# Agential Equanimity: Marcus Aurelius, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Educational Principles for Embracing Change

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***Abstract***

*Much of Western thought has been informed by an ontology of being and a desire to uncover or establish universal truths and principles. This tradition has catalyzed our propensity to see change and difference through the lens of crisis. With this frame in mind, I invite readers to reconsider our relationship to change and difference by discussing the meditations of Heraclitus, Marcus Aurelius, and Friedrich Nietzsche. I conclude by discussing an approach to life, which I call agential equanimity, that embraces change—including covid, climate change, and inequality as it decenters our anthropomorphic worldview and reminds us that we humans are fully within nature.*

***Keywords:*** *Friedrich Nietzsche, Marcus Aurelius, Heraclitus, agency, equanimity, covid, climate change, equity, equality, education*

The thought of change can elicit interesting and sometimes contradictory responses. Within a Hegelian-informed progressive view of history, for example, (social) change resides on the positive side of a binary-organized discursive narrative, while the status quo and the past occupy the inherently bad binary pole (Johnson, 2017). Viewed from this perspective, those who teach for social change are lauded as doing the good work, while those who protect the status quo are seen as getting in the way of progress/history (Johnson, 2014). In educational literature, is it often taken for granted that social change, including increased equality, will be good. On other occasions, however, (the thought of) change and difference evoke fear; discussions about significant changes invoke crisis language and claims that the end is near as well as the demonization of those who hold unsanctioned or unpopular beliefs.

This special issue considers how we might positively respond to change. Inspired by these concerns, I present a naturalistic model for encountering change. Informed by the Stoic concept of equanimity and the three pillars of Friedrich Nietzsche's thought (the will to power, the Ubermensch, and amor fati), this approach, called agential equanimity, invites us to embrace the real world as it is and to think twice before denigrating it and ourselves as immoral, sinful, or fallen in favor of a nonexistent possible world or society that might be better. I address the issue through the question: since disease, climate change, and inequality are natural, and since there is no longer any justification for belief in universal moral principles, why should we presume that these are bad?

## Heraclitus, Change, and Difference

Heraclitus famously observed that one cannot step twice into the same river (Wheelwright, p.29). The river, in a constant state of flow/flux, changes from one moment to the next. Our step into the water changes the river, and hence our second step is into a different river. This is the standard interpretation. It is equally true, however, that we cannot step into the same river twice because between our first and second forays into the river, we too have changed. We breathe in new air. New cells are born. Old ones die. The water in our body flows. Neural connections in our brain strengthen and diminish. And on and on. The river, you and I, and all the rest of the world are in a constant state of flux, and Heraclitus's 2500-year-old claim about the ontological status of the river generalizes to all earthly systems.

If Heraclitus is correct and the world is flow, there can be no unchanging (universal) adjudicator(s) for good and bad. That is, nothing is inherently good or bad. Events, states of affairs, actions and so on are always good or bad only in relation to a desired or posited end. Climate change, covid, and inequality, for example, are not inherently bad. They are so only in relation to a designated possible state of affairs.

We sometimes seem to presume that climate change is universally bad. However, like Heraclitus's river, the climate is always changing, and this is neither inherently good nor bad. The desirability of the change depends on whose interests are being considered. Almost any climate shift will be terrible for some species but a boon for others, as has been the case for hundreds of millions of years. The climate changes, and populations of plants and animals rise and fall. Populations of particular species rise or fall, and the climate changes. A disease that decimates an overpopulated herd of deer or humans, for example, is perhaps bad for those that die, but it often benefits those that survive. Such is the self-regulating nature of the world. A crisis seen from a different perspective is a blessing.

We learn in Biology 1101 that random mutation and natural selection foster differences within populations. These differences, which we might think of as inequalities, benefit the population as a whole by making it more resilient to outbreaks of disease, more adaptable to changes in the climate and to predation sources, better able to respond to changes in resource accessibility, and so on. These differences, which are good for the species as a whole, do not affect individual members of the species equally. There are winners and losers. And that is sort of the point. We would do a species no favors by attempting to erase all difference so as to provide each member of the species an equal opportunity for success in this or that environment.

