

THE STOIC PHILOSOPHER

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MISSION STATEMENT: *A Stoic philosopher has the right to investigate and experiment with life in any and all forms and ways as long as he or she preserves a noble character while doing so.*

That's the vision. That's what we will attempt to do with every issue we publish. We will always attempt to feature the kind of wisdom content that you can use today and refer to tomorrow as you become the Stoic philosopher you know that you can be. That's what we are here for. This is what we do. Welcome to our first issue. The Stoic philosopher is here again.

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Dr. Barnett is a member of the Stoic community and was one of the first tutors for the College of Stoic Philosophers. He has a Ph.D. in Applied Experimental and Human Factors Psychology from University of Central Florida and currently works as a research psychologist for the U.S. Army Research Institute (ARI). John retired from the US Air Force in 1996 where he was a navigator, electronic warfare officer, staff officer for the Strategic Air Command, and a Defensive Systems Officer in B-1B bombers. Outside of work his main interest, other than Stoicism, is military history and collecting bits of militaria from time to time.

“The Laughing Stoic”

John Barnett, PhD

Chrysippus of Soli was the third head of the Stoic school. Legend has it that when he was 73 years old, he saw a donkey eating a plate of figs from a table in a garden. When the lady of the house came out and saw the donkey had eaten her figs, she was understandably outraged. Chrysippus, on the other hand, saw the humor in it, and said to her “He’s waiting for his wine!” Chrysippus thought this incredibly funny - he laughed so hard he died.

I often read that Stoics are supposed to be unemotional people. They are supposed to learn to suppress their emotions so as to weather life’s hardships. Often, writings that are critical of Stoicism say the philosophy trains people to be unfeeling automatons. Even respected academic authorities on philosophy suggest the goal of Stoicism is to forgo all emotions.

I disagree with this view. Obviously Chrysippus, one of the early heads of the Stoic school, had a sense of humor (although laughing yourself to death is a bit extreme – it certainly violates the virtue of moderation). I

do not believe that the original Greek Stoics meant for those who practice Stoicism to forgo all emotions. As Erik Wiegardt reminds me, Epictetus says that we are *not* to be as unfeeling as a statute (*Discourses*, book 3, chapter 2). I think their idea was to learn to deal with negative emotions, but also take advantage of positive emotions. I believe it is possible to practice Stoic philosophy and still experience the joys that Fate allows us.

I believe that the idea of the Stoic as completely unemotional is a misunderstanding, brought about by a number of misinterpretations of terms and ideas (and possibly some bad press). One of these misinterpretations may be an incomplete understanding of the Greek language. For example, the Greek term *pathos* is often translated into English as “emotion.” In English, the term “emotion” is value-neutral; emotions can be positive or negative. In Greek, *pathos* seems to be more about negative emotions. The Greeks also have a term for good emotions, *eupathos*, the “eu-” denoting “good.” This suggests to me that *pathos* refers mostly to negative emotions.

Therefore, the Greek Stoics would encourage students to work towards a state of *apathos*, (“a-” = “without”) which sounds much like the English term “apathy” (not surprising, since “apathy” is derived from *apathos*). In English, “apathy” is usually understood as “uncaring” or “unfeeling.” However, although *pathos* can be translated into English as “emotion,” it can also be translated as “suffering.” Thus, I believe the better understanding of *apathos* is “without [emotional] suffering.”

I apologize for this journey into semantics, but I think it is necessary to appreciate a possible misunderstanding – that Stoics aren’t supposed to be uncaring, unfeeling automatons. Instead, they (we) are supposed to allow their emotions to mature to the state where their logic manages their emotions, rather than allowing oneself to be at the mercy of the whims of unrestrained passions.

Another possible cause for believing Stoics shouldn’t embrace positive emotions is a common belief in western society about what is known in game theory as the zero-sum game. Many of our experiences in life involve the zero-sum principle, that is, to get something valuable, you have to give up something valuable (so that the total sum is zero). Most daily economics is based on this. To buy something you want, you give money, which you get by working. Thus, to get something someone has worked to produce, you have to work to produce something that someone else wants, and use a medium (money) to make the exchange work out. However, although many things in life are zero-sum, not everything is. Sometimes it works out that everyone wins (plus-sum or “win-win”), or unfortunately, everyone loses (a no-win situation).

