

**How effective is Stoicism as a form of psychotherapy?**

**Anthony James Collins**



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**Name:**

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“Of all existing things some are in our power, and others are not in our power. In our power are thought, impulse, will to get and will to avoid, and, in a word, everything which is our own doing.”

Epictetus, *Manual of Epictetus*

“Anyone who is not himself neutral towards pleasure and pain, or life and death, or reputation and disrepute, to which universal nature adopts a neutral attitude, commits a manifest impiety.”

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

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## **Introduction**

According to the World Health Organisation one in four people at some time in their lives will suffer from mental illness. Widely cited large-scale surveys in the United States such as the Epidemiological Catchment Area (ECA) survey and subsequent National Comorbidity Survey (NCS) confirm this. The NCS was replicated and updated between 2000 and 2003 and indicated that, of those groups of disorders assessed, nearly half of Americans (46.4%) reported meeting criteria at some point in their life for either a DSM-IV anxiety disorder (28.8%), mood disorder (20.8%), impulse-control disorder (24.8%) or substance use disorders (14.6%).<sup>1</sup> The growth of mental illness particularly in the West has been described by many psychiatrists as verging on an epidemic.

In the battle against mental illness conventional drug treatments are increasingly being seen as limited in their effectiveness. For example, a meta-analysis published in February 2008 combined 35 clinical trials of four antidepressants (fluoxetine (Prozac), paroxetine (Paxil), nefazodone (Serzone) and venlafaxine (Effexor). The authors concluded that "although the difference [between the placebo and antidepressants] easily attained statistical significance"<sup>2</sup>, it did not meet the criterion for clinical significance, as used by The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (UK), "for any but the most severely depressed patients." Consequently, the reliance upon drugs as a means of treatment for mental illness is now starting to wane and is being replaced by the desire to find different cognitive approaches.

Cognitive techniques from the Stoic school<sup>3</sup> of ancient philosophy, especially their teachings concerning the theory of emotion and action, presents a possible alternative to traditional drug treatment which seeks to work upon the soul of the

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<sup>1</sup> Kessler RC, Berglund P, Demler O, Jin R, Merikangas KR, Walters EE. (2005) Lifetime prevalence and age-of-onset distributions of DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication. *Arch Gen Psychiatry*. Jun;62(6):593-602.

<sup>2</sup> Kirsch I, Deacon BJ, Huedo-Medina TB, Scoboria A, Moore TJ, Johnson BT (February 2008). Initial Severity and Antidepressant Benefits: A Meta-Analysis of Data Submitted to the Food and Drug Administration

<sup>3</sup> Admittedly, Stoicism is not, and does not claim to be psychotherapy, it is a philosophical school first and foremost, but the methods the Stoics utilise for living are of great benefit to those with mental disorders and this is why we are exploring them.

patient, rather than simply offering a substance, with often dangerous side effects, to adjust chemical imbalances within the brain. In this sense, a Stoic approach professes to be a far deeper, longer lasting and crucially self-sustaining treatment, i.e. in theory at least, once the patient is trained in Stoic philosophy they will be able to avoid particular mental states without recourse to others counseling or harmful drugs.

Admittedly, modern psychotherapy professes to equip patients with a similar ability, but achieves this via a more direct, perhaps more superficial route; modern psychotherapy is more patient, or illness focused. Therefore, therapy sessions generally begin by asking the person what they have difficulty with, and how they are feeling, and then goes on to try and find the cause of this feeling, often going back to the patients' formative years in an attempt to diagnose a particular condition and root this problem out.

Stoicism, by contrast, ignores the individuals' particular circumstances<sup>4</sup> by focusing them away from the problem or illness and urging them to adopt a rationalist perspective on their lives, not being caught up by life's trials and tribulations but assuming a perspective beyond the one they were born with. This stems from the view the Stoics have that the universe is inherently rational and ordered, and that the human soul as a part of the universe, is also inherently rational. Therefore, Stoics urge that we meet each difficulty in life with rationality, and argue that all difficulties can be overcome with this approach. In short, whatever the patient has been through in their life can be remedied by the Stoic perspective; by seeing their lives as forming a part of a whole in the natural ordering of the universe and consequently their suffering as a natural and inevitable part of being human and therefore not an evil.

