

CHAPTER 4

Integrity without Apathy?

Stoicism offers a vision of moral integrity uncorrupted by false emotion—but only by classifying all emotions as false. The premise which establishes that classification is not obviously true: it may be that not all beliefs that Z is significant, where Z is something outside my control, are therefore erroneous. But if it is not the case that every emotion must (by definition) be mistaken, then it is essential to assess all of the other ways in which our emotions could be amiss. How could we root out those passions that (in Nietzsche's words) drag us down with their stupidity—without doing away with passion altogether?¹ The critique of apathy as a moral ideal does not amount to a defense of the opposite strategy. Indiscriminate emotionalism is no more defensible than indiscriminate passionlessness: the urgent task, both conceptually and existentially, is to distinguish within the category of emotion between those that are acceptable and those that ought to be rejected. How is it possible to live passionately without being a fool? When are we prone to have emotions that are confused, obtuse, disproportionate, inappropriate, self-deceived, sentimental, or otherwise unsound? To point out the need for these evaluative terms is to turn from the descriptive theory of what an emotion is to the practical issue of how to be passionate without being irrational. "Reasonable" emotion, of course, would not mean emotion which has been

sanctioned by some other intellectual faculty, but that which is trustworthy in itself. The desired end of avoiding flawed emotion might be reached via the negative way of identifying the flaws that our emotions are likely to contain.

This, however, will require a critical investigation of our entire moral life. Because our temporal existence is implicated in our emotional dispositions, there is little to say about the moment of emotion without a thorough analysis of the way in which emotions arise in the midst of our being in time. What would it take to pursue the ideal of emotional integrity, yet to acknowledge that not every emotion is false? In grappling with this question we handle what has been called "the prickliest fruit on the giant cactus of emotion theory,"² for although the Stoics' fundamental thesis has been found wanting, their qualified critique of emotion remains cogent. So we are left with two major questions. How could our emotional dispositions and responses avoid the kinds of inaccuracy to which they are liable? And, more fundamentally, how can we be sure that it is not wrong to find significance in the external world? Stoic philosophy, as Long points out, holds that "from propositions asserting how things are we can derive propositions concerning what is good," and this is because its concept of nature "is first and foremost a normative, evaluative, or, if you will, a moral principle."³ This means that a different view of the world might lead us to adopt a different moral psychology than the one which is endorsed by the Stoics. Perhaps it is possible to develop an alternative philosophy that preserves the virtues of Stoicism while denying the idea that rational understanding must be dispassionate.

Any constructive defense of emotion must not only give an account of how to judge that something is objectively disappointing; it must also focus on the subjective expectations that determine what will count as grounds for disappointment. What is it all right for us to care about? How much unpredictable risk can we accept, how many concerns can we sustain, without being torn apart? Even if we have refused to adopt the view that nothing is worth caring about, it is possible and may be morally essential "to distinguish between things that are worth caring about to one degree or another and things that are not."⁴ As we have noted, our caring is not entirely pliable: nevertheless, our emotional dispositions can become more or less articulate, and to the extent that we are aware of them we have some ability to criticize and to reconsider, to cultivate some while attempting to eradicate others.

The portrait of a soul that cannot be touched, however, is not going to be resuscitated in this inquiry. Our litany of the inadequacies of normative Stoicism has left no uncertainty as to why one contemporary author should

associate Epictetus with images of deterioration while characterizing *detachment* and *serenity* as "vague, almost empty words, except in those moments when we would have answered by a smile if we had been told we had only a few minutes to live."⁵ On the other hand, **the Stoic ideal should not give way to a less-exacting one; it rather needs to be replaced by a conception of a self that is able to maintain its integrity even though it is open to emotion.**⁶ The cardinal virtue of our renovated ethics would be nothing less than **the readiness to be always affected in the right ways, based upon a care for the right things.**⁷ To possess the reflective foresight to have developed a clear sense of the nature and extent of one's cares, along with the concrete insight needed to comprehend an immediate situation in all of its complexity, would be to embody **an extraordinary sort of wisdom.** It would be to have earned the right **to trust oneself in becoming passionate.** The epistemological picture of a subject as "rational" to the extent that he has separated himself from his environment would then need to be thrown away as a misguided paradigm which builds a bias against valued engagement into the definition of what it is to be rational; If **rationality means, not being calm, but reasoning accurately, then emotions could become a form of reliable cognition.**

Attaining this ideal would require a commitment to intense self-scrutiny, and the eradication of all varieties of false belief. **To affirm a life in which one seeks fulfillment through emotional relationships⁸ is to see the world as, more than anything else, a fabric of attachments;** such that, within the human mind, nothing is more real than the emotional force that establishes those attachments. Allowing our convictions to be formed by love does not amount to abdicating moral responsibility: it only means that we cannot aim at the psychological impossibility of being the all-powerful creators of ourselves. **When the Stoic tells us that we ought to revere whatever is best in us, as an expression of what is best in the universe at large,⁹ we may agree entirely with the appropriateness of that reverence while disputing his identification of abstract practical reason as what is worthy of such an attitude.** Epictetus may be wrong to say that we cannot attend both to externals and to our own governing principle at the same time.¹⁰ It could, in fact, be specifically in giving attention to what is not within our control that we are acting in accordance with our highest capacity.

