

An Application of Social oikeiōsis (Affiliation) to Other Humans in Time of Pandemic

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Abstract

Where I live, people have shown much fellow feeling or affiliation towards each other during the Covid pandemic from late 2019. In the Stoic theory of *oikeiōsis*, affiliation, expressed by the ancient Roman philosopher Seneca, humans are said to extend to their own mind as centre point the closest sense of belonging, the next closest to their body in the first surrounding circle, then to parents, siblings, wife and children in the next circle out, followed by the circles of other relatives, of one's *deme*, of one's tribe, of one's city, of its neighbours, of one's race and of the human race.

Where I live, people have shown much fellow feeling for each other during the illness of the Covid pandemic that first began to strike the world in late 2019. Even when confined by regulations to their houses except for work and very limited other purposes, they have, for example, delivered extra food to neighbours in need. In some places, however, the pandemic has hit households so hard that they would not be able to give much help, but instead are in need of help themselves. They may have lost their employment and earnings, when the pandemic made it impossible for their workplaces to continue operating. When, to stop the spread of illness, children's schools were closed, at least one family member may have had to give up earnings in order to stay at home to look after the children and perhaps to engage in home teaching. Just when earnings were lost, expenses rose with the need to maintain all through the day meals, along with gas, electricity or other types of fuel for temperature control and cooking.

Suddenly, in places like Britain, there was a return to an earlier view of common, everyday illness. The Roman senator and philosopher Seneca the younger (4 BCE–65CE), tutor to the future Roman emperor Nero, said in one of his letters¹ that in every (*omnis*) illness there is fear of death, pain of the body and interruption of pleasures. This may have come to seem startling in some places now. In Britain for some time, illness has not regularly involved the fear of death. This is partly because of comparatively recent changes. In the early 1940s, the antibiotic medicines, discovered in the 1930s, had become available in Britain to some, and in 1948 the National Health Service of Britain extended free health care to all. In Britain before that, however, early death of some family member was a common experience in families. Covid has brought the fear back.

Ancient Greek philosophy had a theory about how fellow feeling develops or should be developed, and called the process *oikeiōsis*, a term which has two parts. It is the ending '-sis' which implies a process. The term *oikeios* signifies what is one's own, or belongs to one. According to the Greek-English lexicon of Liddell, Scott and Jones, it is used especially of belonging to the same household. The ancient Greek term for a house is *oikos* or *oikia*.

¹ Seneca, *Ep.* 78, 6–11.

The term *oikos* is thought to be an etymological ancestor of the English term ‘-wick’ which occurs at the end of such English town names as Warwick and Berwick. For *oikeiōsis* I shall sometimes use the English translation ‘affiliation’,² because that word can be used not only for a relationship, but also for a process of endorsing such a relationship, and it has a verb connected with it, ‘to affiliate’.

Humans can have a sense of something belonging to them not only in relation to other humans, but also in relation to things of other kinds, such as their own bodies. And these relationships can be closer or more distant. Indeed, relationship to one’s own body plays a central role in the theory of *oikeiōsis*. Some texts speak of a sequence of affiliations of different strength, starting with the strongest, affiliation to one’s body, and only then spreading in different degrees to other humans. They describe concentric circles in which our affiliation with outer circles is weaker than our affiliation with inner ones. The passage ends with practical advice on how to make one’s feeling towards outer circles closer by modes of address. But our relation to the circles is not a static one of affiliation from a distance. We are encouraged to pull outer circles inwards towards us.

It is time to look at translations of two such texts. The first is a Greek text by the Stoic philosopher, Hierocles of the 2nd century CE. I shall base the translation loosely on that of David Konstan, with some variations.³

From the treatise of Hierocles, How one should behave towards one’s relatives (sungeneis)

It goes along with what has been said concerning behaviour towards parents and brothers and wife and children to add also a discussion of relatives which feels more or less like those others and for this very reason can be expounded concisely. For, in general terms, each of us is circumscribed as though by many circles, some smaller, some larger, some surrounding others, some surrounded, according to their different and unequal relations to one another. The first and nearest circle is that which each of us has drawn around his mind (*dianoia*) as centre point. In this circle is included the body and what is employed for the sake of the body. For this circle is the shortest and all but touches the centre point itself. Second from this and standing further away from the centre point, while surrounding the first circle, is that in which are arranged parents, siblings, wife and children. The third circle from these is that in which are uncles and aunts, grandfathers and grandmothers, the children of siblings and also cousins. Next upon this circle is that of the members of one’s deme, then that of the members of one’s tribe, next that of one’s fellow citizens, and so, finally, that of those neighbouring the city and that of people of the same race. But the furthest out and largest circle surrounding all the circles is the circle of the whole human race. Once these have been thought out, accordingly, it is possible, starting with the circle stretched furthest out, to pull the circles, as it were, inwards as if to the centre, in respect of the treatment due to members, and with an effort always to transfer members from surrounding circles into

² The Latin etymological source of ‘affiliation’ has a meaning entirely different from that of the English, referring to the ancient Roman practice of adopting a son (*filius*) to safeguard the bequest of property.

