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The Stoics on why we should strive to be free of the passions

Keith Seddon

Like the other schools of the Hellenistic period, the Stoics held that the correct end (*telos*) for human beings is happiness (*eudaimonia*) or living well (*eu zēn*). None of the schools accepted this in a descriptive sense: it is not the case that people have an in-built capacity for doing what is required for living well. The Hellenistic schools, including the Stoic school, took it upon themselves to supply their own normative accounts of what we *ought to do* to live well.

In the briefest of outlines, the Stoic theory held that the only good thing is virtue (*aretē*, excellence of character) and the only bad thing is vice, its opposite. Everything else is indifferent between virtue and vice, being in no sense at all good or bad. Thus the Stoics maintained that the bulk of humanity, in pursuing wealth and material goods, status, health and anything at all that is popularly conceiving of as good is making a mistake so long as that pursuit is based on the belief that these things really are good, or are desirable because they are good. Living virtuously is necessary and sufficient for living well and being happy, and the indifferent things, although worth pursuing to the extent that it is appropriate for human beings to seek adequate shelter, sustenance and companionship, are in no way *required* for *eudaimonia*.

The Stoic view of the indifferent things goes back to Plato (see *Meno* 87c-89a and *Euthydemus* 278e-281e). If we accept that what is good must benefit us unconditionally, we can see that conventional goods fail this standard. Wealth, for example, is not unconditionally beneficial, since someone who possesses it might use it to accomplish harmful or shameful ends. And so with all the other conventional goods. Benefit results, when it does, from using conventional goods properly, and to use these things properly we need to be guided by the virtues, for it is only a character possessed of excellence that has the capacity to use

conventional goods in a way that is guaranteed to benefit. If someone uses conventional goods beneficially, and does this without having an excellent character, they have done no more than achieve a fluke. Thus, it is the possession of an excellent character that benefits its possessor unconditionally, and is both necessary and sufficient for living well; and such a person will display the four traditional *primary* virtues of temperance, justice, courage and wisdom. In all circumstances and at all times, when it is appropriate, such a person will act with self-restraint, will be just towards others, will face difficult or painful situations with courage, and will choose their activities and carry them out wisely.

One striking feature that the Stoic wise person will display, and which is necessary to their enjoying *eudamonia*, is a character wholly *apatheia*, *without passion*. I propose now to discuss this notion of *apatheia*, and to consider exactly why the Stoic wise person must aim to attain it, and what they can do practically to attain it.

In Stoic theory there are four primary passions (*pathē*): desire (*epithumia*) is an impulse towards some anticipated thing regarded as good; fear (*phobos*) is an impulse away from some anticipated thing regarded as bad. The other two *pathē* are: delight (*hēdonē*), an impulse towards some present thing regarded as good, and distress (*lupē*), an impulse away from some present thing regarded as bad (see Long and Sedley 1987, 65A–B). Other passions are classified under these four primary passions. Anger, sexual desire, and love of riches for instance, are types of desire (Long and Sedley 1987, 65E). The Stoics explain the passions in terms of the judgements we make regarding the circumstances we find ourselves in. Thus, the distress that someone may feel when confronted by a vicious animal, say, is in part the judgement that this is something bad, and the fear is in part the judgement that something bad will happen (such as the fear that the animal will tear you limb from limb). These passions are of course *more* than just judgements. The Stoics maintained that they were also quite literally movements of the soul, since they held that the soul is material and all its workings are to be explained in terms of its physical characteristics including movement; and passions are also impulses that cause actions.

The Stoic emphasis on the passions being judgements may seem

counterintuitive. Is it not the case that passions are what happen *to us*, not within our control? (This was the view of the ancients: *pathē* is a cognate of *pathein*, what one suffers or what is done to one; cf. Annas 1992, 103.) Whereas making a judgement is something that the agent *does*, not at all the sort of thing that happens when someone is *overcome* by passion. The key to understanding both how and why, according to the Stoics, we should strive to be free of the passions, is to be found in appreciation of why they wanted to explain passion in terms of judgement.

How are passions connected to our experiences? Are they merely blind surges of affect, stirrings or sensations that are identified, and distinguished from one another, by their felt quality alone? (Nussbaum 1994, 369) No: the passions have an essential cognitive component without which they would not be able to serve, as they do, as ways for us to relate to what goes on in the world. Passions are grounded in how we find the world, in how we judge matters; this being so, passions can be evaluated as appropriate or inappropriate, justified or unjustified. An evaluation that we have been slighted, for example, justifies and makes sense of our angry response. My feeling angry, and my displaying anger, only makes sense in a context where I believe (whether I really have reason to or not) that I have been treated unjustly, have been taken advantage of, insulted or something of the sort.

