Chapter 15
The Stoics on the Education of Desire

Daniel Vázquez

Abstract The ancient Stoics proposed one of the most sophisticated and influential ethical frameworks in the history of philosophy. Its impact on theory and practice lasted for centuries during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Today, their arguments and theories still inform many contemporary ethical debates. Moreover, some of the framework's main tenets have been used as a theoretical foundation for cognitive–behavioural therapy (CBT), a widely used psychosocial intervention for improving mental health. Much of its lasting impact is the result of the special attention Stoic ethics pays to moral psychology, action theory and education. Stoics consider one of the main components of the development of virtue to be a careful and systematic training of our desires and aversions.

This chapter will offer a clear, succinct and up-to-date discussion of four main topics: (1) the Stoic theory of desire; (2) the complex taxonomies of desire offered by the ancient Stoics; (3) the arguments, educational strategies, and practices the Stoics recommend to discipline our soul and extirpate our irrational desires and finally (4) a brief discussion of the possibility of adapting the Stoic philosophy for the education of desires in the present day.

Keywords Ancient Greek and Roman philosophy · Virtue ethics · Zeno of Citium · Chrysippus · Mental health

15.1 Introduction

Think about the friend or family member you care the most. Perhaps is one of your parents, a sibling, your partner, your child or your best friend. One of those persons whose happiness and well-being you consider of paramount importance in your life. This person gets ill and you take them to the hospital. There, flagrant medical negligence results in a tragic outcome. First, you wish this tragedy had never

D. Vázquez (✉)
Department of Philosophy, Autonomous University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain
e-mail: SergioDaniel.Vazquez@uab.cat

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happened. Then, you begin to feel angry. How could this happen? Whose fault it was? The medical personnel offers you some incoherent excuses which make things worse. You cannot hold your anger any longer and reply with the most bitter and hurtful criticisms you can think of; that seems to be the least they deserve.

Soon after, you try to file a lawsuit. But the hospital hires an army of lawyers and in the end, no one is held responsible for the tragedy. You cannot believe it. Grief and yearning for your absent loved one drown you in pain for years. In the end, you discover a desire to take revenge, so you begin to look for an opportunity to take things in your own hands. The plotting takes long, but your anger, instead of yielding, increases with time.

After a long wait, the day to avenge injustice has come. You have everything ready. But the imminence of your revenge begins to cause some second thoughts. Are you doing the right thing? Should you let things go? You also fear that your plan will fail, and you will make a fool of yourself. Despite your best efforts, too many variables remain outside your control. Worse, if everything goes south, you might end up in jail, disgraced and humiliated, an outcome that terrifies you. Whatever happens, even if you succeed in your plans, you feel wretched and discontent. Nothing you can do fulfils your desire of getting your loved one back. Will you ever be at peace with the world? Will happiness be forever beyond your reach?

Even in less dramatic situations, many of us live a daily life full of hesitation, fear of failure, shame, and anger. We constantly endure unfulfilled desires to meet with absent friends, get recognition from those we respect, receive better wages, and have time to enjoy the little pleasures we like. Despite all the differences between our times and those of the ancient Stoics—including all the technological advances and knowledge at our disposal—most of us still live the unfulfilled and miserable life of a fool. But the Stoics claim they can help us. They developed one of the most sophisticated, encompassing, and influential curricula to educate our desires and lead people into a better, more peaceful and fulfilling life. Today, many professionals and academics believe that a good part of the Stoics' methods, strategies, and insights have survived the test of time and can be adapted for our benefit. How justified are we to believe that the writings of these ancient philosophers can still be relevant in our times?

Stoicism began as a philosophical school founded in Athens around 300 BCE by Zeno of Citium. The members of the school congregated and taught under the shade of the Painted Porch—the Stoa Poikile from which they derived their name—a building located on the north side of Athens' Agora. The Stoics were careful and avid students of previous philosophers and engaged in debate with members of other philosophical schools. They developed original and powerful theories in all the areas of philosophy, including logic, physics, and ethics. Although they agreed on their most fundamental tenets, inside the school they also debated, disagreed, and defended competing arguments. After Zeno, Cleanthes of Assos led the school, and after him, Chrysippus of Soli. During these first generations, other notable members include Aristo of Chios, Perseus, and Sphaerus.

Stoics like Diogenes of Babylon, Panetius of Rhodes, and Posidonius exported Stoicism to Rome and the Roman Empire. Unfortunately, we only have fragments

and summaries form the older Stoics.[1] The only complete works by Stoic philosophers that survive to this day belong to three Roman writers: Seneca the Younger, Arrian who wrote down the teachings of Epictetus, and Emperor Marcus Aurelius.[2] However, we also have some fragments from Epictetus' teacher Musonius Rufus, and Hierocles.[3] After the decline of their ancient schools (i.e., groups of like-minded philosophers who met regularly), many philosophers of subsequent eras kept engaging with Stoicism. As a movement, it has seen various revivals, including contemporary articulations and adaptations to which I will return later. You might wonder if their reputation is well deserved. Suffices to say that the Stoic promise regarding the education of desire sounds too good to be ignored.

