A RE-READING OF THE INTERFACE BETWEEN SATIRE AND PHILOSOPHY**

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INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that there is a fundamental convergence between satire and philosophy; particularly, as it concerns the morality or behavior of individuals in the society, which incidentally is the domain of Roman satire. Moral philosophy like satire, scrutinizes the conduct of individuals in the society. That aspect of ethical thinking that deals with norms of right or wrong is known as normative ethics.[1] The issues in this paper bear a close relevance to the issues of assessment of character and the behavior, which satire, whether in ancient Roman society, or modern times is concerned with. The satirist's main concern is the effect of actions on human well-being, an idea which, privileges consequentialism, an aspect of ethics that emphasizes the end result of an action. In other words, the utilitarian also bothers about the usefulness of an action as it impacts on the moral health of society.

Generally, when a satirist puts pen on paper he attempts to set a standard of behaviour for society. The issues he discusses assume a moral dimension since the satirist usually sets out to point out the right or wrong attitude in peoples' behaviour. In ancient Rome, especially the period between the 2nd and 4th century BC, some moral writers cum poets, interpreted the behaviours of their contemporaries either in the light of the *mos maiorum* (ancestral customs) or its agreement with the temperament of the *res publica* (the affairs of State) and placed this vis-à-vis the philosophical commonplaces. This is not to say that some of these moral issues are not naturally categorized, for instance, (sexual excesses or

homosexuality), however, any act that falls short of these standards were condemned as immoral and therefore a disruption of the social order.[2]

Roman satire emerged under such conservative intellectual climate and its attendant atmosphere of slackness in morals. Under such circumstances, it was germane for these moralists to develop their themes around Greek philosophical commonplaces. Lucilius, the inventor of Roman moral diatribes, who began his career in the 2nd century BC, criticized the morally decrepit society as well as the politicians/public figures of his time, defending his patron Scipio Aemilianus, whom he described as *virtus ipsa (virtue itself)* against attacks from his political rivals. The montage of activities of the upper class elite and some foreigners, Greeks and Egyptians, as well as the scathing picture of life in Rome given by Umbricius, on his way to Cumae, in (Juv. *Sat. Three)* are seen in the light of the foregoing perspective.

Again, these Roman satirists were aware of the efforts of the post-Aristotelian philosophers to prop up a world that lost initiative in almost all spheres of life. Notable among these were the Cynics, the Epicureans and the Stoics, whose attempts steered individual energies towards the "discipline of the passions, and a constant awareness that wealth, power and sensual delight have no bearing on true contentment."[3] Niall Rudd observes further that Panaetius' rejection of orthodox beliefs, especially in issues such as survival, divination and world cycles, and his advocacy of man's practical duties in society, endeared the stoic system of old to the practical Roman mind. So between 39 and 31 century BC, when Horace produced his satires, “the distinction between the main philosophical schools had become blurred at a number of points.”[4] Consequently, there was a measure of freedom in the interpretation of some of these philosophical doctrines, as is evident in the works of Horace.

Incidentally, Juvenal's works do not appear to have been much influenced by this wave of freedom from the philosophical schools; probably because he wrote much later than Horace, or even Persius - who was a stoic moralising satirist. It may further be stated that Juvenal shows less of this influence, due to what U. Knoche calls the absence of an ideal based on philosophical principles. Moreover, the satirist himself does not appear to have been involved in philosophical debates. But the treatment of his themes reveal a

disposition hinged on practical experiences and an unshakeable belief in the Roman tradition.[5]

From the literature, evidence abound, especially in the works of Lucilius and Horace, as well as other satirists illustrating the blending of satiric issues and philosophy in their thematic development. Fragments from books 18 and 19 of Lucilius' *Satires*, reveal his use of two related themes of *memphimoiria and philoploutia* (discontent and greed), both of which were common place in contemporary Greek philosophical schools. The theme of avarice, for instance, is given an antithetical interpretation in the works of both satirists to the effect that this vice, which manifests in youth and middle age, continues in old age. This position is against the false excuse that such an acquisitive tendency, which manifests in undue quest for material wealth, intended for a comfortable retirement. In *Fragment 557,* Lucilius, for instance, asserts: "wrinkled old men search for all the same gainful occupations"(rugosi passique senes eodem omnia quaerunt). Further on, in *Fragment 561,* although he does not mention the ant, as in Horace, he nevertheless advises the avaricious man to store up gains for use at home, when the unfriendly winter, old age, arrives.

