

## Stoicism, Friendship, and Grief: A Response to Johnson

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Brian Johnson, in his commentary on my effort to update Stoicism,<sup>1</sup> provides a cogent critique of ancient Stoicism and a reasonable suggestion for my attempt to define modern Stoicism. I do not (much) disagree with him in terms of his conclusions, which he applies to the specific cases of friendship and grief, but which also hold for all of the Stoic “preferred indifferents.” I do, however, want to push back on two points: (1) the path he takes to arrive at those conclusions, and (2) the notion that all ancient Stoics would have proposed the same approach to friendship and grief that Epictetus takes.

To begin with, Johnson points out that, for the Stoics, only virtue is good (*agathos*), while everything else is either worthy (*axia*) of choice or to be rejected.<sup>2</sup> Hence the famous Stoic distinction between virtue, on the one hand, and preferred and dispreferred “indifferents” (i.e., everything else), on the other hand. However jarring the word “indifferent” may sound to modern ears, we need to be clear about what it means on the Stoic view. Things like wealth, health, education, friendship, love, and so forth are indifferents in the specific sense that they do not make us morally better or worse persons.

The Stoic project is, fundamentally, one of moral self-improvement. This can be seen, for instance, in Epictetus: “What decides whether a sum of money is good? The money is not going to tell you; it must be the faculty that makes use of such impressions—reason” (*Discourses* I, 1.5). and also: “The following are non-sequiturs: ‘I am richer, therefore superior to you’; or ‘I am a better

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Johnson, “Can the Modern Stoic Grieve? Comments on Massimo Pigliucci’s ‘Toward the Fifth Stoa: The Return of Virtue Ethics,’” *Reason Papers* 40, no. 1 (Summer 2018), pp. 31-36.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

speaker, therefore a better person, than you” (*Enchiridion* 44). The fact that one is wealthy, healthy, educated, has friends, is in love, etc. makes absolutely no difference to one’s moral character and worth. Indeed, one may lack all of those things and yet be a morally good person. It all depends on how one makes use of those externals. That, in fact, is what virtue is: the propensity to make good use of the indifferents.

Another way of looking at what the Stoics are saying, updated with twenty-first century concepts, is through the lens of “lexicographic preferences” in economics.<sup>3</sup> Contrary to a key assumption of classical economics, people do not regard everything as fungible, that is, valued (and hence potentially traded) according to a standard universal currency. Instead, we put things into different buckets, or sets, and regard things as fungible within but not across buckets. Moreover, the sets are ordered by decreasing importance, with the A-set being the most valuable, the B-set less so, and so forth. For instance, I love my daughter, and she is in my A-bucket. I also happen to like orange Lamborghini sports cars, but they are in my B-bucket. While I would be willing to trade quite a bit of money (also a commodity situated in the B-bucket), if I had it, for a Lamborghini, I would never consider trading my daughter. The point is that, for the Stoics, virtue is in the A-set and indifferents are in the B-set. They also recognized a C-set: things that are not even characterized by axial value, and thus completely neutral, such as one’s choice of a flavor of ice cream.

I turn to Johnson’s next point, which is that the Stoics risk becoming “ethical sociopaths” by making tranquility the centerpiece of their quest for *eudaimonia*.<sup>4</sup> I will demonstrate below that the Stoics did not aim at a condition of ethical sociopathy, but the first order of business is to dissect the concept of *eudaimonia* itself.

Johnson deploys the standard, Aristotle-friendly, translation of *eudaimonia* as “flourishing.” While this is far better than the once common “happiness”—a hopelessly vague and confused concept—it begs the question not just against the Stoics, but also against most other Hellenistic schools outside of the Peripatetics. John-Stewart Gordon provides a helpful classification of the major Greco-Roman schools of

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<sup>3</sup> Amartya K. Sen, *Collective Choice and Social Welfare* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 34-35.

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, “Can the Modern Stoic Grieve?” p. 32.

ethical philosophy, distinguishing them precisely on the basis of how they implicitly or explicitly regarded *eudaimonia*.<sup>5</sup>

