

Original Articles

A reconceptualization of the term ataraxia based on its origins

Una reconceptualización del termino ataraxia basada en sus orígenes

Information

Dates:

Received: 17/10/2025

Accepted: 16/11/2025

Published: 31/12/2025

Correspondence:

Jaime Bravo Dector
alosthar@hotmail.com

Conflict of interests:

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Funding:

No funding received.

Autorship

Jaime Bravo Dector¹

¹Independent researcher, Mexico.

How to cite this paper

Bravo Dector, J. (2025). A reconceptualization of the term ataraxia based on its origins. *Revista de Cultura de Paz*, 9, 214–232. <https://doi.org/10.58508/cultpaz.v9.257>

RESUMEN

Pocos términos han sido tan severamente desfigurados en Europa como el de ataraxia. Inicialmente, los pensadores helénicos crearon todo un fenómeno filosófico en torno a este concepto con interpretaciones propias, más o menos acertadas, pero manteniendo un significado relativamente aceptable. Siglos después, cuando en el continente europeo empezaron a surgir nuevos planteamientos filosóficos y sociales, el concepto de ataraxia fue cuestionado por quienes deseaban recuperar las pasiones reprimidas durante un largo periodo de oscurantismo. Varios filósofos atacaron este concepto hasta mediados del siglo pasado, cuando empezaron a aparecer críticas particularmente vehementes en el campo de la sociología en las que la ataraxia pasó a ser equiparada a la apatía sociopolítica, aunque esto sea sencillamente absurdo. El presente análisis, por tanto, se plantea tres objetivos: primero, explicar el origen y la degradación del término ataraxia; segundo, abordar los ataques a este término; y, tercero, reformular la ataraxia para un mundo moderno para esbozar la naturaleza de la posible interacción entre una población y un gobierno que existen ambos en estado de ataraxia.

Palabras clave: ataraxia, necesidades humanas universales, filosofía helénica, felicidad.

ABSTRACT

Few terms have been so severely disfigured in Europe as that of ataraxia. Initially, Hellenic thinkers created an entire philosophical phenomenon around this concept with their own, more or less successful, interpretations, but maintaining a relatively acceptable meaning. Centuries later, when new philosophical and social approaches began to emerge on the European continent, the concept of ataraxia was questioned by those who wished to recover the passions repressed during a long period of obscurantism. Several philosophers attacked this concept until the middle of the last century, when particularly vehement criticisms began to appear in the field of sociology in which ataraxia came to be equated with sociopolitical apathy, though this is simply absurd. The present analysis, therefore, posits three objectives: first, to explain the origin and degradation of the term ataraxia; second, to address the attacks on this term; and, third, to reformulate ataraxia for a modern world to sketch the nature of the possible interaction between a population and a government that both exist in a state of ataraxia.

Keywords: ataraxia, universal human needs, Hellenic philosophy, happiness.

Origin and development of ataraxia

The concept of ataraxia was introduced into Europe more than 2,300 years ago, by a group of thinkers who followed Alexander the Great in his military campaign against India. Those figures, heavily influenced by the gymnosophists, formed an entire philosophical school of their own. This explains how the concept of ataraxia reached the European continent and became a fundamental element of Hellenic philosophy. Pyrrho of Elis, for example, took the concept and adapted it for his own philosophical vision called skepticism, which raised as its main point that the truth does not exist and that, even if it did, human beings would be incapable of knowing it. In this case, ataraxia is achieved when people “no longer become confused by distracting and limiting beliefs [but] can now be appreciated for what they were, thus opening the way to a new, non-dogmatic way of life” (Kuzminski, 2010: 2). This is achieved through *epokhe*, understood basically as the impossibility of knowing what is definitively correct. For example, if one wished to define the correct culture that all humans should adopt, it would not be possible to determine the parameters by which something would be judged as correct or not.

In this order of ideas, one would have to evaluate which variables are correct and which are beneficial in the short, medium, and long term, as well as those that might prove harmful. However, even after doing so, it would be difficult to define if the combination chosen is really the best one. Should one choose a culture that provides greater wealth, one with better at environmental conservation, one that encourages a more contemplative life, or one that offers unlimited pleasures? Each one entails costs and implicit sacrifices. Which culture would have the lowest cost for people compared to its intrinsic benefits? For the skeptics, the answer would be elusive, so committing to one path would be an error. The same would apply to a religion, economic system, or other entity that requires a single, definitive, dogmatic choice. Thus, for the skeptic, the best path is non-choice, suspending judgement, taking nothing for granted, to achieve pure consciousness and, hence, transcendence. The best known Greek influence for the skeptic is Socrates.

For the Stoic tradition, founded by Zeno of Citium, ataraxia was the result of living with an understanding of destiny as something ineluctable, but that can be overcome through the use of reason that leads to a state of imperturbability of being and spirit (Long, 1984). It was also understood as a “mind undisturbed by violent passions, a citadel, and man’s safest fortress in which to take refuge” (Marco Aurelio, 1977). For the followers of Epicurus, in contrast, pleasure resides in happiness, not the happiness that derives from perversion and disequilibrium but, rather, that which flows with life, the senses, and the joy of one’s own body, all of which can produce a condition of tranquility and serenity. It is only in this way that ataraxia can be achieved, as freedom from mental and physical suffering (Lledó, 1996; Pallathadka, 2020).

