

Stoic Counsel for Interpersonal Relations

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ABSTRACT: The foundational principle of stoic counsel is the claim that one's psychological and emotional health need not depend upon anything that does not directly answer to the exertion of one's will. Whatever the difficulty, whatever the circumstance, the ideally rational agent will concern himself only with that which is entirely a matter of his own choosing, and will remain imperturbable by anything that he cannot directly control through the force of his will alone. The ideally rational agent will, thereby, rid himself of psychological and emotional distress. In this paper, I attempt to elucidate and defend this element of stoic counsel.

*There are things which are within our power, and there are things
which are beyond our power.
- Epictetus*

One of Epictetus' students, the historian Flavius Arrian, has selected this most fundamental fact of the human condition as the very first line of his teacher's *Enchiridion* or *Handbook* – a distillation of the main themes found in the former slave's lessons concerning stoicism and the proper conduct of a rational life. With this staggeringly simple, but enormously potent and widely applicable bit of wisdom, the *Enchiridion's* editor directs our focus to the first and most indispensable principle of stoic counsel.

Whatever the difficulty, whatever the circumstance, however one may have arrived at the

current impasse or crisis, we are reminded that not everything is ours to control. Though nearly everyone will give verbal assent to this proposition, we seem inveterately to forget or to ignore its significance – and, in doing so, we subject ourselves repeatedly to needless emotional suffering and psychological trauma. When we lose sight of the fundamental limitations on our powers and the boundaries of our sphere of direct influence, feelings of frustration, anger, guilt, and hopelessness are almost certain to ensue. With a sustained awareness of our limitations and a clearheaded focus on those things that directly conform to the will, we can learn to dramatically ameliorate the psychological and emotional distress from which stoic counsel promises relief.

Epictetus goes on to delineate a distinction between those phenomena that lie within the direct power of the human will, and those that lie beyond it:

Within our power are opinion, aim, desire, aversion, and, in one word, whatever affairs are our own. Beyond our power are body, property, reputation, office, and, in one word, whatever are not properly our own affairs. [*Enchiridion I*]

The reference to “our own affairs” appears intended to pick out only those elements of the human condition that Epictetus believes to be entirely determined, without mediation, by exertion of the agent’s will alone. Any feature of the world that is in any way dependent upon anything external to the agent’s will is designated as “not properly our own affairs”. The reader is then warned about the consequences of failing to appreciate the distinction:

Remember, then, that if you attribute freedom to things by nature dependent, and take what belongs to others for your own, you will be hindered, you will lament, you will be disturbed, you will find fault both with gods and men. But if you take for your own only that which is your own, and view what belongs to others just as it really is, then no one will ever compel you, no one will restrict you, you will find fault with no one, you will accuse no one, you will do nothing against your will; no one will hurt you, you will not have an enemy, nor will you suffer any harm. [*Enchiridion I*]

In other words, Epictetus suggests that it is irrational, and detrimental to one's psychological and emotional well being to trouble oneself with anything that does not directly answer to the exertion of one's will. The ideally rational man will control that which is entirely a matter of his own choosing, and will remain imperturbable by anything that he cannot directly control through the force of his will alone. Hence, the ideally rational man will not suffer psychological or emotional trauma. If a desirable state of affairs can be produced by a rational direction of his mind, the rational man will produce the desired state of affairs by exerting his will – and all else will be regarded with detached indifference. He will thereby achieve an unwavering equanimity irrespective of the vicissitudes of his interactions with the external world and, particularly as concerns the thesis of this paper, with the people he encounters therein.

Some, myself included, may remain skeptical of Epictetus' claim that opinion, desire, aversion and such are as entirely and ultimately within our power as he makes them out to be. Reconciling this sphere of individual control with the stoic doctrine of causal determinism is notoriously problematic, and the issue has received ample treatment elsewhere¹. Long before depth psychology and revelations from the cognitive sciences cast widespread doubt in the modern academic mind as to the freedom of the will and its independence from antecedent circumstances and environmental impingements, the ancient stoics and their antagonists were aware of this potential difficulty for the stoic worldview. Various debates arose among the competing Hellenistic schools concerning the apparent inconsistency between a universe bound by fate and the putative existence of freedom within the "inner citadel" of the mind. Can

¹ See, for example, Long (1971) and Botros (1985).

persons be free in any sense at all if they live in a deterministic universe? Fortunately, we are not required to defend any particular position regarding this matter in order to appreciate and implement Epictetus' negative injunction about attachments to matters beyond our control.

