

The Structural Critique (*Stoic Virtue*)

The Stoic view of emotion includes a normative principle which is typically formulated as an epistemological claim. Passions, the Stoics argue, are false, and it is within our power to eradicate them in the name of preserving our cognitive integrity.¹ As we have seen, both early and late Stoic thinkers agree that nothing matters except what is within our control.² We tend to care for many things, thereby rendering ourselves liable to being affected; instead, say the Stoics, we ought to “make the best of what is up to us” while accepting everything else the way it is.³ If we educate ourselves about what is truly of value—that is, our own moral volition—then we will not be susceptible to passions.⁴ The objects of our care would not cause us to become upset if it were not for our own attitude toward them. As Marcus Aurelius says: “If you are disturbed by something outside yourself, it is not the thing which troubles you but your own conception of it, and it is within your power to obliterate this immediately.”⁵ This statement may exaggerate the ease of undoing a perception of significance, but it suggests that we *can* transform the judgments that render us liable to be affected—and, to the extent that we are able to do so, that we may eliminate the conditions of emotion. This strategy ought to appeal to anyone who is suffering too much, such as the young woman whose tragic story was related in the first epigraph to Part I. At certain times, even a poet can feel its charm:

It's when I'm weary of considerations,
 And life is too much like a pathless wood
 Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
 Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
 From a twig's having lashed across it open.
 I'd like to get away from earth awhile
 And then come back to it and begin over."

It is hard for even a non-Stoic to accept that the considerations which provide our lives with meaning also cause us so much pain. Stoic morality offers us a way of dissolving this paradox: if it is wrong to care about anything beyond one's own control, then we should not be torn between beauty, insight, and instability on the one hand and drab insensibility on the other. Instead, as Seneca says, we should recognize that the emotional life is *wavering and unstable*; beauty is not to be found among externals, and the untroubled state of mind that results from driving out the passions is *stern, but happy*.⁷ The proto-Stoic teachings of Diogenes the Cynic portray this state as one of peaceful simplicity which is ruined when we believe that we must have luxuries in order to be happy; for Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, the goal of uprooting such beliefs is to get rid of the stupidity from which so many emotions arise.⁸ To avoid this kind of stupidity is a virtue, or an admirable state of character.

What enables the Stoics to frame their normative thesis in epistemological language is a method of arguing that *sees wisdom as a kind of mental health and foolishness as something akin to insanity*. On this view, moral and intellectual virtues cannot be neatly distinguished; as a number of contemporary philosophers have also recognized, *epistemological terms are inescapably evaluative*.⁹ From the assessment that a given proposition is *false*, it is a small step to conclude that anyone who believes the proposition to be true is *wrong*. The falsity is a characteristic of the proposition, the wrongness a fact about the person. Now, in order to find significance in anything one must assent (explicitly or implicitly) to a value-ascribing proposition. If I am angry at you for slashing my tires, then I must believe a number of things, including (1) that I have tires, (2) that they have been slashed, (3) that you are the one who did it, and (4) that this should matter to me. The Stoics aim their critique at this last belief, a version of which can be found in every instance of passion: namely, the idea that something outside of one's own control is significant. Since they argue that this cannot be true, they conclude that the passions—which, by definition, involve this kind of belief—must always be

false. It is for the sake of our mental integrity, then, that we should attempt to get rid of the passions entirely. The state of *apatheia* which would result from this expulsion is one in which not only our passions but also our susceptibility to passion have been taken out by the roots. This is the condition in which an exceptionally virtuous person will sustain himself or herself: anyone who wrongly finds significance in contingencies is viewed by the Stoics as irrational, or even insane.¹⁰

Instances of false or mistaken passion illustrate the ways in which we can be wrong in being passionate—that is, the ways in which our emotions can be erroneous. Our emotional lives become contemptibly and oppressively stupid, first of all, when we allow ourselves to care about what Seneca refers to as petty incidents. It is madness, he says, to become incensed by such trivialities as a disarranged couch cushion or a table imperfectly set.¹¹ His examples occasionally sound dated, but the tendency he describes is perennial: in a similar spirit, the philosophical anthropologist quoted earlier follows his portrayal of the self as an amoeba with this admonition:

Usually we extend these pseudopods not only to things we hold dear, but also to silly things; our selves are cluttered up with things we don't need, artificial things, debilitating ones. For example, if you extend a pseudopod to your house, as most people do, you might also extend it to the inventory of an interior decorating program. And so you get vitally upset by a piece of wallpaper that bulges, a shelf that does not join, a light fixture that "isn't right."¹²

The triviality of emotion is linked with the weakness that it exposes in us, when we allow ridiculous things to become significant to us. We often resemble the person who, when advised not to complain that life is sometimes unpleasant, whines to Epictetus: "Oh, but my nose is running!"¹³ When we are too soft to tolerate even a mild annoyance, we compromise our dignity and render ourselves pathetic. If we guarded against these petty concerns, rather than taking them to heart, we would free ourselves from the passions that handicap us with their banality. Only then could we turn our attention toward what is truly significant.

