

Some Logical Reasonings about Schizophrenia

By Joao Ribeiro

To open this article on Schizophrenia nothing better than Epictetus' s saying: " It is not the things that trouble you, but your opinions on them" (Encheiridion 5). Perhaps this article will lead you, the reader, to have a more favorable opinion about people with Schizophrenia, and this will yield some peace to your heart.

I was diagnosed with Schizophrenia when I was nineteen. I am now forty-eight. I never really profited from the medicines (although I see they do help many people) , but I improved by way of studying philosophy, especially the Stoics and the Indian Shankara. I now do many voluntary activities to help other diagnosed people. In this article I will discuss some observations I made, both from myself and from my peers. As this is a Stoic blog, I will focus more on Stoic ideas, leaving Shankara aside.

This article is aimed to be interesting to those unfamiliar with Schizophrenia, and useful for those familiar. There's nothing definitive here, just speculation.

Anthropologist Jane Goodall when asked if she preferred Chimpanzees or Humans, answered she preferred some Chimpanzees and some Humans. Me too. I prefer some people with Schizophrenia and some "normal" people. This article is about those people with Schizophrenia I prefer. As Seneca said: "In the choice of our friends, we should choose the least maculated (the best ones) ". (Of Tranquility of the soul, VII 7)

Most therapists assume there's something immature in a person with Schizophrenia. For them, the best to do is to provide us some reflection about ourselves or about the world that will make us "deal with our feelings" in a superior way. However, there's a mistake here. Because this way of seeing the problem is usually (not always) vertical, not horizontal i.e. the therapist is placed superior to the patient.

That vertical positioning is not true, that's the reason I think I am successful in my work, and that is what I will try to show in this article. Here I include a quotation from Marcus Aurelius: "Have in mind that all rational beings are related, and to care for everybody is of the human nature "(3.4). I think from this quote we can infer everybody should be treated with equal respect.

So, let's be Stoic. The obvious question: what is a superior person? (a question some people may judge politically incorrect, but that is necessary for this inquiry)

The first answer for the readers of this article is "a virtuous person".

But that is a little vague, especially for whom doesn't know Stoicism. I will start with another premise, with which I think most people would agree: a peaceful person is a superior one.

The reader says: Are you saying people with Schizophrenia (I avoid using the term schizophrenic because that reduces the person to this definition i.e. I believe we are more than our diagnostic) are peaceful? Yes, I am. At least those I prefer. I am a facilitator, that is, I direct peer support groups of people with Schizophrenia. I don't know how useful I really am, but I remember Seneca: "What is demanded from a man is that he be useful to the most people possible " (On Leisure, 3)

In one of my groups a girl declared: "I am going to give birth to the devil". There was a respectful silence, and an opportunity for her to explain that was because she had a divine mission to bring peace to the world, and giving birth to the devil she would make him give up his hate, and by way of that make the world more peaceful. Nobody opposed her opinion. Here I quote Marcus Aurelius: "Reason is common to us all" (4.4)

Everything in this event was peaceful. And one should notice here my behavior: I adopted a logical position. I did not allow myself to rush into telling her not to fantasize (although it seemed she was delusional), I gave her the opportunity to explain why she thought that way. And I, and everybody, respected her view, as her viewpoint. And all that was logical, and peaceful. Once, discussing with some followers of Pyrrho, I suggested his viewpoint of having no opinions was a peaceful one, and they agreed. If you are not eager to uphold your opinion, you become more open to others. Or, if you wish, you should be the superman or the child of Nietzsche. (Thus Spoke Zarathustra, part 1, discourse 1)

Another day one of the patients started to hug me, and hold my hand. I did not oppose. I noticed some people were finding that a bit gay, but we did not mind. He now repeats that every time we meet. Even in the street. In fact, he may have set a pattern, I think those of my groups have more physical contact than the average. What is that, if not peace?

My friends have a difficulty in keeping a romantic affair. It is really difficult if you depend on your parents or other relatives, if you don't drive, if you sometimes get anxious and most important, if it is difficult for you to walk around.

Nevertheless, sometimes two people in those groups start a relationship. And, it should be noticed, they often agree not to engage sexually. So, it is just about the love between two people. What is that, if not peace?

Yes, says the reader, but this is a Stoic blog, we want to hear about self-control. And there you are in trouble! We all know all the emphasis of the Stoics in discipline. Perhaps we could remember Epictetus: "When by reasoning you judge you should do something, do it" (Enchiridion 35)

But I answer to the reader: not at all! Because you should not judge the sailor before you know the storm! We are all crossing the ocean, but for some there's a friendly wind, while for others there is a tempest.

Many therapists ignore this, but this is a centrally important fact: my peers have often been abused. They suffered bullying. They experienced trauma. Their own parents were disappointed and aggressive with them. They are more sensible and perhaps more vulnerable (some people are, and that's not their fault), and there is a feature of many people to abuse others who are more vulnerable. It is not the majority but that happens. Some people don't let escape any opportunity of abusing others. And that is tragic, as the abused generalize from that, and start thinking they will be abused forever. I believe Marcus Aurelius is wise when he says: "Remember we live only the present" (3.19). My peers forget this. Their past rules their present.

It is upon knowing that that you should think. And perceive these people may actually be good sailors.

