



Introduction to Stoic Ethics

Michael S. Russo
 Department of Philosophy
 Molloy College

Show me a man who though sick is happy, though in danger is happy, though dying is happy, though condemned to exile is happy, though in disrepute is happy. Show him! By the gods, I would fain see a Stoic. — Epictetus

I. The Foundations of Stoic Ethics

The origin of the Stoic discussion on the happy life is actually found in the Nicomachean Ethics 1095a 18, where Aristotle observes that happiness (eudaimonia) is the end of life for all human beings. The question of what constitutes happiness, however, is a matter of some contention between Aristotle and the Stoa. In Aristotle's opinion, happiness is "an activity of the soul in accordance with perfect virtue." Virtue here is defined as a proper disposition of the soul in pursuit of the good. Up until this point Aristotle and the Stoics are in complete agreement; it is when Aristotle describes the nature of the *sumum bonum* that conflict arises. In Chapter One of the Ethics, he states that there must be a first good that is chosen for its own sake, which is an end in itself, and everything else must be seen as a means towards this end. In order for human beings to be truly happy, however, certain external goods are required (Ethics 1101a 7-1102a 5-6; 1106a20). What are some of these external goods that Aristotle believes are necessary prerequisites for the happy life? In the Rhetoric, he says that they include "noble birth, numerous friends, good friends, good children, numerous children, a good old age; further bodily excellences, such as health, beauty, strength, stature, fitness for athletic contests, a good reputation, honor, good luck, virtue" (Rhetoric 1360b3-4).¹

Whereas Aristotle, then, accepts different senses of the word "good", including health as well as virtue among good things, the ancient Stoics, such as Zeno and Chrysippus, hold that virtue is the exclusive good. In their view, those things that Aristotle calls external goods are not at all morally relevant, since they could not affect virtue, and subsequently are to be treated as indifferents (*adiaphora*). Among the *adiaphora*, however, Zeno considered some "preferred" (*proegmena*), since they accord with nature (*kata phusin*); other things are to be "rejected" as contrary to nature. The class of preferred things corresponds to Aristotle's external goods, and includes such qualities as life, fame, health and beauty, while the things rejected include their opposites—death, ignominy, sickness and ugliness (Lives 7.87, 102). Although the preferables are morally neutral, the wise man will make use of them if they are available, since they are the material upon which virtuous action is based. In the end, though, they remain inessential to the wise man: his virtue remains intact even if he should have none of these advantages (Moralia 1069c-e). This orthodox Stoic position is expressed by Cicero in the following way: "But since we declare that everything that is good occupies the first rank, it follows that this which we entitle preferred (*praecipuum*) or superior is neither good nor evil; accordingly we define it as

being indifferent but possessed of a moderate value” (Ends 3.53).

II. The Problem of the “Preferables” in Stoic Ethics

The ambiguity concerning the status of preferable things, their relation to virtue and their role in the happy life inevitably led to some criticism of the Stoic position. Plutarch, for one, attacked what he perceived to be a dichotomy between the way the Stoics treated the preferables in theory and in practice: “the Stoics in their works and acts cling to things that are in conformity with nature as good things and objects of choice, but in word and speech they reject and spurn them as indifferent and useless and insignificant for happiness” (Moralia 1070a-b). A similar view is expressed by Cicero, who questioned whether there is any real difference between the Stoic and Peripatetic teachings with respect to external goods. “Why what difference does it make,” he asked, “whether you call wealth, power, health ‘goods’ (bona), or ‘things preferred’ (praeposita), when he who calls them ‘goods’ assigns no more value to them than you who style exactly the same things ‘preferred’” (Ends 4.23). Opponents of early Stoic ethical theory correctly understood that the problem with the Stoic formulation of the relation of preferred things to the summum bonum is that either the preferables should be considered goods, and therefore given some moral status, or a more radical approach to the summum bonum would have to be taken to avoid contradiction.