Hence, the desire in traditional approaches to mental illness, particularly in the west, to diagnose specific conditions and to give patients labels, at least from the Stoic perspective, should be avoided, and viewed as counterproductive because it

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<sup>4</sup> Illness of all kinds for Stoics does not make one unique, quite the opposite; it shows that one is a typical member of the cosmos, no more unhealthy than any other, simply going through the natural cycle that all parts of a whole will go through. Where as Western medicine seems replete with stark distinctions between the healthy and the unhealthy, the doctor and the patient, the sane and the insane, Stoicism is some what beyond such crass distinctions, seeing all illness, if incurred during the natural functioning of the person as not unhealthy, unnatural nor bad.

takes the patients gaze away from the cosmos and onto themselves and their illness which often perpetuates the problem.

In order to explore the Stoic approach to mental illness we must first discuss the foundations of Stoic thought which provide the basis for this. Therefore, in the first chapter we will look at the Stoic conception of the soul, the purpose of human life and the Stoic theory of value, action and emotion through a brief examination of Seneca. The second chapter will focus on one of the main causes of mental distress; anger, and the Stoic methods for its alleviation through a detailed examination of Epictetus', Seneca's and Marcus Aurelius's various approaches. The final chapter will be on the Stoic approaches to the relief and prevention of pain and in this we shall use both Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius.

My argument is that, whilst there may be a great deal which can be learnt from Stoicism for the treatment of mental illness, the ideal it presents; that of the wise man, is to a certain extent unattainable, at least for most. Also, perhaps Stoicism is slightly more realistic in its approach for anger as, even wise men still experience anger, than it is to pain, by claiming that not even in the moment does the wise man experience pain. There appear to be many cases which suggest otherwise, for example; unforeseen pain, such as painfully stubbing one's toe into a chair, or an unforeseen loss such as when one discovers a loved one has been brutally killed without reason. However, without going into too much detail here, it seems as with the Christian journey to becoming Christ-like, there is much of value which can be learnt on the path towards the Stoic ideal, regardless of whether the ideal can ever be fully realized. Due to this it would be an unacceptable omission if the ancient wisdom of the Stoic sages was not fully explored in our attempt to find a holistic approach to the current mental illness crisis.

## **Chapter One**

### **Emotions in the Stoic theory of action**

Stoicism professes to go deeper than conventional methods of psychotherapy by addressing the patients' soul, what then do Stoics believe is the nature of a soul? In contrast to the Platonic/Aristotelian view<sup>5</sup>; that the soul is a composite of both rational and irrational parts, the Stoics argue, like Socrates, that the human soul is completely, and only, rational and that emotional states should be viewed as distortions of the soul's natural healthy state. Furthermore, as humans our purpose is revealed through our nature as parts of a whole, and our individual purpose is therefore to be a part of the universe working together with the other parts. Consequently, agitated, emotional mental states, such as anger, which put us at odds with ourselves and others should be seen as detrimental to our purpose and therefore avoided at all costs. In order to avoid emotion, preferably before it arises, we must recognize that it contravenes our purpose in the universe.

For Stoics the primary reason why emotion arises is a misjudgment concerning our notions of good and bad. The Stoics believe that good and bad lies only within the region of our will, specifically our will to get and will to avoid, and that things external to our will, i.e. every thing else in the universe, e.g. our body, reputation, family, possessions etc. are indifferent.<sup>6</sup> As Epictetus puts it; "we must make the best of those things that are in our power, and take the rest as nature gives it."<sup>7</sup> However, there are two things which are not indifferent for Stoics, and this is virtue, which is deemed the only good, and vice, which for Stoics is the only bad in the universe.

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<sup>5</sup> See Plato's *Republic*, and Aristotle's, *Nicomachean Ethics*

<sup>6</sup> As Diogenes Laertius attests "The virtues – prudence, justice, courage, moderation and the rest – are good. The opposites of these – foolishness, injustice and the rest – are bad. Everything which neither does benefit nor harms is neither of these: for instance life, health, pleasure, beauty, strength, wealth, reputation, noble birth and their opposites, death, disease, pain, ugliness, weakness, poverty, low repute, ignoble birth and the like ... For these things are not good but indifferents of the species 'preferred'." Diogenes Laertius, 7.101-3, in A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge 1987) p 354