My take is that it is untenable that the Stoics equated *eudaimonia* with flourishing, because otherwise it is difficult to make sense of their famous notion that the Sage is “happy” even on the rack (i.e., while being tortured).<sup>6</sup> If by flourishing we mean anything like Aristotle did—that is, a combination of virtue and externals such as health, wealth, and so forth—then the Sage on the rack cannot possibly be flourishing. But his life may still be worth living, because he is a moral agent who is suffering, presumably, for a good cause. Take, for instance, Nelson Mandela, who was, as it turns out, influenced by Stoic writer Marcus Aurelius.<sup>7</sup> Famously, Mandela spent eighteen years on Robben Island as punishment for speaking out against South Africa’s Apartheid government. The story turned out well, in the end, and Mandela’s life would probably still count as one of flourishing by Aristotle’s standards. But let’s imagine a possible world in which Mandela died on Robben Island due to torture and other abuses received in prison. For the Aristotelian, he was not *eudaimon*, but for the Stoic he most certainly was. That, I believe, is the power of Stoic philosophy: a *eudaimonic* life understood as a moral life worth living is within the power of everyone, regardless of external circumstances and no matter how extreme they might be.

Returning to the issue of tranquility and the danger of “ethical sociopathy,” it should be pointed out that the goal of a Stoic life is not tranquility (*ataraxia*), nor is it the avoidance of disturbance induced by the “passions” (negative emotions), that is, *apatheia*. Those are only (welcome) byproducts of the actual goal. As Marcus Aurelius explains, to live a virtuous life in the service of the human cosmopolis, “do what is necessary, and whatever the reason of a social animal naturally requires, and as it requires” (*Meditations* IV.24).

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<sup>5</sup> John-Stewart Gordon, “Modern Morality and Ancient Ethics,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed online at: <https://www.iep.utm.edu/anci-mod/>.

<sup>6</sup> See Rene Brouwer, *The Stoic Sage: The Early Stoics on Wisdom, Sagehood, and Socrates* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, “Beyond Anger,” *Aeon*, accessed online at: <https://aeon.co/essays/there-s-no-emotion-we-ought-to-think-harder-about-than-anger>.

I also reject the common misconception that the Stoic approach is antithetic to emotions. It is not. Rather, the Stoics sought to shift our emotional spectrum away from the negative emotions (the passions, *pathē*) and toward the positive ones (*eupatheiai*), which need to be cultivated. Therefore, much hinges on what counts as a negative or positive emotion.

Johnson focuses on two examples to make his point: a positive feeling, friendship, and a (supposedly) negative emotion, grief. Let us consider, beginning with friendship, how his argument stands against my interpretation of Stoicism.

As Johnson points out, Aristotle says that friendship (*philia*) is necessary for *eudaimonia* (*Nicomachean Ethics* IX.9). If by *eudaimonia* we mean flourishing, that is certainly the case. Perhaps surprisingly, then, it turns out that the Stoics also place a high value on friendship. According to Seneca: “If you consider any man a friend whom you do not trust as you trust yourself, you are mightily mistaken and you do not sufficiently understand what true friendship means” (*Letters* III.2). He also says: “Ponder for a long time whether you shall admit a given person to your friendship; but when you have decided to admit him, welcome him with all your heart and soul. Speak as boldly with him as with yourself” (*Letters* III.2). Here, Seneca uses (positive) emotional language, and also places a high value (axial as it may be) on friendship. However, he also spells out the difference between his view and the Peripatetic position: “The wise man is self-sufficient. Nevertheless, he desires friends, neighbors, and associates, no matter how much he is sufficient unto himself” (*Letters* IX.3). He continues: “In this sense the wise man is self-sufficient, that he can do without friends, not that he desires to do without them. When I say ‘can,’ I mean this: he endures the loss of a friend with equanimity” (*Letters* IX.5).

Notice the use of three crucial terms here: the wise person *desires* friends, but if she loses them, then she will *endure* the loss with *equanimity*. Seneca sounds very different from Epictetus. While the latter is direct and blunt, Seneca is nuanced and compassionate. This may have reflected differences in temperament, but also philosophical leanings. The ancient Stoics disagreed among themselves, not just with other schools, on a variety of matters. Epictetus was explicitly closer to what I would term the Cynical end of the Stoic spectrum, while Seneca at times shows contempt for the Cynics’ emphasis on minimalism. Compare Epictetus’s “On the Cynic Calling” (*Discourses* III.22) with Seneca: “Philosophy calls for plain living, but not for penance; and we

may perfectly well be plain and neat at the same time” (*Letters* V.5). Desiring friends, and yet being ready to endure their loss with equanimity, is what I suggest modern Stoics should aim for. As we have just seen, though, this isn’t far from what one of the most important Roman Stoics explicitly advocated two millennia ago.

