

The Stoic rationale and ‘Emotions’ in today’s world by Nigel

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The current emphasis on a person ‘expressing’ their emotions is leading to ever more people with emotional problems in that their emotions are getting out of balance with their rationality of the mind. Much of this is fuelled by talk of the individual’s rights and advertising and the like telling people that ‘you deserve’ this or that, all without the balancing rationality that tells a person that their wants and their needs are two different things. People are not told that they will gain the most by working for the betterment of society and all around them. They are instead being driven into a lonely self-centred existence where their own ‘wants’ are set above that of everyone else – a state that is liable to lead to increased perturbation. Even spouses and children are now being seen as denying a person their ‘rights’ and ‘freedoms’.

However Stoicism tells us that we have no ‘rights’. Stoicism tells us that we have a ‘responsibility’ to serve all around us as best we can – and we do this best by ensuring that our emotions are serving us rather than us serving our emotions.

When Stoicism first came on the scene in ancient Greece much of the perturbations people experienced were understandable in that they were reacting to very real threats. In today’s world there are still countries and situations where such dangers are as real and in a like manner lead to such things as post-traumatic stress disorder and other disabling mental conditions. And, yes. Stoicism can be a real help in such situations.

But the perturbations that many now feel are to a great deal self-induced, being brought about by following the ‘trends’ that are encouraging the expression of heightened emotions and excitability together with overly great concern regards self-image while at the same time reducing actual face to face participation with society as a whole. Where many do show concern for where society is going, all too often such is based on emotional judgements, amounting to perturbations, based on limited consideration of the realities of Nature and the contrary effects that their well-intended actions are liable to have.

There is also the problem of drug abuse in that abuse of drugs is designed to lessen the ability of the reasoning faculty to rule. No Stoic will take drugs with the expressed purpose of ‘getting out of their mind’, especially as drug addiction is enslavement to an inanimate object. Stoics will only use drugs as is medically appropriate.

The abuse of drugs tends to leave a person with over active free ranging emotions and perturbations that help weaken the individual’s ability to apply critical thinking to ideas and situations. An ex drug abuser who wishes to be a Stoic needs to be extra determined in using all of the Stoic training methods. And when it comes to people who are currently abusing drugs, before they can become Stoics they need to kick their habit, even if they consider such to be only the so called ‘social use of drugs’. The use of cannabis is especially pernicious in that many do not recognise the ongoing damage such does regards one’s reasoning faculty’s ability to make rational well thought through judgements.

All of which is why Stoicism overcomes perturbations by looking to Nature, wisdom and knowledge in a rationally thought out manner while ensuring that any natural emotion is answerable to a sound mind governed by a free reasoning faculty. That is, a reasoning faculty that is free in that it is not in thrall of the emotions or to external factors, but is able to make judgements as a judge does. That is, with dispassionate consideration of any situation and its context regards self and society as a whole, whereby the 'judge' will not be 'bribed' by any false emotional promise of some questionable benefit that some 'external' may appear to offer.

The 'judge' will make judgements about emotions and choose to allow such to run their course provided the emotions remain answerable to the rule of reason, where such reason has a sound grounding, such as a grounding based in the Stoic beliefs, metaphysics, principles and teachings.

The trained Stoic ensures that their emotions will not be allowed to run totally wild and free of the reigns of the trained reasoning faculty. It is to be ensured that the rational and the emotional aspects of one's thought processes work together in a balanced manner just as a rider and a horse work together as one to complete their journey, where the rider holds the reins and the horse provides the drive.

And in holding the reins, the experienced Stoic ensures that all of their actions, together with their appropriate emotions, will be of benefit to their family, friends and society as a whole and will be appropriate to their roles in life.

Through such is to be found 'eudaimonia'.

Through putting self and one's emotions first is to be found a shallowness of life and perturbation.

The word 'emotion' is used in many Stoic circles today as a direct translation of the Stoic use of the Greek word 'pathos'. This causes many to question the Stoic apparent stance of rejecting all emotions, whereas in fact Stoicism positively encourages what are called 'eupathos' and natural 'affections' etcetera – all of which come under today's catch-all terms 'emotions' or 'feelings'.

Looked at properly it is to be seen that within Stoic writings of old the word 'pathos' with no prefix or suffix is being restricted to talk of 'bad' and/or inappropriate feelings when in fact the Greek 'pathos' simply means 'feelings' – be they good or bad. This use of a single word can cause some confusions, especially if looking at the rationale to be gained from studying the whole of Stoicism.

But as we have a most excellent rule for every phase of life, to avoid exhibitions of passion [pathos], that is, mental excitement that is excessive and uncontrolled by reason [136 XXXVIII. Cicero's De Officiis]

Zeno's definition, then, is this: "a perturbation" (which he calls a pathos) "is a commotion of the mind repugnant to reason, and against nature." [The Tusculan Disputations, by Marcus Tullius Cicero Book 4. On Other Perturbations Of The Mind.]