The concept of ataraxia has never been indifferent to European philosophy, but the rejection of Epicurus by religious power groups of his time and later ones imposed a censorship that affected not only writings that referred to religion and its main precepts, but to the entire corpus of his teachings, including ataraxia. All reinterpretations subsequent to that rejection were, necessarily, in detriment of conserving his original writings, of which very few remains. For this reason, we depend on the narrations and interpretations of others to understand his philosophy in depth. One of the few documents preserved is his *Epistle to Menoeceus*, where Epicurus explained pleasure as the condition in which the body does not suffer and the soul is not troubled. The first element is easy to understand from the perspective of theories of needs; that is, when all basic needs, such as health, clothing, shelter, food, and water, are satisfied, the body no longer suffers.

And since pleasure is the first natural good, it follows that we do not seek any pleasure, but in certain cases despise many pleasures when they result in greater pain. On the other hand, there are many sufferings that we consider preferable to pleasures, when they give us greater pleasure after having endured them for a long time. Therefore, all pleasure, by its very nature, is a good, but all pleasure is not desirable. Likewise, all pain is evil, but we should not necessarily run away from all pain. Therefore, all things must be appreciated by a prudent consideration of the advantages and inconveniences they afford. Indeed, in some cases we treat good as evil, and in others evil as good (Epicurus, 1982: 95),

In his *Epistle*, Epicurus (1982) delved into this issue by distinguishing between natural and vain desires and, within the former, between those that are of immediate coverage and those that are not. Here, the difference between universal human needs and the way in which they are satisfied is taken up again, as is the topic of the desires that are acquired though there is no real need to satisfy them. Epicurus also pointed out that those desires that legitimately arise from a lack that must be satisfied may include a variety of needs, such as survival, physical and mental health, and, of course, happiness. Once these needs have been satisfied, the rest cease to be necessary.

The pleasure generated by satisfying these needs is not just valid, but truly desirable. In that sense, Epicurus sees it as an end. He also referred to the disturbances of the soul, focusing on certain, very specific ones, such as the fear of the gods based on the idea of absolute creation and destruction, and the fear of death. To solve this, Epicurus affirmed that in death there is only nothingness, and where there is nothingness, there is nothing to fear. When humans comprehend this, they will also understand that they are responsible for themselves, so they can achieve true free will to find happiness. This, he concludes, is what underlies ataraxia (Lucrecio, 1983). Ataraxia, then, is achieved when those things that produce pleasure –friendship, love, security,

recognition, among others– are obtained. If acquired together, the person will experience a state of peace and tranquility.

For Aristotle, reaching that state is the path to happiness, though his vision stipulated intermediate and ultimate ends, the former being the means to obtain the latter, which are the ends actually sought. For this Macedonian philosopher, the “perfect” is what is chosen for itself, never for another reason, desire, or search. One example is happiness:

(...) for we choose it for its own sake and never for anything else, while honors, pleasure, intelligence, and all virtues, we truly desire for themselves (since we would desire all these things, even if no advantage resulted from them), but we also desire them because of happiness, for we think that thanks to them we will be happy. On the other hand, no one seeks happiness for these things, nor for any other in general (Aristotle, , 1994: 9).

Given these different points of view regarding the central issue, it seems that the Hellenic currents had contradictory positions on ataraxia, though this view could be misguided. For Hirschberger (1997), Epicureanism is closer to Stoicism than one might think since, despite having different approaches:

(.) *εποχή* is linked to the ideal of imperturbability (*αταραξία*) of the Epicureans, and to the impassibility (*ἀπάθεια*) of the Stoics (.). By this we also see what kind of pleasure it is that Epicurus proposes in his hedonism. He understands by pleasure the absence of pain and the release of disturbances in the soul (*Αταραξία*), the peace and tranquility of the spirit.

Marx (1971) agreed with the Epicurean vision in accepting the proposal of free will and, hence, the notion of an atheistic ethic. Furthermore, he (1971: 45) defined a specific vision of a contemplative attitude toward life, that he posed as ataraxia:

In the same way, the end of action is dispensation, flight from pain and anguish, ataraxia. Therefore, good consists in removal of evil, and pleasure in the exclusion of pain. Finally, wherever abstract individuality appears in its supreme freedom and autonomy, its totality, the being from which it separates is logically all being.

So, while for Epicurus ataraxia is the ideal of a happy life for the individual who understands a treatment in accordance with nature, for Marx (1971) it is not possible to achieve complete ataraxia if it does not encompass all people. In this regard, Ambrosini (2016: 44) mentioned that:

Marx places Epicurus among the utopian socialists since his materialism is not a project with which to confront power in a combative way; on the contrary, it is in seclusion and abandonment of the agora, in the refuge of friendship with a few, that happiness is achieved.