The Stoics claim that if you learn their philosophy you will never fail to get what you desire. All your fears and pains will disappear, and you will have the unimpeded power to avoid all evil. Furthermore, they believe anyone can benefit from their philosophy, regardless of gender, social status, physical condition, or previous education. There is no magic involved. All you need, they will explain, is to understand the real nature of human beings and things around us, and a firm grasp of our true place in the cosmos.

The Stoic education of desire fits into a larger more ambitious goal: the achievement of tranquillity, enduring joy and, above all, virtue. In particular, mastering our desires contributes to our self-sufficiency, and is the path to authentic freedom. As you might suspect, there is a catch. The Stoics turn the problem of dissatisfaction and fulfilment of desire on its head. Instead of helping us acquire the petty, frivolous or unreachable objects of our current desires, they teach to align our desires exclusively to that which is at our reach and under our control. But, can we really align our desires in this way? Why should we prefer that instead of working to acquire the objects of our current desires?

15.2 The Stoic Notion and Taxonomy of Desire

The obvious objection to the Stoics is that our desires do not seem to be under our control. I might resist my craving for that colourful and fresh macaroon in front of me, but I have no power to extinguish my desire—at least not immediately. Thus, even if good reasons or stronger desires move me away from French confections, I

[1] H. von Arnim (1903–1924) compiled most fragments in their original language. See also Hülser (1987). For Panetius, see M. van Straaten (1952), and for Posidonius, Edelstein and Kidd (1972). I use the translations by Long and Sedley (1987) and Inwood and Gerson (2008) with little modifications. To refer to the Stoic fragments or reports, I give the reference to the original source using the abbreviations and corresponding numbers in the Long and Sedley edition [LS].

[2] For the Latin edition of Seneca, see Reynolds (1965a, 1965b, 1977) and Zwierlein (1986); for Epictetus see Schenkl (1916), and for Marcus Aurelius, Dalfen (1979). Here I use the translations in Fantham (2010), Davie and Reinhardt (2007), Long (2018), and Gill (2013).

[3] For Musonius Rufus, see Hense (1905) and Lutz (1947), and for Hierocles, von Arnim (1906).

still feel somewhat dissatisfied and frustrated beyond my control. The Stoics, however, conceive desires and our relationship with them in a richer, and far more sophisticated way than this picture allows.

First, the Stoics distinguish between practical impression (*phantasia hormētikē*) and rational impulse (*logikēhormē*).[4] Chrysippus defines impressions as alterations or affections of the soul which reveal themselves and their causes (DL 7.49–51- = LS39A; Aëtius 4.12.1–5 = LS39B). We can understand them as epistemic states endowed with unique content we can express with a proposition (*axiōma*). In the case of practical impressions, their content consists of an evaluation of whether we ought to perform a specific action; if it is appropriate, good, or beneficial to act (Stobaeus 2.86,17-88,2 = LS53Q; Plutarch, *SR* 1057A = LS53S). A practical impression, then, takes the following basic form: *It is beneficial or good or appropriate that I do F* (cf. Salles and Boeri 2014; Brennan 2005).

I am walking down the street when I see a homeless person asking for money. I am immediately stroke by the impression that I should donate any cash I happen to have with me. Having or not this impression falls outside my control. However, — the Stoics insist—I have the power to assent (*sunkatathesis*) or not to the content of my impressions. Concerning certain actions, unless I accept that my impression is true, I will not be motivated to act. For the Stoics, the act of assenting to a practical impression is identified with the rational impulse that causes the action (Stobaeus 2.88, 2–6 = LS33I).[5] In this way, they define a rational impulse as the movement of the intellect towards something which is involved in the action (Stobaeus 2.86, 17–87, 6 = LS53Q).[6]

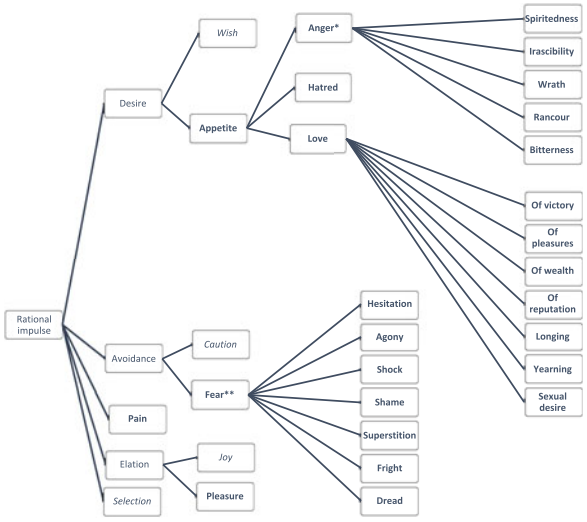
The Stoics distinguished many types of rational impulses (for the full picture, see Diagram 15.1). They call one of them *orexis*, which is commonly translated with the word 'desire'.[7] Our surviving texts do not include a full definition of this term, but we know it is a type of rational impulse concerned with the apparent good. The Stoics differentiate between correct and incorrect forms of desire, and they call them wish (*boulēsis*) and appetite (*epithumia*), respectively (I shall come back to them later). They also talk about 'selection' (*eklogē*), a type of rational impulse directed

[4]According to Stobaeus (2.86,17–88, 2 = LS53Q), the Stoics identify rational impulses with practical impulses. See Salles and Boeri (2014) *ad locum*. However, see Gourinat (1996, 2007).

