

A Stoic Guide to Our Emotions

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Part I –

Can We Trust Our Feelings?

Human beings are often said to be rational creatures, but in reality we are very much emotional creatures as well. More often than not, history is a showcase of tragic actions taken by human beings overcome by their passions. And apart from these grand-scale dramas, our everyday life is full of instances where the right thing is sacrificed for the sake of the urge, the ego, the instinct.

In great theatrical tragedies, such as the Shakespearean *King Lear* or *Romeo and Juliet*, the passionate actions taken by the protagonists lead to an unfortunate chain of events of betrayal and death.

This is the fate of characters in great dramas, but how many times have the small dramas of our everyday life developed in negative ways because of our lack of control? How many times have our passionate actions led us to a deep, dark hole?

In our pursuit of pleasures, we sometimes lose sight of the beauty all around us.

In order to develop the necessary mastery over our emotions, the Stoics recommended we should observe and understand them first, deconstruct them by recognizing their true nature. In their writings we find a startling analysis, almost a system, of the various emotions and their causes.

At the center of their psychological teachings we find the concept of *Pathos*, the unhealthy passions, agitations of the soul that are contrary to reason or nature. Those are the emotions which lead us to act against our nature, and against our best interest. It is interesting that the Greeks used the same word *Pathos* (πάθος) to indicate both passion, and suffering. Today we use this Greek root in the words 'Pathology' (the study of suffering), and 'Apathy' (the lack of passion).

The Stoics, beginning with Zeno and Hecato, divide the passions to four groups¹:

1. Epithumia – Craving or strong desire

A desire to possess something that holds an **apparent** gain for us. Anger, for example is an expression of craving, defined as the desire for punishing the person thought to have inflicted an undeserved injury.

2. Phobos – Fear

A belief of threatening evil which **seems** to the subject of it insupportable. Some examples are fear of disgrace and the fear of impending work.

3. Hêdonê – Pleasure

Newly formed **belief** of present good, and the subject thinks it right to feel enraptured [14]. Malice is one type of such pleasure, which is the enjoyment of another's ills.

4. Lupê – Sorrow (form of suffering)

A newly formed **belief** of present evil, the subject of which thinks it right to feel depression and shrinking of soul. Envy, a distress caused by another person's prosperity, is a form of irrational sorrow.



As can be seen, the passions are based on appearances, that is, on our interpretation of reality. They result from false value judgments.

Objective reality makes an impression (*Phantasia*) on our souls. This impression feeds the passion and causes us to react.

The philosopher aims to reflect (*Dianoia*) on the true nature of these impressions, and guided by the inner *Hegemonikon*, our ruling part, to act according to true value judgments.

The philosopher is vigilant, observes within, and is not led by impressions. He chooses to act according to reason.

For example, we may feel craving for a certain object, thinking it will be good for us. Yet we all know that many times we crave for things that are clearly not good for us, i.e. junk food or other addictions. In that sense, we are acting against our best interest, that is, we are acting irrationally. On the other hand, there are many things we dislike or fear, yet may be good for us in the long term.

This is what the Buddhist and Greek philosophers defined as the greatest evil – ignorance. That is, the false perception that what is good is bad and vice versa. The poison is seen as a blessing, and the blessing as poison.

We cannot trust our feelings so long as they are not purified by the light of reason. The aim is to release ourselves from the effect of ignorance-based passions, and to nurture the positive sentiments of the sage – joy, caution and wishing.

Part II – The Sentiments of the Sage

Despite the popular conception of the Stoics, in their writings, the ideal sage is not portrayed as a cold, apathetic person. By reflecting on the good and the bad, and on the true nature of things, the sage develops natural, rational sentiments – *Hai Eupatheiai*, literally, the good passions.

These are: Wish, Caution and Joy.

Joy [*Chara*], the counterpart of pleasure – rational elation.

Caution [*Eulabeia*], the counterpart of fear – rational avoidance.

Wishing [*Boulesis*], the counterpart of craving – rational appetite.

The philosopher should use utmost caution to avoid putting his soul at risk, that is, to let his soul sink into the abyss of immorality and impurity.

