

Tebahism: Stoic Data Ethics in the Age of Epicurean social media Imperialism

In one of his last essays Michel Foucault describes “. . . technologies of the self which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.” As the primary example of this “technologies of the self”, Foucault makes use of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. The latter, ever since he was a teenager, not only professed to be a Stoic but also was one throughout his life, sleeping without a bed and living only with the essential requirements, bravely facing death and most importantly avoiding fashion, music and excessive food characteristic of the Epicurean life of Rome of his time.

Aurelius was born a century after Christ and was among the last Stoics before Christianity established itself throughout the Empire and beyond. Foucault's essay is based on the idea of self-care which he finds in Aurelius' correspondence, in contrast with the idea of self-punishment brought forward by the Christian doctrine. In my view, the Foucauldian essay is an inspiring alternative to the gray picture of power and oppression he had been depicting in the decades prior his death, when the essay was written. However the essay in itself doesn't bring forward any further insights or ways to reason what this “technology of the self” and care about oneself could be, particularly in relation to Roman Stoicism and in contrast to technologies of power and surveillance that so much characterize our age.

Therefore, prior discussing Stoicism further as my main point of departure, let me briefly describe the society in which Rome evolved throughout the century; from a small group of folk devoted to agriculture and war, expanding its domain South, East, North and West, Rome became a healthy society in which half of the days of the year were dedicated to festivities and half of a working day was dedicated to recreation. Both the Colosseum around which the festivities were centered and the public baths where the daily recreation took place, were freely accessible to all Roman citizens. Thus, while slaves kept doing physical work in the fields and in the mines outside the city, the task of the citizens inside it that of socialize and attend more or less luxurious feasts in luxurious environments.

Now, as in every civilizations, there were exceptions. These exceptions were mainly educated people like Marcus Aurelius who, as we saw, lived a Stoic life. This bunch of Stoic Romans wanted society to go back to its roots and live in accordance with nature avoiding what they defined as an Epicurean behaviour which justified the lavish conduct of most of the Roman citizens of the Empire. Stoics dreamed of returning to the Roman

Republic, a period in which senators not only spent most of the time cultivating their lands but also were ready to sacrifice their lives for Rome heading the army against invaders. The Roman Empire thus promoted an increasingly corrupted and unethical society to which the Stoics opposed not so much with words or essays but rather with an exemplary life conduct. Needless to say, this conduct saw in Cato Uticensis its greatest hero. Not only he exemplary governed the island of Crete where he was confined by his political enemies, astonishing Rome of the fact that he did not enrich himself of all its gold mines throughout his governance. Cato has been mostly put forward as the main Stoic hero for having opposed Julius Cesar, the initiator of the Roman Empire, bravely committing suicide when the latter surrounded him.

Now who tells us of all of this is Lucius Annaeus Seneca, a rich aristocrat who paradoxically was the main adviser of Emperor Nero. In the first years of his empire, Nero was strongly influenced by Seneca's Stoic way of thinking but soon he found a different adviser who led him towards a more Epicurean life-style. I think this figure is rather important to draw at last a parallel between the Epicurean society of Rome and the social media society of the present. In fact, on one side it is clear that Romans spent their time entertaining themselves and socializing with each other, letting the thousands of slaves do the actual work. Similarly today, citizens of healthy societies let automation do the physical work and in turn they can invest their time entertaining themselves with their tablet and smartphones watching movies, playing games and especially keeping up the socializing. Even the very act of capturing, categorizing and sharing personal data is aimed towards becoming completely effortless, meaning that more advanced algorithms in the future will even that kind of work for the users. This is the case at least of futuristic automated and technologies such as life-logging.