Where life flourishes, change is ubiquitous, and difference propagates. With life there is change, with change there is difference, and with difference there is inequality. Only in the absence of life is there no change and no difference. There is but one possibility for perfect equality in our universe, and that is in conjunction with the death of the universe itself. In a scenario known as Heat Death or the Big Freeze, the universe might naturally evolve to use all its available energy and so become a barren sameness: undifferentiated matter/energy that rests at a temperature near zero degrees Kelvin (Davies, 1994). Everything is equal and everything is dead. The consideration of life from this cosmological perspective suggests that life is change and difference and that equality is death.

Thematically at least, Heraclitus understood this about 2500 years ago. Others were troubled by the consequences deduced from a world in flux, however, and sought to find eternal and unchanging beings or principles, hiding beneath the flow, that might save them from the vertigo-inducing world of change. Platonism, Neoplatonism, Christianity, Hegelianism, and a host of other

quasi-mystical belief systems can be understood in part as a desire to bind the flux. These and similar belief systems continue to influence thinking and sentiment, and they directly and indirectly lead people to fear change, inequality, and difference.

## Marcus Aurelius

Nonetheless, there have always been those comfortable with the flux of life depicted by Heraclitus. Many, such as Marcus Aurelius, who ruled Rome from 161-180 CE, believed the ability to encounter change without irrational trepidation is one of the most important skills a person can cultivate (Aurelius, 1945). The term most often associated with this learned disposition is equanimity, a concept central to many nonreligious philosophies of life, including Epicureanism, Daoism, and Stoicism. Common to these slightly different conceptions of equanimity is the belief that the key to living a good life, regardless of one's circumstances, is to cultivate openness to change and difference. To achieve this openness, it helps to understand that change is natural and certain and that states of affairs become good or bad only as a result of our connecting them to our own necessarily narrow perceptions, expectations, and values. That is, events, people, and circumstances are not bad. It is only our perception that makes them so.

For those looking to open new paths that might develop from the context of covid, climate change, and inequality, Aurelius provides an apt study. He lived in a time of significant change that included a plague far more devastating than covid. The Antonine Plague, or Galen Plague as it is also known, is said to have killed as many as 2000 per day in Rome and up to ten million people total. This included a death toll of 1/3 of the population in many areas in Rome (Reff, 2005). With the world population estimated to have been about 200 million, this would have equated to 1/20$^{th}$ of the world dying from the plague, even though the deaths appear to have been centered in the Roman Empire. It was, in a word, devastating. The plague ravaged the Roman army while involved a series of major wars with a formidable adversary. It has even been suggested that the plague was largely responsible for the demise of the traditional pagan religions of Europe and for the rise of imported religions, such as Christianity, that had not yet failed to save the world from death, disease, and war (Stark, 1997).

How did the Stoic emperor, Marcus Aurelius, deal with this plague that killed his adoptive brother and perhaps ended up killing Aurelius himself? With equanimity. Or at least that was his goal. In Book IX of the *Meditations*, Aurelius reiterated a point made repeatedly in earlier books: it is not death that should be feared; it is rather the fear of death that one must defend against. Said more familiarly and broadly, we should focus on those things which we can control: namely, our responses to events. Regarding the plague, he questioned the standard belief that people should do all they could to avoid the disease. For Aurelius, it was important to not hide in fear from the plague but continue to live courageously and attend to his responsibilities. His logic was that we all die one day, and given the expanse of cosmic time, dying one hour or fifty years in the future would be virtually the same. Of far greater importance than outliving the plague or the war was living with courage, composure, and clear mindedness; that is, with equanimity. We might say he valued quality of life over quantity of life.

Aurelius' Stoic values inspired him and others to bridle their emotions and to caution against the pursuit of popularity, fame, glory, and noncharacter possessions such as health and wealth. In contrast, however, he also maintained that it is ridiculous to feel guilty for the possessions and privileges that fate has provided. They should be appreciated while present and dismissed when gone—enjoyed as one would the beauty of a cloud or a falling leaf. Aurelius did not argue

that we should seek equanimity by wandering off into the woods, the desert, or the monastery to avoid all temptation. He himself led the Roman empire from the front lines and demonstrated that the goal for the Stoic sage is not to find peace beyond the world, but to live with peace and composure in this world of change and difference.