G. C. Fiske tells us that Horace's first satire was an attempt to fuse two favorite themes of the Cynic-Stoic popular philosophy, albeit unsuccessfully. And quite in the footprints of Lucilius, he settles for discontent with one's lot in life (*memphimoiria)* and the love of riches or avarice (*philoplotia)*.[6] In a paraphrase of Heinze's notes on Horace's (*Satire* 1. 1.16) by Rudd, we have the following evidence from the writings of a Sophist of the second century AD, Maximus of Tyre, corroborating the views we have expressed above:

> you could see the farmer envying the Townsman, and public figures complaining of their own situation and envying the peasant. You could hear the civilian expressing his envy of the soldier and vice versa. And if a god, as in a play made each actor exchange roles with his fellow, the very same people would yearn for their former ways of life. so hard a creature to please is man.[7]

Another view on discontent, this time much later than Horace, is that found in one of the Pseudo-Hippocratic letters (also cited in the works of Duncan.1990). From the letters it is shown that the vogue in popular philosophy was to associate discontent with greed. Writing *On Self-Sufficiency*, Bion (as quoted by S.A. Braund) made the following observation about discontent and greed: "but we are unable to remain satisfied with what we have, since we spend a lot on luxuries."[8] Here he depicts the discontented man as insatiable. This thought is captured in the works of Horace, when he directs the following rhetorical question to Maecenas saying:

> Qui fit, Maecenas, ut nemo, quam sibi sortem seu
> ratio dederit seu fors obiecerit, illa contentus vivat,
> laudet diversa sequentis?[9]

The English rendition of the above query goes thus :

> Why is it, Maecenas, that no one is ever quite happy, with the life he has chosen or stumbled upon, and never abides by it happily, but loves to praise instead all who do something else![10]

Here, Horace is merely adopting the well-worn lines of Greek popular philosophy, mainly of Cynic-Stoic origin, wondering aloud to Maecenas, why there should be such inconsistency among humans. He is also alarmed at man's foolishness, excesses and the tendency for humans to manifest such insatiable acquisitive tendencies in the pursuit of material wealth. Earlier he had presented complaints by some human types, who grumble about their jobs, in discontent, and envy of the other person. He expresses his thoughts as follows:

> … nemo, ut avarus, se probet ac' potius laudet diversa sequentis? [11]
> (… is no one, on account of greed, to be content with his own situation, and is everyman to envy, instead of pursuing other ways of life?)[12]

Using this theme of greed and discontent, which also appears in Lucilius *Fragment 557*, Horace establishes a middle point between the two vices of *memphimoiria and philoplotia.* In lines 92-107 of his (first Satire) , he gives a Roman colouring to the Greek

philosophical commonplace in condemnation of discontent and avarice, with the aid of Ummidius, representing the *avarus,* (the greedy) (line 108), and advises the miser, whose acquisitiveness knows no limit, saying:

> est modus in rebus, sunt certi denique fines, quos ultra citraque nequit consistere rectum.[13]
> (There is a certain proportion in everything. There are, in short, definite limits, and if you step outside them on this side or on that you cannot possibly be right).[14]

Horace's adaptation of this subject, dove-tails, as it were, into another theme, where he prescribes the *media res,* or natural limits, as the happy medium. This idea of moderation is further developed in the second Satire of Book One, under the sub-theme of adultery. Here, it is instructive to mention that Horace's use of these themes, were influenced by their formulation into Latin satire by Lucilius, as found in *Fragments* of books 27 and 30. Lucilius also established the folly of the *avarus*, through examples (995/1092); these *modus* of the older satirist became the backdrop of the latter's presentation of the same themes to his readers.