Marx (1971) rejected Epicurus’ idea of ataraxia only in terms of the way in which humanity can reach it, for he considered that the struggle of the individual in society is necessary to overthrow capitalism and ensure the triumph of communism. Thus, ataraxia is not something that he deemed use-

ful or desirable, at least not while there was a fight to win. This posture does not, however, diminish Marx' admiration for this path. Pierre Gassendi (as cited in Marx, 1971) played a key role in lifting the censorship imposed by the church on Epicurus and allowing a reopening of studies of his work, but it was Jean-Marie Guyau (2016: 111) who, with his interpretation, positively influenced the generation of 19th-century interest in Epicurus, especially in the way in which religious issues were raised and in discussions of moral sanction:

In order for the internal sanction to be truly moral, it would have to have nothing sensitive or pathological; that is, nothing passionately pleasant or painful. It would have to be the apathy of the Stoics, a perfect serenity, an ataraxia, a suprasensible and suprapassional satisfaction. In relation to this world, it would have to be the nirvana of the Buddhists, complete detachment from everything; It would, then, be necessary for it to lose all character of a sensible sanction. A supersensible law can only have one supersensible sanction, foreign, consequently, to what is called natural pleasure and pain, and this sanction is as indeterminate for us as the supersensible order itself.

For Epicurus, soul and body are two sides of the same coin, each one just as real or material as the other. For this reason, Hegel clearly affirmed that in Epicurus there is no finalism, and that this is justified by the fact that he does not admit a purpose for the universe (Ambrosini, 2016). Hence, his vision of living in accordance with nature is not deterministic, but an invitation to live it freely. The search for the satisfaction of needs should be something natural, for it is the door to satisfy other higher, deeper deficiencies.

In summary, regarding Epicureanism we can affirm, based on our current knowledge of theories of universal human needs (Doyal and Gough, 1994; Max-Neef et al., 1986; Nussbaum and Sen, 1998; Maslow, 1991) and advances in theories of happiness (Veenhoven, 2016), that the path to happiness involves satisfying the natural desires that today are understood as universal needs, for this will lead to tranquility. Carried out prudently, this process of satisfying needs leads to ataraxia because, as Epicurus affirmed:

We need pleasure when its absence causes us pain, but if we do not experience pain, nor do we feel the need for pleasure. The ideal of the Epicurean sage is analogous on this point to the ideal of the Stoic sage: prudence spares us from the disturbances of pleasure and pushes us to live 'like a god among men' (Cubo, 2010: 99)

Obviously, there are more complex and elevated needs that must be satisfied, but while seeking their satisfaction, the lack can be compensated by pleasure, understood as a temporary distraction, while working to achieve what will really lead to happiness.

Ataraxia: confusion and misinterpretation of the term

Over the last two centuries, the term ataraxia has constantly been conceived as derogatory. For example, according to Tuner (2020), Blumenberg saw it as a “dispassionate ease”, a way of putting on hold the immanent curiosity of human beings and their self-assertion in knowledge to subjugate nature. For the author of hedonistic utilitarianism, the path to happiness lay in consuming satisfiers. At first glance, this could be confused with Epicureanism, but as already established, this is untrue. Hobbes (2017: 79) was another early Eurocentric philosopher who contradicted the original meaning of ataraxia and classified it as something negative, for he wrote:

(...) happiness in this life does not consist in the serenity of a satisfied mind, for neither the *finis ultimus* (final purposes) nor the *summum bonum* (supreme good) of which the books of old moralist philosophers speak exists. For a man, when his desire has reached its end, life is as impossible as for another whose sensations and fantasies are paralyzed. Happiness is a continuous progress of desires from one object to another since the achievement of the first is nothing more than a path to carry out a further one.

It may seem that Hobbes (2017) raised the same hedonism as Epicurus by proposing the fulfillment of desires as a priority, but this is not the case. For Epicurus, each desire seeks to achieve specific ends, such that each time one is covered, a higher desire is reached, similar to Maslow's pyramid. For Hobbes (2017), in contrast, desires are an endless escalation, where obtaining them requires power that increases according to the speed and difficulty they demand. The desire for power becomes an ultimate end in itself, though this results in a somewhat ironic contradiction (Hobbes, 2017), as power becomes essential as the only way to satisfy this endless escalation of desires. Thus, Hobbes emerged as one of the first European philosophers to deny the Hellenic vision of ataraxia. Indeed, his perspective may have motivated others to reconsider ataraxia as something undesirable, and allowed other philosophers to adhere to this new vision of the term that, as a result, lost its Hellenic meaning and, hence, its value in modern thought.

Schopenhauer, was perhaps the first western philosopher to attempt to study this subject from an Eastern perspective. Schopenhauer's ataraxia pretends to be the void that Buddhists seek, a place free from everything that prevents knowing reality as such in order to accommodate a deeper understanding. Although this topic was also addressed by Hellenistic philosophers, Schopenhauer's discourse differs from both of these philosophical traditions, for he reaches a different conclusion:

Only knowledge remains, will has disappeared. But then we look with deep and painful nostalgia at that state next to which appears, by contrast, the miserable and infernal of ours in full light. However, this consideration is the only one that can console us in a lasting way when, on the one hand, we have learned that incurable suffering and infinite

misery are essential to the phenomenon of will, to the world; and, on the other, that once will is suppressed we see the world extinguished and only nothingness remains before us (Schopenhauer, 2009).