Elsewhere, in discussing the Stoic view, Cicero differentiates between 'perturbations' and 'emotions' in general, where 'perturbations' are 'emotions' of a particular quality. As the use of words such as 'passion' (pathos) and 'emotions' have such a crossover in meanings today, so as to avoid ongoing confusion I now follow Cicero's lead and here talk of 'perturbations' and 'emotions' where 'perturbations' will refer to the undesirable feelings that much of the Stoic training seeks to avoid. Perturbations are emotions that are excessive, violent, aggressive and inappropriate and beyond the rule of our will. They tend to be antisocial and lead to actions that are contrary to a life lived in accord with Nature. They can be perturbations of overly heightened and apparently 'pleasurable' excitement or of fear, anger and the like – that is, perturbations relating to feelings of 'attraction' or of 'aversion'. Perturbations are a sign of an unsound mind and so are definitely something that the Stoic wishes to avoid.

Emotions in general are not just internal mental states but are seen as states that are felt as inner movements within the body and are to be seen in the physical stance, body language and facial expressions of the individual. Quite literally an 'emotion' is a visible physical outer expression of the inner 'feelings' that a person is experiencing – which is why Cicero talks of avoiding '*exhibitions of passion*'.

Much of the Stoic rationale is based on a 'what you see is what you get' approach. As a result thoughts are seen to be physical actions/interactions that can be recognised by their physical manifestation and from such physical appearance is to be ascertained what their character is.

And generally our actions manifest as having the character of being rationally led, being led by healthy rational emotions and instincts or of being driven by irrational perturbations that are out of control.

The Stoics of old looked to the inner 'feelings' as being the internal bodily feeling of being attracted to something, the internal bodily feelings of aversion, together with other such bodily feelings of inner movement that are common reactions to some thought or perception regards something 'external' where such 'feelings' are to be felt in the gut, the chest or elsewhere in the manner of feelings that can still be recognised today.

The Stoic rationale tells us that emotional feelings are not just mental happenings, but they are the body as a whole being affected according to the nature and strength of the feeling.

Many such feelings are simply the result of our natural instincts reacting to receiving impressions of the external world through our senses. In fact modern sciences show that we have need of such sensitivity to feelings if we are to manage to get on and live life. They provide the drive necessary to get on with life.

By way of the technical language of modern psychology, some talk of emotion/inner feeling as 'affect'. Here 'affect' relates to how an object or situation impacts a person – either through the input of their memory banks or directly in the present moment. Such a sense of 'feeling' is a part of our nature as human animals and is the reaction we feel as our animal self tries to assess our relationship to the ever changing flow of information that our senses are feeding us. Such feelings are the affect that the outside world has on us through the input of our senses. The feelings that this induces in us are based on processes in the brain and nervous system that make judgements and choices faster than our conscious reasoning faculty can. They are to some extent part of our survival instincts whereby we can react to outside events as quickly as is possible. We are forever playing catch-up with any choices that our body makes before our conscious reasoning faculty has a chance to fully assess the situation.

Naturally, such 'affect' is ongoing and as such the 'feeling' part of our consciousness is using our brain at the same time as is our reasoning faculty. So, as science is telling us, we are constantly living a life that is a balance between the choices that our 'feelings' make and the choices that our 'reasoning faculty' makes.

As it is, much can be left to the reactions to our sensory input in that the brain and body are designed to work with such in that we are by nature habituated to react appropriately in accord with our nature as human animals. Basically we live much of life at the behest of the impressions that impinge our mind together with our instincts and our nature as social human animals.

There are however many things that can fool or pervert our instinctive reaction to life.

There is the classic example of a shadow of a bush being mistaken for the shadow of wild animal lying in wait. Through this it may be seen that our senses do not always serve us well. For instance, it is known that we have a blind spot in our eye and it is only through moving the eye that we can fill in the gap in our vision by overlaying in rapid succession multiple images. If we happen not to be moving our eyes, our brain may fill in the gap in our vision created by the blind spot with what it thinks is probably out there, based on past experience so it may actually miss something that we need to be aware of and instead lull us into a sense of false security.

In fact, with all of our senses, the brain will fill in gaps in what we perceive, sometimes to amusing effect. Just consider some confusing conversations that can be had with elderly people who are to some extent hard of hearing. Some of the conversations between me and my wife can be hilarious. All of which is why the Stoic is guided to ensure that their 'impressions' are correct by ensuring that they do not go unexamined. We are guided to try

to ensure that the information we are receiving through our senses is as good a reflection of the reality of 'what is out there' as is possible.