Joy [Charal]

If pleasure is caused by an irrational and ignorant perception, rational elation is brought forth by the enjoyment of that which is proper to the human being.

This is the joy of contemplating the ideas, of seeing the beauty of nature, of acting in the light of reason and wisdom.

In our pursuit of pleasures, we sometimes lose sight of the beauty all around us. What can we really pursue that is more beautiful than the blue skies? Richer than the human being? Deeper and more interesting than our own selves?

In the words of Marcus Aurelius: "Very little is needed to make a happy life, it is all within yourself."

Caution [Eulabeial]

Plato defined courage as recognizing what we should be afraid of, and what we shouldn't be afraid of.

Ideally the philosopher's rational outlook should allow him to avoid all fear, but if the philosopher should avoid all fear, then where does caution come into the picture?

To avoid unnecessary dangers and hindrances, but above all to avoid the dangers of the soul.

Socrates said that a man should have more fear to cause injustice than to be treated unjustly. The health and purity of the soul are at least as important as that of the body.

The philosopher should use utmost caution to avoid putting his soul at risk, that is, to let his soul sink into the abyss of immorality and impurity. It is a subtle form of caution, but the most rational, as it is occupied with taking care of that which is constant, rational and natural. Having caution in regards to the physical survival of the body, which is temporary in any case, is only second to the spiritual survival of the soul.

This means to know ourselves, to recognize those things, whether external or internal, that drag us down, pollute our soul, make us lose our center, and to avoid these things as much as possible.

The stronger we are inside, the more resistant we can be to negative external influences. But we also need to know our "trial threshold", as Jorge Livraga called it – to have the humility to know which things are beyond our mastery of ourselves, and are better to avoid completely.

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Wishing [Boulesis]

The popular saying “be careful what you wish for” refers to irrational craving – that what we wish for may not always be what is good for us or others.

However, while the philosopher should avoid irrational craving, this shouldn't be replaced with apathetic, idle, and purposeless living.

Wishing, or *Boulesis*, is a rational appetite, it is the pursuit of the things that are truly good, for you and for everybody: the virtues, the excellent completion of your duties, the wish to improve the lives of those around you and on which you are responsible.

The meditations of Marcus Aurelius and the books of Seneca are full of these everyday wishes, which are a constant motivation for improvement and realization.

And this leads us to another question: Should one's good life come on the expense of others? In a highly competitive society like ours, one's success means another's failure. If I get a job, another hundred lose it. In a competitive society there are winners and there are losers.

This is the law of the jungle.

It is interesting, however, that the word compete originates in the Latin *competere*, which means to strive together.

Will humanity ever establish a society where one's victory does not mean another's defeat? Where one's strength does not mean another's weakness? Where one's good life does not mean another's miserable one?

So far, we haven't been able to achieve that. Maybe we've been wishing for the wrong things?

In the spirit of the Stoics, we can only answer that everything is natural. And as in nature, everything will balance out eventually. ★★★

1. English definitions are based on the translation of Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* by J. E. King.

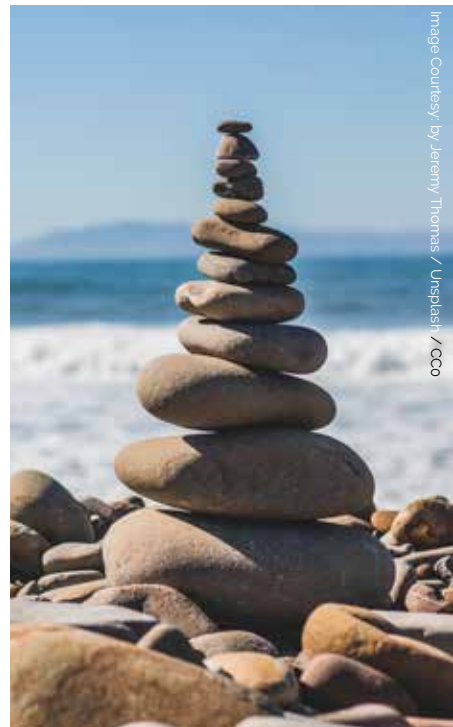


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