonathan Barnes, Jaap Mansfeld, and Malcolm Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 229.

[4] Brad Inwood, "Rules and Reasoning in Stoic Ethics," in *Topics in Stoic Philosophy*, ed. Katerina Ierodiakonou, 95-127 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 126.

[5] Michael Erler, "Physics and Therapy. Meditative elements in Lucretius' *De rerum natura*." https://www.dwc.knaw.nl/DL/publications/PU00010720.pdf.

persona in stoic ethics.[6] Moral decisions should be based not only on – common to us all – human rationality, but also on the unique persona of the individual who is to make the decision. Each and every individual has formed a persona on the basis of the different nature compared to others. This difference is that which creates variability in moral decisions, explaining why a decision might be right for one but not for others, even under the same circumstances. Apart from the example of Cato's suicide, which, according to Cicero, is a rightful decision only in the case of Cato's persona, Sorabji makes reference to Epictetus, who also acknowledges the need of conforming decisions to the nature of the particular agents who carry them.

The Stoics sought after a physical explanation of the processes of sensing information, of transmitting it to a central ruling faculty and of the subsequent processing and, thus, experiencing. 'Hegemonikon' is the single entity that explains the governing of all physical faculties. The hegemonikon is the seat of reason, logos, i.e. God, the universe's controlling 'pneuma.' With the hegemonikon, the stoics create a model of consciousness in which a person can deliberate with his inner being.[7] For Epicureans, the seat of consciousness is the animus. Both hegemonikon and animus capture the notion of a monistic self that actively engages as a whole with all living experience and ascribes personalized mental representation to each experienced object giving the sense of privateness and introspection.

Hegemonikon is not just the faculty that transforms the stimuli of the different organs into sense-perceptions, but it also transforms emotions into volitionary manifestations. Hence, the true essence of this 'syn-eidenai' – whose work is to uniformly perceive and configure - is, per se, intelligence (nous).

The stoic Sage, even if not managing to avoid the emotional irritations originating from the outside world, will resist by

[6] Richard Sorabji, *Self. Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life and Death* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 157-162.

[7] Vivienne Brown, "The Dialogic Experience of Conscience: Adam Smith and the Voices of Stoicism," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 26, no. 2 (1992): 238.

means of reason and will not allow emotions to be converted into passions. The transcendence of the world is actually the transcendence of one's own impulses. Passions are false judgments and not a consequence of irrational origin. Virtue is accomplished by the development of personal reason and not by some kind of mastering of non-rational parts of the soul.

Both Epicurean and Stoic philosophers argued in favour of certain criteria of truth against which all opinions should be examined. For the Epicureans, the criteria of truth are sense-perceptions, passions (pathe), preconceptions (prolepseis) and the 'presentational (phantastikai) applications of the mind;'[8] for the Stoics, the criterion is the 'cognitive impression' (kataleptiki phantasia). But it is sensations (aistheseis) from which the path of information from the outside world originates. The stoic 'phantasia,' operating as a representational function, is the initiation mechanism of the cognitive functions.

The stoic phantasia is a state of consciousness, contrary to the raw data coming from the senses before reaching the hegemonikon. The transferring of raw data from the sense-organs to the ruling faculty is not something for which a person is aware of; however, the outcome of the interaction between the psyche and the physical objects, which according to the stoic physics, leaves a "stamping" or creates an alteration to the soul, is a state of consciousness. Again, for Epicureans, the phantasia (representation or impression) is any event of the senses which is inscribed in consciousness. It is created upon the reception of a sensory stimulus. Phantasia establishes a direct connection between the sensory organs and the objects of reality and is the mechanism by which perception and cognition are explained. However, phantasia cannot be thought of independently of the intellect (the reason), as it is inactive and not capable of constructing concepts. Logic intervenes, through the thin and kinetic atoms and aligns the irrational phantasia with the stored experience of memory, giving it meaning.

Underlying the Stoics' theory of passions or emotions is the conscious control that is involved in the process of evaluating

[8] Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae philosophorum*, X 31

and assessing by the hegemonikon. The soul's essence is manifested through the rational competence/capability to deny assent to impulses and this is an idiosyncratic rivalry admitted by the Stoics to exist in the psychic life. The impulses of the senses are excluded by the soul which is part of the cosmic Logos.