Though legitimate disputes exist concerning determinism, freedom of the will, and related issues, nearly everyone will agree that most events are beyond the direct control of any individual agent insofar as most of the universe clearly does not conform to any particular person's will. The central stoic contention is that a little reflection should reveal that most of what we trouble ourselves about is quite clearly beyond our sphere of direct influence. As Epictetus points out, one's "body, property, reputation, office," and all other "externals" are subject to forces beyond one's control, and do not always obey one's will or coincide with one's desires. So all the energy spent in futile efforts to control phenomena and events that are not, in actuality, subject to one's control, and all psychological and emotional attachment to conditions obtaining in the external world (or failing to obtain therein) is unwise and proceeds from a failure to recognize and accept inescapable limitations on human agency. Yet most of us, being less than ideally rational, persist in these self-defeating patterns of thought and behavior. We do not consistently heed, or do not fully internalize, the stoic's cornerstone insight. As a result, we suffer needlessly. Often, we convince ourselves that our suffering comes at the hands of others, when, in fact, it is a consequence of our own failures of rationality and generally inadequate mental discipline.

Interpersonal Relations and Suffering

The realm of interpersonal relations may be the single most pervasive source of misery among otherwise healthy persons. It may also be the area in which stoic counsel is both most useful and most frequently flouted or forgotten. We ignore wise counsel at our peril. How much suffering would be averted by conscientious and consistent adherence to Marcus Aurelius' advice to himself in the arena of interpersonal endeavor?

In the first entry in Book II of the *Meditations* Marcus enjoins himself to:

Begin each day by telling yourself: Today I shall be meeting with interference, ingratitude, insolence, disloyalty, ill-will, and selfishness – all of them due to the offenders' ignorance of what is good or evil. But for my part I have long perceived the nature of good and its nobility, the nature of evil and its meanness, and also the nature of the culprit himself, who is my brother (not in the physical sense, but as a fellow-creature similarly endowed with reason and a share of the divine); therefore none of those things can injure me, for nobody can implicate me in what is degrading. Neither can I be angry with my brother or fall foul of him; for he and I were born to work together, like a man's two hands, feet, or eyelids, or like the upper and lower rows of his teeth. To obstruct each other is against Nature's law – and what is irritation or aversion but a form of obstruction? [*Book II, Section I*]

In other words, Marcus admonishes himself to remember that the behavior, utterances, attitudes, and desires of persons other than himself all fall into the category of things that lie beyond his control. This reminder is to be repeated each and every day as preparation for the ubiquitous challenge presented by the encounter with one's fellows. He also tells himself that it is "contrary to nature" that he should become angry, offended, or jaundiced by another person's unwise or inappropriate behavior. He entrusts "Nature" (or, perhaps, its author) with a just ordering of all that which lies beyond his control, and reminds himself that aversion to the unfolding of the surrounding world is "against Nature's Law".

This daily recital distinguishing an area over which he believes himself to have direct control (i.e. some of his mental states), from an area that is clearly beyond his control (i.e. the thoughts and actions of other persons), is the psychological equivalent of girding himself with armor and shield before sallying forth into battle. It is intended to serve as deflection and defense against “blows” both expected and unforeseen. Marcus Aurelius understood the value of advance preparation in the face of inevitable challenges posed by interaction with our all-too-human brethren.

Unlike Garcin in Sartre’s “No Exit,” who reaches the pessimistic conclusion that “Hell is—other people,” a committed and conscientious stoic trains himself to “bear and forbear” in his dealings with his neighbor and brother (and we moderns would do well to add “sisters” also). Epictetus would insist that anyone who experiences other people as “hellish” must be confused as to what is properly “his concern” and within the control of his own will. When an agent’s desire takes as its object anything that does not conform to the agent’s will, the stage is set for disappointment and frustration, and needless conflict. It is irrational and unhealthy to allow oneself to become upset by things that other people say, think, and do. One simply cannot control such matters.

Insult and Offense

Consider the common phenomenon of the insult. An insult can have no power to traumatize with which its object does not endow it. One cannot control what others say, write, or think about oneself, and one cannot control the way in which anything said or written about oneself is received by those (other than, perhaps, oneself) who encounter such claims. It is, therefore, pointless and unwise to allow oneself to become enraged,

offended or, in any way, to concern oneself with such matters. Slanders may damage one's reputation, jeopardize one's career, and undermine one's interpersonal relations in any number of ways. These, however, are also beyond one's direct control. If one's contentment depends upon states of affairs that do not conform to one's will, then one is virtually assured of irritation, disappointment, anxiety, and unease. Only through the extirpation of all attachment to those things that do not directly conform to the exertion of one's will can one maintain soundness of mind irrespective of the utterances, attitudes, and actions of persons other than oneself. Sticks and stones may assuredly break our bones, but neither spoken nor written word can ever hurt us if we develop an impregnable indifference to events and phenomena that we cannot command. All of us would do well to regularly remind ourselves to focus our efforts on self-discipline and self-improvement rather than wasting energy in worrying about how we are perceived by others.