Still on the theme of avarice, Horace again in *Sa*t. 2.3 adopts a Stoic philosophical common place, to show the folly of an *avarus*. Here Stertinius, representative of a stoic sage, preaches to Damnsippus, (an interlocutor), citing concrete examples to illustrate the stoic doctrine, that, 'All fools are mad'. He goes further to make the point that the *avarus*, among other vices is mad. Thus in lines 84-157, he begins with the tale of Staberius who forced his heirs, 'to engrave the sum of his wealth on his tombstone', illustrating this idea in the following way:

> If a man buys up harps and puts them all in a warehouse/But doesn't like music and is no devotee of the arts; --- he deserves to be called deranged and goofy.

Earlier, Damasippus had defined the implication of the stoic doctrine as follows: 'whoever is swept blindly through life, and by unbalanced folly is kept/In the dark as to truth, is by stoics full witless cleft'.(82)

Horace presents in addition various types of insanity in the diatribe (2.3. 74-76). After lines 64, the doctrinaire Stertinius gives the *exempla* of types of insanity caused by avarice. In (*Sa*t. 2.3. 82*ff*) he declares as follows:

> danda est ellebori multo pars Maxima avaris, Nescio an Anticyram ratio illis Destinet omnem (it is no use clamouring for hellebore when your flesh is already sick and bloated. Nip the disease in the bud.)

A dose of the greatest panacea for diseases or 'hellebore' was recommended for the avaricious; indeed, reason would dedicate all Anticyra's supply to them; meaning in effect that of all fools and evil men, the *avarus,* are in the majority. The satirist appears to introduce a twist in his categorization of the *avarus,* in (*Sat*.2.3. 94-99), with the story of Staberius, he brings in a fine irony to demonstrate the spiritual poverty of a man who sees excellence only in the possession of wealth, an *exemplum* which Staberius represents in stoic doctrinaire standing: Staberius is mad, and same goes for any individual whose behaviour goes in the opposite extreme (*Sat*. 2.3: 99-102). But only the stoic sage possesses this criterion for excellence, whereas the vast majority of humanity is insane, since they, that is, (the majority mankind) have a desire for wealth. The argument appears sealed on this universal application of the stoic paradox, in (*Sa*t 2.3. 120ff) as follows:

> nimirum insanus paucis videatur, eo quod maxima pars hominum morbo iactatur eodem. (Doubtless he seems insane to a few, since a greater part of mankind is afflicted with the same disease).

In the S*atyricon,* Petronius' tirades are put in the mouth of individuals whose character vividly represents such vices in the society. These human types thus become the satirist's mirror of particular vices and folly. This style differs from that of his predecessors and successors, who use pseudonyms of individuals in the society guilty of such practices. Petronius does not mention particular vices, rather in a sophisticated way; he portrays individuals exhibiting such depraved behavior in society. For instance, it is Eumolpus' bad poem and Agamemnon's that portray bad poetry and a lament for the decline of literature and the perverse nature of these writers. These, though questionable

characters, a debauched poet and pretentious rhetorician, respectively, are used by the satirist to express his anger against this decline.

This informs Petronius' presentation of the themes *memphimoiria* and *philoploutia* such that rather than a moralistic portrayal, he uses Trimalchio, in the "Cena" (Trimalchio's dinner-party), a human representative of the myriads of depravities of the freedmen class, along with other foreigners. The two major classes ridiculed are the ex-slaves, particularly in the "Cena"(dinner-party) and women throughout the *Satyricon.* These ex-slaves and their friends have an acquisitive tendency, which is satisfied in virtually all Roman ways and means. Against all sanctions, these *nouveaux* riches do not disdain to flaunt their ostentation in public.

