



## **Facing Things Stoically: The Stoic recipe for remaining calm**

### **Professor Richard Sorabji FBA**

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What is it to face things Stoically? Perhaps we think of people who clench their teeth and keep a stiff upper lip. But this is not Stoicism at all. Stoic serenity was supposed to have passed beyond the stage of inner struggle. There may be parallel misconceptions about taking things philosophically. Oliver Edwards said, 'I have tried too in my time to be a philosopher; but I don't know how, cheerfulness kept breaking through'. Yet the Stoic philosopher was free to be cheerful. The Stoic School was founded in Athens in 300BC and it modelled itself on Socrates, who was executed in Athens 99 years earlier. We shall see some connections with Socrates at the end. But if one report is to be believed, Socrates achieved his serenity by different means. When he saw the danger of anger coming on, he would put a smile on his face and slow down his walk. He was thus relying on neuro-physiological feedback to remain calm. The Stoics relied entirely on thoughts, and on changing their thoughts, so as to maintain the right attitude of mind.

Part of the Stoic recipe for calmness would be useful to us today, I believe. There is also an unacceptable face of Stoicism, but the acceptable and the unacceptable can be detached from each other. We saw in an earlier year (Lecture 2, November 2000) that the Stoics believed that emotions were just judgments, evaluative judgments. This was relevant, because it meant that unwanted emotions could in principle be changed by rational means, by thinking more carefully, so as to view the situation differently. One did not have to use physical means and wait for the invention of drugs, nor even change one's diet, as some ancient doctors recommended, in order to calm one's emotions.

Every emotion involved at least two judgments, they said, and one was that there was harm or benefit at hand. The second judgment was about how it was appropriate to react. In fear or appetite, the second judgment would be that it was appropriate to avoid or reach for the harm or benefit. In pleasure and distress, the second judgment would be that it was appropriate to have sinking feelings or expansive feelings. The feelings themselves would not be part of the emotion, but only the judgment about their appropriateness.

The Stoics had a battery of methods for revising your two judgments, only a few of which were mentioned in the earlier lecture. The first judgment, the judgment that harm is at hand, might be questioned by reflecting, 'you are not the only one to suffer'. A lot of others can be appealed to in different ways: 'others have suffered even worse', or still better, 'others have overcome such sufferings'. Then again, there is the technique of re-labelling. One Stoic advises you, if caught in a traffic jam, to think of it as a festival. The Stoics did not mind using distortions or even falsehoods in restricted circumstances. The Latin poet Ovid parodied some of this philosophical advice in two contrasting poems that he wrote. One advised both men and women how to seduce; the other told men how to fall out of love. If his beloved is sallow, the male seducer should call her 'honey-dark', if fat, 'curvaceous', if thin, 'slender'. But if it is time to fall out of love, he should reverse the epithets for himself. The honey-dark beloved should be thought of as sallow, the curvaceous as fat, the slender as thin. What is reversed here is a judgment of benefit, not a judgment of harm, but both equally are examples of the first of the two judgments involved in emotion. Ovid also advises the man to catch his lover at her toilet and smell the malodorous chemicals in her cosmetics.

Another aid is to ask yourself whether your situation is really bad or only unexpected. People who had thought that they had won the national lottery, and who then found that they were mistaken, have been known to commit suicide. Why? What is so bad about not winning the national lottery? They had not won in earlier weeks. What was different this week was only the expectation. The situation was not worse, only unexpected, but they had confused the two.

The second judgment in emotion concerns how it is appropriate to react, and this judgment too can be scrutinised. Someone mourning her child is told after three years, 'you are neglecting the grandchildren'. In other words, it is not appropriate to go on indulging the sinking feelings. The mourner is told that she has become attached to the process of mourning, so that giving it up would seem like a second bereavement. But the Stoics were well aware that you must wait for the right time to offer these thoughts. They will not work at once. That would be like striking the open wound. The angry person should reflect, 'but I myself have often behaved in the way of which I am complaining'. That too will make the reaction of seeking to get even inappropriate.