[5]In some sources, assent and impulse seem two closely connected but distinct events (Plutarch, *SR* 1057A = LS53S; Clement, *Strom*. 6.8.69.1 = *FDS* 298). For the discussion see Inwood (1985), Salles and Boeri (2014), and Brennan (2005).

[6]In the same text, the Stoics also distinguish 'repulsions' (*aphormē*), defined as movements of the intellect away from something which is involved in action. To simplify things, I will omit these avoidance behaviors for now, but I will come back to them later.

[7]Our modern use of the word 'desire' is wider than *orexis* and is closer in scope to what the Stoic call rational impulses. Epictetus, however, uses *hormē* and *orexis* in a different way. For him, *orexis* is not a specie or a subordinated genus of *hormē* but two coordinated and mutually exclusive genera, one directed to the apparent good, *orexis*, the other to the appropriate (*kathēkon*) (Epictetus, *Diss*. 1.4.1–2, 3.3.2, 3.3.5; Salles and Boeri 2014; Inwood 1985).



In **Bold** all emotions and in *Italic* all permissible impulses (the three good emotions of the sage plus selections).

*If any of the appetites occurs in failure, then it will also count as an unsatisfied need.

**If any of the fears is produced in conjunction with a hastening in the voice, it will also count as panic.

Diagram 15.1 Stoic analysis of desire

not at the apparent good but at the things that are morally indifferent (*adiaphora*), but still advantageous or preferable.

People can assent to practical impressions whose required action is not to be performed immediately but sometime in the future. For example, I might decide right now to climb mount Baintha Brakk—one of the most dangerous peaks in the world to climb. However, I cannot climb it right away. I would have to save money, train, buy the equipment, find out how to get there and, above all, convince my loved ones that risking my life for such a thing is not an absolute stupidity. In these cases, the Stoics talk about 'planning' (*orousis*), a rational impulse consisting in a movement of the intellect to something in the future. We do not have enough evidence regarding the exact relation between planning, desires, and selections. However, it does not seem they are meant to be mutually exclusive. Some desires and selections might count as planning as well. Other terms seem to have been used as types of planning. These include [setting a] purpose (*prothesis*), project (*epibolē*), and preparation (*paraskeuē*) (Inwood 1985).

Now, the Stoics think that it is impossible to assent to a practical impression and have an impulse towards something else (Epictetus, *Diss*. I, 18.1). If I kept my

change in my pocket instead of giving it to the homeless, I did not truly think giving it away was the appropriate thing to do. Notice the severity of the Stoic diagnosis of our behaviour. Even if I have the clearest impression that I should fight climate change, advocate for human rights and help people in need, if I do not lift a finger when I can, for them I do not really believe I should do any of those things.

The common reaction here is to resist the Stoic analysis. After all, people believe smoking causes cancer and yet, they keep lighting their cigarettes every morning. Of course, we should be fighting for a better world, but we juggle too many other things in our hands. We might fully understand the urgency and importance of a task, but exhausted from our jobs and daily duties, our feeble will fails us. We would love to help, but we lack strength. All these responses sound fine, but are we using them as excuses?

The Stoics offer a smart alternative. Instead of appealing to the weakness of the will or simultaneous conflicting motivations, they argue that our reason vacillates between two beliefs. I do one thing, then I rapidly regret it, sometimes even while I am still doing it. At times, they think, we do not even notice the vacillation (Plutarch, *VM*, 446F–447A = LS65G).[8] But that happens because when beliefs fall short of knowledge, they tend to be unstable. The assent we give to our impressions is weak and easily shakeable. This would not happen if we carefully examined our practical impressions before assenting to them. However, since we do not do it at all or do it deficiently, we often assent too blandly to true impressions or, worse, we assent to false ones.

