

The rationale of the Stoic training by Nigel Glassborow March 2019

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Many tell us that it is a Stoic claim that 'Arete is necessary and sufficient for eudaimonia.' Some reword this to say 'Virtue is necessary and sufficient for eudaimonia.' In both cases 'arete' and 'virtue' are seen as being equivalent to some perfected state that only the impossible sage can achieve. Whereas the Stoic rationale tells us that to a great extent 'arete' and 'eudaimonia' have little to do with what the Stoic is really aiming for.

Stoicism was born into a time when most of the Athenian schools were investigating as to how to achieve and benefit from a state of eudaimonia (good spirits). However it becomes clear that Stoicism set a different agenda. Instead, the Stoic's primary aim is to become a good person – a person of good character - through aligning their will with the will of God as best they can. Consequently the Stoic rationale recognises that 'being of good spirits' (eudaimonia) is just a side effect of achieving some level of success in the true purpose of the Stoic life.

Doing what is right and proper is more important than some self-satisfying 'feeling' a person may personally gain from such action - and in Stoicism doing what is right and proper is to seek to live 'harmoniously' in accord with all else around us, taking into account the 'bigger picture'. This means living in a manner that does not necessarily involve going for the 'obvious' immediate solution, but going for actions that aim for what one may reasonably believe is the path that will prove of most benefit to the whole - such chosen actions being based on wise forethought that is aiming to achieve what is truly of benefit.

In this respect it also has to be remembered that inaction is action in that action or inaction both help to determine how the flow of change pans out. All of which is why gaining an understanding of the degree of influence (control) one can bring to bear in any given circumstance, together with rationally thinking through the likely outcomes of the consequences of such, is an important aspect of the Stoic training.

Our training covers two areas of consideration. As indicated above, the prime one is regards how to physically live life as a 'good' beneficially contributing citizen of the Cosmos and the other is that of acquiring and maintaining a sound mind whereby we can make sound judgements and choices that will manifest as the actions of a person of good character. Of course the second is a prime requisite if one is to succeed at the former, where success will be that of living in accord with Nature.

So what is a sound mind?

Ideally it is a mind that is in total control of itself and that is not enslaved to anything – but Stoicism recognises that the 'ideal' is not a reality of life. After all, the Stoic rationale teaches us to see things as they are – not as we may wish them to be.

In one respect, some minds are not free of their physical state in that 'physical' disorders (big and small) affecting the mind can lead to all sorts of problems regards self-control. But in that we are not looking to perfection, it is accepted that some people will not have the capability to have as much self-control as others. All, as Stoics, will try to maintain as good a control over their mind and their actions as is possible given their circumstance, while striving, through ongoing training and exercises, to achieve their 'personal best' in their chosen discipline – and that discipline is that of being a good and skilful actor on the play of life.

Much of being of sound mind involves coming to terms with matters that are external to our 'reasoning faculty'. So we need to establish what the 'reasoning faculty' is when it comes to the Stoic monistic view that mind and body are one.

While according to the Stoic rationale our individual consciousness is a oneness that is an aspect of our physical being, it is also to be seen that we can categorise various aspects of the output of our mind while recognising that all aspects operate through their common use of our brain and our nervous system. However, unlike with bodily organs etcetera, there is no definitive boundary between different aspects of the workings of our minds.

There are physical aspects of our brains that appear to be involved in certain physical aspects of our body and thinking processes, however when it comes to the making of choices as a result of the 'feeling' aspects of the mind and the 'reasoning' aspects of the mind there is no real distinction in that in both cases it is our whole self that is making judgements and choices that manifest as action.

As such, this 'reasoning faculty' is in reality a Stoic visualisation that is used as a means to concentrate our minds whereby we ensure that the reasoning and feeling aspects of our consciousness are in harmony and that our emotions do not run away with us. We could just as easily call it our 'Jiminy Cricket' or our 'moral conscience'.

We visualise what it would be like to view 'from afar' how we act within the play of life and what such a dispassionate 'observer' would make of seeing any situation as it really is and what would such an 'observer' judge would be the best way for us to live life. Of course such an 'observer' ought not to 'feel' our emotions so they are not 'bribed' by such, albeit they may observe them. And so much of the Stoic training is aimed at distancing the 'reasoning faculty' from the effects of the emotions, and more especially at using its 'distancing skills' to try to prevent any 'feeling' from developing into a perturbation. We create an imagined duality of mind in order to ensure that the mind works as a harmonious whole, despite the rationale of the Stoic beliefs telling us that our nature is monistic.