What if the mourner is still crying, or still experiencing sinking feelings? These are mere side effects, according to the Stoics, and are not the emotion itself. Nor do they matter. What matters is, whether you are right that you are suffering harm, and that your reaction is appropriate. I have referred before to William James, who said, 'We are sad because we cry; we do not cry because we are sad'. This is not quite true, but there is a lot of truth in it. People do think, 'Look, I am crying - I must have been maltreated'. But no such thing follows. The crying is a side effect of the initial impression that you have been maltreated. What is important is to evaluate that impression. Again, the Stoic advice is to distinguish mere physical reactions, and focus on the veracity of your judgments.

The restorative thoughts suggested above ('you are not the only one', 'you are neglecting the grandchildren') may seem like old wives' recipes. Do they need a philosopher to produce them? The Stoics called such thoughts 'precepts', but the Stoic Seneca argued that you need what he called 'doctrines' as well. I think that by 'doctrines' he meant the Philosophy, including the Philosophy that identifies emotions with judgments and specifies the two relevant judgments, so that you know how to target the precepts on them, and marks off the mere sinking feelings, so that you are not distracted by those.

The techniques of the Stoics and of other philosophers were all tried out by Cicero in the first century BC, when he first lost office in the civil wars at the time of Julius Caesar, and then lost his daughter, and found himself sobbing uncontrollably in the woods. We find them again when in the next century the Stoic Seneca addressed some of them to the imperial lady Marcia, who had lost her son. What is striking is that the approach has come back again in modern psychotherapy of the kind called 'cognitive therapy'. Modern cognitive therapy also says that emotions are just judgments, and that unwanted ones can be removed by rational discussion in no more than 4 to 6 meetings. Interestingly, the techniques have been particularly successful with phobias, and also more with bulimia than with anorexia, although committed practitioners say that they will in time find how to get the same results there too. There are small differences from the ancient techniques, with more use of the imagination to help change judgments. And the judgments treated are often factual ones about what is likely to happen to you, rather than whether it would matter if it did happen. The Stoics, by contrast, stuck to evaluative judgments like the last. One area in which cognitive therapy has been successfully used, for example, is in a one-day course supplied by British Airways to cure the fear of flying, which was said to have an 80% success rate.

A great advantage of the Stoic ideas so far is that they could be used by anyone, whether they believed the rest of Stoicism, or not. And indeed, a famous early Stoic, Chrysippus, claimed that he could enable people to get rid of unwanted emotions, whether they agreed with Stoic values, or not. He could cure those who took the diametrically opposite view to the Stoics, and thought that the most important thing in life was pleasure. But now I must move to the unacceptable face of Stoicism, and tell you about some far less familiar ideas.

Drawing on hints in Plato,<sup>1</sup> the Stoics held that in a certain sense nothing mattered except character; the rest was in their words 'indifferent'.<sup>2</sup> Being intellectualist, as we have seen, they thought that good character boiled down to rationality, because if you had the right views, you would have the right character. A great advantage of treating character or rationality as the only thing that ultimately matters, is thought to be that your character is under your control. So, no tyrant can take away from you the thing that really matters. You are inviolable, if you once accept this.

Indifferent things include life, health, pleasure, beauty, strength, functioning sense organs, wealth, reputation and their opposites. But although these are indifferent, some are objectives that it is natural and right to prefer. They are 'naturally preferred indifferents'. Moreover, we even have a duty to be energetic about them. This emerges when we ask what, for the Stoics, is the goal to be aimed at in life. A later Stoic, Antipater, defines the goal as doing everything in your power to obtain these natural objectives. But that is not because they are truly valuable in themselves. What is truly valuable is having the right natural

objectives, whether you succeed in securing them or not, for this exemplifies the right character. Antipater takes a metaphor from archery. Your objective is to hit the target, but what really matters is not whether you succeed in hitting it. That might be due to a freak of the wind. What matters is aiming well. The English used to be taught the same thing about cricket. You try very hard to win, but if you lose, the thing to remember is that 'the game's the thing'. Americans are taught the same thing in connection with American football. In the immortal words of Grantland Rice,

*When the last Great Scorer comes*

*To mark against your name,*

*He asks not if you won or lost,*

*But how you played the game.*

The indifference of winning, or hitting, or securing natural objectives, comes out retrospectively, not prospectively. If you miss them, through no fault of your own, there is nothing to regret, so long as you did everything in your power to aim right.