The Stoics offer a tenable conception of human dignity, and their program for the eradication of passion is based upon a view of the universe which some have found satisfactory. For such a person, my description of what Stoicism prohibits might be taken as evidence in favor of being a Stoic. But I

think that its deficiencies are sufficiently troubling to justify an inquiry into the possibility of an alternative—and that the nonapathetic exemplar of emotional integrity (insofar as we can conceive of such a person) represents a compelling ideal. Accepting the validity of passionate experience, affirming the truth of love in spite of every argument for resisting it, may enable a person to attain a state just as truthful, yet more admirable and courageous, than the apathy of the Stoic sage. To suggest what this state of being might be like, I quote from a biographical portrait of a great musical composer:

He did not turn away from life toward some mystical nirvana. He forgot none of the joy, the effort, or the pain. He abandoned nothing. What he achieved is something much more wonderful than an old man's serenity. . . . There were no feigned or borrowed emotions, and nerve-storms never took the place of feelings. He had no need to complicate his joy with bitterness or to distort his rapture with cynicism. These are the devices of a man who wishes to come to terms with his suffering without facing it in all its starkness. But Beethoven had the innocence of his courage.¹¹

It is fair to say that in Stoicism and its imagined alternative we are presented with different visions of wisdom—and different ideals of human existence. The stance we end up taking with regard to our own emotional nature will be determined by, or will itself determine, how we conceive of self and world. Our attitude toward emotion reveals quite a bit about our overall way of thinking: if we believe that nothing in this vain sublunary realm can affect us, then we will regard emotions as basically mistaken. If, on the other hand, we believe that a responsive engagement with the world is more truthful, then we cannot dismiss our proclivity to care as misleading. While we might not always use religious language in talking about the ultimate categories in which we understand ourselves, our attitude toward passion is nevertheless connected to our most general beliefs about the nature of reality. And if we do not agree with the Stoics, if we think that our capacity to love what is beyond our control should not be eradicated, then the reverence that Marcus Aurelius asks us to direct toward what is best in us will need to be reoriented.

In his spiritual exercises, Ignatius of Loyola lists rules "to aid us toward perceiving and then understanding, at least to some extent, the various motions that are caused in the soul: the good motions, that they may be received, and the bad that they may be rejected."¹² He submits a list of criteria

for evaluating a given experience: for example, in a person who is making spiritual progress, a bad movement of soul will be sharp, noisy, and disturbing. It may or may not be possible to develop this kind of phenomenological method for assessing a moment of emotion: but even the Ignatian rule draws upon the idea of moral improvement in making its distinctions. The formation of the self over time must be taken into account if we are to set terms of evaluation within experience. Because of the intentionality of emotion, the reliability of our affective dispositions is dependent upon the coherence of our world of cares and commitments. In our situated existence, we embody an ongoing history of love and suffering, bearing witness to what has moved us.¹³ What future movements should we admit, and which should we (as far as we can) strive to resist? In order to decide what passions we ought make space for, we must determine what in the world is worthy of love. Outward extends the simple fact of attachment; from that, a diverse array of passions is liable to ensue. And caring for the right things is not enough: we must also be aware of our limitations, not least of which is the limit to how much we can honestly afford to care about. As our cares increase, they are more and more likely to conflict with one another—and, even in the absence of any such conflict, we can bear only so much reality. If we accept the risk of emotion, we should remember the Stoic images of dismemberment: our integrity is very much at stake wherever there is an attachment of love.

If we are going to care, then, we had better be careful.¹⁴ A solid proof that, all in all, the emotional life is worth living, is not forthcoming. But this does not mean that there is nothing to be said about various alternatives. What *can* be demonstrated, in the logical sense of showing what follows from what, are the consequences of living—whether tacitly or explicitly—in accordance with certain principles. I have already done this with certain tenets of normative Stoicism; in what follows, we will consider some other ways of thinking about emotion. From a non-Stoic point of view, it ought to be possible to develop some process of legitimation in which some emotions would drop away, but others would be amplified. In other words, it could be that *something* will remain after all false emotion has been rooted out.¹⁵ The careful education of our emotional dispositions would perhaps leave us with something in ourselves that could be trusted. Our passions would be clarified and refined: we would understand what our sufferings were all about, and would know that they were legitimate.¹⁶ This is a lofty goal, but if attained it would enable us to live with a kind of emotional wisdom that the Stoic will never know.

TWELVE. Conclusion: The Tragicomedy of Passionate Existence

1. JP 2.2003; PAP VIII¹ A 462. In this 1847 journal entry, Kierkegaard goes on to say that “In this far deeper sense one sees the significance of the Hebraic expression—to know one’s wife.” See, e.g., Genesis 4:1.

2. Cf. Donna M. Orange, *Emotional Understanding*, 21. Stanley Cavell’s remarks on skepticism are relevant to this discussion of a mode of knowing that requires love: “I cannot be more certain than I am of some beliefs, so that when I say I know, what I am expressing is . . . a different stance I take toward that certainty. . . . And if I refuse ever to take such steps, I am not being *cautious* but irresponsible or obsessional.” *Themes Out of School*, 214.