What about “negative” emotions, such as grief? Johnson correctly points out that grief is a natural response to the loss of a loved one. There is plenty of empirical evidence that to suppress or ignore grief is not good for one’s emotional health, and therefore not rational—the standard by which the Stoics themselves sorted emotions into *pathē* and *eupatheiai*. However, did they really counsel to suppress grief? It sounds that way, if one reads one of Epictetus’s famous passages: “If you kiss your child or your wife, say to yourself that it is a human being that you’re kissing; and then, if one of them should die, you won’t be upset” (*Enchiridion* 3). There is no denying the harshness of this passage, but another one will help put it into perspective: “What harm is there in your saying beneath your breath as you’re kissing your child, ‘Tomorrow you’ll die’? Or similarly to your friend, ‘Tomorrow you’ll go abroad, or I will, and we’ll never see one another again’” (*Discourses* III.24.88).

Here, Epictetus suggests what modern Stoics call a *premeditatio malorum*, an exercise to remind ourselves of the possibility of bad outcomes in order mentally (and emotionally) to prepare ourselves. Setting aside the modern empirical evidence that this sort of negative visualization works,<sup>8</sup> we need to remember that in Epictetus’s time that kind of tragedy was the order of the day. Emperor Marcus Aurelius, the most powerful man in the Western world at the time, whose personal physician was Galen, lost the majority of his thirteen children before they reached adulthood. The ancients (and unfortunately a staggering portion of modern humanity) often had to deal with the death of their children or the departure of their friends (e.g., in exile, as happened to both Seneca and Epictetus). It’s no wonder that they emphasized blunting the trauma by preemptively reflecting on its likelihood.

Epictetus also wished his students not to be hypocritical, a view with which even modern sensibilities can readily relate: “When somebody’s wife or child dies, to a man we all routinely say, ‘Well,

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<sup>8</sup> Johanna S. Kaplan and David F. Tolin, “Exposure Therapy for Anxiety Disorders,” *Psychiatric Times*, September 6, 2011, accessed online at: [www.psychiatrytimes.com/anxiety/exposure-therapy-anxiety-disorders](http://www.psychiatrytimes.com/anxiety/exposure-therapy-anxiety-disorders).

that's part of life.' But if one of our own family is involved, then right away it's 'Poor, poor me!' We would do better to remember how we react when a similar loss afflicts others" (*Enchiridion* 26). Nevertheless, we may again be witnessing more an effect of Epictetus's own personality and Cynic leanings than something inherent in Stoic philosophy. The contrast here, again, is with Seneca: "Am I advising you to be hard-hearted, desiring you to keep your countenance unmoved at the very funeral ceremony, and not allowing your soul even to feel the pinch of pain? By no means. That would mean lack of feeling rather than virtue" (*Letters* XCIX.15).

Seneca wrote extensively about grief, particularly in two of his three letters of consolation, to Marcia (who had lost an adult son) and to Polybius (who had lost his brother). He says to Polybius:

I know, indeed, that there are some men, whose wisdom is of a harsh rather than a brave character, who say that the wise man never would mourn. It seems to me that they never can have been in the position of mourners, for otherwise their misfortune would have shaken all their haughty philosophy out of them, and, however much against their will, would have forced them to confess their sorrow. (*On Consolation* XVIII)

Seneca writes to Marcia not because she is in grief (which he takes to be a natural reaction to her loss), but because her grief has lasted years and is in danger of festering:

Three years have now passed, and there has been no lessening of that initial shock; your mourning renews and strengthens itself each day; through the passage of time it has established squatter's rights, and has reached the point where it thinks that it would be shameful to stop. Just as every kind of fault becomes deeply embedded unless it is stamped out while it is still growing, so these sad, wretched, self-destructive faults in the end feed on their own bitterness, and the unhappy mind finds a perverse pleasure in grief. (*On Consolation* VII)

Johnson is right when he says that overcoming grief

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.<sup>9</sup>

However, I seriously doubt that Seneca would have disagreed, and the letters to Marcia and Polybius lay out precisely this scenario.

Finally, Johnson is on target when he makes the comparison between physical and emotional pain. The Stoics, he observes, were not mad.<sup>10</sup> They didn't seek physical pain, nor did they think that their attitude could magically make it go away. The same goes for emotional pain. The issue is one of rational acceptance of the reality of things and of (virtuous) endurance of that reality when we are exposed to the hardship and tragedies of life. The Senecean approach to Stoicism, I maintain, is in line with Johnson's own suggestion of where modern Stoicism should aim. One should not suppress negative emotions or undervalue positive emotions, but rather, use reason as a guide to manage the former and cultivate the latter.

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<sup>9</sup> Johnson, "Can the Modern Stoic Grieve?" p. 35.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