It may be objected that you cannot expect to calm people who miss the natural objectives by telling them that they are really indifferent. But in a way the Stoics agree. You cannot tell a bereaved person that the life of their loved one is in the end indifferent. If they could believe that, they would be sages already and would not need your consolation. But with ordinary people, you both need to wait, and then to suggest not that their loss is indifferent, but, for example, they are neglecting the grandchildren. In lesser cases, you might try to convince people that their objective was indifferent. Does it matter winning the lottery or getting through the traffic jam?

But what about those who sign up to be trained as true Stoics? For them a far more strenuous regime is required. The attitude of treating natural objectives as indifferent is to be practised not merely in retrospect, but in advance, and across the board, not only for losses that have actually occurred, but, for the whole range of possible losses. This is again unacceptable to me. The later Stoic Epictetus in the first century AD sends his students out at dawn round the streets and asks them to report what they saw. 'A man mourning his child'. Is death under the control of your will? No. Out with it then; it is not one of the things that matter. What did the next student see? 'A consul passed by'. Is acquiring the consulship under the control of your will? No. Out with it then; it is not one of the things that matter. At their first lesson the students should feel agony - not usually the test of a successful lesson - but they should feel agony at their wrong attitudes. Epictetus is very severe with students who are homesick and sends them home forever.

Notoriously, he recommends that each time you handle your favourite pot, you should think, 'one day this pot will be broken'. And you should work upwards, until each time you kiss your wife or child, you can reflect, 'I am kissing a mortal'. My reaction would be that it is better to suffer loss when it comes. But Epictetus has a further answer. His detached love is the only true love. Witness the case of those who profess undying love of the ordinary kind. Let a woman or a necklace come between them and that so-called love will turn into hatred. This is because they have never learnt to treat naturally preferred indifferents for the indifferents that they really are. Only the Stoic who has taken in their indifference will never cease to seek their well being or remain immune from hatred.

Other exercises are gentler. To cure irascibility, offer a sacrifice when you manage to avoid anger 30 days in a row. When the strawberries are passed round, do not wonder whether there will be enough for you. Ignore it, until the plate is before you. This is why my grand mother never allowed me to take a glass of water straight to my lips. Always put it on the table first, as if you had all the time in the world.

The Stoics practised wanting with reservation, the reservation being 'if God wills'. Your first preference might be to regain your health and for God to will that. But failing that, a Stoic's second preference would be just for what God wills. So the Stoic wants God's will to be done in any case, and stands ready to abandon the first preference that that should go along with recovery of health. The reservation, 'if God wills'

is paralleled, I presume, in the Islamic reservation, 'God willing'. And it is closely parallel to Christ's saying when facing betrayal and death, 'My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt'. On my interpretation, the Stoics would initially will the combination of life and God's will, but stand ready to abandon the will for life. But some Christians took it the other way round with Christ. he did not will to stay alive, but merely stood ready to do so, should that prove to be God's will.

Given their belief in indifference, the Stoics thought that almost everything that we would count as an emotion involved a mistaken evaluation and should therefore be got rid of. For every emotion, on their view, consists in part of the judgment that there is harm or benefit at hand. But in fact nothing is harmful or beneficial, for them, except character and rationality. This leaves just a few emotional states free from error and therefore acceptable. Cheerfulness is one of them, provided that this is defined as joy at God's conduct of the universe. No error would be involved in such an emotional attitude, because the rational conduct of the universe is a genuine benefit, and it is genuinely appropriate to have expansive feelings at the thought of it. Most emotional evaluations, however, are erroneous, attaching the wrong kind of importance to the preferred indifferents like life, health and wealth.

