Fooled By Randomness

Fourteen

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BACCHUS ABANDONS ANTONY

Montherlant's death. Stoicism is not the stiff upper lip, but the illusion of victory of man against randomness. It is so easy to be heroic. Randomness and personal elegance.

When the classicist aristocratic French writer Henry de Montherlant was told that he was about to lose his eyesight to a degenerative disease, he found it most appropriate to take his own life. Such is the end that becomes a classicist. Why? Because the stoic's prescription was precisely to elect what one can do to control one's destiny in front of a random outcome. At the end, one is allowed to choose between no life at all and what one is given by destiny; we always have an option against uncertainty. But such an attitude is not limited to stoics; both competing sects in the ancient world, stoicism and Epicureanism, recommended such control (the difference between the two resides in minor technicalities—neither philosophies meant then what is commonly accepted today in middlebrow culture).

Being a hero does not necessarily mean such an extreme act as getting killed in battle or taking one's life—the latter is only recommended in a narrow set of circumstances and considered cowardly otherwise. Having control over randomness can be expressed in the manner in which one acts in the small and the large. Recall that epic heroes were judged by their actions, not by the results. No matter how sophisticated our choices, how good we are at dominating the odds, randomness will have the last word. We are left only with dignity as a solution—dignity defined as the execution of a protocol of behavior that does not depend on the immediate circumstance. It may not be the optimal one, but it certainly is the one that makes us feel best. Grace under pressure, for example. Or in deciding not to toady up to someone, whatever the reward. Or in fighting a duel to save face. Or in signaling to a prospective mate during courtship: "Listen, I have a crush on you; I am obsessed with you, but I will not do a thing to compromise my dignity. Accordingly, the slightest snub and you will never see me again."

This last chapter will discuss randomness from a totally new angle; philosophical but not the hard philosophy of science and epistemology as we saw in Part I with the black swan problem. It is a more archaic, softer type of philosophy, the various guidelines that the ancients had concerning the manner in which a man of virtue and dignity deals with randomness—there was no real religion at the time (in the modern sense). It is worthy of note that before the spread of what can be best called Mediterranean monotheism, the ancients did not believe enough in their prayers to influence the course of destiny. Their world was dangerous, fraught with invasions and reversals of fortune. They needed substantial prescriptions in dealing with randomness. It is such beliefs that we will outline next.

NOTES ON JACKIE O.'S FUNERAL

If a stoic were to visit us, he would feel represented by the following poem. To many (sophisticated) lovers of poetry, one of the greatest poets who ever breathed is C. P. Cavafy. Cavafy was an Alexandrian Greek civil servant with a Turkish or Arabic last name who wrote almost a century ago in a combination of classical and modern Greek a lean poetry that seems to have eluded the last fifteen centuries of Western literature. Greeks treasure him like their national monument. Most of his poems take place in Syria (his Grecosyrian poems initially drew me to him), Asia Minor, and Alexandria. Many people believe it worth learning formal semi-classical Greek just to savor his poems. Somehow their acute aestheticism stripped of sentimentality provides a relief from centuries of mawkishness in poetry and drama. He provides a classical relief for those of us who were subjected to the middle-class-valued

melodrama as represented by Dickens's novels, romantic poetry, and Verdi's operas.

I was surprised to hear that Maurice Tempelsman, last consort of Jackie Kennedy Onassis, read Cavafy's valedictory "Apoleipein o Theos Antonion" ("The God Abandons Antony") at her funeral. The poem addresses Marc Antony, who has just lost the battle against Octavius and was forsaken by Bacchus, the god who until then had protected him. It is one of the most elevating poems I have ever read, beautiful because it was the epitome of such dignified aestheticism—and because of the gentle but edifying tone of the voice of the narrator advising a man who had just received a crushing reversal of fortune.

The poem addresses Antony, now defeated and betrayed (according to legend, even his horse deserted him to go to his enemy Octavius). It asks him to just bid her farewell, Alexandria the city that is leaving him. It tells him not to mourn his luck, not to enter denial, not to believe that his ears and eyes are deceiving him. Antony, do not degrade yourself with empty hopes. Antony,

Just listen while shaken by emotion but not with the coward's imploration and complaints.

While shaken with emotion. No stiff upper lip. There is nothing wrong and undignified with emotions—we are cut to have them. What is wrong is not following the heroic or, at least, the dignified path. That is what stoicism truly means. It is the attempt by man to get even with probability. I need not be nasty at all and break the spell of the poem and its message, but I cannot resist some cynicism. A couple of decades later, Cavafy, while dying of throat cancer, did not quite follow the prescription. Deprived of his voice by the surgeons, he used to randomly enter undignified spells of crying and cling to his visitors, preventing them from leaving his death room.

Some history. I said that stoicism has rather little to do with the stiff-upper-lip notion that we believe it means. Started as an intellectual movement in antiquity by a Phoenician Cypriot, Zeno of Kition, it developed by Roman time into a life based on a system of virtues—in the ancient sense when virtue meant virtu, the sort of belief in which virtue is its own reward. There developed a social model for a stoic person, like the gentlemen in Victorian England. Its tenets can be summarized as follows: The stoic is a person who combines the qualities of wisdom, upright dealing, and courage. The stoic will thus be immune from life's gyrations as he will be superior to the wounds from some of life's dirty tricks. But things can be carried to the extreme; the stern Cato found it beneath him to have human feelings. A more human version can be read in Seneca's Letters from a Stoic, a soothing and surprisingly readable book that I distribute to my trader friends (Seneca also took his own life when cornered by destiny).

RANDOMNESS AND PERSONAL ELEGANCE

The reader knows my opinion on unsolicited advice and sermons on how to behave in life. Recall that ideas do not truly sink in when emotions come into play; we do not use our rational brain outside of classrooms. Self-help books (even when they are not written by charlatans) are largely ineffectual. Good, enlightened (and "friendly") advice and eloquent sermons do not register for more than a few moments when they go against our wiring. The interesting thing about stoicism is that it plays on dignity and personal aesthetics, which are part of our genes. Start stressing personal elegance at your next misfortune. Exhibit sapere vivere ("know how to live") in all circumstances.

Dress at your best on your execution day (shave carefully); try to leave a good impression on the death squad by standing erect and proud. Try not to play victim when diagnosed with cancer (hide it from others and only share the information with the doctor—it will avert the platitudes and nobody will treat you like a victim worthy of their pity; in addition, the dignified attitude will make both defeat and victory feel equally heroic). Be extremely courteous to your assistant when you lose money (instead of taking it out on him as many of the traders whom I scorn routinely do). Try not to blame others for your fate, even if they deserve blame. Never exhibit any self-pity, even if your significant other bolts with the

handsome ski instructor or the younger aspiring model. Do not complain. If you suffer from a benign version of the “attitude problem,” like one of my childhood friends, do not start playing nice guy if your business dries up (he sent a heroic e-mail to his colleagues informing them “less business, but same attitude”). The only article Lady Fortuna has no control over is your behavior. Good luck.