³ Hierocles, *Elements of Ethics*, preserved in the *Anthology* compiled by Stobaeus probably in the 5th century CE, cf. Ioannis Stobaei *Anthologium*, ed. C. Wachmuth – O. Hense, Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, Berlin 1884, Vol. 4, p. 671.3 ff. The translation by David Konstan, with facing Greek text, is in I. Ramelli – D. Konstan, *Hierocles the Stoic: Elements of Ethics*, Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta 2009, pp. 91-93.

surrounded ones. For example, according to one's love of family affiliation, it is possible [to treat] parents and siblings [... lacuna ...] and therefore in the same proportion as for relatives, [to treat] older men and women as grandparents, uncles or aunts, those of the same age as cousins, and those younger as the children of cousins. Thus a clear recommendation (*hupothēkē*) has been formulated in concise terms as to how one should behave towards relatives, since we had already given instruction on how we should treat ourselves, how children and siblings and again how wife and children. It has been added that one must honour in a way similar to these latter those from the third circle and must honour relatives in turn similarly to these last. For although the greater distance in blood will subtract something from good will, we must nonetheless make an effort about assimilation. For it would arrive at due moderation if through our own initiative we cut down the distance in our relationship towards each person. The all-embracing and most practical point has been made, but to the measure we must add usage in regard to modes of address by calling cousins, uncles and aunts 'brothers', 'fathers' and 'mothers' and among further relatives calling some 'uncle', others 'nephews' and still others 'cousins' in whatever way their ages may run, for the sake of the attachment in the names. For this kind of address would be no slight sign of the care we feel for each and at the same time would excite and intensify the indicated drawing together of the circles.

This advice on modes of address is practised, for example, in India, where cousins may be called brothers, and in England the name 'Auntie' may be used of kind older ladies, even if they are more distantly related or not related at all.

The affiliation described above by the Greek Stoics, and shared by some other Greek schools of philosophy, was also described in Latin, without the advice on modes of address, by the Roman orator and writer on philosophy Cicero in 45 BCE, who translated the Greek word *oikeiōsis* by the Latin name *commendatio*, in the following passage of his *De Finibus* (*On Ends*) about the different conceptions of different philosophers concerning what humans should aim at in life.⁴

[The Stoics] think it important to be understood that it is arranged by nature that children are loved by their parents and it is as something following on this beginning that we trace the common sociability of the human race. This should be understood first from the configuration and the members of our bodies, which themselves make clear that the scheme for procreation is a possession we derive from nature. But it would not be consistent for nature to wish for procreation and not make provision for the offspring to be loved. Indeed, even in animals the force of nature can be seen. When we see the labour involved in their gestation and upbringing, we seem to hear the voice of nature itself. So as it is clearly by nature that we shrink from pain, so it is apparent that we are impelled by nature itself to love those whom we have procreated. From this is born the result that the communal affiliation (*commendatio*) of humans with humans should be natural and that one human, from the very fact of being human, should (*oporteat*) be seen by another human as not alien.

Cicero's account here is not merely descriptive, but prescriptive. He speaks at the end of affiliation for humans as mandatory ('should', *oporteat*), and Hierocles does so more

⁴ Cicero, *De Finibus*, 3, 19.62-3.

frequently. He speaks of the treatment due to people (*deousan khresin*), of a recommendation (*hupothēkē*) as to how one should (*pōs khrē*) behave to relatives. He uses *khrē* again to say that one should give more honour to the father, more love to the mother, and three times uses the imperative word-ending *-teon*, as in *pōs khrēsteon* (how one should treat), *timēteon* (one must honour), *spoudastea* (we must make an effort). He goes on to add that it is fitting (*prepei*) to give more love to the mother's relatives, more honour to the father's.

Cicero *De Finibus* (as above) at 3, 19.62-3, applies *oikeiōsis* to animals, insofar as they go through the early stages of affiliation or attachment to their bodily parts, without which they could not achieve self-preservation. But Hierocles' treatise *Elements of Ethics* brings in animals far more extensively.⁵ Here too, as their means to self-preservation, animals are extensively described as experiencing *oikeiōsis* towards their own bodily constitution.

To return to the evidence of fellow feeling in the context of the Covid pandemic, I doubt if it has been produced by the thought processes recommended in the ancient Greek doctrine of *oikeiōsis*, and it did not need to be. It might be wondered whether the complex thought processes of *oikeiōsis* would ever really be useful. But I think the thought practices of *oikeiōsis* could still have been useful at an earlier phase, when laws were being passed that might have protected people better during the pandemic: laws about job security, disparities of income, minimum wage, health coverage, vacation meals for poor school children, prompt delivery of benefits for those badly off, adequate payment for invalids unable to work, attention to the living and working conditions of black and minority ethnic groups, who were to be attacked most by the pandemic. Problems in delivery of such services are accentuated during a pandemic in ways that may be hard to foresee. The conscious practice of attention to outer circles required by *oikeiōsis*, might well, I believe, help legislators in their task of providing in advance for a mixture of normal and abnormal circumstances.

⁵ Hierocles, *Elements of Ethics* VI.51-2, VII.4, text and translation in Ramelli–Konstan, *Hierocles the Stoic* (above, n. 3), pp. 16-25.