



Enemies at the Frontier: The Problem of the Passions in Seneca's *On Anger*

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Traditionally, the passions in Stoic moral theory are divided into four kinds, based upon the expectation of either a good or an evil.¹ Pleasure (*laetitia*) and pain (*aegritudo*) are impulses of the soul in the presence of an apparent good or evil, while desire (*libido*) and fear (*metus*) are impulses related to some future apparent good or evil. All the passions are based upon judgments about perceived states of affairs that cause some active response in the moral agent: pleasure, for example, is a judgment about a present perceived good that causes the subject to feel elated, while pain is a judgment about a present perceived evil that causes depression in its subject. Fear is a judgment about some expected evil, the threat of which is perceived to be unbearable, and desire is a judgment about some future good, which the subject perceives to be advantageous (*Lives* 7.110-111). From the above analysis, it is clear that when the ancient Stoa speak of the passions, they (1) connect them with judgments or beliefs, (2) imply that these judgments are by their very nature incorrect, (3) acknowledge that assent given to these faulty judgments creates an excessive impulse in the soul that goes contrary to reason, and hence (4) believe that all passions are an impediment to virtue.

Although there was some debate in Stoic moral thought as to whether the passions were the consequence of judgments or judgments themselves², all the Stoics agree in principle that judgments—the assent given to external stimuli—are capable of producing “violent and excessive” impulses in the soul, which cause the agent to respond to events in an inappropriate way. For example, it may happen that at a given time a person gives assent to the presentation that fame is good. This belief, of course, is false, because, if the person were to consistently follow the path of reason rather than that of opinion, he would realize that fame at best is a purely indifferent external thing (an *adiaphoron*). The assent to this false presentation, in turn, causes contractions of the soul and an excessive impulse to pursue the path to fame at all costs. What is most apparent from this example is that, for the ancient Stoa, the passions must be viewed as both false by their very nature, but also completely within an agent's own power (*Moralia* 449d). When in the *Tusculan Disputations* Cicero, for example, explains that the Stoics refer to passion as a “sickness of the soul,” he does not mean to imply that this sickness, like a sickness of the body, overcomes the individual without his full awareness or consent. Rather, he understands the passions to be deep-rooted beliefs that regard something that is not desirable as though it were desirable

or something that is not to be feared as though it were worthy of fear (*Disputations* 4.26). Thus, to impute to Stoicism the view that the passions have an uncontrollable element to them, or that the moral agent is somehow a passive victim of their power, would appear to be a gross misunderstanding of Stoic ethical theory. The evidence that we have available to us indicates that the early Stoa clearly rejected the dual-faculty approach to the soul that other schools frequently used to explain the apparent conflict between reason and the passions.³

Having described the approach of the ancient Stoa to the passions, it now becomes possible to determine whether Seneca follows Zeno and Chrysippus in adopting their monistic psychology or whether he also opts for a dual-faculty approach. Turning to *On Anger* Seneca's most thorough work on the topic, it would appear at first glance that a clear dichotomy is established between reason and the passions. Reason, he says in Book One, is able to maintain autonomy over the soul only insofar as it remains separated from the passions; once the passions have gained a foothold in the soul, reason, in effect, becomes powerless to stop their advance: "reason herself, to whom the reigns of power have been entrusted, remains mistress only as long as she is kept apart from the passions: if once she mingles with them and is contaminated she becomes unable to hold back those whom she might have cleared from the path" (*Anger* 1.7.3-4). Reason, once having been moved by the passions, inevitably must become enslaved to them. Ultimately, the mind, having admitted a passion, becomes transformed into that passion (*in adfectum ipse mutatur*) and becomes unable of its own power to regain its former autonomous functioning.

In 1.9 Seneca raises the Peripatetic objection that some passions are useful in helping to achieve certain ends. Aristotle, for example, believes that anger, by emboldening men, actually helps wars to be won. For Seneca though, a passion by its very nature is an impulse of the soul completely disobedient to reason, and therefore can never be of any practical use. Insofar as anger is useful in winning wars then it ceases to be anger, but is instead an emotion subordinate to reason. It is by the power of reason that wars are won, not by the power of the passions:

If [the passion] resists and is not submissive when ordered, but is carried away by its own caprice and fury, it will be an instrument of the mind as useless as the soldier who disregards the signal for retreat. If, therefore, anger suffers any limitation upon it, it must be called by some other name—it has ceased to be anger; for I understand this to be unbridled and ungovernable (1.7.3-4).