In response to any display of passion (or when we have some other reason to believe that an agent is in the grip of some passion) we may enquire of the agent the reason for the passion, and any satisfactory response will feature a reference to a set of beliefs about how the agent regards the world. With respect to our example of anger, not only must the agent believe that they have been slighted, or what have you, but they must also believe that this is *bad* for them. Someone may, for example, believe that their possessions have been stolen. They could not feel distress about this unless they also believed that the loss of the possessions constituted a harm, which was bad for them. Furthermore, the objects or events that concern us, and to which our passions attach, must be fairly substantial — that is, the way they matter to us must be fairly important, for as Nussbaum (1994, 370) points out, we don't live in fear of our coffee cup getting broken, we don't get angry at the theft of a paperclip, or pity

someone who has lost a toothbrush.

On this view, we can maintain with the Stoics that passions can always be avoided by deciding to withhold our assent to the effect that anything really good or really bad is happening to us. If I do not judge that I have been slighted, I will not be angry. If I do not judge that I have suffered a loss, I will not be distressed at the destruction of my Ming vase. Certainly, I *could* do this, if I did truly believe that I had not been slighted, and if I did not think the loss of my Ming vase a true disaster. But surely these things do constitute genuine harm? And does not my winning a vast fortune in the lottery ♦ such that I can both solve my financial problems and live in luxury to the end of my days ♦ constitute a genuine good? Most people would say so. But the Stoics say not.

This is because the Stoics maintain that only the virtues and virtuous acts are genuinely good, while only the vices and vicious acts are genuinely bad (see Long and Sedley 1987 ♦58). Other sorts of things usually held to be beneficial or harmful ♦ or neither ♦ are the ♦indifferents♦; these are such things as health, wealth, possessions, status, relationships, physical beauty, intelligence, sickness, poverty, lack of possessions, lack of status, few relationships, ugliness, dim-wittedness, etc. Some indifferents are preferred, some dispreferred, and some neither (such as whether someone has an odd or an even number of hairs on their head (Long and Sedley 1987, 58B 2)). Stoics pursue preferred things, not because they are good, but because it is ♦appropriate♦ for human beings, in virtue of the nature of the world and in virtue of the sort of creature that we are, to do so. (Thus, it is appropriate to prefer health, for instance.) What *results* from virtuous acts and from vicious acts is not respectively good or bad ♦ but is preferred or dispreferred.

For the Stoics, then, *all* passion is inappropriate because having any passion can occur only in the circumstance that the agent has an attachment to something that can be only properly preferred or dispreferred. Getting or preserving what is preferred cannot constitute a good, and getting or enduring what is dispreferred cannot constitute a harm.

If this view is correct, we are faced with a simple choice. Either we

recognise the nature of the world and our own natures as rational creatures within it, in which case, if we *really* embrace the legitimacy of our perception, we would simply stop having passions, which among other ways of unpacking ♦embracing this perception♦ would overall constitute a genuine spiritual transformation after which our rational natures are fully realised, or we ignore the Stoic perception and fail to realise our potential as rational creatures.

The Stoics say that we should take the Stoic path because this is the very best that we can achieve; the taking of any other path would be irrational. Does this not leave the follower of the Stoic path moving away from what most people would regard as truly human towards resembling a sort of machine, an unfeeling android from a science-fiction story?

Not altogether. The Stoic will be *apath*♦s, without passion (not apathetic, but dispassionate), but not wholly without feeling. It is impossible for the Stoic to eliminate purely physiological responses, such as starting at an unexpected or loud noise, or feeling faint in excessive heat (cf. Long and Sedley 1987, 65Y) ♦ as we all do, the Stoic will have the usual physiological response, jumping or keeling over, but they will also have the usual phenomenological feelings that accompany such responses. But the Stoic will, they claim, also have three ♦affective responses♦, the ♦good feelings♦ (*eupatheiai*): watchfulness (*eulabeia*), wishing (*boul*♦sis), and joy (*chara*) (see Long and Sedley 1987, 65F). Nussbaum (1994, 398) describes these as ♦motivations that will help [the agent] steer her way among things indifferent♦. Instead of being fearful, the Stoic will be watchful; instead of having desire, they will wish; and instead of feeling delight, they will feel joy (there is no ♦good feeling♦ that correlates with distress, the fourth of the primary passions). These special feelings do not arise from judgements that good or bad things are happening or will happen but from purely rational considerations that the agent is exercising their capacities as well as possible in the appropriate pursuit of what is preferred. Judgements are still required. But instead of saying, ♦I feel delight because I have obtained something good♦ (this judgement will always be false), the Stoic says, ♦I feel joy because I have appropriately secured a preferred indifferent.♦ It is hard to see that the phenomenological content of the passion and the good feeling must always be different ♦ indeed, we may

decide that they must always be the same ♦ but it seems coherent to hold that the first judgement has as its object a non-existent good, whereas the second judgement has as its object an existent indifferent.