While the ability to reason is seen in Stoicism as being what is added to the hierarchy of being – namely 'material' as in all physical 'things', 'animate' as in all living states, 'independently mobile' as in all animal life, 'reasoning' as in all rational beings – living in

accord with Nature requires that we acknowledge that our nature extends across all four qualities of being. So when we look to live in accord with our own nature as human animals, as well as to live in accord with Nature as a whole, we are recognising ourselves as human beings that are made out of the matter that is the body of the Cosmos, beings that have the quality of animate life and beings with an element of freedom of movement as well as the ability to reason.

As such the Stoic training is not aimed at just training our reasoning faculty, but at training us to live as physical living independently mobile rational animals that are manifested out of the body of God. We train both body and mind in that they are one.

Which is why learning to keep emotions answerable to the 'ruling faculty' involves both clearing our minds of unsound opinions through rational examination of such opinions, and also habituating our bodies through being aware as to how our body 'exhibits' our emotions through our body language.

For instance, in situations where we are faced with a person who is showing all the signs of being physically threatened we can add to the problem in that our bodies are liable to mirror their aggression by showing the tenseness of readying itself for flight or fight and such 'exhibition of our emotions' can add to an already tense situation and so bring on an attack that may have been otherwise avoided.

By consciously relaxing one's facial muscles, shoulders and arms and by ensuring that one is not clenching one's fists and the arms are hanging loosely by one's side and that one talks in a calm voice, one presents a non-threatening stance that also says that you are not intending to attack. Concentration on what the body is manifesting helps one to keep calm whereby one is able to ensure that one is thinking rationally and so will be truly ready to act as necessary. Such conscious relaxation of the body language does not reduce one's readiness for action if reason says such is needed. However, often the lack of a threatening response will take the wind out of the other person's sails and they too will unconsciously start to mirror your stance and so will become calmer in themselves.

Some believe that at times deliberate aggressive body language may be appropriate – even Seneca hints at such in his views on feigning anger – but here care is needed as the deliberate use of threatening body language will probably heighten one's own inner emotions to whereby the reasoning faculty loses control while stirring up emotions in anyone coming into range of such aggression. This aspect of our nature, whereby emotions are made manifest through body language and body language can affect emotional states, is something that the Stoic needs to be well aware of.

Instead of aggression, the Stoic adds an air of determination to their air of calm as and when necessary, as is exemplified in the following report regards Socrates' use of body language:

"But to see Socrates when our army was defeated and scattered in flight at [Delium], was a spectacle worthy to behold. On that occasion I was among the cavalry, and he

was on foot, heavily armed. After the total rout of our troops he and Laches retreated together; I came upon them by chance, and seeing them, bade them be of good cheer, for that I would not leave them. As I was on horseback, and therefore less occupied by a regard of my own situation, I could better observe that at Potidaea the beautiful spectacle exhibited by Socrates on this emergency. How superior he was to Laches in presence of mind and courage! Your representation of him on stage, O Aristophanes, was not wholly unlike his real self on this occasion, for he walked and darted his regard around with a majestic composure, looking tranquilly both on his friends and enemies; so that it was obvious to everyone, even from afar, that whoever should venture to attack him would encounter a desperate resistance. He and his companion thus departed in safety; for those who are scattered in flight are pursued and killed, while men hesitate to touch those who exhibit such countenance as that of Socrates even in defeat. [Alcibiades speaking in Plato's 'The Banquet' from Socrates, A source book compiled by John Ferguson, 1970 The Open University Press]

Socrates shows a determined stance, but does not invite attack by '*looking tranquilly both on his friends and enemies.*'

All of which is why the Stoic aim of maintaining calm inner feelings while presenting a calm exterior through the rule of the 'reasoning faculty' is sound. And what applies to threatening situations can be of equal benefit in all situations. So part of the Stoic training is to habituate both calm emotions and an outwardly calm physical appearance in all situations whereby the emotions are appropriate and proportionate to the facts of the situation.