Sometimes the Stoics go no further than to censure emotional responses that are disproportionate because we are excessively concerned about paltry objects. This argument might be called a *structural* critique, since it depends upon the ability to discern the comparative significance of particular externals

(as opposed to the *fundamental* thesis which dismisses all externals as categorically unimportant). And it is a valuable one, since even a non-Stoic moral philosophy should not regard emotions as invulnerable to rational criticism: they are certainly fallible, and they may be especially prone to distortion, bias, and excess.¹⁴ At one point, Chrysippus defines the passions as diseases not just because they see certain things as good, but because they do so to an unnatural extent.¹⁵ Someone who builds his or her entire life around the pursuit of fashionable outfits could, on this account, be accused of going too far, even if being dressed is worth a bit of attention. And we often go much too far with regard to petty things—caring too much about what other people think of us, for instance, or about how much money we have in the bank.¹⁶ Normally, though, the Stoics will not grant that a person who has lost a daughter should be more upset than one who has lost a kitchen utensil: for anything but a dispassionate response will be seen as excessive. “The man who would fear losing any of these things cannot be happy,” Cicero reminds us. “We want the happy man to be safe, impregnable, fenced and fortified, so that he is not just largely unafraid, but completely.”¹⁷ And we are liable to suffer as long as we believe that aspects of the world outside of our control are significant *at all*. By telling ourselves that these things do not “really” matter, we can annihilate this liability.

The thoroughgoing Stoic does not, therefore, force a staid demeanor from the top down. She does not have emotions that she holds in check. Her tranquility arises without conflict out of a deep freedom from any cares that would dispose her toward being moved. Stoics, in other words, do not triumph over passions as they occur, but shun whatever may lead to emotion. And the method is effective: if we monitor ourselves in this way, we can evade much suffering that we would otherwise experience. Sincere care for anything subject to chance entails the possibility of suffering; by loving we become susceptible to all kinds of emotional torment. To return to Augustine’s terminology for a moment, if the passions are bad (as the Stoics believe), then the love that underlies them must be a dubious influence which ought to be resisted.¹⁸ Even if love does not always lead to the kind of violence portrayed in tragic drama,¹⁹ it can nonetheless bring fierce emotions into every mundane situation. We sometimes find ourselves striking out at inanimate objects, as when we kick a stone in anger after absentmindedly walking into it.²⁰ Believing that even apparently major events should not arouse a passionate response, the Stoics accordingly find the most grotesque excess in vehement passions that are instigated by paltry concerns.

The allegations against emotion—that it renders us trivial and weak, that it usually becomes disproportionate and always puts us in a precarious relation to what is out of our power—justify the Stoic attempt to mitigate our cares (and perhaps to get rid of them entirely). But there is yet another type of charge directed by stoical authors at the category of passion: that, compared with other forms of cognition, it is notoriously prone to confusion.²¹ Emotions do not only focus the mind; they can also cloud it in such a way that “it does not see things in their whole context.”²² Seneca’s caricature of what anger does to a person extends a theme introduced by Chrysippus, who insists that a false belief can grow into a disorder that “penetrates the veins and attaches itself to the viscera,” becoming ineradicable once embedded.²³ Our belief-forming procedures are often flawed, as the Skeptics recognized: how often might we be perceiving confusedly in the moment of emotion? Our passionate reactions could be influenced by biases which were established in our minds through some unreliable process yet which persistently affect our thinking. Considering the risk of such error in our emotional responses, we might be tempted to forgo all but apathetic modes of cognition.

There is also the risk of what could be called emotion by association: I return to the town where I was once in love with a certain person, in order to visit her again under quite different conditions. But the associations of the place remind me of what it was like, and soon I am confused into almost believing myself still in love. The intentionality of the former passion is not reestablished, but in remembering I live it again confusedly. “If the mind has once been affected by two emotions at the same time,” Spinoza cautions, “when it is later affected by the one it will also be affected by the other.”²⁴ This can precipitate a whole cluster of confused, or self-deceived, emotions. When many significant concerns are touched upon at once, ambiguity is likely to ensue; likewise, whenever unclear thoughts are brought to bear upon a situation, we will perceive it in a vague way. Again, the Stoics offer a solution to this predicament: if we stop caring about what is beyond the scope of our own volition, then all of these difficulties will disappear. “What is external to my mind is of no concern,” Marcus Aurelius says; and Epictetus adds that “whatever happens, if it is outside the realm of choice, then it is nothing to me.”²⁵ Caring about inconstant objects is “a certain recipe for disappointment, anxiety, and unhappiness”: if we never question appearances of value, if we do not avoid concern about external things, then we are bound to suffer as a result.²⁶ The Stoic avoids this suffering by withdrawing his care from the realm of chance events and cultivating an impersonal point of view. This

method makes it easier to deal with “the ups and downs of life”;²⁷ it can help us moderate or even avoid selfish jealousies, misplaced blame, road rage, frustration at work, or turmoil over sudden changes of fortune.