Although severe, the Stoic analysis offers a clear way out of our miserable, unsatisfied lives (if not an easy one!). We need a rational and careful exam of our practical impressions before assenting to them. It also invites us to re-evaluate our beliefs. If I do something that I have some reason to believe is wrong, could it be that despite such reasons, I still consider it is beneficial or good or appropriate that I do it, right here, right now? Is my reasoning sound? Examining our beliefs could lead to discovering that there is no conflict in our beliefs. Perhaps I know smoking causes cancer in the long run, but one cigarette—I might say to myself—will not make a difference and will satisfy my immediate craving. Similarly, I might think people should care about the environment but also that my behaviour will not turn the scales. The Stoics believe only a sage's assent is infallible and immutable. The rest of us, simple fools, commonly rush our judgement. But doing that means disobeying the dictates of the best part of our nature—our reason—, which gives rise to excessive impulses. They call these impulses, emotions or passions (*pathos*): 'They say that an emotion is an impulse which is excessive and disobedient to the reason which constrains, or an <irrational>, unnatural motion of the soul (and all passions belong to the leading part of the soul)' (Stobaeus, 2.88 in LS65A; tr. Inwood and Gerson).

[8]According to Galen (*PHP* 316, 28–320,28), Posidonius, unlike the other Stoics, defended a psychology of parts in conflict. Scholars disagree on whether or not we can trust Galen's reports (Salles and Boeri 2014).

The Stoics are famous for advocating the elimination of all our emotions. They classify all our appetites, fears, pleasures and pains (*lupē;* also tr. 'distress') as emotions. And they want them all gone. But given the way they conceive emotions, this should be no surprise—by definition they are unnatural, and the Stoics advocate life in accordance with nature. The problem with emotions, the Stoics explain, consists in their intensity. Once people find themselves in emotional states, even if they realise what they are doing is not right, they cannot stop, and are carried away (Stobaeus 2.88, 8–90, 6 = LS65A; Andronicus, *De Passionibus* 1 = LS65B). Chrysippus explains the excess in impulse with an analogy: when we walk, the movements of our legs are not excessive but commensurate with our impulse. We can stop or change direction whenever we want. But when we run, the movement of our legs exceeds their impulse, so they are carried away and unable to stop or change course obediently (Galen, *PHP*, 4.2.10–18 = LS65J). The same happens with emotions. If I lose my temper, I might start doing or saying things that I realise are inappropriate, yet I cannot stop myself. The intensity of emotions also makes them violent, very unstable and uncertain (Plutarch, *VM* 446F–447B = LS65G).

Here I will focus on two emotions: appetite and fear. As I explained, the Stoics classify appetite (*epithumia*) as incorrect desires. Stobaeus' report preserves a definition: 'appetite is a desire (*orexis*) which is disobedient to reason; its cause is believing that a good is approaching and that when it is here we shall do well by it; this opinion itself <that it really is worth striving for> has a <fresh> [power] to stimulate irregular motion' (Stobaeus 2.90,7–11; tr. Inwood and Gerson). They describe the counterpart of appetite, fear, as 'an avoidance disobedient to reason, and its cause is believing that a bad thing is approaching; this opinion that it really is worth avoiding has a "fresh" [power] to stimulate motion' (Stobaeus, 2.90,11–14; tr. Inwood and Gerson).

The Stoic distinguish many types of appetite: anger and its forms [spiritedness, irascibility, wrath, rancour, exasperation, etc.], hatred, unsatisfied need, love of victory, sexual love, longing, yearning, love of pleasures, love of wealth, love of reputation, and other similar things. Under fear, they include hesitation, agony, shock, shame, panic, superstition, fright, and dread. I think is worth looking at the surviving descriptions of these emotions. Below I present two comparative tables with the information given in two of our main sources (tr. Inwood and Gerson) (Table 15.1).

Not all of these descriptions offer equally useful information, and the classification does not go into any further detail. However, there seem to be four main types of appetite: anger, hatred, love, and unsatisfied needs. These main appetites have different objects and qualities. Anger is a reactive emotion. It aims to obtain revenge at someone who we believe has wrong us. Different intensity and duration give rise to distinct forms of anger. Hatred, in contrast, could be directed to anyone, with any excuse, it seems, and its intensity increases over time. Different objects, in turn, give rise to different types of love. Finally, unsatisfied needs have as their objects things someone has already failed to obtain yet keeps desiring. Since people can fail to obtain the object of their different appetites, it seems that any object of appetite could become an unsatisfied need. It is important to remember, however, that for the Stoics

Table 15.1 Types of appetites

Appetites	DL 7.113–114	Stobaeus 2.90,19-91,4 = LS65E
Anger (*orgē*)	A desire for revenge on one who seems to have done an injustice inappropriately	A desire to take revenge on someone who appears to have wronged [you] contrary to what is appropriate[a]
Spiritedness (*thumos*)	Anger just beginning	Anger just beginning
Irascibility (*cholos*)	–	Swollen anger
Wrath (*mēnis*)	Long-standing and spiteful anger that just waits for its chance, as is apparent in these lines: 'For even if he swallows his resentment for today, still he will retain his spite in the future, until it is satisfied' (Homer *Iliad* 1.81–82)	Anger laid by or saved up for a long time
Rancour (*kotos*)	–	Anger which watches for an opportunity for vengeance
Exasperation (*pikriai*)	–	Anger which breaks out immediately
Hatred (*misos*)	A progressive and increasing desire for things to go badly for someone	–
Unsatisfied need (*spanis*)	Is a desire that that occurs in a failure and that is to say having been separated from its object, is vainly straining for and drawn to it	–
Love of victory (*philoneikia*)	A desire concerned with a [philosophical] school	–
Love of pleasures (*filēdonia*)	–	A desire for pleasures
Love of wealth (*filoploutia*)	–	A desire for wealth
Love of reputation (*filodoxia*)	–	A desire for reputation
Sexual love (*erōs*)	A desire which does not afflict virtuous men, for it is an attempt to gain friends caused by a manifest beauty	Sexual desire is an attempt to gain friends caused by a manifest beauty
Longing (*pothos*)	–	A sexual love for someone who is absent
Yearning (*himeros*)	–	A desire for contact with a friend who is absent