While the objective of Buddhism is to reach nirvana, which is not a place but a state in which the individual is free from desires, the self and the wheel of reincarnation, for Schopenhauer (2009), its goal was to renounce life, so he despised the concept and classified it as myth and nonsense. For this Polish philosopher, the only reality is that if will is suppressed, only nothingness remains.

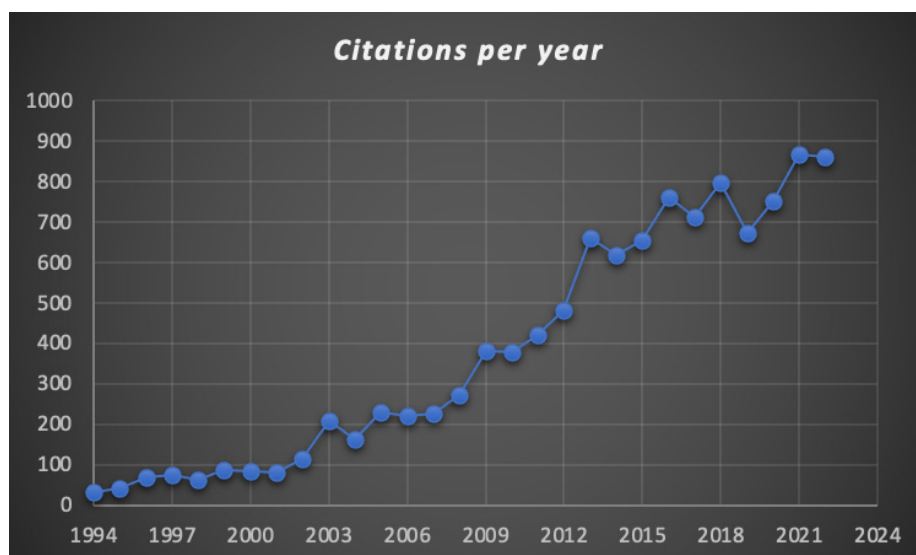
Nietzsche (2008) referred to ataraxia in pejorative terms, insisting that it was a foreign, oriental term. He also defined Stoicism, the source of Hellenic ataraxia, as “a work of Semites.” This German philosopher

(.) refers to the Stoic as an ‘Arab sheik wrapped in Greek cloth and concepts.’ ‘Quietism’ –we might dare to formulate– is observed by Nietzsche in Stoic ataraxia or apatheia [as a] means through which man aspires to achieve peace of mind, but this is a symptom of ‘degeneration’, of passive nihilism and, therefore, of illness, since it seeks a relief that is supported by a metaphysical order that is nothing more than ‘nothingness’ or a denial of reality (Garcés, 2015: 202).

Here we see how Nietzsche (2008) reframed the original term in a way remarkably close to Schopenhauer’s vision, though much more aggressively, for he stated that people who seek ataraxia are, in reality, sick and need to be cured.

Bourdieu and the reductionist embattlement

Among contemporary scholars who have used the term ataraxia, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu stands out, not only as a representative of the adverse use of this concept, but also as one who created a negative conceptualization of something positive and then went on to create a school based on it. The influence of this school in academia has increased over time, as can be seen in the following graph.



Graph 1. Annual trends in citations of Pierre Bourdieu. Elaborated by the author based on Bourdieu, Pierre, by Scopus Preview (2023) (<https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=55911103200>).

Perhaps the first step in this process was taken when Bourdieu proposed replacing the term “interest” with that of *illusio*. The reason lay in this French philosopher’s objective of pointing out that interest is nothing more than an individual’s belief in society. Bourdieu further maintained that interest is opposed not only to disinterest, but also, and specifically, to indifference to the game that is unfolding.

Indifference is an axiological state, an ethical state of non-preference, as well as a state of knowledge in which I am not capable of differentiating what is at stake (.) *Illusio* is the very opposite of ataraxia: it is being concerned, taken by the game. To be interested is to accept that what happens in a given social game matters, that the issue at stake in it is important (another word with the same root as interest) and that it is worth fighting for (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2005: 174).

Interest, according to this author, is what the agent pursues, what drives him out of the indifference in which he finds himself, that difference which Bourdieu casually called “ataraxia”. Interest is not something that is generally sought but, rather, “is born in the game and with the game, and the relationship of belief, illusion, investment is all the more total, unconditional, when it is ignored as such” (Bourdieu, 2007:108). According to this French philosopher, this is due to the *habitus* of the agent, a term that today can be understood more simply and clearly as his microculture.

The word ‘interest’ must be interpreted in the broadest sense: what interests me is what matters to me, what counts for me, what makes me move, what gets me out of ataraxia, what gets me out of indifference (.) we must raise the question of knowing why there is action, investment, interest, instead of nothing (.) Whoever is inserted in a field is inserted in the game. Theoretically, he can exit the game at any time, and from the point of view of the staring sage looking at him, he looks like a crazy [man] investing in nonsense. However, he is built in such a way that he is willing to die for that game (Bourdieu, 2019: 121).