This is hardly an easy task, and Aurelius recognized the importance of what we might with reservation call moral education. Most of the first book of the *Meditations* was devoted to recounting the positive influence of various teachers who taught him how to live as a sage. It famously begins: "From my grandfather, Verus, I learned good morals and the government of my temper. From the reputation and remembrance of my father, modesty and a manly character. From my mother, generosity and…simplicity in my way of living…" (Aurelius, p. 11). He expressed his gratitude over several pages. Among those mentioned was a man named Rusticus, who Aurelius thanked for sharing the Stoic ideas of Epictetus, a former slave and originator of Stoicism. This is important because Aurelius and other Stoics believed these principles were suited for all excellent people, whether they be a slave or an emperor. The point, indeed, is that we are thrown into circumstances largely not of our own making, and the question is how we make the most of this life in which we find ourselves. The answer provided by Aurelius was rational action and equanimity.

## Engaged Equanimity

For Aurelius, human life is best lived when we are rational, and to be rational is to act in accordance with nature. By understanding and aligning our goals and actions with nature, we swim with the current of the cosmos rather than against it. We will not change nature. We are fully within it. So rather than vainly attempt to control what we cannot and become irrationally upset that nature does not conform to our wishes, we should (i.e., it would be pragmatically advantageous for us to) focus on our proper purview: ourselves. This does not mean passive inaction, however. If we believe a friend or colleague is upset with us, and it is within our power, we should tend to the issue. If the water bill needs to be paid, and it is within our power to do so, we should pay it. We should do our jobs well, be good spouses and parents, and be contributing members of our community. We should not, however, expect that the rest of the world will be as rational as we aim to be. Nor should we become upset when things do not go our way. It is irrational, unproductive, and unbecoming for humans to be unduly upset by things beyond our control.

Aurelius' writings suggest that in his day, as in ours, people were drawn to emotionally engage in drama. In some cases that is fine, but in those cases that require clear thinking for success, we would do better to avoid the emotional additions to our interpretations and assessments. One might, for example, conclude that it would be better for the environment to buy a car with a smaller engine or to take public transportation. If this is the conclusion one reaches, and doing so is in one's power, then that is what should be done. All too often, however, people want to supplement that rational action by demonizing others who think differently. They take to social media and virtue signal. They go into the streets and protest. They engage in identity politics that leads them to experience feelings of hatred for the evil others who see things differently. This provides a certain primitive, emotional thrill: the righteous indignation that has always made propaganda so successful. It is addictive. We come to desire more and more group confirmation and more and more of the feeling of righteous anger we get from the Othering.

This emotional fix comes at the expense of clear-thinking. The Stoic approach offers an alternative to the polarizing effects of the emotion-laden demonizing of others with whom we

disagree. It boils down to thinking differently. Instead of focusing on what others believe or do, the Stoic is careful to look first at one's own personal reactions to make sure they are guided by reason rather than emotion. Rather than say, for example, "the climate is changing, and this is a crisis caused by evil, selfish, and dumb people" the Stoic would think "the climate appears to be changing. How can I ensure I don't fall into emotional fearmongering, and I am not distracted or vexed by things that are beyond my control?" Similarly, rather than say, "covid is killing millions of people, and the crisis is caused by selfish, evil, and dumb people," the Stoic might reckon, "covid is killing millions of people. How can I ensure that I don't fall into emotional fearmongering and become distracted by or engaged with emotional othering?" "What should I do to ensure that this does not negatively affect the simple and abstemious lifestyle that allows me to embrace life with stoic equanimity?" And so on.

Thinking in this way has helped improve my peace and clarity. Because this reflective process is more likely than Othering to afford opportunities for reasoned dialogue, perhaps society would benefit if more people were to take this approach. Stoic equanimity does not require that we stick our heads in the sand or spend our lives disengaged. We can still lead Rome from the front lines. We can live an excellent life despite starting on the lowest rungs of the social ladder. Stoically inclined academics and educators still write and teach.