Implicit in Seneca's understanding of the passions is the idea that they are impulses devoid of any trace of reason. Thus we have the image of the soul in this work as a kind of vacuum, where either reason or the passions predominate, but where neither can reside concurrently. If the passions are present in the soul, reason must necessarily be subordinate to them.⁴

While it is true, then, that Seneca views passion and reason as completely in opposition to one another, unlike Plutarch and Cicero, he does not establish this dichotomy at the expense of a monistic psychology. In attempting to answer the question, in Book Two, of whether passion arises in the soul without the control of reason or only with its consent, he unhesitatingly adopts the latter position. "It is our opinion," writes Seneca, "that [the passion] ventures nothing, but acts only with the approval of the mind" (*Anger* 2.1.3). In

other words, the passions are not to be conceived as sensations out of our control, such as shivering when we are cold; nor should they be viewed as moving the mind passively and without its approval; rather, they must be seen as impulses that can only arise with the preliminary assent of reason.⁴

How can it be that, on one hand, the passions are able by their very nature to dominate reason, while on the other hand, they can never do this without the consent of reason itself? Either we should have a dual-faculty psychology at work to allow for this tension between two opposing faculties, or, adopting a monistic framework, there should be only the appearance of conflict, with reason always in control of the soul. To see how Seneca resolves this apparent dilemma, it is necessary to turn to his treatment of the various motions involved in passion, found in *De Ira* 2.4. The first motion of a passion, according to Seneca, is a simple reflex, completely involuntary, which is not a passion yet, but has the potential to become a passion. For example, in the case of fear, sweaty palms or an increased heart-beat should not be considered passions themselves since they proceed completely without the assent of reason. Even the sage, says Seneca time and again, will experience these sensations, and, therefore, they should always be perceived as morally neutral. The second motion, however, is a judgment or an act of volition still somewhat reserved. In the case of fear such a judgment would entail a perception that it is right to flee when confronted with an apparent danger. At this stage, the passions are still under the control of reason, but once an erroneous judgment has been assented to by the will, it now becomes possible for passion to dominate reason. Thus, in the third motion, the passion leaps beyond the control of reason. The person who gives in to fear now desires to flee, whether or not the danger he has perceived is real. At this point, reason has lost control over the soul, has been transformed into a passion itself, and must await the dissipation of the passion's energy in order to regain control over the soul (*Anger* 2.4.1-2).

What should be apparent from this illustration is that only after the mind has assented to a false presentation do we have an excessive and irrational impulse that leads the mind away from the path of reason. But if Seneca does in fact reject a dual-faculty approach to the soul, how are we to account for the obvious opposition between reason and the passions that we find in his writings? Why was it necessary for Seneca at the same time to maintain the monistic framework of his predecessors and yet also allow for the continual threat that the passions could ultimately overwhelm reason if not guarded against? The only possible solution is to situate his discussion of the three motions of passion within the context of the insights that have been gained from a reading of Seneca's *De Providentia*. In this work, Seneca argues that man has been given the gift of reason by God, and that it is intended that he use this faculty in a proper and pious way. Insofar as he does this—by adapting his will to that of God—he receives the blessing of being freed from the tyranny of the passions and has the possibility of attaining happiness in this life and participating fully in the Divine.

But human beings have been given the freedom to adopt an improper attitude towards externals as well. In *De Providentia*, Seneca has made it perfectly clear that all men have the ability to willfully and rationally choose to accommodate themselves to Right Reason or not to. "I am under no compulsion," argues Seneca, "I suffer nothing against my will, and I am not God's slave but his follower" (*Providence* 5.6). It is this freedom which has been given to man that is the possibility for his salvation, but it is also the possibility for his damnation as well. Just as the individual can choose to recognize nothing as good except what is ordained by God, so too can he choose to assent to pernicious judgments about

external things.

The result of such a misuse of reason is the enslavement of reason by the passions, the turmoil and misery of a life dominated by these unruly impulses, and the dissolution of the divine in man. In the end, even after a passion has dissipated from the soul or has been checked by another opposing passion, reason, having suffered the contamination of their presence, must forever be wary of the threat of their possible return. The final motion of the passions, however, must always be seen as a product of the assent of the soul. It is for human beings alone to choose either the life of the sage, freed from all external control, or the dissolute life of one who has willingly chosen his own particular mode of slavery.