OK, says the reader. What are you suggesting, that we elect our next president a schizophrenic?

I thank you for the question. Let's be logical once again. Who makes beautiful chairs? A good carpenter, correct? Who plays football well? Brazilian players, who play in the difficult fields of the streets since their childhood, correct? And who is able to be a good president? An honest person who knows how things work, correct?

And then, the proper question is, what do people with Schizophrenia know how to do. As a facilitator I tell you. They make you exercise your logic, your patience, your sense of justice, even your courage. People with schizophrenia might make you more virtuous. Is there a better talent than that?

Marcus Aurelius spoke about turning obstacles into fuel, people with schizophrenia are an obstacle of a special quality, they provide more fuel than other obstacles.

But then I can hear the angry father: What the hell are you suggesting? That Schizophrenia is good? That I should not give medicine to my son?

No. Schizophrenia brings a lot of bad feelings. To the person and to everybody who coexist with the person. And yes. Statistics are undeniable. Those who take medicine have less surges and less suicide attempts. But let's think this through together, and figure out the best we can do.

Some observations are possible. My peers are afraid. They all are. They are highly insecure, and they feel deeply misunderstood. All of them (I have never seen one who did not agree with this) report a deep sense of loneliness.

I was once an employee in a psychiatric clinic. I was paid just to talk to the patients, what I called "a philosophical conversation". One day, as I arrived, a nurse approached me and speaking low, as if afraid someone could hear, told me to be careful, because one guy there was very aggressive, and he might attack me physically. I thought, well, I have a challenge here and I will face it.

He was making strange gestures with his arms and hands, what I could not understand. But then I realized he was conducting a music that was playing, like a maestro. I did not know what to do, but I started to mimic him. He apparently thought I appreciated the music the same as him and laughed. That started an understanding. He lowered the music, so that we could start talking. And a bit later, he turned off the music. As we talked, I asked if there was someone he trusted. He said no, only me. I was sad and happy at the same time.

But we can infer something from this experience. At first, he was completely alone, just making his gestures, with no hope of being understood. Then, it seems, a hope appeared in his heart. And finally, he seemed to feel I understood him. As Marcus Aurelius puts it: "Judge things as they really are, not as a hasty man judges them" (4.11)

That experience is not an exception. I felt similar in my life. Nobody had the least idea what was going on inside me. So, it seems to me, it is useful to make the person feel he is being understood. It is a first step he can acquire confidence. But he will never feel understood if he perceives you judge yourself superior. So, here we have a delicate situation. We need to show both respect and comprehension.

I think a good way to do that, is focusing in on logic. Trying to understand what the person is saying, and just that, with no wish to show anything, that you have some knowledge or experience he doesn't have. And, very important, the person should not think you are

talking to him in order to acquire prestige, that is, that you want to show everybody you understand him. Here a lot of quotations would fit, I believe all Stoic thinkers stressed the importance of logic. Perhaps I could quote Marcus Aurelius: "Do you have an ability of being rational? If so, why don't you use it?" (4.13)

Other people may have other approaches, I don't want to rule those out, but I think logic is a good start. Someone may argue logic is cold, and the greatest need is to be warm. That is true. But I believe, as I said, logic is a start. You begin the relationship trying to understand what the person has to say, and agreeing, whatever he says. And then, as the talk goes, you can reach an emotive understanding.

I am not saying it is easy, or that there is a precise way of behaving. However, I work in a hospital. Anyone can see that those who participate in my groups, (or some other person's group) are better. It is also because those who search for these groups are already in a better condition, but I keep the argument, because the reason they are better before coming to the groups, is the same they improve with the groups. That is, they feel understood.

To provide that, my feelings are it is better to forget any preconceived ideas. In other words, to be logical. And logic here is also to acknowledge you never understand all the person. We may today reach an agreement, but tomorrow this same person may surprise you. So, I think we can help my peers by way of making them feel understood. They may grow more confident, they may improve their communicative skills, and ultimately make friends, and be able to walk around. Logic pervades all this process.

And something interesting happens, that sometimes the participants in the group learn from the facilitator a more logical attitude. And this improves their lives.

Logic for me, is perhaps the subtraction of the Ego. What hinders us from being logical? Our wishes and desires? So, logic is opposed to a big Ego. It helps you being more detached, and therefore more free. As Epictetus said: "You won't wish to be a general, a priest or a consul, you will wish to be free. And the only way to be free is to despise what we are not in charge" (Enchiridion 19) (here we know that logic is perhaps what is most up to us)

My peers are not inferior. They should be treated as equals, and we should not judge that all of Schizophrenia is bad. It brings undoubtedly much suffering, but also some qualities to the sufferer.

And, to that angry father, I do not oppose the use of medicines. But something should be said. The drugs available in the market, they don't teach you anything. Nobody learns from the experience of consuming Haldol or Clozapine. Such is true that we can observe when the person stops taking the medicine, all symptoms come back. They do not disappear with the use of these drugs as some people argue they do, they only diminish, and they all resurge when we stop taking the medicine. So, what have we profited from those drugs? While a more logical attitude the patients may learn from the example of the facilitator, is more likely to last, and to really make us better people, more confident, more open.

"Happy is the person who's led by reason" Seneca (book 6 of "On Happiness ")

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