It might be wondered why we should not retain the pleasant emotions, while ridding ourselves only of the unpleasant. But quite apart from the error involved in most emotions, the suggestion is multiply impractical. Hoping for the pleasure of obtaining what you want is inextricably linked to anxiety as to whether you will get it, depression if you do not, pride if you do, fear you may lose it, the possibility of actual loss, of jealousy, anger fear or subservience. Not only are pleasant emotions tied in this way to unpleasant ones, but even within a single emotion that is bitter, there may be sweet thoughts as of revenge in anger, the sweetness of tears in distress, and of hopes in envy.

Aristotle and the Aristotelians could not disagree more. For them good character actually requires you to feel the right emotions to the right extent at the right time and towards the right people. Emotion is involved in what it is to be good. The difference between the two schools got summed up as the controversy between moderating emotion and eradicating emotion. Which side are we on?

The Stoic ban on most emotion in no way robbed them of motivation. There were two types of desire still to be practised, because free from error. First, genuinely good things like goodness of character should be desired as genuinely good and promoted in other people and in yourself. Secondly, naturally preferred indifferents should be seen and pursued, as the indifferents that they are. Indeed, we have seen that is your Stoic duty to pursue them energetically, but without illusion about their character. To this kind of desire the Stoics gave a special name, 'selection', to distinguish it from the emotional desire that wrongly pursued the indifferents as if they were genuinely beneficial. Your desire for naturally preferred indifferents, like your family's health or your own, will not be emotional if, with Epictetus, you remember that these are in the end only a naturally preferred indifferents.

But do not some outrages call for anger? Perhaps we should think instead of the kind of compassion that is genuine in spite of not including personal pain as a component. A modern example may be provided by a certain kind of Buddhist, perhaps by the Dalai Lama's attitude to the rape of his country. But without resentment and gratitude, would we be human? I rather doubt it, but the Stoics think that in any case humans belong in a community with the gods and that human rationality is part of God's rationality.

But are not the emotions essential? Do we not need them for warfare? I regret to say that soldiers have often been trained to 'disguise fair nature with hard-favoured rage', as Shakespeare puts it in Henry the Fifth. Do we not need emotion, the ancient philosophers debated, for self-defence, fighting in the arena, training animals, independence of spirit, ambition, dutifulness, law-abidingness, prudence offering succour, and punishment? As regards punishment, the Stoics were able to say 'no' since they regarded the purpose of punishment as corrective, not retributive. Does not love often help us to understand others, even if it can also blind us? But here the Stoic can say that the Stoic will not lack this understanding, since in reaching the status of sage, the Stoic will first have had to experience the emotions before shedding them. Do we not need anger sometimes to give other people a message? But the rival school of Epicureans replied that this could be achieved by pretending anger. The Stoics distinguished between mercy, which they approved, and pity, which they rejected as involving misplaced personal pain. Certainly, such pain can get in the way of being helpful. Nonetheless, I am against the Stoics here. I do not see, for example, how, as humans, we could eat or procreate without pleasure or rear happy children, without giving them love of the ordinary kind.

Nonetheless, I should now tell you of a case in which certain Stoic ideas were most successfully used quite recently. I invited to London Admiral Stockdale, an American war hero, because he had survived four years of solitary confinement in Vietnam, eight years of captivity and nineteen occasions of physical torture and helped his men to endure the same, and all, he said, through having studied the sayings of the Stoic Epictetus. As he fluttered to earth from his crashing plane, his parachute was fired at, and the fall was heavy enough to break his leg. He thought, as he fell, 'I am leaving the world I know for the world of Epictetus'. The broken leg gave him something in common with Epictetus, who had had his leg broken when he was a slave, and imagined a conversation in which the victim says, 'you can put my leg in chains, but not me'. The captors of Stockdale exploited the pain in his leg, when they tortured him.