<sup>7</sup> Epictetus, *The Discourses and Manual*, trans. P. E. Matheson, Clarendon Press, ( Oxford 1916). p 45

Furthermore, the value of “anything in Stoicism is defined by reference to nature”<sup>8</sup>, so unless something is fulfilling our natural purpose it is deemed bad. For example, if we use our body to inflict indiscriminate harm upon the undeserving this is bad because it contravenes our purpose to serve one another and work together, or if we slander others with our words unnecessarily, this hurts others, thus going against humanity’s unified purpose. However, a Stoic is not therefore a pacifist but one who would willingly engage in warfare if it was in line with his nature and purpose. Equally, he may become embroiled in heated debates in government, but once again, only to the extent that this was consistent with the fulfillment of his nature and purpose to work together with others towards the shared universal purpose and the furtherment of the *logos* or rational principle innate in the minds of all humans.

But then what is the mind for Stoics? The closest Greek word for our conception of the mind that Stoics have is *psuche*, which was understood by Stoics as a ‘spirit’ which is distributed throughout all of our limbs and organs which gives us the capacity to behave on the basis of sensation (*aisthetike*) and impulse (*horme*).<sup>9</sup> From this we form impressions (*phantasia*) of the state of things or situations, and, as Diogenes Laertius records, for the Stoics

“... the impression arises first, and then thought, which has the power of utterance, and expresses in language what it experiences by the agency of the impression...Furthermore some impressions are rational and others non-rational.”<sup>10</sup>

The great skill which the Stoics therefore urge us to develop in order to meet all the difficulties life puts before us, is to judge our impressions correctly, whilst remembering the Stoic conception of value (see above). What does this mean in practice?

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<sup>8</sup> A. A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy, Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics*, Gerald Duckworth Ltd., (London 1974) p 189

<sup>9</sup> A. A. Long, “Stoic Psychology”, in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. K. Algra, J. Barnes, J. Mansfeld and M. Schofield, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge 1999) p 564

<sup>10</sup> A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge 1987) pp 236-7

Let us imagine that we are in possession of an expensive Swiss watch, one day we take the watch off whilst sleeping in a park on a warm day and lay it down beside us, after some time we awake and notice that the watch is missing. We immediately feel distressed and a pained look creases the brow and we sigh loudly. Why? Because we have the impressions that, whilst asleep, our precious possession has been stolen, and we make the step from the impression (*phantasia*) that this is bad, to our impulse to distress. For Stoics we have judged our impressions very poorly because it is not a bad thing (see value theory above) to have a possession, even a precious one, stolen from us, because crucially, this is something outside of the will and therefore neither good nor bad but indifferent, and not worthy of our distress. In order to prevent our anguish at the loss we need simply to judge our impression that something bad has befallen us for what it is, an irrational and potentially misleading impression which we have the ability to resist.

The mind has two further faculties; assent (*sunkatathesis*) and reason (*logos*) and reason is the determining faculty of the human *psuche* and the other faculties can become rational through its proper functioning.<sup>11</sup> The impulse changes and becomes the ‘rational impulse’ or ‘volition’,<sup>12</sup> and our impressions experienced through our sensory capacity and acted upon through our impulse become rational making them a thought, and the assents’ link to reason becomes evident through its capacity to endorse or reject propositions.<sup>13</sup> As Epictetus puts it; “attending to an impression signifies not simply your going along with it but focusing on it, interpreting it, asking what it tells one about objective reality but also about oneself.”<sup>14</sup> The function of assent is to evaluate impressions, to adjudicate on the truth-value of their propositional content to decide whether or not they represent something one has good reason to endorse as one’s judgment of the way things are.<sup>15</sup> The important point for Stoics and impressions, as we shall see in greater detail later, is that there is no impulse to action without assent to impression. Therefore, once we have conquered, or successfully judged our impressions, none of our actions will be out of line with our nature, or beyond our control. In short, for Stoics it is possible to regulate all behaviour appropriately through the correct judgment of impression.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p 574

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p 574

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p 574

<sup>14</sup> See Epictetus, *Discourses*, 1.1.7. 2.1.4, 4.6.34

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, pp 577-78

Emotions function in this scheme as a ‘species of impulse’ which, for Stoics, are irrational and contrary to our nature, as Zeno puts it, they are ‘excessive impulses’, that is, as action tendencies of a certain powerful kind.<sup>16</sup>