Keeping things at a distance and using our assent, we ensure a robust independence of our personality; this doesn't mean that a person can avoid the joy or pain that destiny reserves for him, but it means that he becomes independent of the trajectory of things keeping his self-sufficiency proudly intact.

Rationality, of course, plays the principal role as it makes sure that the individual character will practice virtue. Under this perspective, the one and only good is virtue and the one and only bad is the dominance of passions over rationality. All other things are, from an ethical point of view, indifferents. At this point, however, Stoics introduce a further evaluation of goods, albeit subordinate to the goodness of virtue. This secondary distinction is between preferred and dispreferred indifferents.

The mechanism of shaping the individual course of reason and consciousness by each human being is described by the theory of *oikeiosis*. Oikeiosis is a predominant concept in the Stoic philosophy, indispensable and unifying element of their moral psychology and ethics. It can be seen as an evolution of the Classical period's philosophical injunction "gnothi seauton" ("know thyself"), a practice calling for self-consciousness. For the Stoics, the concept of self-consciousness goes beyond the knowing of oneself to becoming aware of and relating to one's environment.[9]

It is a term enclosing multiple meanings making it rather difficult to translate. Its etymological root is the work *oikos*, meaning "house," including the persons who belong to the household; its cognate adjective is *oikeios*, referring to those who are members of one's household or to the objects that

[9] Ali Kashani, *Radical Generosity. Resisting Xenophobia, Considering Cosmopolitanism* (London: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2019), 13.

one possesses. Stoics often used the middle verb *oikeiousthai* to suggest making something familiar and making something one's own, with emphasis on the claim rather than the possession itself. Blundell has described oikeiosis as "the process by which we recognize our natural affinity first to ourselves and subsequently to various features of our environment, which we pursue as being oikeios or 'belonging to us."[10] A list of English translations include 'appropriation,' 'familiarization,' 'affinity,' 'well-disposedness towards,' 'attachment,' 'propensity.' Appropriation has been the one mostly used, although it does not capture the concept of personal affinity.[11]

Oikeiosis is not a static psychological state but entails a natural aspect of human evolution, an unending process of change. The starting point is the innate impulse of all animals, including humans, for self-preservation; the relationship here is the one between an animal and itself, specifically its constitution (systasis).[12] Gradually, through human maturation, we progress to a 'rational mode of existence,' which means that we move from valuing natural advantages to valuing reason in its own right and, thus, acting according to it. Sociability develops from self-affiliation, with one becoming aware that all human beings are members of the same human community. The personal and social aspects of oikeiosis go hand in hand, promoting the idea of a world citizen (cosmou politis).[13]

Hierocles visualizes the various relationships with self and others as a series of concentric circles around one's own intelligence, *dianoia*. Body and the associated material advantages form the innermost circle, practically in contact with the centre.

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[10] Mary Whitlock Blundell, "Parental nature and Stoic *Οἰκείωσις*," *Ancient Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (1990): 221-242.

[11] Jacob Klein, "The Stoic Argument from Oikeiosis," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 50 (2016): 143-200.

[12] Wayne M. Martin, "Stoic Self-Consciousness. Self-Comprehension and Orientation in the Stoic Theory of Oikeiosis," September 28, 2006, http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.405.2438&rep=rep1&type=pdf.

[13] Kashani, *Radical Generosity*, 13.

As extending outwards, each circle represents a declined level of relationship affinity, beginning with family and friends and reaching the whole mankind.[14] Hierocles actually visualized the phenomenon now known as proprioception. Human beings and animals as well, need a kind of familiarity with their perceptual organs for their effective usage.

The norms that outline the conditions enabling a person to work towards moral development are, essentially, the medical norms that define the psychological health in human beings. *Oikeiosis* is therefore the psychological component in the principle governing the "journey" of a person leading, ultimately, to virtue.[15] This perspective of *oikeiosis* becomes even more evident when acknowledging it as a form of self-consciousness; it provides an organism with the normative orientation in the environment.[16]

The doctrine of oikeiosis is closely related to the hegemonikon, in that it provides a description/characterisation of the psychic faculty that governs human action. In children (pre-rational humans), as in non-rational animals, oikeiosis drives self-preservation through self-perception. When the child reaches the age of 7 or 14, it is in the position to become capable to regulate impulses and guide actions by reason. In this case, self-perception is transformed into a sophisticated set of conceptions. This possession and employment of concepts, which is the distinction from the animals, is due to the governing faculty, the hegemonikon.

