

Can the Modern Stoic Grieve? Comments on Massimo Pigliucci's "Toward the Fifth Stoa: The Return of Virtue Ethics"¹

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I appreciate Massimo's remarkable efforts on behalf of Stoicism. I have long been impressed by his ability to communicate philosophy to the layman while remaining accurate in the technical details. That is a rare achievement. I am equally intrigued by his pursuit of a modernized Stoicism that will work within both secular and theological frameworks.

In this comment, I will raise what I believe is the major impediment to modern Stoicism as well as propose a possible way forward. Specifically, I am interested in what the Stoics say about externals, or preferred indifferents, and our feelings about them. According to the Stoics, only virtue is good (*agathos*), only virtue is up to us, and only virtue should be desired. By contrast, externals have mere "worth" (*axia*), but they are not up to us and are not to be desired; they are to be "selected."²

The Stoics have two main arguments for holding such a view. First, they rely on a theological argument where God has logically, and thus providentially, arranged the world. If you desire what God has put outside of your control (e.g., you desire to live until you are 200 years old), you are being impious. You are acting, as Epictetus says, ignorantly and like a stranger in the universe.³ This theological argument doubles as an ethical argument.

¹ Massimo Pigliucci, "Toward the Fifth Stoa: The Return of Virtue Ethics," *Reason Papers* 40, no. 1 (Summer 2018), pp. 14-30.

² See A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), sec. 58.

³ Epictetus, *Discourses*, 3.24.21.

However, since Massimo has indicated that he seeks a Stoicism which accommodates both theism and atheism, we should set aside this first argument. This brings us to the second argument, one that appeals to tranquility. The basic idea, again expressed by Epictetus, is that we should only want what actually happens so that our desire will never be frustrated. By confining ourselves only to our volition, we will be tranquil.⁴

Perhaps the Stoics are right in this second argument. If I regard no external as a good, I could never feel grief about its loss. If I regard other people as “little corpses” (using Epictetus’s provocative phrase),⁵ I will not be grieved at their death. And yet, by the same token, we equally give up being *eudaimôn* (i.e., in a state of well-being) about the birth of a child or about any of the joyous elements of life, from birthdays to weddings, from falling in love to experiencing a transformational piece of art. We have purchased our tranquility at the cost of becoming an “ethical sociopath.”⁶

Moreover, and here is the point I want to press, the tranquility argument entails an unwarranted assumption: emotional distress is necessarily irrational. I can easily grant that emotional upset is unpleasant, but is its experience proof of irrationality, proof that we are acting contrary to nature (small “n”)? Although the Stoics wish to say, “Yes,” their assumption about distress is not supportable from the available (non-theological) Stoic premises. The Stoics rightfully distinguish between what is and is not up to us. This distinction is the proper grounds for praise and blame; we should praise or blame only actions that are up to each person. In turn, this distinction is a fitting basis for acceptance; we should accept the things we cannot change (here borrowing from Reinhold Niebuhr’s Serenity Prayer). I also think that the Stoics are right to infer that our beliefs about good and bad are up to us; we have choices about our values. Insofar as our choices are reasonable or unreasonable, we should be praised or blamed for the goods that we choose.

⁴ Ibid., 1.27.10; cf. 1.17.23-28, 2.17.31, and 3.2.2-3.

⁵ Epictetus, *Discourses*, frag. 26, originally reported by Marcus Aurelius in *Meditations* IV.41. Compare also Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, 3 and 11.

⁶ This phrase is not my own, but I have long lost track of where I acquired it.

So far, so good. However, from these available premises, does it follow that it is unreasonable to consider something a good, even if it is partially or entirely out of my control? Does it follow that I am unreasonable to be distressed when I lose such a good? I answer, “No,” on both counts. Once we have set aside Stoic theology, we can no longer appeal to God in order to assert that it is wrong to value an external as a good or that it is wrong to feel upset about the loss of an external.

Once we let go of the Stoic God, as it were, ancient virtue ethics has only one measure for good and bad, right and wrong: *eudaimonia* (which I will translate as “well-being”). When we make well-being our standard, it quickly becomes evident that we ought to reckon certain externals as necessary goods to our *eudaimonia*. Aristotle, I think, makes this most clear when it comes to *philia* (friendship). If, as he argues in *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.9, that *philia* is necessary for *eudaimonia*, then *philia* is a good.

It is here, I think, that the Stoics go beyond the available premises when they try to section off friends as a preferred indifferent. My brother has worth (*axia*), but, as Epictetus says, he is not a good (*agathos*).⁷ This claim appears to have force to students of Stoicism because friendship is not up to us, whereas virtue (the good) is up to us. And yet, I submit, none of the foregoing premises (including my added point about *eudaimonia* as the measure of good and bad) permits us to equate what we can control with the elements of *eudaimonia*.

To make my point clear, let us take up the analogy of a healthy body. Health has components that are up to us and components that are not up to us. I have choice over bodily exercise as well as what I consume. I can certainly be praised or blamed for these choices; if I eat pizza for the third dinner in a row, I am rightfully blamed. By contrast, if I am eating food I thought was better for me (e.g., using margarine instead of butter—as many of us did in the 1980s), I should not be blamed. Nevertheless, in both cases, I have harmed my bodily health.