Another reason for eradicating our particular attachments is that intense passions for certain objects can limit the scope of our moral awareness. Selfish cares can be overcome if we develop an impartial regard for humanity instead.²⁸ It is only in this way, the Stoics argue, that each of us can live in harmony with the rational order of the universe. Rather than celebrating the accidents of time and place that lead us to form specific affinities, Seneca encourages us to consider ourselves part of a greater community, “where we look not to this or that corner, but measure the boundaries of our state by the sun.”²⁹ If our moral purpose is uniquely worthy of respect, then our highly personal concerns are not an expression of what is best in us. The Stoics tell us that we can read in the nature of the cosmos a moral imperative which bids us to care equally for all rational beings.³⁰ And no less compassionate a person than Gandhi has agreed with the Stoics that our individual passions may blind us to the plight of those who are not within our circle of concern.³¹ In other words, the passions that Stoic teachings urge us to overcome may be distinctly at odds with humanitarian charity.

Diogenes the Cynic is reported to have compared himself to a chorus leader who pitches a note too high so that the others may stretch their voices toward it.³² Similarly, the aphorisms of the Stoics are strong and uncompromising in order that they may have a transformative effect. Taken at face value, however, these prescriptions would enable a person to be in control of his or her world. When we open ourselves to emotion, we lose that assurance. In the words of Pierre Hadot, the elimination of the passions through stoical exercise “raises the individual from an inauthentic condition of life, darkened by unconsciousness and harassed by worry, to an authentic state of life, in which he attains self-consciousness, an exact vision of the world, inner peace, and freedom.”³³ By withdrawing the bonds of care that attach us to objects beyond ourselves, we anticipate the risk of being injured when these appendages are torn away:

There is no more certain proof of greatness than to be in a state where nothing can possibly happen to disturb you. The higher and more well-ordered part of the universe, nearest to the stars, is not condensed into a cloud or lashed into a tempest or churned into a whirlwind; it is free of all

tumult. It is only in the lower regions that lightning strikes. In the same way the lofty mind always remains calm, at rest in a tranquil haven.³⁴

This calm anchorage is the state of *apatheia*, or the absence of *pathos*, that should result from obedience to the precepts of normative Stoicism. Since passions are perceptions of significance, a person for whom nothing in the world is significant will (as a logical consequence) rest in a condition of apathy. As Epictetus points out, it is only by altering our beliefs that we can rid our lives of sorrow and disappointment, and of such cries as “Woe is me!”³⁵

Complete freedom from emotion is taken by the Stoics to be necessary for emotional integrity. They trace all false evaluations to mistaken ways of thinking about the nature of reality, seeing in the logic of the cosmos a model of rational order that should be mirrored in the human soul.³⁶ Apart from the perfection of the soul, they recognize no other good as truly worth pursuing. This enables Marcus Aurelius to say that what is truly valuable in us cannot be damaged under any circumstances, “even if wild animals tear to pieces the limbs of this claylike matter which has grown around you.”³⁷ As the Stoics consistently encourage us to believe, our true self is not touched by such incidents. Seeing that our emotions are in need of clarification, they urge us toward a goal which is attainable by any of us, regardless of our situation.³⁸ In return we are promised not only freedom and peace, but also consistency over the course of life and sincerity of character.³⁹ As a later advocate of self-reliance would agree, we achieve peace of mind only when we rise above contingency and cease to look outside of ourselves. “A political victory, a rise of rents, the recovery of your sick or the return of your absent friend, or some other favorable event raises your spirits, and you think good days are preparing for you. Do not believe it. Nothing can bring you peace but yourself.”⁴⁰

TWO. The Structural Critique (Stoic Virtue)

1. See, e.g., Diogenes Laertius 7.110 and Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.1.65–69. On “integrity” in Stoic philosophy, see Long, *Epictetus*, 223. Cf. Nancy Sherman, *Making a Necessity of Virtue*, 108: “[A] passion is a false belief; the cure is a discursive method that leads to true and reasoned belief about what is of value or worth in the world.”

2. See, e.g., SVF II 977; see also Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.4.27.

3. Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.1.14–17.