Following Bourdieu, the game begins with the application of an illusion that necessarily leads to action; that is, in terms of the struggle between dominator and dominated, even when there is a symbolic capital that makes the latter more susceptible to accepting the power of the former, since this relationship is adverse, it is necessary to break the process that makes it possible. For Bourdieu, the condition of being in ataraxia precludes breaking the relationship, so the person is maintained in a scenario of symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2005).

In this sense, Bourdieu made it clear in his texts that ataraxia is the path of inaction, injustice, the passive acceptance of symbolic violence. Following this path means existing as a passive entity in a game where you have everything to lose. Thus, it is not surprising that this vision, repeated for decades in the university environment, has led to a radical and extreme definition of the term ataraxia. Some generations that followed this path conceptualized it as “political ataraxia”, even considering it a perversion that resulted from the

“coloniality of knowledge” and an “epistemic-political lethargy”. The following quote from Borsani (2015: 8) clearly illustrates this extreme discourse:

El hoy no es sino un estado de fascismo y misantropía hiperbólica, radicalizada, extrema, un desprecio visceral hacia el género humano que se traduce en políticas fascistas, muy bien maquilladas y discursivas altamente comprometidas con toda la humanidad, no obstante, convalidando acá y allá crímenes de lesa humanidad que ya conviven sin producir insomnio alguno, muy por el contrario, produciendo la *ataraxia* e imperturbabilidad de quienes justamente si de algo debieran ocuparse y es su razón de ser, es de aquello que ocurre al género humano¹.

The idea that *ataraxia* is simply indolence and indifference, that it can be achieved effortlessly and that it is natural to turn away, especially from those who suffer, is an absurd generalization of the term. This misconception has been influenced by generations of social science students who have been exposed to Bourdieu’s insistence on this view in his writings on *ataraxia*. This interpretation has certainly had a significant impact in the last five decades, as shown by the number of times that Bourdieu has been cited on this topic, though it is difficult to determine the exact magnitude of its influence.

This imposition of this vision of *ataraxia* as simple indolence is anything but harmless. In its original sense, even before the Hellenic interpretations, *ataraxia* was never an easy process to achieve, contrary to Bourdieu’s unfounded opinion that he implanted in the minds of his followers. On the contrary, *ataraxia* requires superhuman effort to gain a deeper understanding of problems and thus better comprehend what needs to be changed, how it needs to be changed, and where that change will lead once implemented. These aspects, which are so difficult to discern in Bourdieu’s proposal, become essential to achieving a positive change when applied to reality.

Reformulating the term *ataraxia* for the new millennium

Fifty years of fighting against cultural inequality, without the promised long-term results, led to the consideration that it was perhaps a good time to set Bourdieu’s rhetoric aside and rethink *ataraxia* from its original Eastern vision instead of from the European one, for the former set out from coherent, though somewhat heterogeneous, visions among the followers of the original concept. Later, despite having maintained a certain coherence for millennia, in fewer than three centuries that concept began to deteriorate until reaching the absurd reductionism in which it exists today. In order to adequately define a new proposal of *ataraxia* for the modern world, it is necessary to reconsid-

¹ Today [it] is nothing but a state of hyperbolic, radicalized, extreme fascism and misanthropy, a visceral contempt for the human race that translates into fascist policies, very well made up and discursive, highly-committed to all humanity; but validating here and there crimes against humanity that already coexist without causing insomnia; quite the contrary, producing the *ataraxia* and imperturbability of those who, precisely if they have to deal with something that involves their reason for being, [reveals] what happens to the human race.

er those concepts step-by-step. This entails taking into account the great advances that have been made in universal knowledge since the original appearance of the term in Hellenic Greece.

The first step in properly defining ataraxia in the modern world consists in understanding its basic concepts from their origin. Although Plutarch (2000), in his work *Life of Alexander*, narrated the contact of Alexander and his people with the gymnosophist philosophers, it is not completely clear what specific philosophy those Indian philosophers followed. Therefore, it is difficult to identify with certainty the source –or sources– of the concepts that were imported to Greece as a result of Alexander’s journey. Buddhist philosophy has been chosen as a probable and acceptable option for analysis due to the similarity of most of its concepts, especially that of equanimity, with those present in Hellenic philosophy. This path of analysis, I argue, will allow us to achieve a current, precise conceptualization of the meaning of ataraxia.

Having clarified the source on which our approach is based, the next step is to explain ataraxia from the Buddhist perspective, where it was also known as *upekkhā* or equanimity. In simple terms, this can be defined as that which allows humans to face life with all its problems, eventualities, and contingencies, no matter how intense they may be, with an imperturbable mind; that is, maintaining a calm, serene demeanor no matter what occurs, no matter how difficult or disturbing it might be. It is a position in which the person becomes indifferent to the demands of his ego and more attentive to the wellbeing of those around him (Pallathadka, 2020).