The prospect of an effortless life would have upset a person like Seneca who did not see money as the main human capital. For Seneca money can come and go and money can in fact enable a person to be virtuous. Stoically speaking, the main human capital is time. Of this time it is interesting to bring forward the figure of Seneca's former pupil, the Emperor Nero who was apparently in constant need for likes. As one of the many celebrities in the social media realm, Nero used to force his network of people to assist to his theatrical, musical, lyrical and athletic performances where he acted as the poet, musician and charioteer. In all the vane reputation and cult that he forcefully created around his persona, he made himself a God and possibly burnt Rome, thus self-destructing the epicenter of the Empire, to build a new a more spacious one. Are we to expect a Nero-like Epicurean behaviour from the political celebrities rising from social media or are we to hope for a more Stoic emperor such as Aurelius?

I find it interesting here and vital for this article focusing on data ethics, to point out that, loosing the reins of the young and indomitable emperor, Seneca reflected on the main role of the Stoic, mainly to bring society back to nature and thus back to common sense. It is here that we can connect back to Foucault's essay. The essay is in fact increasingly important to understand new data trends, such as the Quantified Self and self-tracking at large. Not the least, Seneca, is considered the very first self-tracker, carefully examining his daily activities, recording the food he ate, his dream and constantly being aware of his ethical conduct. The ethics driving Seneca's everyday life, as we can see in later political figures like Benjamin Franklin and Mahatma Gandhi, were quite practical ones.

To some extent it is said, contrary to the rhetoric brought forward by Foucault in the latter part of his essay, that Stoicism was in fact a precursor of Christian ethics. We can see this particularly in Epictetus, another later Stoic who believed that every human is on earth with a role given to us by providence and we shall perform this role well. Seneca believed the same, he believed in the afterlife but he particularly believed that we should examine our soul as in front of a forum crowded with people, and as if to this people we shall say our evening prayers. In this respect Seneca's kind of self examination is far distant from the one proposed by new technology cults like the Quantified Self divulging their trend based on the examination of our bodily conditions and not in the least on the human soul.

To keep a soul clean of corruption however, Seneca specifies that it is important that it is kept under work, in constant labour. The concept of laboriousness is central to Stoic ethics and I appropriate of it to make a distinction in today increasingly more imperialistic society, an imperialism that is, in my opinion, facilitated by what replaces the human effort, namely the algorithm which is, in my deterministic point of view, the direct cause of ethical decadence and in turn the possible cause of future catastrophes ahead of humanity. While on one side then newer digital technologies are seen as a form of total surveillance exploiting personal data even more accurately, I therefore differentiate between technologies that are effortless (e.g. the one we are subjected to using any social media platform) and the ones that are effortfull and conducted by individuals without the use of automated algorithms. While it is tempting to call the former Epicurean, in this article I will mainly focus on the former, which I will temporarily call Stoic.

Unlike what Foucault has said in his essay however, this Stoic effortfulness or laboriousness should be oriented in taking care of oneself alone but also in directing society back to nature and simplicity. Ethically speaking, then this laboriousness has two

principle effects. The first effect is by now clear and that is through laboriousness, avoid the vices emerging from boredom, investigate one's own nature but most importantly attempt to maintain society close to simplicity and nature. The second characteristic of laboriousness is less clear but can be summed in the following Daoist parable used by other media scholars like Sigfried Giedion but particularly Marshal McLuhan who will soon become our useful link to understand a possible Stoic role in today effortless technological scenario. The parable goes as this:

As Tzu-Gung was traveling through the regions north of the river Han, he saw an old man working in his vegetable garden. He had dug an irrigation ditch. The man would descend into a well, fetch up a vessel of water in his arms and pour it out into the ditch. While his efforts were tremendous the results appeared to be very meager. Tzu-Gung said. "There is a way whereby you can irrigate a hundred ditches in one day, and whereby you can do much with little effort. Would you not like to hear of it?" Then the gardener stood up, looked at him and said, "And what would that be?" Tzu-Gung replied, "You take a wooden lever, weighted at the back and light in front. In this way you can bring up water so quickly that it just gushes out. This is called a draw- well." Then anger rose up in the old man's face and he said, "I have heard my teacher say that whoever uses machines does all his work like a machine. He who does his work like a machine grows a heart like a machine, and he who carries the heart of a machine in his breast loses his simplicity. He who has lost his simplicity becomes unsure in the strivings of his soul. Uncertainty in the strivings of the soul is something which does not agree with honest sense. It is not that I do not know of such things; I am ashamed to use them.