III. Attempts at a Solution: The Middle Stoics

Criticisms such as these, which ripped at the very core of Stoic theory, called for a strong response from the Stoics of the Republic and early Empire, if their philosophy was not to be abandoned in favor of the more moderate teachings of the Peripatetics. Out of this battle for intellectual survival, there arose two radically different approaches to the summum bonum within the Stoic tradition. The first attempt at a solution was initiated in the late second and early first centuries B.C. under the initiative of Middle Stoics such as Panaetius and Posidonius. It represented an eclectic blend of traditional Stoicism with an Aristotelian approach to external goods.²

According to Diogenes Laertius, Panaetius and Posidonius broke from the ancient Stoics by denying “that virtue is self-sufficing; on the contrary, health is necessary, and some means of living and strength” (Lives 7.128). Panaetius’s goal, according to Diogenes, was to affirm that certain things, which the ancient Stoics call indifferent, when present, facilitate virtue and happiness, and therefore can hardly be considered completely indifferent. He also seems to have shifted the emphasis of Stoic thought away from the sage to the average morally imperfect individual, and from a philosophy that trained the soul to face adversity to a useful code of decorum for everyday life (Epistle 19.9). Likewise, Posidonius was said to have placed some of the adiaphora among goods. His approach was clearly contrasted by Diogenes with that of the ancient Stoics: “they [the ancient Stoa] say that is not good of which both good and bad use can be made; therefore wealth and health are not goods. On the other hand, Posidonius maintains that these things too are among goods” (Lives 7.103).

IV. Attempts at a Solution: Seneca’s *On Providence*

By the time we get to later Stoics such as Epictetus, Seneca and Marcus Aurelius there is a complete turn around with respect to the status of the adiaphora. Rather than viewing such things as wealth or health as good or even preferable, there is a tendency in the works of these author’s to treat them with suspicion, since they can lead the one who pursues them into vice.

For example, Seneca often seems to reject the idea that external goods are to be preferred to their opposites. He argues that these externals somehow drain virtue from men if they are accorded any preferable status; with the first change of fortune the man who has valued these goods will be broken, because he has not been trained to view them with contempt. The only

morally acceptable attitude that one can take is to scorn the desirability of all external goods:

Flee luxury, flee enfeebling good fortune, from which men's minds grow sodden...and sink, as it were, into the stupor of unending drunkenness. The man who has always had glazed windows to shield him from a draught, whose feet have been kept warm by hot appliances renewed from time to time..., this man will run great risk if he is brushed by a gentle breeze. While all excesses are hurtful, the most dangerous is unlimited good fortune (Providence 4.9-10).

Elsewhere, he refers to wealth as "the greatest of human sorrows" and claims that it is actually preferable not to have money than to have it and be plagued by it. In one's attitude towards externals one should imitate the gods, who are "quite needy, giving all and having nothing" (Tranquillity 8.1, 6). A man, then, can only really be happy who has nothing left to lose, an attitude that seems to oppose the idea of the preferability of external things. In Epistle 71, Seneca goes even further, stating that, objectively, dining in a banquet hall is not necessarily preferable to submitting to torture. In fact, submitting to torture can be a greater good if one does so in an honorable manner. All these examples are used to indicate that there is nothing objectively preferable about external goods.

What can account for this radical break from the earlier, seemingly more moderate positions of Zeno and the Middle Stoa? The answer, I believe, is to be found in the development of a more personalistic view of God as benevolent father-figure rather than simply as the impersonal tool of fate. This new understanding of God is expressed most clearly in Seneca's essay, On Providence, in which he attempts to respond to the perennial question of why bad things happen to good men if the world is ruled by a benevolent Providence. Seneca's answer will ultimately be that God "does not make a spoiled pet out of a good man; he tests him, hardens him, and fits him for his service." In other words, the very concern that God has for man's moral welfare is the reason why adversity befalls him—it is meant to strengthen his virtue. The words that Seneca uses to describe this relationship between God and man also serves to highlight this beneficent bond: God is referred to as "ever best to those who are best;" he is called the good man's parent; and their relationship is based upon friendship, not upon blind necessity (1.5-6).