## Friedrich Nietzsche, Change, and Difference

Thoughtful ethical and moral systems begin with or at least contain an account of the world: a basic ontology. Aurelius, for example, believed that Nature is rationally ordered. From this ontology he surmised that humans are happiest, and societies function most optimally, when nature's lead is followed. Variations of the view that the world is rationally ordered continued to direct western thinking for a millennium and a half beyond Aurelius, until Charles Darwin proposed a different explanation for the order we see in the world. From this new explanation of order were derived new models for ethical reasoning. One such model was the product of Friedrich Nietzsche's thinking.

Nietzsche's model, as illustrated in the will to power, the Ubermensch, and amor fati retained many of Aurelius' contentions. Nietzsche too believed it is beneficial to allow oneself to be guided by nature, that we would do well to bridle emotions (and certainly not extinguish them), and that we should not pursue popularity or popular doctrines. There are substantial differences, however. Key among those is Nietzsche's rejection of the view that the world is rationally ordered and his acceptance of some central tenets of Darwinian evolution. Because of these important ontological shifts, some of the justification for equanimity as understood by Aurelius is lost. In particular, if Darwin and Nietzsche are correct, and the world is not directed by cosmic reason but by an unrelenting drive to change, then equanimous acquiescence can no longer be deemed supremely natural. If evolution rather than timeless reason is the cause of the apparent order, then the *soul* of the world is not Reason. Nietzsche believed that it is the impetus to complexify that most characterizes our world. Nietzsche called this primordial characteristic the will to power. Following this reasoning, to embrace nature no longer requires finding our preordained place. To felicitously follow nature impelled by the will to power, we would instead actively cultivate our own instinct and ability to practice self-overcoming.

This new understanding of the world characterized by growth and change rather than universal reason led Nietzsche to deny the existence of essences and universals. In so doing, he referenced Heraclitus (Nietzsche, 1968, 1996). In the distant and recent past, universals and essences,

the tools of philosophy and religion, were used to ontologically connect the cognitive and physical world. In the ancient ontology, physical humans were bound to the concept 'human' through Plato's essences and forms. This binding was necessary for the cosmos (the physical plus the non-physical world) to be rationally ordered and for everything to have its defined place and purpose. By positing that all humans have the same essence, reason and morality could be said to be universally binding for all humans. Now, however, all of that was gone. Nietzsche is perhaps most famous for having Zarathustra announce the death of God. Equally important, however, was Nietzsche's undermining of the Hegelian Geist (i.e., the Rational world). Following Darwin, equanimity required revision if not abandonment.

**The Will to Power**

Friedrich Nietzsche was an unlikely candidate for the spread of Darwin's views. Nietzsche was at first a Hegelian. This can be seen in his early seminal work from 1872, *The Birth of Tragedy,* where he more or less argued that the Greek tragedies were world-historic because they successfully synthesized the primordial elements of the Dionysian and the Apollonian. The concepts used and the form of his analysis were dialectical in nature. By the time he wrote the second *Untimely Meditations*, in 1874, however, he had come to question the teleology, essentialism, and whiggish moral progressivism inherent in Hegel's rational historicism. In time, Nietzsche incorporated some of Darwin's ideas into his understanding of the world and humans' place in it (Ansell-Pearson, 1997). Equipped with Darwin's naturalistic conception of evolution, Nietzsche was no longer bound to view the world as either eternally rational (Aurelius) or as becoming-rational (Hegel). Instead, he could allow for the influence of randomness and chance, combined with competition and an impetus for growth, to account for the dynamic order apparent in the living world.

In a rational, purposeful world, humans, fire, stones, and maple seeds each have a proper place and purpose. Their meaning and being are united as part of a rational, cosmic whole. In Nietzsche's nominalist naturalism, maple seeds that fall from a tree are not destined to find their proper place. There is nowhere the seed is supposed to be. The seeds are produced and then exposed to the vagaries of life on earth—winds, rains, changing climate, the passing animal that might or might not eat it, and so on. Whether a maple seed lands in an ideal location and grows into a great tree or lands in the middle of a street and withers and dies involves chance. The same is true for human lives. Life's fortunes are not determined by a cosmic rational force, and life does not conform to our made-up conception of fairness. Some are born into ideal situations. Others are not. Neither maples nor humans deserve the lives into which they are born. Someone accustomed to thinking in terms of a purposely ordered world might be inclined to think that this belief leads to nihilism. Nietzsche explained that while someone could come to this conclusion, doing so is not necessary. We may also embrace the fundamental element of chance that is, perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, necessary for the growth in complexity that characterizes the world.