SOURCES

Anger	Seneca, <i>On Anger</i> (Harvard UP, 1917)
Disputations	Cicero, <i>Tusculan Disputation</i> (Harvard UP, 1942)
Ends	Cicero, <i>On The Ends of Good and Evil</i> (Harvard UP, 1942)
Epistle	Seneca, <i>Moral Epistles</i> (Harvard UP, 1917)
Ethics	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> (Prentice Hall, 1962)
Lives	Diogenes Laertius, <i>Lives of the Eminent Philosophers</i> (Harvard UP, 1925)
Moralia	Plutarch, <i>Moralia</i> (Harvard UP, 1976)
Providence	Seneca, <i>On Providence</i> (Harvard UP, 1917)
Tranquility	Seneca, <i>On the Tranquility of Spirit</i> (Harvard UP, 1917)

NOTES

¹ For a good overview of the early Stoic theory of the passions see Michael Frede, “The Stoic Doctrine of the Affections of the Soul,” *Norms of Nature*, ed. Malcolm Schofield and Gisela Striker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 93-110.

² Zeno is supposed to have held the former opinion, while Chrysippus the latter (D.L. 7.111). Among later ancient commentators on Stoic thought, Cicero implies that the Stoics held the passions to be due to judgments (TD 4.14), suggesting that Zeno’s view was the predominant one; Diogenes Laertius, on the other hand, implies that the Chrysippian view was the norm (D.L. 7.111). Contemporary scholars have tried to resolve this dilemma by suggesting that Chrysippus’ view represents a mere verbal refinement of Zeno’s doctrine, or that the distinction is simply irrelevant, since, as mental events, assent and impulse always occur together. See: A.C. Lloyd, “Emotion and Decision in Stoic Psychology,” *The Stoics*, ed. J.M. Rist (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1978): 240-241. Brad Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism* (Oxford: University Press, 1985): 131.

³ This image of the passions as a force alien to reason, threatening the proper and harmonious functioning of the soul, and able to be controlled only by a concerted effort of the reasoning faculty, is found in numerous authors in late antiquity. Plutarch, for example, believes that the direct evidence of our perceptions leads us to an awareness that the passions and reason are two separate faculties “struggling and fighting against one another”

(*Moralia* 447c. See also *Disputations* 4.10-11). Although a dualistic approach to the soul is a prevalent feature of both Academic and Peripatetic psychology, the question that we must ask is whether this approach was also adopted by the ancient Stoics in their treatment of the passions. When we read that Zeno defined passion as “an irrational and unnatural movement of the soul,” (*Lives* 7.110.) we might be tempted to believe that this is the case. However, as Brad Inwood points out, the ancient Stoics, for the most part, conceived of the soul in terms of a monistic psychology. The passions in this model are seen as the products of reason, so that there can never truly be a conflict between reason and the passions. How are we to account then for what at times appears to be a tension between the two? Inwood claims that at best all the ancient Stoa are able to say is that at certain times a man gives assent incorrectly or too vehemently to a certain presentation. In responding to stimuli in an improper way he falls into conflict, not with his own reason but with Right Reason or, rather, Divine Reason (Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, 139). This monistic interpretation of the passions finds support in the Tucculan Disputations, where Cicero gives Zeno’s definition of the passions as “an agitation of the soul alien from right reason” (*adversa a recta ratione*) (*Disputations* 4.11).

⁴ A difficulty arises in this analysis when we consider the cases of individuals who appear to be able to control themselves even in anger, a phenomenon which seems to dispel the idea of the mutual exclusiveness of reason and the passions. According to Seneca, however, either the passions are more powerful than reason, in which case reason must give way to their control, or they are less powerful; in this latter case the passions are completely useless and we would do better to eliminate them entirely (*Anger* 1.8.4-5). This view is confirmed in Epistle 116 where Seneca writes, “The question has been raised whether it is better to have moderate emotions or none at all....I however do not understand how any half-way disease can be either wholesome or helpful.” (*Epistle* 116.1) Just as a disease of the body, if left unchecked, will cause the destruction of the entire organism, so too will passion, even in limited form, cause the destruction of the reasoning faculty.

⁵ The case of a man who is injured and wishes to take revenge, but after deliberation calms down, is a good illustration of what a passion is not for Seneca. In this case, we do not have an example of a passion at work, but only of a prompting of the mind that is ultimately submissive to reason. In a true passion the mind not only gives an incorrect impression (i.e., that injury has taken place) but also must assent somehow to that impression (i.e., by seeking revenge). See *Anger* 2.3.5.