The image of God as a good father is used in 1.2 to illustrate why a loving deity would allow the good man to suffer. Whereas mothers try to spare their children any hardship, toil or suffering, a wise father shows his love for his children by placing some adversity in their path: he causes the pain and hardship precisely to help make them stronger and more worthy. Similarly, in his relationship to the good man, God causes suffering so that man can derive from it true moral strength. "Unimpaired prosperity," claims Seneca, "cannot withstand a single blow; but he who has struggled continually with his ills becomes hardened through suffering, and yields to no misfortune" (2.6).

This principle, that adversity is necessary for virtue to thrive and for the good man to discover his true moral capacities, is illustrated further by Seneca in his analogy between the sapiens and a dedicated athlete. The chief end of an athlete, he says, is to strengthen his body, and to achieve this end the athlete should be willing to submit to all kinds of pain and discomfort. A truly great athlete will also make every effort possible to seek out the best opponents in order to increase his powers. The same is true for the wise men: "they should not shrink from hardships and difficulties, nor complain against fate; they should take in good part whatever happens and should turn it to good" (2.4).

The adversities that a good man must face are further compared to a painful medical treatment, which at first seems unduly harsh, but which proves beneficial in the long run (3.2-4). What is the chief benefit that one can derive from adversity? Primarily, adversity serves as a means of discovering the great individual in oneself. Success can come to anyone, Seneca says, even to someone with mediocre qualities, but the ability to triumph over calamities is the sign of a truly extraordinary individual. Greatness, strength and virtue lie dormant in most men until they have the opportunity to prove themselves against fortune. Without constantly being tested, no one

can be made aware of his full moral worth:

For if a man is to know himself, he must be tested; no one finds out what he can do except by trying. And so some men have presented themselves voluntarily to loggard misfortune, and have sought an opportunity to blazon forth their worth when it was about to pass into obscurity. Great men, I say, rejoice oft-times in adversity, as do brave soldiers in warfare (Providence 4.3; Epistle 110.3).

Thus the misfortunes that befall a brave individual, in this context, are to be seen as the highest sign of divine favor, since they work to strengthen the soul to endure all suffering calmly. Only through continually being tested in this way can a man come to know his true moral worth.

For Seneca, then, the proper attitude of the pious individual is conformity of his will with the divine will; such an individual prefers only that which the benevolent deity wills for him, regardless of whether it entails suffering, exile or even death. The impious attitude, on the other hand, is to prefer certain externals to others. The problem with the latter approach to the *adiaphora* is that in preferring an apparent good, one inevitably becomes emotionally (i.e., passionately) invested in that good. The valuing of such a vulnerable good leads either to the fear that it will one day be removed or to pain upon its actual removal. I may, for example, prefer that my family remains intact and that its members have good health and long life. The preference that I show to this set of circumstances, however, goes contrary to the proper attitude that I should have—that it is for God to choose and for humans to accept. Having opened myself up to judging as valuable what should never be thought of as valuable, the formerly autonomous functioning of my soul now becomes able to be passively moved by the fear and pain that are a consequence of such an ill-founded judgment. What I have done, by expressing my preference in this way is to disturb the homeostasis of a soul that should only admit what is rational—and therefore what is divine, invulnerable to fate—into its faculties.

On the side of those externals that the ancient Stoa would view as rejectable, Seneca has likewise demonstrated that what appears to be evil from the perspective of opinion can become, from the perspective of the divine, a means of testing and strengthening one's virtue. Once again, the proper attitude of the pious man is that of willing his own suffering, his own poverty, his own ignominy, if this accords with the divine will. The improper attitude, which rejects what appears to be contrary to nature, leads to a judgment that such external circumstances are evil and hence should always be avoided. As in the case of preferences, these negative judgments ultimately give rise to the impulses of fear and pain in the soul, threatening its homeostatic functioning (Epistle 13.4-13).