Buddhism holds that the greatest obstacles to reaching the state of ataraxia are attachment and desire. The first refers to the obsession to obtain and keep some specific thing, possibly an object, a result, or one’s feeling toward oneself (among many others). The cure consists in coming to comprehend impermanence, understanding that, no matter how much effort is made, nothing can be preserved, and that the simple act of trying to conserve things leads to suffering. In this regard Rinpoche (2006: 48) wrote that “The past has already passed, the future has not yet arisen, and present thought, even as we experience it, becomes the past. Only the present moment, the “now” really belongs to us. The idea that everything that is not present thought is attachment thus implies that belonging only exists in the present. In this context, making any effort to retain for the future what existed in the past prevents reaching equanimity or ataraxia.”

Buddhism’s second obstacle –desire– refers to the idea that needs must be satisfied in specific ways, even if those ways do not ensure complete coverage, or do so only poorly. If a person believes that he requires some object or another person to be happy, then his attachment is evident and observable. However, in the end, every object of attachment tends to cause more suffering than it soothes. A glass of water, for example, is something definite that

helps quench thirst since it contains in itself the element necessary to produce that effect. It is a simple need that requires a simple response. However, if we take the need for group acceptance, the situation becomes much more complicated. Perhaps a package of mundane sundries will help a person fit in with the group, but if he does not fit in because of his own, innate, qualities, that extra help will not only do him little good, but may even work to his detriment. For instance, if he wants a real friend, he will suddenly discover that those objects hinder more than help him, because they only attract people who are interested in those objects, not in him as a person, as an individual. Hence, true wisdom lies in meeting the need with the best possible option, especially if it is a feasible choice that requires less cost in terms of time, money, and effort than others that may, or may not, be available.

Given the above, it is not difficult to understand why, from the Buddhist perspective, desire and attachment are sources of great human suffering. Attachment is unhealthy behavior and vain desire raises problems. The Eurocentric vision of *ataraxis* –even the romantic, idealistic visions of recent centuries–, in contrast, assumes that desire is the engine of passions and, indeed, of life itself. But this is only an illusion. The Buddhist perspective holds that passion blinds the person who experiences it, adds benefits to the object of said passion –that it does not really possess– and makes it an essential element for meeting a series of needs that it is absolutely unable to satisfy.

Equanimity, or *upekkhā* (the synonym for the Greek term *ataraxia*), could be translated from Pali as “to see patiently”, but its meaning is more closely related to “seeing with understanding” or “seeing with wisdom”, since it implies setting aside one’s personal emotional burden to perceive clearly what is really happening. If a son yells at his mother or father that he does not love them, they do not cling to the idea of the phrase shouted because, clearly, it would be painful if accepted as such. Instead, delving deeper, not the words expressed directly but, rather, why he said them, changes the context completely. Those words no longer set off a personal drama for the parents who could lament that in spite of everything they have sacrificed for him in the past their son apparently does not want them in the present. Instead, they can calmly reflect on “the other” instead of focusing on themselves, and ask: What led our son to say that? What is happening to him? How can we help? This is a way of thinking wisely, detaching oneself from suffering and one’s own anguish to analyze the whole as it is without our ego getting in the way.

Equanimity can also be translated as *tatramajjhata*, interpreted as an intense, positive spiritual balance (Soto Zen Buddhist Community, 2021). This means being in internal balance before ulterior reality with no attachment to anything, the ability to lose oneself in the face of what happens –positive or negative– and remaining attentive to external circumstances so as to judge wisely and act accordingly to achieve the best result possible for oneself, despite the onslaught of things that occurs around one, including all those

who are, or may be, affected. In this sense, equanimity or ataraxia not only means seeking a better solution in the moment, but also finding the optimal long-term solution.

For this reason, if we define happiness as a primary objective of every human being and consider that satisfying universal human needs –not only the basic ones but all needs– appears to be an effective means to achieve it (Veenhoven, 2016), then it is important to understand, from the perspective of equanimity, that theories of happiness often overlook a fundamental factor. Analyses of proposals on universal human needs allow us to understand that achieving full, complete satisfaction requires going beyond the individual. It means that people must have goals for those around them that are similar to their own, so that happiness is truly maintained for everyone, especially for the people one loves. For those who attempt to achieve happiness only for themselves, the challenge will be much more complex and, ultimately, unsuccessful than the one that those who seek to share their efforts and results with others will confront.

This is not difficult to comprehend when we realize that the shortcomings of others generate situations of pain and suffering that will invariably have repercussions that affect the entire environment, though in ways that may well be unimaginable. This implies that in a world marked by social inequality there is no way to achieve coverage of all deficiencies without working on, and for, everyone. As this framework shows, nothing is more distant from indifference than ataraxia since, in this vision, solving problems means setting aside one's own prejudices, desires, and attachments to achieve a state of perfect balance with the wisdom necessary to help oneself and everyone else involved by finding the best possible solution. Redefined in this way, ataraxia takes on a meaning completely foreign to the one bestowed by Eurocentrism in recent centuries, and its potential for change becomes clearly evident for the new societies that could be built upon this vision.