And that does not just apply to the effectiveness of our senses. When we receive an impression through our senses it travels through the nervous system and the brain and is subjected to various processes whereby it is categorised, assessed against past experience and the like. By the time we are conscious of the impression, not only have the bodily instincts been triggered, but any given impression may have picked up a load of baggage by way of past emotionally loaded experience. Our instinctive drives will also be trying to add to the impression so as to encourage us to follow through in accord with our habituated learnt reactions.

By the time it comes to our conscious awareness, any impression impressed into our mind by the signals from our senses will have become a 'perception' - where we look at 'perception' as meaning 'understanding' in that the 'perception' is an interpretation of the original 'impression' developed by the merging of the impression with our inbuilt and learnt 'habitual opinions' – which often manifest as our appropriate or inappropriate coping mechanism. As such we are constantly being bombarded with the effects of ever fluctuating emotional feelings in that they are for ever reacting to incoming 'impressions'.

When the perception/impression comes to the attention of our reasoning faculty, Stoicism teaches us to unpack all and any inappropriate baggage by way of our training to critically examine such. Despite there being only fractions of a second between our instincts and habituated reactions having triggered our bodily feelings and our getting to grips with any situation through applying our reasoning faculty, more often than not a trained Stoic will be able to put a brake on the development of any inappropriate feelings and so prevent them from getting out of control.

The reasoning faculty is able to re-train errant instincts or inappropriate habituated reactions through rational thought. Science shows that many thought processes in our brains follow well-worn paths – neural pathways. It is known that, through reasoned thought and new habituation, we can lessen the use of some pathways in favour of more appropriate pathways.

In the Stoic training this is done by constantly reinforcing the Stoic framework of beliefs through contemplation and study whereby the beliefs gradually become the thought process that guide all the others. It is also done by trying to maintain as constant a conscious watch on our interaction with all around us as we are able to maintain, both on an ongoing basis and by way of regular self-assessments as to how well we have managed to comply with our chosen standards.

This ongoing reasoned self-assessment of how we ought to have acted as against how we did act helps to set road blocks on the undesirable neural pathways. Our instincts and habitualised reactions will evolve over time according to what our reasoning faculty has

assessed to be appropriate. We can educate our instincts to lower the threshold at which they will trigger.

As an example, an 'angry person' is a person who has allowed (usually subconsciously) the threshold that triggers their anger to be lower and lower where eventually the slightest thing can trigger anger in them. But such can be reversed by applying some discipline and willpower to counter the tendency to get angry over small matters, slowly moving on to greater matters till the tendency to anger is all but eliminated. When the instincts spot any issue coming to their attention that may have in the past elicited the perturbation that is anger, they will instead have learnt to prepare the body for action while holding off from any external action till such time as guidance has been sought from the reasoning faculty as to what is the best way to deal with the situations – whereby any reactive action is carried out because such is appropriate and not because one has become angry.

If past judgements as to what is appropriate have been faulty then we will find that we have errant areas of our instincts and habitualised reactions that work against our chosen moral path. Unless we set about correcting our errant mind sets we will have inappropriate feelings and emotions that will affect how we interact with the world about us.

In that errant or appropriate mind sets are set into place by conscious or subconscious judgements as to what we experience of the outside world it may be said that what is affecting our mind sets is 'opinion'. And of course 'opinion' comes down to the issue of wise or unwise use of knowledge or impressions. It is to be remembered that most opinions are learnt - through upbringing or through one's own input. But it is also true that we can change our opinions for the better where necessary, especially as we gain more knowledge and wisdom. And of course it is Stoicism's assertion that a good understanding of the Stoic view of our place in the scheme of things and how things manifest as they do is part of what will confirm sound opinions and help to eliminate unsound opinions.

Many emotions express themselves naturally and in accord with the individual's design without any immediate involvement of the reasoning faculty. While the Stoics of old did to some degree recognised such matters, they did not have the science of today that differentiates between what is simply the input of our nature as social human animals and what is the input of our reasoning faculty when it comes to our choices and judgements. That is, there was no real recognition of what goes on in us subconsciously and all talk was of what we are consciously aware of. But in that we also now know that the conscious mind can train the subconscious mind, much of the Stoic ideas regards dealing with emotions still hold.

Generally emotions and feelings will be instinctual and will be under the control of the choices and judgements of the individual's natural emotion processes. However when it comes to 'healing' an emotion that tends towards perturbations due to inappropriate historical opinions it is necessary for the Stoic to look to their reasoned judgements and

choices and, in the moment, correct any inappropriate habituation of ideas and to ensure that they make fresh judgements and choices based on their examined impressions and examined perceptions - which is where much of the Stoic training for achieving a sound mind comes in.

Even if such is not explicitly part of the Stoic training as passed down to us from yesteryear, there is the saying 'Fake it to make it'. By consciously acting out the natural appearance of a healthy emotion we can cause an unhealthy emotion to fall into line. For instance, it is known that we naturally smile when we are feeling happy and also that we can bring on the feeling of being happy just by smiling.