Like Bergson (1907) who followed him, Nietzsche surmised that the doctrine of natural selection is too passive and external to be able to explain all evolution. Darwin explained how the world comes to have the appearance of being purposeful, but he did not provide an explanation for how or why the world practices random mutation and natural selection. Where did these things come from? At times, Nietzsche can be read to have flirted with cosmological, religious, and other teleological explanations for this development. In the end, however, he seemed to settle on a nominalist, internal explanation, which was that the world has a property or characteristic that gives rise to growth and complexity. He called this quality the will to power.

The will to power is best understood as a primordial quality of the physical world. It addresses the age-old question of *why something rather than nothing* by reframing it as *why did the world grow rather than sit eternally inert*? The nominalist answer is *that's just the way the world is*. We have not yet reached the point where we can explain why the world has a growth principle. The best we can do is to recognize that the primary characteristic of the world itself is to grow and complexify. We might think of it as something like the strong nuclear force. Atoms have this quality. If they did not, the universe would not exist as it does. As Nietzsche put it, "The world is will to power—and nothing besides! And you yourselves are also this will to power—and nothing besides" (1968, p.550).

The will to power can also be understood as a forerunner of contemporary complexity and systems theories in that it attempts to theorize the appearance of autopoietic systems such as individual humans and human social systems (Ansell-Pearson, 1997; Capra & Luisi, 2014). Order, reason, and meaning thus understood are neither imposed nor static. Each are always in flux, and they are generated by means-end relationships that develop historically within overlapping systems. In conjunction with this ontology Nietzsche (1887, 1968) built his ethical system, discussed next.

**The Ubermensch and Morality**

In his books *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) and *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), Nietzsche attempted to explain the ethical ramifications of a world without essences and universals. In the *Genealogy*, he argued that ethical systems develop historically (evolve) and that moral sentiments express prejudices rather than universal truths. Nietzsche reduced moral systems to two general types: systems that embrace the world and those that denigrate it. Systems that embrace the world as it is he labeled aristocratic. He suggested that these systems were created by the agential conquering peoples of old who viewed themselves as courageous and capable. Their virtues and values reflected the will to power.

Our contemporary moral sentiments have a different history, however. They can be traced back to groups that found themselves on the losing side of the will to power. To these conquered groups, the world seemed unfair, unjust, and hostile. As such, these groups were driven by psychological pressures to contrive what most today would recognize as Christian/Western morality. To assuage their pride and later to wield a new type of psychological weapon, those people lacking in natural excellence transformed qualities such as patience, meekness, obedience, and humility from the odious burdens of the powerless into virtues had by "good" (i.e., moral) people. Moreover, because the natural world did not conform to this new moral vision, the earth itself was reinterpreted as fallen, evil, flawed, debased, and so on. In consequence, those *worldly people* who enjoyed life and excelled relative to others came to be labeled evil oppressors, sinners, and the like. The key point here is that our moral sentiments are merely prejudices that have evolved over time. They do not express anything universal. Universal human rights, for example are as real as unicorns and angels. They do not exist. They are cognitive tools people use to reach desired ends, and they are wielded precisely to muddle thinking by tapping into prejudice and emotion.

All is in flux, change is constant, and difference is the engine of evolution. Therefore, rather than improve mankind by futilely trying to make everyone equal, Nietzsche espoused the goal of liberating exceptional humans (Ubermenschen) who had been poisoned by the guilt-inducing, anti-nature morality employed to psychologically cripple and subjugate those who lived in accordance with nature and the will to power. The Ubermensch concept was a vision and doctrine intended to

help excellent people overcome the psychological sickness caused by resentment-based/herd morality and to embrace the world and its primordial quality, the will to power. As such, the Ubermensch can serve as the basis for a model of agency for those disinclined to take comfort in the values sanctioned by the herd.