According to the Chinese parable and to some media scholars, labouriousness enables the Stoic to, beside avoiding vices, it allows him or her to maintain a warm heart and therefore, contrary to what anyone may think, it allows him or her to keep his human empathy and simplicity. If on one hand then the cold heart of our contemporaries and the degrading of their ethics could be explained by the adoption of a machine such a social media, this article emphasizes the ethical integrity that a labour-intensive practice can arise. Also, considering the rise of imperialistic attitudes to overcome the fear of radicalization partially provoked by the new social media paradigm, we might here consider what is the third ethical dimension of labour-intensive Stoic data practices using once again Marshal McLuhan who states:

In the history of human culture there is no example of a conscious adjustment of the various factors of personal and social life to new extensions except in the puny and peripheral efforts of artists. The artist picks up the message of cultural and technological challenge decades before its transforming impact occurs. He, then, builds models or

Noah's arks for facing the change that is at hand.

It is the marginal artist, through his or manual labouriousness then to disclose an ultimate Stoic mission in today's technologically accelerated scenario. McLuhan's theory here is explicit: there are marginal artists using contemporary media who creates Noah's ark of their time. The theory is not completely uncanny; the dominant understanding of archiving in the humanities has been now for decades based on Jacques Derrida. The latter proved that the word archive derives from arkeion, the Greek magistrate who both archived and dictated the law. In fact, my etymological work on the word archive has shown a second meaning. In the masoretic ancient version of the Bible, the word is used not to refer to the ark of covenant where the laws are kept but to both Noah's ark and the basket with which baby Moses was abandoned in the river Nile.

Now I want to be clear that, by linking Stoicism with biblical events I am far from linking with Judaism, Christianity or any other particular theistic religion. This is obvious thinking for example how both biblical events are presents in cultures world-wide. A basket with which to abandon a child in a river is used for example in the legend on the origins of Rome; the twin founders Romolo and Remo reached the land where Rome was to be constructed after their mother left them on a basket going down the river Tevere. The other biblical episode, namely that of the Noah's Ark is found in dozens of other cultures, even among native Indians of North America. In one of oldest of these accounts, that of Gilgamesh, the ark is literally called "Preserver of Life" and the actual flooding, interestingly, was caused by a god who could not tolerate not so much the sins but the actual noise that humans on earth were making. Are we in our global village and filter bubbles too noisy?

I call this life preserving feature of Stoic data ethics Tebahism, a name derived from the Egyptian word tebah which was in fact used to indicate both Noah's Ark and Moses' basket. Tebahism is the ethic of preserving life by stowing it manually and in defined containers rather than storing it automatically and in open ended sites. This ethical approach to the preserving of life is not altogether unrealistic; elsewhere I have given many examples in the history of the many paradigms characterizing the human age. I can provide a further one here using the example of the German photographer August Sander. Discussing his extensive photographic work, George Steeves writes:

Sander's premonitions of calamitous adversity, triggered by his reading of the signs all about him, impelled him to alter the emphasis of his photographic practice. The collecting for People of the 20th Century slowed while landscape and architectural work accelerated. Sander had been assembling cityscapes and architectural details of his adopted home of Cologne since 1920. In the last years of the 1930s he assiduously

pursued his aesthetic convictions in photographs of the city. Could he have apprehended its approaching near total destruction?

We can think of several other examples of individuals who I call tebahists who have been stoically stowing the reality around them perceiving a threat ahead. A recent sensational case was the work of the Chicago based nanny Vivian Maier who stowed life in boxes that were later abandoned in an unpaid storage room. As we speak, several tebahists might be using digital media as a form to stow the reality around them and preserve it. In contrast then with the ethics brought forward by the social media algorithmic based regime the Tebahists' ethic is to base one life to act as this algorithm and basically do the work for which technology is otherwise replacing the human agent. In this sense, under the Foucauldian vision of technology of the self, tebahists take care not so much of themselves but of stowing the reality around them through themselves.