Now that we have seen what is the correct attitude with regard to externals in later Stoic thought, we can ask why certain men—perhaps even the vast majority of men—are unable to treat worldly goods with the kind of indifference that virtue demands. The answer, of course, has to do with the Stoic understanding of the nature of the passions. For in order to attain happiness in the Stoic scheme, it is first necessary to have an adequate grasp of the way the passions operate in dominating the reasoning faculty. Only then can we discuss the means whereby reason can perhaps prevent these passions from arising in the first place.

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

Traditionally, the passions in Stoic moral theory are divided into four kinds, based upon the expectation of either a good or an evil.³ 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 themselves⁴, 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 passions⁵

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.⁶

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.⁷

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 heartbeat 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 our reading of *De Providentia*. As we have seen, both Seneca and Epictetus believe 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.

Thus man's ultimate happiness depends upon his ability to stop the passions before they begin to move the soul. As we will see, this can be done through the use of Stoic *apatheia* (stopping the passions "at the very frontier" of the soul) or by the more radical means of *apathetic rehearsal*. It is to this final stage in the development of an *apathetic* approach to beatitude that we now turn in order to see how Seneca turns *apatheia* into a method for ensuring the happy life.

1.4 From *Apatheia* to *Apathetic Rehearsal*

As we have seen above, Seneca believes that once the passions have gained entrance into the soul they threaten the stable functioning of the whole reasoning faculty. Unlike the Peripatetics and Academics, who believe that the passions, if modified, can ultimately be used to serve reason⁸ Seneca maintains that these impulses can never be of any practical use, since they are completely ungovernable. Because it makes no sense to limit or restrain the passions, the Stoics believe that the passions must be extirpated before they begin to contaminate reason. "In the first place," says Seneca, "it is easier to exclude harmful passions than to rule them, and to deny them admittance, then, after they have been admitted, to control them; for when they have established themselves in possession, they are stronger than their ruler and do not permit themselves to be restrained or reduced" (Anger 1.7.2-3). The wise man, knowing how dangerous the passions are, makes every possible attempt to destroy them from their incipience: this is Stoic *apatheia*—the state of freedom that the sage experiences by eliminating the passions from his soul and being moved by reason alone.

In the hands of Seneca, however, *apatheia* takes on two distinct forms. In its classical form, *apatheia* is used as a method of stopping the passions "at the very frontier" of the soul (Anger 1.8.1-2). Recognizing that the first movement of the passions is not within the agent's control, the sage uses *apatheia* to destroy the passion before it receives the assent of reason. Seneca never ceases to remind us that the passions, properly speaking, are always the result of an act of assent. Therefore, any affective reaction that a person has that is not the result of assent is not a passion. This includes bodily sensations as well as all involuntary reactions:

You must not think that our human virtue transcends nature; the wise man will tremble, will feel pain, will turn pale. For all these are sensations of the body. Where, then, is the abode of utter distress, of that which is truly an evil? In the other part of us, no doubt, if it is the mind that these trials drag down, force to a confession of its own servitude, and cause to regret its existence (Epistle 71.29).

In short, it is not the goal of *apatheia* in its classical form to attempt to control involuntary reactions, but simply to prevent those reactions from receiving the approval of reason. As Seneca points out in Epistle 85, the sage, while undergoing torture, of course feels pain (just as he trembles when confronted by danger or weeps when a family member dies), for this feeling is beyond his control. "But he has no fear; unconquered he looks down from lofty heights upon his suffering" (Epistle 25.89). This lofty height, for Seneca, is human reason perfectly in tune with the divine *logos* that rules the world. The sage never experiences the turbulence

of the passions because he never allows his mind to give assent to false presentations from his environment. His legs may quake when confronted by calamity, but his soul remains firm; he may tremble, but he will never flee.