## Amor Fati

The third pillar of Nietzsche's thinking, amor fati, translates as love of fate. It can be understood as a revision of the stoic notion of equanimity—revised to incorporate the new Darwinian worldview. The concept was designed as a counter to heaven and similar utopias. Nietzsche was critical of these utopias because they lead us to denigrate the real world and ourselves as evil, fallen, sinful, and in need of redemption, salvation, and the like. We are all born into a world not of our making and that feels no compulsion to bend to our moral or other principles. Nonetheless, it is our world—and the only real world that we have.

To practice amor fati is to embrace this world and oneself. It is to recognize that we are the product of 46 chromosomes and a throw of the genetic dice: the manifestation of the history of our ancestors as realized in a novel place and time: the culmination of about three and a half billion years of evolution. I am the present tip of this organic trajectory. Had I a different set of chromosomes, I would not be me: i.e., *I* would not exist. Had these exact chromosomes been born in a different place, I would not be me. I am exactly who I am: one tiny instance of life that will be here today and gone tomorrow. Given the fact of my existence, I am faced with a constant choice to love myself and the world or to vainly wish that it was otherwise. It seems best to me to embrace who I am, with all my flaws, deficiencies, and privileges – and to embrace the real world as it is – with disease, death, change, competition, clouds, streams, and flowers. This includes an image of the me that I would like to become, one that requires cultivation. But I recognize that my desire to be that person is not one that I have "chosen." I wish to be that way because nature has created me this way. I am learning to be more comfortable with my difference and with that of others.

## Agential Equanimity

To return to Heraclitus: change is the primary characteristic of the world, and changes are neither inherently good nor bad. To presume that climate change, covid, or inequality are universally bad is irrational, and it distracts from the cognitive poise characteristic of a stoic sage. As educators and scholars, we can model agential equanimity, and offer it as an alternative to the emotional moral sentimentalism characteristic of the present. It is the height of anthropocentric hubris to despise or lament the world that gave birth to you and all other things. Why should the world conform to your expectations and desires? How petty and narcissistic we are when we think in this way.

We can live our lives outraged by the injustice of a world that allows some maple seeds to fall in fertile soil and others to fall on barren ground. However, we might pause to recognize that we are such a seed (one of about one million eggs with which our mother was born), cast by nature into this world to live for a moment, reproduce, and die. Our fate is delimited by the circumstance of being human. This does not include the ability to divide ourselves by splitting in half and regrow, to convert the energy of the sun into our own energy via our skin, to fly, or change skin color; but it does include the ability to reflect and to value and to act in the world.

The ability to think and act with intention (agency) burdens us. It can make us a little crazy. It can make us feel like we are the center of the universe. And yet we are simultaneously guided—almost determined—by deeply primitive emotions that cause us to be anxious, reactionary, and responsive to herd pressures in ways that never make it up to cognitive awareness. The goal of agential equanimity is to help us recognize these facts, to think and act more clearly, and to model this behavior for others. This mode of living is not for everyone, but for some it might be a refreshing alternative. In the final section of the paper, I attempt to apply this doctrine to three issues: climate change, covid, and inequality. I want to explicitly note that a similar analysis could be applied to *crises* discussed along other areas of the political spectrum, such as demographic shifts, the censorship of conservative viewpoints, the loss of traditional values, the plight of Palestinians, and so on.

## Climate Change

The sun has a life expectancy of about 10 billion years. It is currently thought to be 4.6 billion years old. In 5.5 billion years the sun will have burned all its hydrogen. At that point, it will expand and destroy the earth and everything on it. No matter how much I recycle, compost, or grow my own food, the earth will one day cease to exist. No matter how many whales, dolphins, and elephants I save, they will all die, eventually.

These thoughts might sound depressing or nihilistic, but our reaction depends on how we interpret these matters of fact. Hume woke Kant from his dogmatic slumbers by reminding him that we cannot derive an *ought* from an *is:* that it is not *unreasonable* to prefer the destruction of the entire world to getting a paper cut. Hume's insight is that there is no necessary connection between events in the world and how they *should* be characterized. States of the world belong to a different realm of being than do our evaluations of them.