[a]In Seneca (*ir*. 1.3.2–8), anger is just a desire to punish someone

Table 15.2 Types of fear

Fears	DL 7.112–113	Stobaeus 2.91,5–7 in LS65E
Hesitation (*oknos*)	A fear of future action	A fear of future action
Agony (*agōnia*)	–	A fear of failure or, otherwise, a fear of defeat
Shock (*ekplēxis*)	A fear arising from the appearance of an unfamiliar thing	A fear arising from a presentation of something unfamiliar
Shame (*aischunē*)	A fear of bad reputation	A fear of bad reputation
Panic (*thorubos*)	A fear in conjunction with a hastening of the voice	A fear which hastens with the voice
Superstition (*deisidaimonia*)	–	A fear of gods and daimons
Fright (*deos*)	–	A fear of something dreadful
Dread (*deima*)	A fear which produces fright	A fear caused by reason

all these appetites are impulses that initiate actions. If I am waiting to buy a ticket for a train and someone jumps the queue in front of me, I might think 'I will throw my coffee at this person's face to teach him a lesson'. However, if I only think about it but do not initiate any action, then, in the Stoic analysis, I only received a practical impression, but I did not assent to it (unless someone next to me or some other external factor stopped me).

Let us now take a look at the descriptions of fears (Table 15.2). The Stoics differentiate most fears according to their object. An exception is panic, whose main characteristic is the effect on the person's voice. This suggests that people could fall into states of panic regardless of the object of their fear. Thus, panic is not mutually exclusive with the other types. Finally, is difficult to understand how the Stoics understood dread.[9]

Although the Stoics advocate for the extirpation of all our appetites and fears they acknowledge that sometimes people react without giving their consent to any practical impressions. Examples include getting pale, blush, and jumping after being surprised. For the Stoics, these are not emotions but involuntary reactions, morally irrelevant (Seneca, *ir.* 2.3.1–2.4 = LS65X; Gellius 19.1.17–18 = LS65Y; Graver 2007). Moreover, they think that a perfectly virtuous person—a Stoic sage—would have some good emotions (*eupatheiai*). As I mentioned, they call wish the desire which obeys reason. Similarly, the sage will not experience fear but will be cautious. Finally, instead of pleasure, the Stoic sage experiences a reasonable elation they call joy.[10] The Stoic education of desire, as we will see in the next section, consists of learning to replace our foolish emotions with selections and the good emotions of the sage. Diagram 15.1 sums up the Stoic analysis of desire discussed in this section (except for planning and its types).

[9]For suggestions see Salles and Boeri (2014).

[10]Stoic sages have no pain in the Stoic sense (contractions of the soul disobedient to reason). Good emotions have many subtypes. Wish includes goodwill, kindliness, acceptance, and contentment. Caution subdivides into respect and sanctity, while joy includes enjoyment (although there is also a type of pleasure called enjoyment), good spirits, and tranquility (DL 7.116 = LS65F).

15.3 Teaching and Learning to Align our Desires

The Stoics recognise that aligning our desires with reason requires much more than getting acquainted with the Stoic theory of desire. In this regard, they make heavy use of a medical analogy. Musonius Rufus, for example, argues that: 'Just as a medical argument is no use unless it brings human bodies to health, so too, if someone grasps or teaches an argument as a philosopher, that argument is no use, unless it conduces to the excellence of the human soul' (12.5–19 Hense; tr. Nussbaum).[11] But the Stoics also acknowledged that not everybody faces the same challenges in their education. Some of us are predisposed to certain types of emotions (DL 7.116; Stobaeus 2.93,1–6). Others will find certain circumstances or people, especially irritating. Extending the medical analogy, they talk about diseases, antipathies, and ailments of the soul:

> A disease is an opinion connected to a desire which has settled and hardened into a condition, in virtue of which people think that things not worth choosing are extremely worth choosing, for example, love of women, love of wine, love of money; there are also certain states opposite to <these> diseases which turn up as antipathies, such as hatred of women, hatred of wine, hatred of humanity. Those diseases which occur in conjunction with weakness are called ailments. (Stobaeus 2.93,6-13; tr. Inwood and Gerson)[12]

Given their ongoing analogy with physical illness and medicine, the Stoics frame much of their education of desire as therapy. The Stoic teacher, like a doctor, has to know the patient as much as possible, observe their specific symptoms, circumstances, and previous history before deciding on the best treatment and the moment to administer it (Nussbaum 1994). However, the aim is always the same: to teach the students to critically evaluate their impressions before assenting to them. Moreover, the aspiring Stoic needs to eliminate error, rashness, ignorance, opinion, frivolity, and conjecture from their life, since they are 'hostile to a solid and stable assent' (Cicero, *Academica*, 1 [Varro] 42; tr. Inwood and Gerson; see *Academica* 2 [Lucullus] 66).