3. See *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, KW 5.59–60; SV 4.60–61 and *Works of Love*, KW 16.158–59; SV 12.153–54. See also Jean-Luc Marion, *Reduction and Givenness*, 190–92.

4. We must, as Helm says, “appeal to a kind of holism that rejects both the assumption that the world is ontologically prior to our cognitions and the assumption that our conations are ontologically prior to the world.” *Emotional Reason*, 58.

5. Ferreira, *Love’s Grateful Striving*, 104–107.

6. Schopenhauer, *World as Will and Representation*, 2:433–34.

7. Lines 9–12 of an untitled poem by Philip Larkin, “Sinking like sediment through the day.” *Collected Poems*, 27.

8. Cf. Kundera, *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 86: “If there were too much incontestable meaning in the world (the angels’ power), man would succumb under its weight. If the world were to lose all its meaning (the devils’ reign), we could not live either.”

9. See, e.g., Kafka, diary entry for 15 October 1913: “Perhaps I have caught hold of myself again . . . and now I, who already despair in loneliness, have pulled myself up again. But the headaches, the sleeplessness! Well, it is worth the struggle, *or rather, I have no choice*.” *Diaries: 1910–1923*, 231. My italics. David Wiggins suggests that “happiness” is less important in moral philosophy than the question of life’s meaning. *Needs, Values, Truth*, 88.

10. See, e.g., JP 6.6166; PAP IX A 70 (on his melancholy and upbringing), JP 6.6385; PAP XI A 260 (on having felt obligated “to demolish an authentic love”), JP 5.5664; PAP IV A 107 (on realizing after the fact that there had been no religious grounds for rejecting this love and breaking his engagement), and JP 5.5962; PAP VII¹ A 222 (on the overwhelming and persistent creative imperative which must, “one would think,” be a divine calling). Not only does Kierkegaard never question his love for Regine, but he even says that nothing is more certain than his love for her. See PAP III A 166, VIII¹ A 641.

11. In JP 5.5913; PAP VII¹ A 126, Kierkegaard presents himself as a tragic figure whose task in his work has been to offer guidance to those who, unlike himself, are still capable of attaining happiness. He laments his inability to let anyone become

“deeply and intimately attached” to him, and says that his melancholy would have made Regine unhappy in spite of his love for her. See JP 5.5517; PAP III A 161 and JP 6.6163; PAP IX A 67. Also worth noting in this regard is his ill-fated attempt to reconcile himself with his ex-fiancée in a way that would allow her to “realize her significance” to him. JP 6.6162, 6.6471–73; PAP IX A 66, XI A 148–50. See also PAP XI A 83 and *Letters and Documents*, KW 25.322–37; *Breve og Aktstykker* 235–39.

12. On the proximity of tragedy and comedy, see JP 4.4823; PAP I A 34 and *Stages on Life’s Way*, KW 11.420; SV 8.218–19.

13. See *Book on Adler*, KW 24.164; PAP VIII² B 12.55.

14. Kierkegaard envisions “a novel in which the main character would be a man who had obtained a pair of glasses, one lens of which reduced images as powerfully as an oxyhydrogen microscope and the other magnified on the same scale, so that he perceived everything relatively.” JP 5.5281; PAP II A 203. This kind of relativism is not what emotional perception should be, as is shown by the fragment in which “A” says: “My observation of life makes no sense at all. I suppose that an evil spirit has put a pair of glasses on my nose, one lens of which magnifies on an immense scale and the other reduces on the same scale.” *Either/Or*, KW 3.24; SV 2.28.

15. *Letters and Documents*, KW 25.62–63; *Breve og Aktstykker* 17 (to Regine Olsen). Under a line drawing of a figure who appears to be suspended in a volleyball net, Kierkegaard explains that it is in fact a picture of himself standing on a bridge and looking through a telescope: “This is Knippelsbro. I am that person with the spyglass. As you know, figures appearing in a landscape are apt to look somewhat curious. You may take comfort, therefore, in the fact that I do not look quite that ugly and that every artistic conception always retains something of the ideal, even in caricature. Several art experts have disagreed as to why the painter has not provided any background whatsoever. Some have thought this an allusion to a folk tale about a man who so completely lost himself in the enjoyment of the view from Knippelsbro that at last he saw nothing but the picture produced by his own soul, which he could just as well have been looking at in a dark room. Others have thought that it was because he lacked the perspective necessary for drawing—houses. But the spyglass itself has a unique characteristic about which tradition tells us the following: the outermost lens is of mirror glass so that when one trains it on *Trekroner* and stands on the left side of the bridge at an angle of 50° off Copenhagen, one sees something quite different from what is seen by all the other people about one; thus, in the midst of a friendly chat about the view of the ships, one sees or thinks one sees, or hopes to see, or wishes to see, or despairs of seeing that which the secret *genie* of the spyglass reveals to him who understands how to use it correctly. Only in the proper hands and for the proper eye is it a divine telegraph; for everybody else it is a useless contrivance.”