The sensations allow us to access knowledge that concerns specific observable facts, but to gain knowledge

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[14] Brad Inwood, "Hierocles: Theory and Argument in the Second Century AD," *The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter* 115, no. 1 (1983): 115-136.

[15] Lawrence Becker, "Human Health and Stoic Moral Norms," *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 28 (2003): 221-238.

[16] Wayne M. Martin, "Stoic Self-Consciousness. Self-Comprehension and Orientation in the Stoic Theory of *Oikeiosis*," September 28, 2006, http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.405.2438&rep=rep1&type=pdf.

that leads to wisdom requires more and, at this point, both philosophical schools point out preconceptions (prolepseis). The development of reason is made possible because of the existence of preconceptions, which may be innate, i.e. residing in the human cognitive architecture, but they arise naturally and are not active before the impression of sensations takes place. Preconceptions are constituents of reason whose function is to interpret what the senses perceive.

The theory of cognitive development that takes place in phases, depending on the human's age, is nuanced as in the sophisticated work of Jean Piaget, who established Developmental Psychology. In this theory, preconceptions are rudimentary forms of understanding reality which are replaced by increasingly reasoned and structured concepts.

So, the teleological success or failure depends entirely on the integrity and sophistication of the hegemonikon, which, in turn, through the mechanisms of assent, governs human actions. A failure to conform to nature stems from a defect in the coordinator faculty.[17] However, hegemonikon is not metaphysically or causally independent of the whole body.

Lombardini distinguished between objective and subjective oikeiosis to discriminate variations in what can be considered valuable for a human individual; although virtue is the objective terminal of human moral development and, thus, it could be postulated – in concept – that each and every individual would count as valuable that which accords with nature, in reality, the human beings consider valuable what they perceive as appropriate and advantageous for themselves. The multitude of different subjective standpoints of valuing what is appropriate explains the spectrum of "points of view." There exist as many sets of beliefs as human beings, and what distinguish them are the individual criteria of value.[18]

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[17] Jakob Klein, "Nature and Reason in Stoic Ethics" (PhD Diss., Cornell University, 2010), https://ecommons.cornell.edu/bitstream/handle/1813/17104/Klein,%20Jacob.pdf;sequence=1.

[18] John Lombardini, "Stoicism and the Virtue of Toleration," *History of*

Today, consciousness is acknowledged as retaining a personal character throughout the lifespan of an individual and is an essential background for the advanced intellect. The functions of the mind, as well as the perpetual development are based on constant conscious self-evidence. The brain creates an internal representation of reality which is constantly faced with stimuli from the external reality, available through the senses. The input is intertwined with the current brain activity and complex spatial and temporal re-arrangements take place. Hence, a dynamic system is in place for which the relationship between function and structure is by itself inadequate to understand the brain and its evolvement through life.[19]

Consciousness is also closely associated with neuroplasticity, interconnected in a 2-way relationship, promoting the ever-learning mechanism of the brain. The complex networks in the human brain are subjected to continuous re-organisation following changes in consciousness, which are caused by either input from the senses or by changes in the internal states of mind.[20]

The dominant feature of the stoic and epicurean theories about the ethical consciousness is that they entail an internal realization of the person himself and not a kind of arrangement with the external environment. The success in avoiding ethical deviations and distinguish between good and evil is not a result of metaphysical processes but is a mental work of the intellect. In this frame, human consciousness is of significant value.

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[19] Egidio D' Angelo, and Claudia Gandini Wheeler-Kingshott, "Modelling the Brain: Elementary Components to Explain Ensemble Functions," *Rivista del Nuovo Cimento* 40, no. 7 (2017): 304.

[20] Jean Askenasy, and Joseph Lehmann. "Consciousness, Brain, Neuroplasticity." *Frontiers in Psychology* vol. 4, no. 412 (2013): 1-10.

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