What he specially took from Epictetus was the importance of distinguishing what is under your control from what is not. When the U.S. prisoners were tortured, they all gave away more than their name and number, and then they were too ashamed to face each other. The captors were not interested in the extra information. What they did instead was to exploit the shame, to get the prisoners to denounce US policy on television. Stockdale's Epictetan response to the troops was that it is not in anyone's power to confine their answers to name and number under physical torture, so they should not feel ashamed. They had, however, overlooked that something else was in their power, namely to get tortured again by petty acts of disobedience. Some of them followed Stockdale in this policy. They were tortured again, and again revealed more than their name and number. But what mattered was they had regained their pride. None of the prisoners in this group was ever persuaded to go on television, and the captors were powerless to get what they wanted.

Stockdale was unaware that the Stoic Seneca regarded the possibility of suicide as a guarantee of freedom, because it was a way of frustrating any tyrant, and that certain Stoics recognised five contexts in which suicide was legitimate. Stockdale once attempted suicide in circumstances that, unbeknownst to him, were among the five recognised by the Stoics. To some extent, he said, you can select under torture what information you give, so long as the captors do not know how much you know. But on this occasion they did know that Stockdale had the names of those who had committed a particular act of defiance. To frustrate the captors, he made a thoroughgoing attempt at suicide, and was rescued only by chance.

One might expect that to Mrs Stockdale Stoicism would have been useless, a philosophy that says it is a matter of indifference whether your husband returns alive or not. But in fact, from their joint book *In Love and War*,<sup>3</sup> in which they wrote alternate chapters about their separate predicaments, it becomes clear that Stoic ideas would have been very relevant to her position too. After five years, she forced a meeting with the President of the United States in the White House, on behalf of prisoners' wives, to get their previously secret existence acknowledged. It would have been relevant in forcing the meeting to keep in mind a clear idea of what is and is not in your power. As the situation dragged on, with no official letters back and forth from her husband, she was finally given professional advice by a psychologist, which I initially found shocking: 'assume your husband will not return'. But this too was in line with Stoicism. The Stoics tell you not to pin hopes on the future - hope is an emotion - and not even to expect the preferred outcome, since unexpected frustration is harder.

When Stockdale returned, a war hero, I realised that Stoicism was relevant again. Showered with honours and opportunities, and persuaded to stand for the Vice-Presidency of the United States, he found something trivial about the altercations of civilian life. His account led me to realise that Stoicism is a philosophy for the emotions of peace as well as war, and of good fortune as well as bad.

I should like to finish with something I have not said before. I think we can see the Stoic view as something needed by Socratic ethics, if that ethics was to be made more viable. Socrates was a model for the Stoics. He had in 399 BC voluntarily stayed in prison and drunk the fatal hemlock, rather than violate the laws which had, however unjustly, led to his being condemned. But Socrates said a lot of apparently paradoxical things. One was that anybody who had the opinion that one course of action was better than another would not even want to follow the other course. Again, he held that the good person couldn't be harmed. Moreover, goodness is enough to make you happy, whatever fortune does to you. Further, Socrates subjected people to relentless cross-examination in the apparent belief that they would be better off, if freed from contradictory opinions.

The Stoic system begins to show how all this might be true. If emotional wanting simply is, as the Stoics think, having the opinion that a given course of action is the beneficial one and, accordingly, is appropriate to pursue, then we will get Socrates' result that you won't even want a course that is contrary to your opinion. If the Stoics are right that emotions are opinions, then again we get Socrates' result, that Socratic

questioning, by making all your opinions consistent with each other, will have made all your emotions consistent with each other and so you should be happier. If the Stoics are right that everything is indifferent except character and rationality, then we should get Socrates' result that good character assures you of happiness, whatever fortune does to you. Finally, if the good Stoic only wants things, provided that Zeus wills them, we get Socrates' result that the good person cannot be harmed. These four doctrines, which seemed so paradoxical when Socrates uttered them, are shown by the Stoics to fit into a whole system, which gives them certain credibility. We may in the end not believe the system as a whole, but it requires careful evaluation, and forces us to see how the Socratic sayings might be defended. My own opinion is that Socrates is not credible, but that nonetheless we have much to learn from the Stoics who develop his views into a system.

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