

The Stoic's need for a sound mind by Nigel Glassborow March 2019

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'The happy life... is a life that is in harmony with its own nature, and it can be attained in only one way. First of all, we must have a sound mind and one that is in constant possession of its sanity; second, it must be courageous and energetic, and, too, capable of the noblest fortitude, ready for every emergency, careful of the body and of all that concerns it, but without anxiety; lastly, it must be attentive to all the advantages that adorn life – the user, but not the slave, of the gifts of Fortune.' [On the happy life iii, 'Seneca Moral Essays' Translation by John W Basore]

A sick person does not need a place; he needs medical treatment. If someone has a broken leg or dislocated a joint, he doesn't get on a carriage or a ship; he calls a doctor to set the fracture or relocate the limb. Do you get the point? When the mind has been broken and sprained in so many places, do you think it can be restored by changing places? Your trouble is too grave to be cured by moving around. Travel does not make one a doctor or an orator. One does not learn a skill from one's location. Do you suppose that wisdom, the greatest of all skills, can be assembled on a journey? Believe me, there is no journey that could deposit you beyond desires, beyond outbursts of temper, beyond your fears. If that were so, the human race would have headed there in droves. So long as you carry around the reasons for your troubles, wandering all over the world, those troubles will continue to harass and torment you. Are you puzzled that running away is not helping you? What you are running from is with you. You need to correct your flaws, unload your burdens, and keep your desires within a healthy limit." [CIV - On the care of Health and Peace of Mind, 'Seneca Epistulae Morales' Translation by Richard M Gummere.]

There is an ongoing debate as to if we have 'free-will'. The science of the workings of our brains can show that we are already acting before we consciously 'decide' to act as we act. It would appear that matters deep within us have already 'pre-determined' how we are to act in every instance of our lives, albeit sometimes by only a matter of fractions of a second before we become aware that such action has been initiated. Even quite random choices as to a choice between what to drink to quench a feeling of thirst are not spontaneous.

So, as we cannot be responsible for what 'pops into our minds', it is necessary to ensure that we are of sound mind and can deal with what 'pops into our minds' as appropriately as possible.

But if we are not responsible for what our minds dish up and are not in conscious control of the decisions that our physical brains have already made for us how can we ever become better than we are?

Without any knowledge of the science of the brain that we have available to us today, Stoicism recognised this problem of 'pre-determined' thoughts and so directed part of the training of the Stoic to concentrate on 'changing their mind'. Stoicism, in its belief that the

physics of life is a combination of matter and mind, saw a thought arising in the mind as being an inner action triggered by the physical properties of an 'impressions' together with our 'opinions', where the thought is a precursor to further action that will affect the outer world – the world of society.

However Stoicism teaches us that we have the free-will to 'change' our minds and so change the flow of inner action whereby it does not become inappropriate outer action - provided that we are attentive to what we are thinking and where such is directing us. Our bodies may already be moving towards action in response to this or that by such things as raising the blood flow and by increasing the production of various hormones etcetera. We may even have started to act externally on our thoughts such as blurting out some comment before we have time to consciously think through the consequences, but by the use of conscious reasoned thought we can mitigate, redirect or reverse such sub-conscious induced activity.

At the same time, Stoicism teaches us that, through habituation, we can change the processes that are driving our thoughts. While it is often said that we Stoics believe that we cannot be held responsible for what we think, only for the choices we make in light of such thoughts, in truth Stoicism tells us that we are, once we have achieved adulthood, responsible for the habituation of our deep down subconscious thought process. Stoicism teaches us to examine our thought processes and to re-habituate our neural pathways by self-indoctrination. And we start to reprogram our minds by settling on a belief system that will form a framework of ideas which will become embedded into the workings of our brain whereby, as much as possible, our thoughts and actions will be governed by such principles – even before we become consciously aware of a situation.

However, Stoicism does not associate the individual's will solely with the workings of the brain. Rather the starting point for all Stoic psychology is that our true consciousness, our will, is the result of our being one with the Whole in that we are manifested by and out of the body of God where the body of God is the passive Prime Matter imbued with a Single Mind – of which our will is a 'spark'.

And for whatever reason, God has evolved us to have a free will – a will that is part of God's very being and so is inextricably linked to the Whole, but a will that is gifted to us whereby we are free to partake, in accord with our individual nature and our nature as human beings, in the ongoing determination of how matters will evolve in the never ending flow of change that is Existence. We have been given a free will which makes us individuals in our own right. But regardless of having a free will, Stoicism teaches us that our psychological wellbeing involves us in aligning our free will with the will of God:

'For I regard God's will as better than my will. I shall attach myself to Him as a servant and follower, my choice is one with His, my desire one with His, in a word my will is one with His will.' [IV.VII. 'Epictetus, the discourses as reported by Arrian, the Manual and Fragments' Translated by W A Oldfather.]

We are taught to live as we see fit while learning what such means by looking to God for guidance. Such guidance is generally to be found by looking to what God is telling us through the nature of life and all that we find around us.