Sometimes those who most closely identify themselves with fighting climate change and naturalism act and think in ways that seem very religious-minded to me. The language, rhetorical devices, and emotion seem to redirect the ancient trope that the world is doomed because of our sins, that the hour is nigh, and so on. It also reminds me of the story Foucault told in *Madness and Civilization*, where he explained how processes and structures can be carried forward from one era and then unwittingly be repurposed for another cause. In particular, he discussed how leper houses were transformed into sanitoriums. The processes, structures, and ways of thinking remained the same, but they were directed toward a new "problem." Is not the message of climate change that humans are sinners in the hands of an angry god who is going to destroy the world if we don't repent today and change our ways? Although we have made amazing technological advances, we seem to be using the same conceptual structures (Johnson, 2017b) we used when we believed the world was created by God: fear, propaganda, emotive language.

Notice that I am not claiming that the climate isn't changing. Nor am I claiming that humans play no significant role in the changing climate. I am only pointing out that the way in which we think and talk about this is steeped in a sentimental moralism that has roots in an irrational fear of change: the very change that has allowed us humans to come to exist. If the cyanobacteria had taken steps to stop climate change (the Great Oxidation Event), there would be no humans here to worry about the currently changing climate. And if we "destroy" the environment, some other organisms will likely look back and be happy we did. Taking the longer view used to introduce this section, it is clear that humans and the earth will, in the future, both cease to exist. It is almost certain that humans will exit the stage long before the flaming, supernova-induced end of the earth

and our solar system. And that's ok. We are not the point of all this, and change is the primary characteristic of the universe. Why do we allow ourselves to get so emotionally worked up about what amounts to changing the linens on the Titanic?

A related point is that the term *anthropogenic climate change* is redundant. The use of this term illustrates the influence of a prior religious worldview. It also suggests that humans are supernatural. (The term makes sense only if we humans somehow transcend nature.) We do not. You and I are fully and completely part of nature. If you will, allow me a personal illustration. My wife and I consider ourselves environmentalists, and we maintain an edible landscape in a .8-acre yard in our small rural town. We compost, keep organic vegetable plots, mixed perennial/annual pollinator garden spots, grow a variety of vines and fruit and nut trees, and keep a couple hens. My goal is to daily eat something we have grown in our own yard. This practice led to an experience which significantly changed my perspective on anthropogenic climate change.

As we have repeatedly observed, the Gulf Fritillary butterfly will deposit her eggs on the beautiful, purple passionflower plant. Once the larvae grow into spiky red-orange caterpillars, mostly in August, they will begin to eat every leaf on the vine. Then, rather than go to a different plant to eat, they will completely consume the plant, including the stem, all the way down to the ground, until nothing is left, save the root/rhizome hiding underground. Witnessing this annual event led me to understand that anthropogenic climate change is completely natural. It is not the case that we evil humans (especially Westerners) strip the world of its resources while other organisms righteously and naturally strike a balance with their environment. We are all the same. We are all driven, though differently, by the primordial will to power. Nature has made each of us (individuals and species) the way we are. The *problem* is that we like to believe humans are unique and inherently different. As a result, we over-esteem our very limited perspective and influence. We forget that we are nothing more than an instance in evolutionary history, that climate collapse is as natural as is climate continuity, and that change is constant.

A different perspective might help us think more clearly. Following Heraclitus, Aurelius, and Nietzsche, we might begin by acknowledging that climate change is inherently neither good nor bad. It just is. Change is always better for some and worse for other species (and individuals within a species). Rather than yell at people for not recycling or fly halfway across the country to deliver a paper on the evils of climate change deniers, we might plant trees that will benefit from the anticipated climate change in our planting zone, for example. I understand that not everyone will go for this. Some seem to relish experiencing the righteous indignation that accompanies doing good and fighting evil, especially when it occurs in a social setting. And that's ok too. Why would I presume that everyone should believe and act as I do? Nature creates people unequally – with different temperaments, instinctive desires, and so on.

## COVID

As the Director of Faculty Development and the Center for Teaching and Learning at my small college, I was on the front lines, so to speak, in helping our faculty switch to a multiple access model for teaching that included online, hybrid, and socially distanced classes. At first, some faculty complained about having to move to an online or hybrid format. *My class can't be taught online* was a phrase I heard several times. Unsurprisingly, in some cases, those who were the most resistant to moving online have also been most resistant to returning to teach face to face.