Stoicism and Exertion

None of the foregoing entails a life of inactivity or withdrawal from social interaction. Active engagement in interpersonal relations and group efforts is, by no means, prohibited to the fully committed stoic. To remain imperturbable in the face of interpersonal friction, one must simply learn to carefully and consistently distinguish between that part of the interaction that is "one's own" and the part that is determined by forces beyond one's control. One must assess success or failure solely by reference to one's self-control (or lack thereof). In the *Discourses*, Epictetus opens his commentary "On Anxiety" with the following:

When I see anyone anxious, I say, what does this man want? Unless he wanted something or other not in his own power, how could he still be anxious? A

musician, for instance, feels no anxiety while he is singing by himself; but when he appears upon the stage he does, even if his voice be ever so good, or he plays ever so well. For what he wishes is not only to sing well, but likewise to gain applause. But this is not in his own power.

And later:

If, then, the things independent of our will are neither good nor evil, and all things that do depend on will are in our own power, and can neither be taken away from us nor given to us unless we please, what room is there left for anxiety? But we are anxious about this paltry body or estate of ours, or about what Caesar thinks, and not at all about anything internal... When, therefore, you see anyone pale with anxiety, just as the physician pronounces from the complexion that such a patient is disordered in the spleen, and another in the liver, so do you likewise say, this man is disordered in his desires and aversions; he cannot walk steadily; he is in a fever. [Book II]

The musician suffers anxiety and worry only insofar as he desires that the audience should react to his performance in a particular fashion, or that he should be received positively. Were he sufficiently disciplined and devoid of all concern for things he cannot control, then any potential anxiety attached to his audience and their evaluation of him would be dissipated. The sage performer could still endeavor to give the best performance of which he is, on that occasion, capable – but the exertion of the effort to do so conforms entirely to the performer's will alone. Though his voice may crack, or his lungs may fail his will, the disciplined performer can remain unperturbed by any such happenstance and rest content in the knowledge that he has done the best that he is able. A recalcitrant body or inhospitable audience will not trouble the performer who understands that such matters lie beyond his control and should, therefore, be regarded as nothing of significance and unworthy of his concern. And all of us are, in some sense, performers of our respective roles – as Epictetus reminds us:

Remember that you are an actor in a play the character of which is determined by the author – if short, then in a short one; if long, then in a long one. If it be his pleasure that you should enact a poor man, see that you act it well; or a cripple, or

a ruler, or a private citizen. For this is your business, to act well the given part; but to choose it, belongs to God. [*Enchiridion 17*]

One succeeds insofar as one does the best that one can given the circumstances and one's innate ability. Whether anyone else regards the effort as a success is immaterial to the rational man. Others will think what they will, and the surrounding world will unfold in accordance with God's plan. All of that is "not properly our own affair".

What's Love Got To Do With It?

Perhaps stoicism offers reasonable advice about dealing with potentially damaging reactive attitudes such as anger, fear, anxiety, or frustration that may be triggered by interpersonal relationships, but what does it have to say about emotions generally deemed beneficial and valuable to the person who experiences them? What does stoicism tell us, for example, about love? In remaining indifferent to "externals," must the committed stoic deprive himself of experiences such as reciprocal love of spouse, children, and friends? If so, is this not sufficient reason to reject stoic counsel – at least as it pertains to interpersonal relations? Surely, love is good. If stoicism counsels us to regard love and loving relationships with indifference, well then so much the worse for stoicism.

Lawrence Becker addresses this line of objection as part of his overall defense of a stoic worldview and account of the virtuous life. In *A New Stoicism*, Becker points out that stoics need not live a life devoid of the benefits of familial love and of friendship. Rather, the stoic will rationally direct his will in such matters. Where and when it is reasonable to do so, the stoic can both love and be loved:

We simply hold that it is wise to calibrate the strength, depth, and dissemination of our attachments to the fragility and transience of the objects involved. (The ancients were fond of expressing this in terms of the distinction between things that are within our control, or are “up to us,” and those that are not. But this is misleading)... That means we are very reluctant to endorse any attachment that is maximally strong, deep, and disseminated. It does not mean, however, that we endorse only weak, superficial attachments. On the contrary, strong and deep attachments can be so encapsulated (undisseminated) in our personalities that we can continue to exercise our agency despite their rupture. (One child is dead, and another needs rescue. Parents who can rescue the living child despite the loss of the other have encapsulated attachments, nonetheless strong or deep—and we add virtuous—for being so.) [1998: p. 100]

So, rational love is an expression of the virtuous, well-ordered mind. But love for others must be tempered by recognition of human frailty and a rational understanding of the loved one’s susceptibility to danger. The stoic sage loves others, but also recognizes the mortality of his beloved. Both his own fate and that of his beloved are entrusted to providence insofar as “externals” are concerned, and the rational man is prepared to embrace and accept eventualities as they may arise.

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