The Stoics ♦ case is sound. *If* it is the case both that the distinction between good-and-bad and preferred-and-dispreferred-indifferent things is legitimate, and if it is true that only my acting virtuously is good for me (or my acting viciously is bad for me) then it would be right for me to abandon the passions. If I ostensibly accept the truth of this, but do not immediately act dispassionately, this will reflect to what extent I have not properly embraced the Stoic theory of the passions rather than the extent to which the theory is mistaken.

If I wish to throw in my lot with the rational creatures of this universe, I must move towards embracing the Stoic theory of the passions. In practice, the more I moderate my emotional response to circumstances, the easier it is to see how inappropriate and irrational an emotional response would be, and the easier it is to see how the only good I can enjoy in this world is that good which I can secure for myself by striving to perfect my rational and virtuous natures, and become truly *apath* ♦s.

The Stoics then offer us a stark choice. Either we carry on as we have been doing, abandoning ourselves to the lure and pull of ♦externals♦, over which we have no control, held to ransom by feelings and emotions that the world at large stirs up in us, or we take a stand and recognise ♦ if we can ♦ that the Stoics were right to declare that our sole good lies exclusively in embracing a life of virtue.

How can we stop ourselves falling prey to the passions? We need to repeat to ourselves over and over again that anything ♦good♦ we come across is merely a preferred indifferent. If we find a twenty-pound note in the street, if we get a rise, if we seem to be favoured in any way, we must say that this is not really something good for us; our various projects and interests may indeed be furthered by such eventualities, and it is rational to prefer a life that contains more, rather than less, incidents of this sort. Indeed, it is to be *preferred*, and should we be so blessed, we can make ours a *good* life only by *being good*, by acting well, by acting virtuously.

And when ♦bad♦ things happen, we must say immediately that this is not really bad ♦ for we have not (if it is true) acted viciously. All that has been harmed is my project, whatever it may be. In acting well I have done all I can do and all that is required to secure a good life.

This is such a strange way to view the world and the way we engage with it, that continuous effort must be made to maintain progress in the life of virtuous wisdom. The Stoics recommended a variety of practical ♦exercises♦ by means of which we can ♦make progress♦. Some require self-observation. As the Stoic Epictetus said, the Stoic philosopher ♦keeps watch over himself as over an enemy lying in ambush♦ (*Enchiridion* 48.3, trans. Higginson). Seneca recommended a daily review of our affairs; in connection with the passion of anger (though this is applicable generally) he said:

All our senses ought to be trained to endurance. They are naturally long-suffering, if only the mind desists from weakening them. This should be summoned to give an account of itself every day. Sextius had this habit, and when the day was over and he had retired to his nightly rest, he would put these questions to his soul: ♦What bad habit have you cured today? What fault have you resisted? In what respect are you better?♦ Anger will cease and become more controllable if it finds that it must appear before a judge every day. Can anything be more excellent than this practice of thoroughly sifting the whole day? And how delightful the sleep that follows this self-examination ♦ how tranquil it is, how deep and untroubled, when the soul has either praised or admonished itself, and when this secret examiner and critic of self has given report of its own character! I avail myself of this privilege, and every day I plead my cause before the bar of self. When the light has been removed from sight, and my wife, long aware of my habit, has become silent, I scan the whole of my day and retrace all my deeds and words. I conceal nothing from myself, I omit nothing. For why should I shrink from any of my mistakes, when I may commune thus with myself?

♦See that you never do that again; I will pardon you this time.

In that dispute, you spoke too offensively; after this don't have encounters with ignorant people; those who have never learned do not want to learn. You reproofed that man more frankly than you ought, and consequently you have not so much mended him as offended him. In the future, consider not only the truth of what you say, but also whether the man to whom you are speaking can endure the truth. A good man accepts reproof gladly; the worse a man is the more bitterly he resents it.

Seneca, *On Anger*, 3.36.1-4

One further exercise that Seneca alludes to throughout his writings is that of using our imaginations to anticipate disasters. When something bad happens, of course we say that this is not really bad, but is simply dispreferred, but more than this, we can say that this is the sort of thing that can happen to creatures who are constituted as we are and who live as we do. It is nothing surprising, and it is not harmful, and we should not respond emotionally to it. We knew all along that it could happen.

But the new student who sets off in good faith with a view to practically testing this philosophy by honestly endeavouring to live it, must also be urged to read the Stoic writers as well as the secondary literature. For Stoic philosophy constitutes a *system* in which each part is connected to all the other parts, and it has not been possible to show how this works in this short paper. To orientate one's life as a Stoic, one will need to appreciate the Stoic views of the divine logos, our relation to it and our participation in it, as well as the Stoic understanding of determinism, fate and providence. Many would say that this constitutes a mystical grasp of things, but striving to obtain it, the Stoics say, amounts to striving to perfect our rationality and our very selves. This, and possibly this alone, is what will mark us out as truly human.

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