This first movement of the soul, however, while not a passion itself, is a preparation for passion (*praeparatio adfectus*), and thus is acknowledged to be a “sort of menace” (Anger 2.1.3). Just as the divisions of the *adiaphora* into preferable and rejectable can pave the way for the inadvertent valuing of external things, so too does an involuntary reaction, if not checked immediately, have the possibility of becoming a full-blown passion. Given the danger of this move, it would seem advisable not only to stop the passions “at the very frontier of the soul” but even prior to the point where they can lead to a potentially dangerous, involuntary reaction. If *apatheia* can be employed, not only to crush the passions once they have arisen in the soul, but also to prevent them from arising in the first place, this would ensure that right reason would be employed in all decisions and, hence, that happiness would be an inevitable result. While *apatheia* in its classical form could be called the condition of possibility for happiness, this new form of *apatheia*, about which Seneca speaks, can be considered a method or device for ensuring the *beata vita*.

For lack of a better term, we can refer to this new approach to *apatheia* as “*apathetic training*”—a means of testing the constancy of one’s mind (*temptare animi...firmitatim*) prior to the assault of the passions upon it (Epistle 18.5). In Epistle 18, Seneca uses the image of soldiers “practicing against a dummy target” to illustrate how this type of training works: just as soldiers practice against an imaginary opponent during times of peace in order to strengthen themselves against real opponents in war, so too does the virtuous man rehearse during good times to face the blows of fortune. As Seneca writes:

It is precisely in time of immunity from care that the soul should toughen itself beforehand for occasions of great stress, and it is while fortune is kind that it should fortify itself against her violence. In days of peace the soldier performs, throws up earthworks with no enemy in sight, and wearies himself by gratuitous toil, in order that he may be equal to unavoidable toil. If you would not have a man flinch when toil comes, train him before it comes (Epistle 18.6).

If we understand “flinching” to refer to the involuntary reaction that constitutes the first motion of a passion, then it seems clear that *apathetic training* is being used by Seneca precisely to prevent even these preliminary passions from arising. In theory, if a man can rehearse imaginary adverse circumstances often enough during periods when he is in absolute control of his will, not only will he not give in to the passions during times of real crisis, but he may not even experience many of the involuntary reactions that pave the way for the passions in the first place.⁹

In the writings of Seneca, *apathetic training* takes on three different forms of varying intensity: imaginary rehearsal, practical training and the limited asceticism of the simple life. Imaginary rehearsal can be described as the process of thinking that all possible states of affairs are necessary ones and reconciling one’s mind to them. An example of this type of *apatheia* is given in Epistle 24, where Seneca replies to Lucilius’s concern about the outcome of a lawsuit with which he is being threatened. Seneca proposes that if Lucilius wants to ensure himself against the pain that might result from a negative decision, he should prepare in advance for the worst possible outcome, and train his mind to regard this outcome with complete indifference:

if you want to put off all worry, assume that whatever you fear may happen will certainly happen in any event; whatever the trouble may be, measure it in your own mind, and estimate the amount of your fear. You will understand that your fear is either insignificant or short lived (Epistle 24.2).

In the case of the lawsuit, he suggests that Lucilius should reject the path of optimism and

instead prepare himself for the most unjust decisions that can be reached. In this case the aim is to train his mind to prepare itself to endure all possible outcomes without giving in to sorrow, disappointment or any other variety of pain.