Petronius further criticizes the foolishness and insensitivity of these individuals, in their display of discontent and greed, as he beams a search light on them, through the eyes of another disreputable character -Encolpius, who is in a way morally superior, to those he criticized. The *cena trimalchionis* (Trimalchio's dinner-party) is hosted by a character - Trimalchio whose lavish dinner-party betrays the host's inordinate ostentation and avarice. Trimalchio's acquisitiveness is typical of his ex-slaves class the satirist tells us as he flaunts his estates, before his guests at table, with such blithe attitude and pomposity:

> … sed nunc quidquid ad salivam facit, in suburbano nascilur eo, quod ego adhuc non novi. dicitur confine esse Taraciniensibus et Tarentinis. nunc coniungere agellis siciliam volo, ut cum Africam libuerit ire, per meos fines navigem.[15]
>
> (Anything here which makes your mouths water is grown on a country estate of mine which I know nothing about as yet. I believe it is on the boundary of Terracina and Tarentum. Just now I want to join up all Sicily with properties of mine, so that if I take a fancy to go to Africa, I shall travel through my own land).[16]

The uniqueness of Petronius' treatment of this theme is its unconventionality, yet it is as effective as the Horatian stoic moralising common places. He is saying,while mocking this class of individuals that in addition to their avarice and discontent with life, they

exhibit other attributes of moral degeneracy; such as the ridiculous nature of their conversation, replete with slangs and solecisms. These ex-slaves are vainglorious, vulgar and illiterate, and have failed in their attempts at imbibing the Roman culture. Petronius,' presentation of this class is replete with mock irony, particularly, when Trimalchio boasts about: his opulent houses, his outlandish culinary tastes, and makes reference to his estates, among others. Incidentally, Petronius does not indulge in the Horatian style of moralizing rhetoric, or on the stoic paradox about the miser. But equally effective, is his presentation of Trimalchio and his friends to the reader, via the eyes of an equally debauched fool - Encolpius. He echoes the Horatian illustration of the story of Staberius which demonstrates the spiritual poverty of a man who sees excellence only in the possession of wealth.

Persius was a stoic moralist. He wrote from a slightly peculiar situation from his compatriots. Unlike Horace or Juvenal he lived a sheltered life, insulated by wealth, resulting from his family's fortune. Consequently, he does not approach issues from the perspective of life's realities. But his approach is based on experience acquired from formal education in stoic moral philosophy. Even though, he affects on occasions the 'Juvenalian fire'; lampooning with a sanctimonious mien, his is a highly capricious and textbook based morality. Persius' six satires portray the pedantic stamp of a stoic doctrinaire. And his lines flow with the speed of a typical Horatian moralizing rhetoric buoyed in thinly disguised satire. Among other themes, *Satire V*, lines 52*ff* dwells on the diversity of human desires:

> mille hominum species et rerum discolor usus; velle suum cuique est, nec voto vivitur uno.[17]
> (Men are of a thousand kinds, and diverse are the colours of their lives. Each has his own desires; no two offer the same prayers).[18]

When Persius sermonizes on the need to be in control of these desires, he singles out further-on in lines 104*ff* the core theme of greed, and asks rhetorically:

> inque luto fixum possis transcendere nummum/nec guttu sorbere salivam Mercurialem?(can you pass by a coin sticking in the mud, without gulping down your saliva in your greed for treasure?)[19]

Man's acquisitive tendency, he condemns in such brutally descriptive language. Earlier he had asked, 'are you moderate in your desires, modest in your establishment and

kindly to your friends? Can you now close your granaries, and now again throw them open?'(110-112). It is only the man that can beat his chest with a 'yes' response to the above that can truly be called wise and free from slavery to avarice. The *avarus* is further satirized in lines 132*ff* in a dramatic-dialogue with Avarice as interlocutor;

> mane piger stertis. "surge," inquit Avaritia",
> you are snoring lazily in the morning, "up you get",
> says Avarice.

although Horace *et al* made much of the insanity sub-theme in their application of the stoic paradox on avarice, that all acquisitive individuals were not just fools but insane, Persius however does not only imply that but he also presents the *avarus* in his frenzy for materialism (*Sat*. v 140ff):

> Iam pueris pellem succinctus et Oenophorum aptas;
> "Oculis ad navem!"(And now you are all ready,
> piling packing-cases and wine jars on to your
> slaves. "Quick aboard!" you cry)[20]

Insinuating the insane frenzy with which he scuttles over the Aegean in a big ship in search of wealth; his message however borders on the need to free oneself from slavery to such vices, which bedevil man. This line of argument is obviously a deliberate avoidance of a repetition of that of his predecessors, and equally in line with the stoic paradox. There is a skillful transitioning from one scenario of manifestation of greed to another. But beneath the attack on this vice, is another, apparently philosophically linked -ambition. Persius presents this stoic category through some somewhat leading questions; especially in the section starting from line (140).