On the strength of this analogy, we should recognize that *eudaimonia* has components that are up to us and components that are not up to us. I have the choice, for example, to pursue friendships or to isolate myself. Insofar as I understand the positive role that *philia* plays in human well-being, I can be praised or blamed for the actions that I take. And yet, part of the drama of living arises from the fact that the

⁷ Epictetus, *Discourses*, 3.3.5-10.

good of *philia* can be lost through no fault of our own and our well-being can likewise be harmed.

In this way, when it comes to health and *eudaimonia*, I think the proper distinction a modern Stoic should draw is between (a) acceptance and (b) loving, desiring, liking, and approving. (The Stoic term “preferred” is far too mild for what I am expressing here.) We do, I suggest, have control over what we accept or reject; it is, in Stoic parlance, up to us. However, just because we can change what we like or dislike by means of our changing value judgments, this does not mean that we should so change it. I cannot control the life or death of a loved one, but that does not mean I should reject them as a good.

Moreover, once we recognize the fact that we rightfully think that many things are good even though we cannot directly control them, we have grounds to re-admit many of the emotions rejected by the Stoics as so-called passions. A passion, according to the Stoics, is a movement of the soul contrary to reason.⁸ Since I have cited friendship as my example of a reasonable feeling and an external good, I will briefly take up grief as a natural, reasonable emotion in response to the death of a loved one.

In fact, from a naturalistic perspective, grief turns out to be a *rational* coping mechanism for moving from a state of profound horror about someone’s death to a state of acceptance.⁹ This claim is my answer to Shantideva’s question about what use there is in being glum. Using my health analogy, we might rephrase his question as: What use is there in the body being bruised? Quite a lot, actually; bruising is how the body marshals resources to repair an injury. Just as the body forms sensitive bruises as part of its healing process, so too the psyche forms emotional bruises (e.g., grief) as a part of its own healing process. Of course, we should not approve of anyone seeking to be bruised, but we should certainly accept bruising as a normal part of life. Well-being does not mean living in a physical bubble any more than it means living in a spiritual one.

Granted, recovery from an emotional bruise can be challenging precisely because some elements are up to us; therein, we can go awry. In the case of a bodily bruise, we merely need to be extra cautious so

⁸ See Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, sec. 65.

⁹ By contrast, the Stoics are emphatic that grief is not one of the so-called good emotions (*eupatheia*). See Tad Brennan, *The Stoic Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 110.

as to allow the body its own resources to recover. It turns out, though, that grief does not necessarily resolve on its own. It does not, as the famous Elisabeth Kubler-Ross model has it, operate in stages (shock, denial, anger, sadness, acceptance).¹⁰ Instead, as the research of William Worden has shown, grieving takes conscious work.¹¹ It has its own tasks. As Worden sees it, grieving is a process in which we work toward total acceptance. It begins with accepting the reality of the loss itself (which can itself take a long time) and it entails feeling the pain in all of its force. From there, the work moves toward reconfiguring one's life around the absence and ends with moving on while still accepting a connection to the deceased.

Furthermore, when that work is not done, the grief becomes stuck or frozen. It is this latter event which must be avoided rather than avoiding grief itself. Indeed, it is often the avoidance of grief or the denial of grief which freezes it and makes it far more drawn out. Compare this to jogging on a bruised foot. If a jogger refuses to accept that she has been injured, she will continue to run and exacerbate her injury. In the same way, if we refuse to accept our grief, we will continue to behave as normal and exacerbate our emotional pain. Instead, just as the jogger should accept her injury and act accordingly, so we should accept our grief and act accordingly. It is natural, then, that we grieve as part of the process of reaching equanimity about the death of a beloved. Grieving is a part of a *eudaimôn* life.

Here, then, is how I could see being a modern Stoic about external goods as well as about a wide variety of difficult emotions. We modernize Stoicism by taking the courageous way in which the ancient Stoics approached physical pain and apply that courage to the way in which we approach affective pain. When it comes to physical pain, the Stoics are not mad men; they do not hold their hand over a fire just to prove that they can take it. They avoid pain where reasonably possible. However, when pain cannot virtuously and reasonably be avoided, they accept it and even rise to meet it. Compare Hercules and the Nemean lion; he could have avoided that pain by running away. At the same time, as Epictetus points out, Hercules did not “seek to bring a lion into his own country from somewhere or

¹⁰ Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1969).

¹¹ J. William Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 4th ed. (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2008).

other,” for that would have been “folly and madness.”¹² Nevertheless, since the lion did exist, Hercules wrestled with the lion; the beast “revealed and exercised our Hercules.”¹³

So, too, I suggest, a modern Stoic does not seek emotional pain nor does she flee it when it becomes reasonably inevitable. Likewise, she does not struggle against the prospect of pain by eliminating from her mind a belief in the value of certain externals. With regard to, say, a dying loved one, she does not short-circuit her grief by convincing herself that the loved one is not a good. Rather, a modern Stoic should bravely accept the pain that comes from losing valued externals. For, paradoxically, it is only by courageously accepting the pains of life that we can also experience the abiding *eudaimonia* that life has to offer.

¹² Epictetus, *Discourses*, 1.6.35-36.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1.6.36.