We look to the Stoic mantra 'Live in accord with Nature' for it is through looking to the design of all around us that we can see the nature of Existence, the nature of the world on which our lives depend, our nature as human social animals, and our nature as individuals with the ability to reason.

We also, in looking to the common perception of all the world faiths, see that trying to live good and honourable lives, so becoming people of good character, is what living wisely involves and that this means aligning our will with the will of the Whole – or in other words, God.

And to this end, so that we may be as consistent as possible in our drive to be the best we can, we keep reminding ourselves of our oneness with God while also looking as to how we can use such knowledge to ensure that our brains are working for us and not against us.

And so we move on to recognising that we have an independent will or self that can reprogram our minds while also watching over the output of our brains as 'a second line of defence'.

And of course, based on the Stoic view of the physics of existence, our will is more than just the output of our brain. The brain is made out of the same material that manifests the whole Cosmos. But the brain is only part of our being. The whole of our body is made up out of the material that manifests the whole Cosmos, and so our 'spark' of the 'intelligence' that is an aspect of the Cosmos is not limited to the 'matter' that forms our brain. Our will is linked to our whole being, not just to the biological computer contained within our skulls.

As a result, much of the Stoic mind training is aimed at ensuring that we 'act' according to our will as against acting at the behest of some errant program in our brain that is presenting us with a misperceived impression that has set the brain on pushing for an inappropriate course of action.

For the Stoic, our will is an aspect of who we are, but it is not solely the output of our brains. It is so much more, for it reaches out to the Cosmos and all around us and it can perceive our place within the Whole while seeing that our individual well-being is in truth achieved through putting the well-being of all around us first whereby we can rest contented that we have 'played our part well' when it comes to the play of life.

Working out what we can reasonably and appropriately do for the well-being of the whole requires that we are able to:

'See things in all their naked reality.' [IV.11. 'The Communings with Himself of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, together with his speeches and essays' Translated by C R Haines.]

In other words we need to be able to see reality as it is, and not necessarily as our emotions, instinctive reactions or the programming of our brain may see things. It may be that such inbuilt aspects of our brains do at times see matters correctly, but the Stoic is taught to ensure that such have been properly trained and will answer the rule of reason as applied by our will – our whole self.

Epictetus did a pretty good job of outlining much of the Stoic training methods, but what many forget is that the setting aside of the emotions is only a temporary aspect of the early training of novices. As Epictetus says:

With such high aims, therefore, remember that you must bestir yourself with no slight effort to lay hold of them, but you will have to give up some things entirely, and defer others for the time being. [I.IV The Encheiridion of Epictetus as translated by W A Oldfather]

From this we see Epictetus telling us that there are some aspects that lead to an unsound mind, such as anger, that are to be avoided for ever and a day. However there is much that may be deferred '*for the time being*' – that is, until such time as the initial stage of our study of Stoicism is over and we are able to start having some degree of rational control over such matters.

Stoicism does not demand that we avoid all emotions or affections for ever and a day, only emotions that are excessive, violent, aggressive, inappropriate and beyond the rule of our will. Calmer natural appropriate emotions, affections and feelings are to be encouraged – just as appropriate love for our children and spouses is encouraged, where the word 'appropriate' is key.

Stoicism recognises that often emotions are triggered by not seeing matters as they are – false impressions. Many of our instinctive reactions can be triggered by false impressions, such as seeing a shadow cast by a tree as presenting the apparent shadow of a wild animal lying in wait to attack us. And to add to our problems of being able to see reality as it is, the process of the workings of our brains can involve emotionally loaded memories of past events that automatically colour the fresh impressions we are receiving from our senses in the present moment in a negative way, so leading us to react in an inappropriate way.

So Epictetus advises anyone not of sound mind who wishes to become a Stoic to set aside preconceived ideas and avoid any situations that may elicit emotional responses until such time as they have examined the whole of the Stoic teachings and have seen how it all fits together. And such is set aside until the novice has achieved some mastery over their brain. That is, we have to achieve a level of self-control through the use of our reasoning faculty together with a balance between the 'feeling' and 'rational' aspects of our mind – the achievement of which is seen as 'being of sound mind'.

For some the Stoic training will be hard work because of some clinical issue affecting them whereby trying to maintain a sound mind requires more work than most may need. For some, by nature and/or upbringing, what it takes to maintain a sound mind will be the norm and they will experience only minor blips to their normal level state of mind. Whereas for many starting out, they will have need to regain control of their mind from the onslaught of their emotions and their inappropriate habituated mind sets and so will need to work to set the foundations in place while also working through the Stoic mind training.

And for the person who holds back because they think such is beyond them, Seneca reminds us:

'Do you know why we have not the power to attain the Stoic Ideal? It is because we refuse to believe in our power. Nay, of a surety, there is something else which plays a part: it is because we are in love with our vices; we uphold them and prefer to make excuses for them rather than shake them off... The reason is unwillingness, the excuse, inability.' [CXVI. On Self Control, 'Seneca Epistulae Morales' Translation by Richard M Gummere]