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The Pleasure of Tea

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To acquire an understanding and appreciation of fine teas is not just a self-indulgent pleasure. It is a cultivation of the genius and bounty of nature as we strive for perfection in craftsmanship and in practicing the fundamental Stoic attitude *prosochē*, attention, focusing with full mental and sensory awareness in the present moment.

The most expensive tea is cheaper than a decent table wine. To be a connoisseur of fine teas requires many of the same skills and experience in refined sensory judgment, but at a small fraction of the cost. Among those who know, being an expert on even one group of teas, such as the oolong, can be the work of a lifetime and can enjoy the same prestige in the tea community as the connoisseur of rare wines has in his. But, is this expertise acceptable for a Stoic? Is there such a thing as an acceptable Stoic pleasure?

Both tea and alcohol affect the nervous system, but on opposite ends of a polarity. Tea is a stimulant; alcohol is a depressant. Tea clears the mind; alcohol clouds it. Both, when taken to excess, can be deleterious to one's health, although I know of no outer limit in excessive tea drinking that can cause one to get wasted, plastered, blotto, blind drunk, comatose, or dead. People don't injure, maim, or kill from the effects of tea. Homes are not wrecked, baby's milk money is not stolen, spouses are not beaten, and the fabric of society is not undermined.

Stupid behavior is not commonly exhibited when tea is consumed, even when consumed to "excess," if there is such a thing. The stimulating effect of most teas is very mild, usually unnoticeable, and doesn't have the same urge alcohol gives to keep drinking more and more until the threshold of inebriation has been crossed. The numerous health benefits of regular tea consumption, especially green tea, are readily and widely documented. Rehabilitation programs for tea drinkers is nonexistent, because there is no need for it, and Teetotalers Anonymous is only an Internet blog written by a man who is looking for friends to chat with about the pleasures of tea.

The most expensive tea is cheaper than a decent table wine in every possible way—from individual to social costs. However, that still does not necessarily mean the enjoyment of drinking tea is an

acceptable Stoic pleasure. What is it about pleasure that is so suspect to Stoics regardless of all the positive attributes that can be associated with some forms of it? Or, could it be that we have misread the characterization of pleasure in Stoic literature? This is a profoundly important question to anyone who aspires to becoming a Stoic philosopher. How *do* we define good and bad pleasures; or, are all pleasures bad? Are we to avoid anything and everything our physical senses tell us is enjoyable? To read Diogenes Laertius and the Roman Stoics one would certainly think so.

What They Said

Diogenes Laertius:

...they [the Stoics] tell us that all good men are austere and harsh, because they neither have dealings with pleasure themselves nor tolerate those who have (Lives of Eminent Philosophers, v.II, bk VII, Zeno, 117).

Seneca:

"Virtue is something lofty, elevated, regal, unconquerable, and untiring: pleasure is something lowly and slavish, weak and destructible, whose haunt and living-quarters are brothels and taverns. Virtue you will find in a temple, in the forum, in the senate house...pleasure you will find more often lurking out of sight and searching for darkness around the baths and sweating-rooms and places that fear the aedile [a Roman board of magistrates], soft and drained of strength, soaked with wine and perfume, with features that are pale or painted and tricked out with cosmetics like a corpse [*Seneca, Dialogues and Essays*, trans. By John Davie (Oxford, 2007), from the essay, "On the Happy Life," p. 90-91]."

Musonius Rufus:

"...although there are many pleasures which persuade human beings to do wrong and compel them to act against their own interests, the pleasure connected with food is undoubtedly the most difficult of all pleasures to combat....the god who made human kind provided us with food and drink to keep us alive rather than give us pleasure....[*Musonius Rufus: Lectures and Sayings*, trans. Cynthia King (Creative Space, 2011) Lectures 18, Part B (3,6), p.74-5]."

Marcus Aurelius:

"We should also observe the nature of all objects of sense – particularly such as allure us with pleasure, or frighten us with pain, or are clamorously urged upon us by the voice of self-conceit – the cheapness and contemptibility of them, how sordid they are, and how quickly fading and dead [*Meditations*, by Marcus Aurelius, trans. Maxwell Staniforth (Penguin Books, 1964), book two, 12]."