> quid petis? et nummi, quos hic quincunce modesto
> nutrieras, peragant avidos sudore deunces ?(What
> would you be at? Is it that the money which you
> have been nursing at a modest five percent shall go
> on until it sweats out an exorbitant eleven?)[21]

The stoics were habitually categorizing and systematizing different ethical concepts and definitions as subdivision, of either the *summum bonum*(the highest good) or the *ultimum malum* (highest vice), and to use them as bases for commentary. Therefore Persius, in consonance with this practice introduces this category of stoic ethics into the discussion on avarice.

According to the stoic categorisation of vices, acquisitiveness overlaps with discontent. Persius does not exempt this tendency in humanity. The Discontented has difficulty in making up his mind on what to do. Rather than present scenes of a discontented individual as in the Horatrian instance, Persius uses the rhetorical device, which incidentally is an equally effective, line 154*ff*:

> En quid agis? duplici in diversum scinderis hamo subeas alternus oportet ancipiti obsequio dominos, alternus oberres. What are you to do? Two hooks are pulling you in different ways; with wavering allegiance you must needs submit to each master by turns, and by turns break away from him.[22]

The attack on discontent is well illustrated by the expression, s*cinderis hamo (*torn apart by hooks). The point being made by the satirist is that the individual is 'torn apart,' this way and that way by discontent. The object of discontent as it were, both securing/hooking its claws into him, so that he 'wavers', and in this state of uncertainty, he seeks to satisfy the two 'masters', having been enslaved by them. Persius thus drives the point home on the need for freedom from slavery to vice. Of course, only the stoic sage is free. Cornutus, as he informs us earlier in this same satire, is most equipped to stave off this tendency.

Reading through Juvenal's pledge in the first few satires, one would have thought that the tempo of his indignation would be sustained throughout the work. But after what looks like a spent *saeva indignation (savage anger),* of the earlier satires, Juvenal in *Satire XIV,* seem a sobered moralist. The bitterness of the first three satires has given way to what appears like a Horatian stoic styled moralising. Indeed his *sermones,* because that's what he presents in this satire, is based partly on avarice. One would have thought that, Juvenal would have presented a better parody of this vice, had he included it in his earlier writings. This theme is incidentally subsumed in an opener on parental *exempla* as a potent educational instrument. The satirist starts out with a caution for fathers to be mindful of the things they do in the presence of their children.

> Let fathers therefore see to it that no foul sight be seen, no foul word be heard, within their doors.[23]

These lines somehow do not echo our typical Juvenal but it is Juvenal alright, trying to sound Horatian. This incidentally is a launching pad into his sermon proper on avarice. Unlike his predecessors he has chosen to blame the father for his son's acquisitive tendency; since according to him, it is the one and only vice which the young practice unwillingly. Before you wonder why he is doing this, he continues: “fathers take double pains, both by precepts and example, to instill the love of money in their sons.”[24]

According to Juvenal, they do this by economising their wealth, so that the son may become wealthy when they are dead. In the lines following we catch a glimpse of the old Juvenal, when he says: “in the hurry to be rich no law is /regarded, no crime stops the way.” As usual, he sees avarice in terms of its criminality and morality. His attack is measured to the extent that it disrupts the old order: "Foreign purple has banished the hardy contentment of the old Marsian and Hernican heroes, and opened the door to all villainy!"[25] And this is the crux of it all, the influence of foreign luxury, and its effect on Rome and her noble citizenry. Juvenal is irked by the insanity of men braving all odds after a 'pile of cash', all this not for their livelihood, *but just to store up little pieces of gold and silver stamped with tiny images*. For all this frenzy, he comes to the same conclusion as his predecessors and the paradoxy-stoic that such a man is fit only for a mad-house.