As I mentioned, this often takes the form of learning to substitute our emotions with selections.[13] In other words, we need to learn to correct a false belief about the apparent good of an action (an emotion) with the true belief about the action's true value (selection or good emotion). Consider the following case: As every morning, I am close to one of my favourite coffee shops and I receive the following impression: *It would be good to get a Flat White*. Every day, without thinking too much about it, I assent to this impression, so I buy myself a coffee. Under the Stoic analysis, my appetite is a love of pleasures and it should be eradicated. But like me, you may wonder what is wrong with indulging in a small little pleasure like this.

The problem is not the action itself but my belief that my action has any value. If I believe drinking coffee constitutes part of the good life, what am I going to do the

[11]For the Stoic use of the medical analogy, see Nussbaum (1994).

[12]Epictetus (*Diss*. 1.28.30–33) calls madmen (*mainomenoi*) all people who follows their impressions recklessly.

[13]'Impulses' in Epictetus.

day I can no longer drink coffee? Imagine my doctor tells me I have to cut it out of my diet. At present, I will feel sorrow for myself and envy others. My happiness and tranquillity will be disturbed. Epictetus explains why: 'Keep in mind that desire presumes your getting what you want and that aversion presumes your avoiding what you don't want, and that not getting what we want makes us unfortunate, while encountering what we don't want makes us miserable' (*Ench*. 2; tr. A. A. Long). If I let my desires depend on things outside my control, the quality and worth of my life hang on a wire. I cannot take full control of my life and I become a slave of the object of my desires (*Ench*. 14). For the Stoics this is unacceptable. Since they believe that true happiness and tranquillity are self-sufficient, they think it can be achieved regardless of things outside of our control. For them, a good life is available to everyone, but we can only achieve it by living a virtuous life. Thus, they argue that only virtue has absolute value (Stobaeus 2.84,18-85,11 = LS58E). Any action not connected with virtue cannot be called good. Does that mean I cannot get my coffee fix?

According to the Stoics, many of our actions and their objects are completely indifferent to the development of virtue. Yet, some are according to nature, and thus, appropriate and preferable. So, if drinking coffee has some health benefits, or I find myself in the appropriate circumstance, I can do it. Although my action would be the same, I would be assenting to a different impression: *It would be appropriate to get a Flat White*. The difference is not as small as it seems. Assenting to this new impression implies a huge change in my reasoning and motivation. I will not be drinking coffee for the pleasure but the health benefit or context.

The Stoics offer additional advice on how to manage the damaging expectations of success that come with our appetites and fears. This is known as the Stoic theory of reservation (*hupexairesis* or *exceptio*). Having our impulses with reservation consists of remaining aware of the possibility of failing to secure the object of our desire. We should be especially aware of the multitude of factors beyond our control that can prevent us from getting what we want to do. In my previous example, I could assent to the following: *It would be appropriate to get a Flat White unless I find some impediment to do it* (see Marcus Aurelius, *Ad se ipsum* 5.20, 6.50).[14] Reservation is especially useful in the context of making and fulfilling promises. If we make our promises with reservation, change of circumstances outside of our control will free us from our pledges and the suffering caused by not fulfilling them.

The Stoics know that applying these techniques—replacing emotions with selections and assenting with reservation—is easier said than done. Even if we agree with them, overcoming rashness in specific situations might prove extremely difficult. The Roman Stoics took an especial interest on this problem. The strategies and techniques they offer to deal with rashness, although variated, have at its core some common elements. Many of them are reminders. Admonitions we should know, have constantly in our mind and remind ourselves not only when testing situations

[14] Alternatively: *It would be appropriate to get a Flat White if nothing happens to prevent it* (see Seneca, *Ben*. 4.34).

arise but also after them. The content of these reminders has often a common structure: they ask us to carefully analyse our circumstance, the nature of the object of our desire, the bigger context, what part of the situation is under our control, the little time we have in this world, or the future scenarios where something external impedes our success. In sum, as Nussbaum (1994) puts it, 'the pupil must be watchful and critical of the way in which she sees the world' (p. 327). Some of the Stoics use colourful images to set up these reminders. Take for example Epictetus' and Marcus Aurelius' reminders of the bigger context and what is up to the gods:

> Keep in mind that you are an actor in a play that is just the way the producer wants it to be. It is short, if that is his wish, or long, if he wants it long. If he wants you to act the part of a beggar, see that you play it skilfully; and similarly, if the part is to be a cripple, or an official, or a private person. Your job is to put on a splendid performance of the role you have been given, but selecting the role is the job of someone else. (*Ench*. 17; tr. A. A. Long; cf. DL 7.37)

> As doctors always keep their instruments and knives at hand to deal with any urgent cases, you should keep your doctrines ready for understanding divine and human affairs and should carry out every action, even the smallest, remembering the bond between the two spheres; you will not succeed in any human action without reference to the divine or vice versa. (*Ad se ipsum* 3, 13; tr. Gill)

Often, the reminder comes with an argument that explains the relevance of the proposed analysis. In his *Consolation to Marcia*, Seneca explains why understanding and reminding the fragile nature of human life help us make the most out of every moment of our life:

> Many times must the heart be reminded, it must not forget that those we love will leave, indeed are already leaving: you should take whatever Fortune has given but realize its security is not guaranteed. Seize the pleasures your children bring, let them in turn take enjoyment in you, and drink the cup of happiness dry without delay: you have been given no promise about tonight—I have granted too long an adjournment—no promise about this very hour. (*De Consolatione ad Marciam* 10; tr. Davie; see also Epictetus, *Ench*. 3, 14, 16, 26)

The Stoic should enjoy what life has to offer at every turn but also keep in mind the impermanent nature of most of the people, circumstances, and things that surround us. But again, this is hard work. When we experience a period of stability in our external environment, we get used to it. For cases like these, the Stoic proposes many exercises that aim to keep our feet on the ground. Some of these exercises ask us to purposely abstain from certain preferred indifferents. Epictetus, for example proposes to take a mouthful of cold water when we are very thirsty, and then spit it out instead of drinking it (*Ench*. 47).[15] The idea is to be always prepared for the eventuality of having to endure thirst and other bodily discomforts. Epictetus construes this as learning to manage our attachments, and considers it the most important training:

[15]In *Diss*. 3.2.1–5 (=LS56C), Epictetus divides his training program into three topics: desires (*orexis*) and aversions, impulses and repulsions, and infallibility and uncarelessness, or acts of assent quite generally.

> First of all, the highest and most authoritative training, the one standing right at the gates, so to speak, is this: when you have an attachment to something, remember that you are attached to a thing which is not among those immune to loss but rather to something in the same category as a pot or a piece of glassware, so that when it gets broken you won't be upset. (*Diss*. 3.24.84; tr. Inwood and Gerson)

Notice again the structure of Epictetus' advice: a reminder to analyse or have in mind the nature of the object of our attachment. All these exercises and reminders aim to make us, in a literal way, as mindful and resilient as possible.

Becoming a mindful Stoic sage, however, looks almost impossible. According to the texts, the Stoic sage is the only one who possesses knowledge, displays virtue, and enjoys tranquillity and happiness. Only the assent of a sage is a stable, unimpeded and perfectly free impulse. Moreover, for the Stoics, sages suppose nothing, cannot be deceived, become infallible and do everything well (*Herculaneum papyrus* 1020, col. 4, col. 1 = LS41D; SE, *M* 7.151–157 = LS41C; Stobaeus 2.111, 18–112, 8 = LS41G). As you might imagine, this description seems to create a dilemma for any teacher of Stoic doctrines. If teachers are not sages, how can they teach what they do not know? But if they claim to be sages, they face incredulity and invite challenges and scrutiny to their every move. Some Stoics were happy to take a challenge:

> Once, when a discussion arose about whether the wise man will form opinions, Sphaerus said that he did not. The king wanted to refute him and ordered wax pomegranates to be set out. Sphaerus was fooled and the king shouted that he had assented to a false presentation, to which Sphaerus nimbly replied by saying that what he had assented to was not that they were pomegranates but that it was reasonable that they were pomegranates and that there was a difference between a graspable presentation and a reasonable one. (DL 7.117 = Athenaeus 354E = LS40F; tr. Inwood and Gerson)[16]

Sphaerus' reply to the king explains how the Stoics might avoid many mistakes. Yet, not all the Stoics claimed to be sages. Panetius, for example did not consider himself a sage nor he claimed to know how the sage would act in every circumstance (Seneca, *Ep.* 116 [book XIX.7]). In his works, Seneca often recognizes his own mistakes, limitations, and warns us not to be too quick to be satisfied with ourselves. He reacts to flattery saying: 'You call me wise, but I see how many harmful things I desire, how I long for things that will hurt me. I do not even realize what satiety shows animals, what should be the limit of food and drink: I still don't know how much I can handle' (Seneca, *Ep.* 59, 13 [book VI.7]; tr. Fantham). For him, as for