I think that some people feel that to gain peace from letting go of negative emotions, you must also let go of positive emotions. I feel that in this case they are applying the zero-sum principle unnecessarily. I believe it is possible to let go of negative emotions, yet still experience the joy of positive emotions. There does not seem to be any negative outcome to this win-win situation.

The test of whether it would be inappropriate for someone who follows the philosophical life (a Stoic) to apply win-win to emotions would be if doing so would be counter to virtue. If we use the four foundation virtues (wisdom, courage, justice, moderation) as our benchmarks, would it be unwise, cowardly, unjust, or excessive to let go of negative emotions yet experience positive emotions? I believe not.

Instead, my personal opinion is that positive emotions should fall in the same category as “preferred indifferents” (wealth, fame, power, etc.) in that they are not in-and-of-themselves virtues or vices, but can be virtuous or immoral depending on how they are expressed. For example, feeling admiration for an aesthetically pleasing object (or person) is not contrary to virtue, but obsessing over the object or person would be contrary to the virtue of moderation. Or, feeling satisfaction when a miscreant is sentenced to perform community service as restitution for committing an offense would be acceptable, because justice is being served. However, gloating over the misfortune of others (epicuricity or “Schadenfreude”) would be a violation of the virtue of

justice, since, except in rare cases, the victims most likely did nothing to warrant the misfortune. It is therefore unjust, and feeling joy at injustice is counter to virtue.

In addition, used appropriately, positive emotions can provide motivation for following virtue (although a true Sage may not need such motivation, it might be useful for those of us who have not reached sagacity). For example, if a person feels satisfaction when justice is seen to be done, or pride at acts of courage, it can be an encouragement to further these virtues. Feelings of gratification when wisdom triumphs over foolishness, or when modesty overcomes conceit can promote further expressions of those virtues. Of course, if these feelings are used inappropriately, they can also encourage vices as well. Such is the nature of indifferents, in that they can be used for good or evil. However, I believe that positive emotions should be considered like preferred indifferents, that is, preferred because they can motivate people to act more virtuously, when used appropriately.

Epictetus often uses attending a banquet as a metaphor for Stoic behavior (Enchiridion, chap. 15). At a banquet, we wait patiently for dishes to come to us, and take what the host serves to us. We don't jump up and run around to take food from others, nor do we ask the host for special dishes. We take what is served and accept it with grace.

Following this metaphor, when dishes are passed to us, we take what we're given. If it's a dish we don't especially like, we take a little anyway so as not to embarrass the host, and eat it with grace. If a dish we like comes by, we take a full portion (but not more than our share), and enjoy it. Similarly, when life presents us with misfortunes, we deal with our misfortunes with as much grace as we can muster. However, I believe that when Fate presents us with good fortune, we should ladle our fair share on our plate and thoroughly enjoy it.

If a Stoic is expected to weather the misfortunes Fate brings their way with grace, then it is only just (keeping with the virtue of justice) that the Stoic should also experience joy at the beneficial gifts Fate gives.

Perhaps the perfect Stoic, the Sage, may mature to the point of letting go of all emotions, positive as well as negative. However, I believe for most of us, the journey to perfect Sagacity is a destination we may never reach in this life. I believe while we are on our journey to Sage-hood we should use good emotions to help us along our way.

Therefore, I say to my fellow followers of Stoic philosophy; as you go about your life preparing to meet hardships with grace, also make sure you talk and laugh with friends, view sunsets, play with children and pets, and love those close to you. Even as you remind yourself that Fate can take them away without warning, for now, you should thoroughly enjoy these gifts that Nature has allocated to you.

(I'd like to thank Erik Wiegardt for reviewing this article and for his valuable comments. I sincerely appreciate his guidance.)

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