4. See Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.22.9–11, 2.22.19–20, 3.1.40. In the last of these passages, Epictetus says that volition or will is what a human being essentially is: “*You* are not flesh . . . but volition [*prohairesis*]; therefore, if you make your will beautiful, then *you* will be beautiful.” For Aristotle, this term means something like “decision”: see, e.g., *Rhetoric* 1355b. Cf. Seneca, *De Ira* 2.2.1–2. In this chapter, “what is truly of value” and “what is truly significant” are phrases that ought to sound contentious. They allude to the Stoic idea that nothing matters (i.e., nothing is of value) other than rational volition.

5. *Meditations* 8.47.

6. Robert Frost, “Birches,” lines 43–49.

7. Letters 23, 92. Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus* 242e–256e. Many of the theses of Socrates’ speech in praise of madness are directly contradicted by the Stoics. Writing about this dialogue, Martha Nussbaum says that, according to Socrates, certain forms of passion “are not only not incompatible with insight and stability, [but] are actually necessary for the highest sort of insight and the best kind of stability.” *The Fragility of Goodness*, 201.

8. Diogenes Laertius 6.44, 7.110.

9. See, e.g., Alvin I. Goldman, *Epistemology and Cognition*, 3: "Clearly, 'justified,' 'warranted,' and 'rational' are evaluative terms; and the advocacy of particular methods is a normative activity." Or, as Linda Zagzebski says, "Epistemic evaluation just is a form of moral evaluation." *Virtues of the Mind*, 256. Epictetus frequently speaks of moral judgments as true or false; see, e.g., *Discourses* 3.17.8. In *De Finibus* 3.72, Cicero also hints at a virtue epistemology: if rash judgment is a vice, then the skill which removes it is a virtue.

10. See, e.g., Stobaeus 2.68 and Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 11.38.

11. *De Ira* 2.25.1.

12. Ernest Becker, *Birth and Death of Meaning*, 34.

13. *Discourses* 1.6.30–32.

14. Cf. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 2.

15. SVF III 480.

16. Chrysippus says that a good reputation is not worth stretching out a finger to obtain. See Cicero, *De Finibus* 3.57. On limiting our desire for wealth, see Seneca, Letter 2. With regard to both of these ideas, see Schopenhauer, *The Wisdom of Life*, 57.

17. *Tusculan Disputations* 5.40–41 (LS 63–L). Long and Sedley translation.

18. Cicero contends in *Tusculan Disputations* (4.68) that love "is of such excessive triviality that I see nothing that I believe comparable with it." He doubts (4.72) that in the actual world there is an instance of love free from disquietude, longing, anxiety, and sighing. The treatment that ought to be given to a person in love (4.74) is "to make it clear how trivial, contemptible, and wholly insignificant [*nihili*] is what he loves."

19. Epictetus cites examples from Sophocles and Euripides in *Discourses* 1.24.14–19, 1.28.7–11, 2.17.17–22, and 2.22.13–16. For an overview of Senecan tragedy and its Stoic background, see Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, *Senecan Drama and Stoic Cosmology*.

20. This example is given by Epictetus, *Discourses* III.19.4.

21. Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1147a, 1149a.

22. Lingis, *Dangerous Emotions*, 15.

23. SVF III 424.

24. *Ethics*, 112 (Part III, Proposition 14).

25. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 7.2; Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.29.24.

26. Long, *Epictetus*, 28–29. See also Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind*, 29, 45–46.

27. Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind*, 2.

28. See, e.g., Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.22.14, 1.27.14.

29. *De Otio* 4.1.

30. See the discussion by Julia Annas in *The Morality of Happiness*, 174–76.

31. Gandhi's repudiation of partisan divisions takes to a greater extreme the position of Marcus Aurelius in *Meditations* 1.5; and his belief that the divinity of the uni-

verse supports an attitude of respect toward all human beings is comparable to the Stoic idea of living in accordance with nature. See, e.g., *The Sayings of Mahātma Gandhi*, 10, 67.

32. Diogenes Laertius 6.35.

33. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 83.

34. Seneca, *De Ira* 3.6.1.

35. *Discourses* 1.4.23.

36. See Diogenes Laertius 7.88, 143; Stobaeus 2.75–76; Seneca, Letter 76; and Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 4.23.

37. *Meditations* 7.68.

38. That is, whether we are "on the throne or in chains," as Hegel says (alluding to Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus), we can "maintain that lifeless indifference which steadfastly withdraws from the bustle of existence . . . into the simple essentiality of thought." *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §199.

39. See Diogenes Laertius 7.89 and Epictetus, *Encheiridion* 33; see also Diogenes Laertius 7.119.

40. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," 48. Cf. Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.24.112.