In training our 'observer', our reasoning faculty, we learn through the Stoic rationale that its only concern should be to make judgements that will lead to appropriate actions that would be those of a person of good character whose only real interest is to be of benefit to the Whole.

To this end no 'external' has any value to it. The 'reasoning faculty' will not be bribed by some perceived benefit or attachment or aversion. It will judge only as to what is the reality of any given situation. For instance, it will look to the nature of our love for our family members only to consider as to if such love is appropriate and proportionate for a person whose has a role in life to care for their family. From such a stance it will bring its influence to bear by encouraging what is appropriate and/or by trying to reign back on what is inappropriate to a life of good.

And how does it make such dispassionate judgements?

By ensuring that the impressions one is getting from one's senses are as accurate an impression as is possible of the reality of what is happening in our lives. This way our 'reasoning faculty' will be able to see things as they really are, free from any influence that our emotions may have. As such, by way of example, a spouse or a child is viewed by the reasoning faculty as being a mortal human being that can be physically harmed or taken

away from us at any time, while at the same time the individual will still have the natural affections that any healthy human animal will have for their family members.

The view of the visualised 'reasoning faculty' is not in conflict with the view of the 'whole person'. All that happens is that the 'reasoning faculty' offers an alternative view of the same situation whereby we are able to arrive at a sounder understanding of any situation.

So we train to examine the 'naked facts' behind what our senses are telling us and also to examine what our 'opinions' are telling us, especially regards emotionally induced 'opinions'.

In that our true 'reasoning faculty' is the totality of the 'spark of God' that is an aspect of our nature as animals manifested out of the body of the Cosmos, our 'reasoning faculty' is able to rise above many of our excitements, fears or upsets and so continue to help to guide us even in the worst of times. For instance, it can see to it that any natural feeling of loss does not overcome us whereby we cease to be of any benefit to the rest of society.

As Seneca tells us, as Stoics we will feel our hurts but we will overcome or bear them without getting to the stage of suffering perturbations. And we are more likely to overcome or bear them if we keep them in proportion by ensuring that they are appropriate to what it is that is causing the triggering of our feelings. And to do this we look at life from many viewpoints – that of the impressions we receive, that of our instincts and that of our ability to think rationally etcetera. And to help us in all of this we have our framework of beliefs about the nature of Existence that helps to ground our thoughts and actions in the reality of what is.

One of the main Stoic training matters in maintaining a sound mind is that of understanding how to value external things, including people, when it comes to making appropriate choices, especially regards our ongoing choice as Stoics regards being 'good'.

There is a trend to deny that, in Stoicism, anything has any value other than that which maintains the 'goodness' of our 'reasoning faculty'. Yet this is to ignore the Stoic rationale that tells us that God manifests all that there is and that therefore we ought to value all that God has seen fit to present us with through the evolution of the Cosmos. 'What is' is as God wills it to be, so we ought to value 'the gifts of Fortune' - as appropriate.

Restricting value to the 'reasoning faculty' also ignores the Stoic rationale that tells us that our 'reasoning faculty' is one with our physical body whereby we need to maintain the 'goodness' of all '*that is of our doing,*' which includes our interaction with 'externals'. And to choose how we interact with 'externals' we need some means of valuing their implications when they impinge on our lives, both regards temptations and regards usefulness.

I need a new car. I am eyeing up a fancy red open top sports car.

Does it have any value regards my being a person of good character. No, but it may make others question my sanity in wanting such a car at my age.

Does it have any value regards fulfilling my needs as governed by my roles in life? Will it help me to fulfil my duties any better than a more sedate sensible and practical car? Probably not. In fact a more practical car would probably be better in many respects, especially when it suddenly pours with rain.

Is there any reason why I ought to buy the sports car? Maybe I can afford it and I am buying the car as an alternative to my practical car and there is no reason why I should not indulge myself – after all, in buying the car I am providing employment for others and I will be taking advantage of ‘the gifts of fortune’.