[16]Sextus Empiricus also reports how the Academics challenged the Stoics: 'They confront the Stoics with appearances. In the case of things which are similar in shape but different objectively it is impossible to distinguish the cognitive impression from that which is false and incognitive. For example, if I give the Stoic first one and then another of two exactly similar eggs to discriminate, will the wise man, by focusing on them, be able to say infallibly that the one egg he is being shown is this one rather than that one? The same argument applies in the case of twins. For the virtuous man will get a false impression, albeit one from what is and imprinted and stamped exactly in accordance with what is, if the impression he gets from Castor is one of Polydeuces' (*M* 7.402–10 = LS40H; tr. Long and Sedley).

most other Stoics, the sage is an ideal and its description serves to test our moral progress:

> Now I will explain how you can recognize that you are not wise. The wise man is full of joy, cheerful and calm, undisturbed. He lives on equal terms with the gods. Now examine yourself: if you are never sad, if no hope disturbs your mind with anticipation of the future, if by day and night the condition of your spirit is even and unvarying, alert and happy with itself, then you have reached the high point of human good. But if you constantly desire all kinds of pleasures, know that you are as far short of wisdom as of joy. (Seneca, *Ep.* 59, 14 [book VI.7]; tr. Fantham)

As Nussbaum (1994) points out, since the Stoic teachers recognize their distance from the sage, the relationship with their pupils becomes more symmetrical and anti-authoritarian.[17] Moreover, since learning to align our desires becomes a personal journey, the Stoic teacher becomes a guide, perhaps a more experienced mentor and friend.

At every step, repetition, constancy, and discipline become the key element for progress. The Stoic education of desire requires daily exercise and study. At the beginning of the day, before and after acting, and before we go to bed. If possible, the analysis of concrete situations and the application of general guides should be discussed in person with fellow Stoics. In the absence of this, detailed epistolary interchange, attending lectures, reading Stoic texts, and writing your reflections become a powerful tool.

15.4 Conclusion: Should we Drink the Stoic Medicine?

The Stoic analysis, diagnosis, and education of desire resonate with many people today. Stoicism has inspired, been used, and abused to shape the culture of specific communities.[18] In the last decades, a wider popular interest in Stoicism as a philosophy of life has gained momentum. Certain authors, for example, advocate for a New or Modern Stoicism that preserves all the core elements of the education of desire but puts the doctrines in an up-to-date scientific context (see, e.g. Becker 1997; Irvine 2009; Pigliucci 2017).

Perhaps there is no need to integrate Stoicism with evolution and modern cosmology. Stoic ethics might hold together independently from their claims about the nature of the cosmos (see Engberg-Pedersen 1990; Annas 2007; Irwin 2003). After all, right from the beginning, Aristo of Chios held that Stoic ethics could be practiced without physics and logic (DL 7.160–161 = LS31N). Furthermore,

[17]For the Stoic sage, see Brouwer (2014) and Cooper (2005).

[18]Sherman (2005) has analysed the legacy of stoicism in military culture. Zuckerberg (2018) discusses the misuse and oversimplification of Stoicism in the far-right online community. For the use of the term 'stoicism' in health literature, see Moore et al. (2012). Stoics are also mentioned as the philosophical foundation and precursors of modern cognitive–behavioural therapy (CBT), a widely used psychosocial intervention for improving mental health (Robertson 2010).

perhaps we could profit from the Stoic therapeutic techniques even if we disagree with the content of some of their ethical doctrines (Nussbaum 1994; Sorabji 1997).

Maybe we should be careful and not get carried away. For most ancient Stoics, the parts of philosophy stand in a strong interdependent relation. It seems that without Stoic cosmology the sage cannot achieve knowledge or evaluate the goodness or appropriateness of concrete situations (Boeri 2009; Inwood 2009). Many of their techniques and exercises depend on a specific and normative concept of nature, divine order, and providence. If we do not accept these doctrines of Stoic philosophy, infallibility, tranquillity, virtue, and happiness slip from our hands. And if these goals remain beyond our reach, the allure of the Stoic life diminishes.

A possible response—suggested by Irvine (2009)—is to adapt the Stoic motto of living in accordance with Nature as living in accordance with (lowercase) reason. This threatens, however, trading the distinctive features of the Stoic advice for a generic truism. Surely we should think before acting, examine the beliefs and assumptions underpinning our emotions, and make conscious efforts to master our desires. Undoubtedly, some people, in certain circumstances, and with specific sociocultural backgrounds, will find Stoic exercises helpful. Perhaps you, like me, will find some of these practices highly ineffective or counterproductive. For example, no matter how much I prepare myself or visualise the possibility of losing my loved ones, the Stoic analysis yields little to no comfort for such eventuality. Similarly, recognising that certain decisive outcome stands outside my control, not always helps me to consider myself less of a moral failure (cf. Tessman 2015). If despite these warnings you still want to give Stoicism a chance, I suggest carrying out a negative test. Instead of assuming these ancient doctrines, practices, and exercises will lead us to happiness, tranquillity, and virtue, examine if practicing them makes you less miserable, troubled, and obnoxious.

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