Although, he in the earlier satires sounded so aggrieved about his inability to make enough money for the equestrian station, Juvenal still has a good sense enough to recommend a panacea for the the *avarus:*

> If you ask how much money should suffice, I could
> bid you have enough to keep out cold and hunger.[26]

Gone is the Juvenal that pile up tirades on humanity, without as much as a single word of advice. But of course, the tone of this advice is nothing akin to that of Juvenal, after all, the typical Juvenal has always frowned at commerce; his grouse against foreigners in Rome has always been about their enterprising attitude; the practice of doing business, with no scruples. This theme is also touched on in his account of the scramble for the patron’s *sportula* or dole in the opening satire. In *Sa*t. 1.95*ff* he attacks the *avaritia (the greed)* of both patron and client; where the Roman magistrate is seen queuing up at the door of a patron, along with the poor client for their 25 asses.[27] The satirist is also irked at

the disgraceful inversion of Roman values, when the rich *liberti (ex-slave),* who has no rights of citizenship, jumps the queue to deprive the poor and humble client of the *sportula.* It would therefore not have crossed his republican mind that there was nothing immoral or criminal about taking risks in a business venture. But then, this line of thought can only make sense to the mind of a modern reader.

Conclusion

In conclusion, satire in antiquity exploited the long moralistic tradition of Roman culture, in its criticism. The Roman audience's sensibilities were attuned to Roman traditionalistic morality, hence it is not necessary to dispute the facts alleged by an angry satirist. No doubt some Greeks were uncommonly successful in getting ahead in Rome, in addition to myriads of other moral problems, but what counts, however, is not the sporadic facts of moral degradation, but the way the satirist reacts. The satirists' indignation insists that morality is crucially relevant. The satirist repeatedly appeals to the venerable moralistic tradition of Rome, lamenting that it has fallen into disuse, but he is usually not taken seriously.

ENDNOTES

[1]W. K. Frankena and J. T. Granrose, *Introductory Readings in Ethics.* New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1974, p. 1.

[2]G. Juvenal, *The Sixteen Satires*. P. Green (trans.). New York: Penguin Books, 1974, Sat. 1:100*ff*.

[3]N. Rudd, "The Names in Horace's Satires," in *Classical Quarterly*, vol. 10, 1979, pp. 161-162.80.

[4]N. Rudd, *The Satires of Horace: A study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966, p.126.

[5]U. Knoche, *Roman Satire.* E. S. Ramage (trans). Bloomington : Indiana University Press, p. 5.

[6]G. C. Fiske, *Lucilius and Horace: A Study in the Classical Theory of Imitation*. London: Greenwood Press, 1971, p. 12.

[7]U. Rudd, op. cit., p. 211.

[8]Bion as quoted by S. A. Braund, "Satires of Book One," *Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics.* London: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 21.

[9] *Satires of Horace*

[10] *Horace: satire and Epistles and Persius: Satires*, (trans.) Niall R. 1987, Penguin. Books**.** *Sat.* 1.1.

[11] ibid. op. cit. (*Sat*.1.1.108*ff)*

[12]Nial R. op. cit. p.210.

[13] ibid.op.cit. (*Sat.*1.109)

[14] ibid. Nial R.p.210.

[15] Petronius, *The satyricon* (trans.) M. Heseltine. Loeb Classical Library.Harvard University Press .London, 1987.p. 48.

[16] M. Heseltine, op. cit.p.49.

[17] Juvenal and Persius trans. G.G.Ramsay. Loeb Classical Library: London .Heinemann, 1987.p.372.

[18] ibid.G.Ramsay, p.373.

[19] op. cit.pp.354-355.

[20] ibid.p.355.

[21] ibid.p.356.

[22] ibid.p.384

[23] ibid.p.356-357.

[24]ibid. p.358.

[25] G. Ramsay, op. cit.p.8.

[26] ibid.p.10.

[27] The stipend given to the poor client, each visit by his patron.

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