Diogenes Laertius (again):

[The Stoics hold that] Pleasure is an irrational elation at the accruing of what seems to be choiceworthy; and under it are ranged ravishment, malevolent joy, delight, transport. Ravishment is pleasure which charms the ear. Malevolent joy is pleasure at another's ills. Delight is the mind's propulsion to weakness....To be in transports of delight is the melting away of virtue (Lives of Eminent Philosophers, v.II, bk VII, Zeno, 114).

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This is very strange. DL said that ravishment is pleasure that *charms the ear*? Did the ancients really believe this? Did they really believe that good men will have absolutely nothing to do with any pleasure, including the ridiculous ravishment that charms the ear? Could any philosophy flourish for

500 years and be so harsh? I would hope not. If it did, would there be any Stoics living in the 21st century? Doubtful. How many people are attracted to living life with only a crust of dry bread, a jug of ditch water, and a hairshirt? I know one who *claims* that he would, but he doesn't live that way now. Certainly a Stoic can choose an ascetic attitude and lifestyle for a short time or for a lifetime, but that doesn't mean one must *be* an ascetic to be a Stoic.

This is what s Stoic needs to know and remember about pleasure and pain:

PLEASURE: There are pleasures which *help* the body (e.g., nutritious foods that are also delicious). We call them “preferred indifferents.” And, there are pleasures which *harm* the body (e.g., drug drunkenness or gluttonous gorging), which we call “non-preferred indifferents.” Everything else is neutral.

PAIN: There are pains which *help* the body (e.g., dental care or physical fitness training). We call them “preferred indifferents.” And, there are pains which *harm* the body (falling out of a tree and breaking your neck), which we call “non-preferred indifferents.” Everything else is neutral.

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Diogenes Laertius (*again*)

[Describing Stoic physics]: “Nature is defined as a force moving of itself, producing and preserving in being its offspring in accordance with seminal principles...Nature, [the Stoics] hold, aims both at utility and at pleasure, as is clear from the analogy of human craftsmanship (Lives of Eminent Philosophers, vol. II, bk. VII, Zeno, 149).”

Did he just say that nature aims at both utility *and* pleasure? Yes. DL has given us an entirely new perspective on the matter when he says Stoics believe nature utilizes both utility and pleasure as exemplified by human craftsmanship. The excellence in nature and in any human occupation, such as the cultivation of tea, *does* involve both utility and pleasure. So, how can we reconcile this DL passage that aligns nature and pleasure and at the same time believe all good men are austere and harsh and do not tolerate pleasure in themselves or others?

Was DL mistaken in his understanding of our philosophy? Not necessarily. Not if you read what the ancients repeatedly said about pleasure. Perhaps the best answer is that in both Ancient Greece and Rome there were those, such as the Epicureans, our most popular competitors, who focused on pleasure as the foundation and reason for living. We disagreed with them then, and we still do, but perhaps we no longer need to throw the baby out with the bathwater to emphasize our point. Life really *is* made up of utility and pleasure, and when we manage that rightly we are living in agreement with nature. Stoics can find acceptable pleasures in many things that nature and human craftsmanship continually gives to us.

Remember, there are pleasures which help the body, the preferred indifferents, and pleasures which harm the body, the non-preferred indifferents. Everything else is neutral.

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All tea is made from the leaves of the *Camellia sinensis* plant and its three major varieties. Each tea has its own *terroir*, a term borrowed from wine cultivation, that includes quality of the soil, plant elevation, weather, and the total natural environment of its physical location. The tea we drink, from green to black, differs principally in the production of that leaf. After it is picked, oxidation in the cells of the leaf begins. The length of time it is allowed to oxidize determines both its final color and caffeine content. If the oxidation process is quickly halted by heat, then we have a green tea; if it's allowed to oxidize a little longer we have the whites; longer still and we enter the realm of the oolongs; and, finally, the longest oxidation time produces the blacks. Exactly how long is determined by the tea master.

I enjoy a good quality green tea, such as the Chinese Long Jing (Dragon Well), one of China's top ten teas. Dragon Well tea is made only from the outermost two or three tender budding leaves, which are then rolled and flattened before immediate firing to forestall oxidation. I drink three or four cups a day, some days. On other days, those days when I seek to rekindle my ascetic nature, I enjoy a Japanese green tea, a common, nameless sencha, machine harvested, of lesser quality and price, and one with an astringency that could indeed be called harsh and austere. The pleasure that I derive from both of these green teas is one which is acceptable and appropriate, a preferred indifferent, because it is one that brings physical and mental strength and health.

I invite you to join me in the very Stoic pleasure of tea.

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