Seneca then attempts to extend this method to all possible adversities that are capable of giving rise to the passions, thus creating a general method of ensuring permanent tranquility of mind. A man, he says, should constantly call to mind the worst possible calamities that can happen to him in life, and examine them as rationally as possible in order to recognize that the fear that one has of these events is unfounded. In this way he will ultimately be able to scorn all types of pain when they eventually inflict him:

Why does thou hold before my eyes swords, fires, and a throng of executioners raging about thee? Take away all that vain show behind which thou lurkest and scarest fools!... Why does thou again unfold and spread before me, with all that great display, the whip and the rack? Away with such stuff, which makes us numb with terror! And thou, silence the groans, the cries and the bitter shrieks ground out of the victim as he is torn on the rack! Forsooth, thou art naught but pain, scorned by yonder guilt-ridden wretch, endured by yonder dyspeptic in the midst of his dainties, born bravely by the girl in travail. Slight thou art, if I can bear thee; short thou art if I cannot bear thee (Epistle 24.14; see also Tranquility 11.6).

The key to this method, according to Seneca, is to continually think of everything that can possibly happen to us—particularly the most odious possibilities—as something that will inevitably happen (Epistle 24.16). If the possibility of being destitute, tortured or sent into exile is capable of eliciting a passion-oriented response, we should continually imagine that these possible states of affairs are necessary ones. Further, since all men fear death, we should never fail to remind ourselves that each moment of our existence is a continual process towards this inevitable conclusion: “For we are not suddenly smitten and laid low; we are worn away, and every day reduces our powers to a certain extent” (Epistle 26.4; see also Epistle 24.22-25). When the moment of death approaches, the man who has trained himself to view this event with right reason (as an inevitable but insignificant affair), will face death in the same way he has lived his life, with absolute freedom from any external influences. Thus, to “think on death” or to contemplate all adverse possibilities in one’s life as actualities becomes one way of escaping the slavery of the passions even before their inception (Epistle 26.9-10).

The second type of apathetic training proposed in the Moral Epistles is practical training, which is essentially a Stoic modification of a common Epicurean practice. In Epistle 18, Seneca informs Lucilius that Epicurus frequently set aside a number of days in which he satisfied his hunger with cheap food. The goal of this exercise apparently was to develop enough self-sufficiency that he would be able to remain happy, regardless of what his circumstances might be. Using this example, Seneca similarly advises Lucilius to practice extreme poverty for limited periods in order to test the ability of his mind to withstand the loss of his wealth in the future.

Although Seneca does not expect this type of practice to go on indefinitely or to be too severe, he makes it clear to Lucilius in Epistle 13 that it should be more than just a “mere hobby” that rich young men might play to “beguile the tedium of their lives.” Even though it is meant to last for only a few days at a time, the method should be harsh enough that it can prepare the subject for the most extreme reversal of fortune—the possibility of utter destitution. In this way when a man is reduced to poverty by fortune he will realize that his happiness is not incumbent upon the amount of wealth he has or the quality of his food; “for even when angry [fortune] grants quite enough for our needs” (Epistle 13.7). Such a man, once again, will never be subjected to the influence of the passions, because he has trained himself in peaceful times to develop a proper attitude towards externals.

While it is undoubtedly the case that Seneca would reject the type of long-term, rigid asceticism that was later common among Christians in the fourth and fifth centuries, occasionally he does

suggest that a kind of limited asceticism of the simple life may be a necessary prerequisite for happiness. In *On the Tranquility of Spirit*, for example, he characterizes tranquility of mind as a consequence of having nothing that can be removed by fate: the fewer possessions a man has, needless to say, the more he is able to be freed from their eventual loss. If we are not able to give up everything we own, “we ought, at least, to reduce our possessions, so as to be less exposed to the injuries of fortune.” The image of wartime preparation is once again used to illustrate the aims of this limited type of asceticism:

In war those men are better fitted for service whose bodies can be squeezed into their armor than those whose bodies spill over, and whose very bulk everywhere exposes them to wounds. In the case of money, any amount that does not descend to poverty, and yet is not far removed from poverty, is the most desirable (*Tranquility* 8.9).