Is there any reason why I should not buy the car? I cannot afford it and it will affect my ability to fulfil my roles in life, whereby those around me may suffer. And bearing this last point in mind, if I still buy the car it will be because I have placed a ‘value’ on it that it does not deserve. I will be allowing my emotions to rule my head and this will lead to perturbations, if not immediately, sometime in the future – when, as they say, the chickens will come home to roost. Eventually a solely selfish irrational emotional choice will lead to sorrow.

This is how a Stoic views matters – from many angles, whereby any choice is based on the ratio of importance of many factors.

We are not just looking for how to be ‘good’, but also as to how to live well in this life we have been gifted.

Above all else, the only thing of real value to the ‘ruling faculty’ is making choices that will lead to the Stoic being ‘good’ and so aligning their will with the will of God. However we are not just our ‘ruling faculty’. We are rational social animals and as Stoics we aim to live as such. So there is much that is of ‘value’ when it comes to our being able to fulfil our roles in life. And circumstance will dictate what value we place on such ‘externals’.

Traditionally talking of all ‘externals’ as being ‘indifferents’ and that such ‘indifferents’ are ‘preferred’ or ‘dispreferred’ can be confusing, especially if you tell a would-be-Stoic that their children are ‘indifferents’ - albeit that if a child is playing up it might be comforting to think of them as such.

It is better to consider that Stoicism offers two value systems. The first is that the ‘reasoning faculty’ needs to be as the dispassionate judge, whereby all that it is considering is seen rationally and free of being in the thrall of the emotions. As a judge may look to the justifiability and even the desirability of some ‘external’, including emotions, when making a judgement, they will be judging as to if and to what extent the involvement of the externals and the emotion is desirable as matters move on. However they will not be swayed by any forceful argument presented by the emotions. The judgement will be about the value of the

emotions and externals and will not be a judgement made by the emotions. So the only thing of value to the 'judge' is maintaining a sound mind and having to hand as many examined 'facts' as are possible in order to make sound choices.

Part of making such rational choices will be the ability to judge the relative value of varying factors. And here we have the Stoic value system regards 'externals'.

Now some of the classic examples of looking to the value of 'externals' is health, wealth and reputation. It is clear that all of these are of negative value if such are being used to further the cause of 'bad' people. But for the Stoic, in that we are aiming to be 'good', in almost all circumstance degrees of health, wealth and reputation will be of some value and as such appropriate effort needs to be expended to try to maintain them.

A carpenter will place a value on their tools in that they are necessary for them to fulfil their role as a carpenter. They will place an even greater value on good quality tools that enable them to be at their best. However if a Stoic carpenter lost all of their tools and could not replace them they would simply see that their role as a carpenter had been taken away from them – temporarily or permanently.

In like manner, 'externals' have a positive or negative value to us regards whether they help us to serve the greater good or not. But at the same time, even that which obstructs our aims is to be valued as a God given manifestation, for all is a part of the Cosmos that is manifested in accord with the will of God.

Here we step over into the allied Stoic teachings about acceptance and accepting what is. We also step over into the Stoic teachings about the acceptance of the temporary nature of all 'externals' – even that of our spouses and children in that all humans are mortal.

By seeing and internalising the overarching totally interlinked nature of the Stoic view of life we gradually arrive at the point whereby all falls into place and we are able to mostly live as a 'good' person trying to align their will with the will of God. Occasionally emotions will overpower us. Our training will help keep such incidents to a minimum while also ensuring that we regain control as quickly as possible. For instance, we may feel the loss of a loved one, but our training will tell us that we have not lost the time we did have with them and that we should be grateful for such and that we should move on in our journey just as they have moved on in their journey. And, following the Stoic rationale, if the moving on relates to their death, they will have been reabsorbed into the body of God and so they are still with us.

All such ideas help to lessen any sense of loss and so helps to prevent such becoming a perturbation, as also seeing matters from the varying Stoic viewpoints helps us to address all sorts of issues.

As Stoics we can experience all sorts of emotions – however our training ensures, for the most part, that we do not become our emotions.

By protecting our ability to think rationally, by keeping our emotions under control through training, we are better placed to live a life of 'good'. At the same time, by giving voice to our appropriate and proportionate emotions, we ensure that we do not allow our nature as social animals to be perverted into a cold uncaring way of living as is often depicted as being the nature of certain classes of stern and unbending Victorians - those who have given Stoicism a bad name by their unwise rejection of all emotions.