Having recovered the original meaning of this term, and updating it for the new millennium, it becomes feasible to foresee the characteristics of a political system based on ataraxia from the perspective of both the elected and the electors. This vision is elucidated in the following section.

Reaching a modern political ataraxia

Revolutionary movements arise from passion and are usually based on a specific form of indoctrination. Indoctrination implies attachment to a solution that the ideologues of the movement have established and that its leaders will seek to apply insofar as possible. Often, this indoctrination prevents pursuing other possible options at a later time when the founding theory has failed and the expected results have not been attained, conditions that can generate suffering for both those who applied it and those who are affected

by the consequences of its failure. However, it is important to recognize that no doctrine can be born, grow, and develop without such attachment. Obviously, any idea that goes against the attachment, desire, and obsession that accompany the doctrine will be identified and repudiated by the ideologues of the original theory. Thus, we can understand that the defenders of theories of this kind could easily perceive the idea of ataraxia as a threat, since it procures, precisely, release from such attachment.

Political ataraxia moves away from the vision of indolence that has been imposed for centuries to free itself from an indoctrinating vision. It becomes a profound strategy in which active, judicious, well-informed citizens make decisions based on reason, instead of making superficial choices based on the manipulative opinions of power groups that seek only to preserve their privileges. In ataraxia, a voter would be balanced before the facts; that is, he would evaluate the proposals and actions implemented by politicians in a balanced, detached, impartial way that would allow him to perceive the deficiencies, excesses, and partialities of each proposal presented (Bodhi, 2010) and so vote for the candidates that not only offer the solutions that benefit him personally, but that are also based on the sage understanding that real personal happiness cannot be achieved in an unjust society. Under those conditions, better candidates will step forward and fewer power groups will be successful in selling attachments and cowing to the popular desires of their constituents simply to attract the militants and votes they need to remain in office.

In a scheme based on ataraxia, the manipulation of the vote or impositions by the parties of inadequate candidates would turn against them, since ataraxia in no way justifies indifference to such acts. Instead, some citizens would recoup their faculties wisely, come to recognize the weaknesses of those who seek to appropriate and violate their rights and, in this way, the faculties of all voters would ultimately be recovered. In such a context, no option can be ruled out; rather, all possible paths are evaluated until the most appropriate action required to achieve the objective is determined, taking into account the lowest cost for all those involved in terms of time, money, and effort and, preferably, without inflicting harm on anyone, though the latter goal may be unattainable.

Considering these developments, it is also feasible to define the public policy of a government that applies ataraxia in the way proposed herein, since the process will be facilitated if the final goal of all public policy is set as increasing the happiness of the target population. As stated previously, the strategy that seems to be most appropriate in this sense is one that proposes satisfying all universal human needs (Veenhoven, 2016).

Understanding this process requires establishing that a need is the lack of something required, while desire refers to the way in which each individual

aspires for their lack(s) to be satisfied. From the perspective of ataraxia, and that of public policy, a desire that does not arise from a universal human need –what Epicurus called a “vain desire”– becomes irrelevant. If people wish to transit, then the State must create conditions that provide decent, sufficient transportation. It is not, however, obliged to create the conditions that would allow an individual to obtain the precise type of transportation he desires –a sports car, for example– much less to respond to his demand for special roads where he can drive it, because such vain desires are a matter for the private, not public, sphere. Providing the conditions to acquire and use such facilities is not, and will never be, a public problem, except when fulfilling that desire in some way contravenes current regulations or causes problems that require sanctions and a resolution by the State.

Operating from this perspective helps the State economize and utilize its resources more effectively than trying to satisfy the vain desires and attachments of individuals. By reducing costs, the benefits of public resources can be extended to many more people and employed to develop more efficient processes of broader scope that generate greater wellbeing for all. In addition, by eliminating vain desire and attachment as factors for consideration, the time and effort required to meet needs will decrease significantly. This does not affect the individual's or group's ability to fulfill their vain desires, as long as doing so does not harm others. Since it is not the government's responsibility to respond to such desires, it can develop processes that are more homogeneous, quicker to apply, and require less supervisory personnel. This would also improve its ability to predict the effects of public policy on each specific group and field, thus minimizing negative consequences in the short, medium, and long term for all concerned.

Final considerations

Comparing the ataraxia of the three main Hellenic philosophies to the concept of *upekkhā* or equanimity allows us to glimpse how they complement the original concept. Ataraxia, on the one hand, means the state of imperturbability of being and spirit achieved through meditation; on the other, the Stoics built their reasoning upon the emptiness of the skeptics and the search for freedom from mental and physical suffering that characterized Epicurus and his followers. The elements of these Hellenic schools that make up the way to achieve ataraxia combined to achieve the Buddhist equanimity explained in the text.