Elsewhere, Seneca refers to this method as “draw[ing] in our activities to a narrow compass in order that the darts of fortune may fall into nothingness” (*Tranquillity* 9.3). It is his intention to create the condition of possibility whereby one may develop the habit of self-sufficiency and ultimately to become detached from the need to invest externals with value. Once one attains the kind of disposition that regards the things of the world with contemptuous indifference, then, and only then, can one rise above the enslaving power of fear and desire. Such a state of absolute tranquility, of freedom from the cares and woes of daily existence, can come about only once one has made the commitment “to form the habit of” (*adsuescare*) simplicity of life. Economy, austerity and frugality limit the degree to which one can fall victim to fate, since the simple life contains little that can be removed by circumstance. In rejecting all excesses, the virtuous man ultimately comes to realize that the only true good in life is that which he possesses in himself and thereby assures himself of a happy existence:

Let us form the habit of putting away from us mere pomp and of measuring the uses of things, not their decorative qualities. Let food subdue hunger, drink quench thirst; let lust follow the course of nature...; let us learn to increase our self control, to restrain luxury, to moderate ambition, to soften anger, to view poverty with unprejudiced eyes, to cultivate frugality, even if many shall be ashamed, all the more to apply to the wants of nature the remedies that cost little, to keep unruly hopes and a mind that is intent upon the future, as if it were in chains and to determine to seek our fortune from ourselves rather than from fortune (*Tranquility* 9.2).

Though varying in intensity, all the forms of apathetic training described above aim at the same goal: by developing a disposition that comes to regard external goods as unimportant, a person becomes liberated from the influence of the passions and can be fully open to following the will of God (i.e., right reason) regardless of where it may lead. If a virtuous man is stripped by providence of his wealth, he has trained himself to endure it compliantly; if he is forced to bear suffering, being no stranger to it, he can persevere regardless of its intensity; finally, when such a man is beckoned by death, having contemplated his own death numerous times, he joyfully embraces that which he knows he cannot avoid.

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 Lertius, <i>Lives of the Em.Phil.</i> (Harvard UP, 1925).
Moralia	Plutarch, <i>Moralia</i> (Harvard UP, 1976).

Providence
Tranquility

Seneca, *On Providence* (Harvard UP, 1917).
Seneca, *On the Tranquility of Spirit* (Harvard UP, 1917).

Notes

1. For a more involved discussion of the connection between the Stoic and Aristotelian conceptions of the happy life see: T. H. Irwin, "Stoic and Aristotelian Conceptions of Happiness," *The Norms of Nature*, ed. Malcom Schofield and Gisela Striker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986): 93-110. J. M. Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969): 1-21.
2. There is, in fact, much debate in recent literature as to whether Panaetius and Posidonius should be classified as Stoics at all. While authors such as Long and Kidd believe that there is no real break in the unity of Stoic thought from Zeno through late Stoicism, Margaret Reesor convincingly argues that Panaetius and Posidonius represent a radical departure from orthodox Stoicism. For a full discussion of this question, see the following: A.A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1974): 195; Kidd, I.G., "Stoic Intermediates and the End for Man," *Problems in Stoicism*, ed. A.A. Long (London: Athlone, 1971): 158-168; Margaret Reesor, "The 'Indifferents' in the Old and Middle Stoa," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 82 (1951): 102-10.
3. 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. Malcom Schofield and Gisela Striker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 93-110.
4. 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.
5. 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 *Tuculan 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).

6. 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.
7. 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.
8. See Mor. 443c-d and 452b and D.L. 5.31. The aim of moral life for the Peripatetics and Academics is to be *metriopathes*—measured in emotional response, not freed from the passions altogether. For a contrast of these alternative approaches to dealing with the passions see: Michael Frede, “The Stoic Doctrine of the Affections of the Soul,” *The Norms of Nature*, ed. Malcom Schofield and Gisela Stricker (Cambridge: UP, 1986): 93-95.
9. Note: this does not imply that the sage could avoid experiencing involuntary sensations which are beyond human control. If he is tortured he will feel physical pain, but he may not give in to involuntary reactions—i.e., pulling his hand out of a fire or trembling when he approaches death.

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