Most faculty at my institution did a fabulous job, however. They dug in and worked extra hard to make the best of what they, and most students, viewed as a less than ideal situation. As a result, many of us learned a great deal about instructional technology and about teaching more generally. Covid provided us with an unexpected and unwelcomed opportunity to grow. Those who were predisposed to expect change and to deal with it rationally seemed to fare better than those who viewed covid as a world-historic crisis. Seeing the more and less effective ways that people dealt with covid as it related to teaching has only strengthened my appreciation for practicing equanimity.

The world is constantly changing. Humans are born, and in a tick of the cosmic clock, we die. And each of us *must* die in order for the next generations to come along and have their shot at life. Humans have been so successful, recently, at prolonging life and avoiding death that it is easy for us to lose perspective. It is estimated that in 1 AD, the world population was two million. In the five years from 2010 to 2015, the world population *increased by 420 million* to 7 billion and some change – the change being 150x larger than the world population in 1 AD. Probably everyone writing in this issue and reading it has lost someone to covid. That made us sad. But as we look forward, we might recognize that we have been inspired by the stoic equanimity of some of our peers and compatriots: those who have continued to do their jobs well, be excellent, and grow. In contrast, we have been embarrassed by others, who seem to have become irrationally fearful and have focused on the drama rather than the task at hand. One of the more unexpected but welcome sights for me has been seeing the young college students take up the torch for equanimity and develop a healthy skepticism in response to the mass hysteria they have witnessed over the last couple of years.

## Inequality

Like climate change, inequality is perfectly natural. Difference is both the result and catalyst of evolution. Unfortunately, however, moral sentimentalism, derived from religious thinking, dupes most into believing that inequality is bad, that the US is bad, and that we all must be redeemed from our sinful ways. What would happen if we thought more clearly and less sentimentally, and we recognized that inequality is neither good nor bad?

It is an old idea that we are on the verge of the end of history: that God is about to end history, that the Geist has become self-aware, or that the equalizing revolution is just around the corner. Colonialism, industrialization, the information age, and overpopulation have all brought humans closer together in many ways. But we should not be fooled into believing that the forces of evolution and nature have ceased to function. We have perhaps largely evaded selection pressures for the moment, but this is just a blip. In time, new groups/races will surely form. There will be a series of unforeseen, cascading calamities that lead to geographic or other forms of separation/isolation, and the very real and natural differences between the different groups will lead to speciation. This is neither good nor bad universally, but the development of difference is indeed natural.

In some circles, the equality/inequality binary is as strong as the salvation/sin is in others. For many it is taken as an article of faith that people are essentially equal and that we should strive for equal outcomes. But why should we presume this? Why *must* we? There is no logical necessity. Perhaps it is because a cultural industry has developed around this that allows people

to feel like they are fighting for universal good and against universal evil. As with sin, we can always "find" inequality if we look for it, and so there is plenty of work to do in the moralizing trade—taking natural desires and differences and pathologizing them. Rather than lament inequality, however, why not celebrate difference? Rather than fear difference and unequal outcomes, why not accept them as perfectly natural? What would this look like as a different path forward—whereby people embrace the world as it is rather than denigrate it for not emulating our made-up concepts? For me, these are not rhetorical questions. They are starting points for reflection designed to help me think more clearly and to practice intellectual humility and openness. This helps keep me from being dragged this way or that by popular, morally-infused presuppositions. Again, this approach will not suit all temperaments or histories. Given our natural differences, how could it?

## Conclusion

Throughout time, people have feared difference and change, and when faced with these have often positioned the other as evil and have lamented that the end is near. I commend the editors of this special edition. Instead of calling for the demonization of those who see things differently, they have invited us to enjoin a dialogue so that new and different paths forward might be considered. In this essay, I have used Heraclitus, Marcus Aurelius and Friedrich Nietzsche to present a naturalistic model for agency that is understood in contrast to emotional-moralistic approaches, which I have argued have no philosophical grounding in a world not governed by God or Reason. In so doing, I have attempted to refresh the stoic principle of equanimity with Nietzschean concepts that were derived after the shift toward a Darwinian-inspired worldview. I call this approach to dealing with change agential equanimity, and I suggest that given innate human difference, this is a doctrine for some but certainly not all.

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