One of the most interesting topics for analysis in this dissertation is, without doubt, the great capacity that humans have manifested to observe and understand nature, for this allowed Epicurus to differentiate between two types of desire: natural and vain. It is important to note that Hobbes, for example, did not make this distinction. Advances in science on this subject to date

make it possible to affirm that Epicurus was revolutionary in presenting one of the first attempts (perhaps the first) to differentiate between universal human needs and desires. If we add that Epicurus was one of the earliest thinkers to sustain that meeting universal human needs constitutes the path to happiness, then the progress of his proposal becomes astounding. But if to this we add Aristotle's vision of happiness as the ultimate goal –2,300 years before Veenhoven– then our astonishment grows even more. When comparing current advances with the proposals of philosophers like Blumenberg and Hobbes, we find that they formulated ideas that contradicted Epicurus's understanding of the term "desire". The former assumed that all needs were satisfied by consuming satisfiers, while Hobbes did not distinguish needs from desires, for he gave the same value to both.

During the development of this analysis, it was also possible to observe that various critics have erred in their appreciation of ataraxia. Schopenhauer, for example, confused void with nothingness, failing to understand that a void is a container that is ready to be filled with a reality with no content inside that might contaminate it, while nothingness simply cannot hold anything, much less something like the truth. Nietzsche, perhaps the first recognized philosopher to express absolute contempt for ataraxia –because the basis of his argumentation was flawed– may have defined this concept under the influence of Schopenhauer when he assimilated the concept of a nothingness free of all will.

It is also interesting to learn that Marx, despite considering Epicurus a utopian socialist since he saw his approach as inapplicable because it did not involve violent struggle, made his sympathy toward the idea of ataraxia as something positive quite clear; especially the concept that a person in search of ataraxia requires that everyone around him must also reach it in order for it to be fully achieved. This marked the beginning of a new vision of a political ataraxia. Marx, then, was one of the first Eurocentric philosophers to understand ataraxia, yet he was also one of the first to reject it, for the reasons stated above. However, his ideal of consummate communism does bear some resemblance to a state of ataraxia in which everyone works to satisfy universal human needs, thus facilitating the kind of life that Epicurus would have cherished. Perhaps it is not entirely irrational that this Hellenic philosopher was the inspiration for it.

The exponential increase in references to Bourdieu since 1992 demonstrates his growing influence in academia. In the present study, however, his ideas were analyzed as a specific case of a scholar who misused the term ataraxia. This evaluation led to the conclusion that one feature of Bourdieu is his great confusion between the terms "culture" and "education". It is hardly surprising, then, that he coined a term like *habitus* to speak of cultural issues. At the end of the day, *habitus* is a microculture; that is, a specific culture developed within another, more general, one. Bourdieu, in his absurd simplification of

the term ataraxia, meaninglessly degraded it, an act in itself condemnable. But his growing influence further complicates the problems that surround this term.

Therefore, political ataraxia is not what various generations of European intellectuals in recent centuries ended up concluding, due to their inadequate understanding of Eastern philosophies and their failure to distinguish between needs (natural desires) and desires (vain desires). We must recall that Buddhism has always been something of an alien being outside Asia, with the exception of a few European thinkers who came into direct contact with it. In fact, it was not until the middle of the last century that this philosophy began to spread through America and Europe, as its teachers and apprentices were forced to flee to other nations after China's occupation of Tibet, and began to establish monasteries and teaching centers worldwide to make this philosophy truly accessible in the West firsthand and in its full depth. As a result, today anyone can easily review the roots of the term and draw their own conclusions, with no need to study the interpretations of Western authors.

Based on the foregoing, we can affirm that the objectives set out at the beginning of the paper were achieved. The argumentation presented shows that the vision of ataraxia in contemporary philosophy was misinterpreted, and that this term has a high value in and of itself that cannot be denied once the real depth of its meaning is understood. Regarding the second objective, it proved possible to reformulate ataraxia for today's world. Finally, the third objective was achieved, as we proposed a sketch of what the interaction between a population and a government would be like when both exist in a state of ataraxia.

In closing, however, it is prudent to mention various points that must be pondered. First, we would clarify that the proposal outlined herein is just one conceptualization of what a population acting in political ataraxia might be like. It does not include any instructions or indications as to how such a state could be achieved, or what economic, political, or social system contains the elements required to reach this utopia, at least not under current circumstances. Our intentions were only to share a definition of ataraxia freed from the Eurocentric influences that eroded it to the point of making it absurd and meaningless, and explain how it might operate if a reconceptualization were applied.

Finding people in a given country who have reached ataraxia and, in addition, want to form a political party, would likely be a vain search in contemporary reality. Likewise, we must understand that a sufficiently large population of people with ataraxia would be required to achieve the participation needed to win elections in existing sociopolitical models, something that seems unachievable even in the long term. For this reason, we insist that this is a theoretical exercise, nothing more.

It is also important to point out that there are not sufficient grounds to affirm that any political system that has existed up to now –anarchism, liberalism, socialism, or any other ideology or combination– is capable of achieving the political ataraxia proposed herein. In fact, it is highly likely that a unique, specific sociopolitical proposal will be needed to make ataraxia functional where people may attempt to implement it.

Finally, we must clarify that, although this proposal for political ataraxia is based on the understanding of ataraxia in the concepts of Tibetan Buddhism, it is not the approach that Buddhists have used to build a sociopolitical system in any place where they have governed. Therefore, no government exercised by Buddhists in the past or present should, in any sense, be used as a reference for the proposal presented herein.

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