And Zeno held that emotions are not the judgments themselves, but the contractions and pourings and elevations and lowerings of the psyche that follow upon the judgments.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, emotion can also be false belief as it frequently gives us the impression that something indifferent is bad,<sup>18</sup> such as stubbing a toe. And emotional action is distinct from rational action through its excess and irrationality of impulse.<sup>19</sup> In short, emotion is an error or malfunction in reasoning, an unhealthy, unnatural or corrupted state of the rational soul, physically speaking, the emotion is an extreme expansion or contraction of the *pneuma*,<sup>20</sup> which is the substance that permeates all things and is identical to God. The crucial point for the Stoics, as Graver points out, is that it is possible to experience something that feels like delight, anger or fear but that is not one of those emotions because it does not meet the intentional criteria.<sup>21</sup> These should therefore be seen as impressions and not emotions and are therefore possible for us to resist. Furthermore, the overall purpose of our mind is to contribute to the rational life of the world<sup>22</sup> and this can only be achieved through accurately judging our impressions via the avoidance of emotion.

The Stoic goal is that we journey through life judging our impressions correctly, seeing that it is not bad if someone hits us, or has an affair with our wife, or steals from us, because these things are beyond the region of our will and therefore neither good nor bad, but indifferent. Our impressions of things, such as the

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<sup>16</sup> M. R. Graver, *Stoicism and Emotion*, University of Chicago Press, (Chicago and London 2007) p 28

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p 29

<sup>18</sup> A. A. Long, “*Stoic Psychology*”, in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. K. Algra, J. Barnes, J. Mansfeld and M. Schofield, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge 1999) p 580

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p 581

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p 583

<sup>21</sup> M. R. Graver, *Stoicism and Emotion*, University of Chicago Press, (Chicago and London 2007) p 34

<sup>22</sup> A. A. Long, “*Stoic Psychology*”, p 562

impression that it is bad to be violently attacked, or gossiped about by peers, must be removed because, as Margaret Graver puts it, “what matters about them is only how they are used, the adverbial aspect, as it were, of our engagement with them.”<sup>23</sup>

Seneca perhaps gives the most concise exposition of the Stoic theory of emotion: He uses the example of anger and argues that it arises due to an impression received of a wrong, and divides the process for anger into four parts; 1) realization, 2) indignation, 3) condemnation and 4) retribution.<sup>24</sup> Crucially for Seneca this does not occur without the mind’s approval. He urges us to see our reactions to things which might lead to anger as only preliminaries and not emotions themselves. For example; if tears fall down our face or we have a sudden glint in the eye or our knees tremble we are urged by Seneca to see this as what it is; only preliminaries, and not emotion at all. His definition of emotion is not the impression itself but the consent to be moved by the impression, or the surrender to the impression. For him, the anger out-leaps reason and drags it along.<sup>25</sup>

Emotions for Seneca can be broken down into three main parts; the first is the involuntary trembling, or glinting eyes, the second is the voluntary judgment that it is right to act, and the third is the reckless out of control moment where we want retribution regardless of the consequences. The first movement, he argues, cannot be eliminated but the second, voluntary part, can by decision.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, Stoics argue that there is only one thing in the universe which is truly within an individual’s control; his will. Everything else that many people cling so dearly to such as wealth, reputation, careers etc. we should surrender our concern for, recognizing that they are outside our will, and therefore beyond our control. The Stoics also urge that we should content ourselves in the knowledge that things external to our will, whilst being beyond our control, are controlled and predetermined by God, hence all that happens in the world is part of a natural ordering in which we must play our role. We are urged to realize that even though a moment may be painful or damaging to us in some way that it is necessary and inevitable, and therefore we must accept this without being distressed. What determines whether or

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<sup>23</sup> M. R. Graver, *Stoicism and Emotion*, pp 48-9

<sup>24</sup> Seneca, *Moral and Political Essays*, ed. and trans. John M. Cooper and J. F. Procope, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge 1995) p 43

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p 44

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p 45

not an action is good or bad is therefore not the act or thing itself, but the motivation of the agent, and in this virtue is deemed the only good. Hence, conventional notions of goods such as material wealth, beautiful wives, reputations etc. are rejected by Stoics as indifferent.

This idea is linked to the Stoic belief that human beings develop in their attractions from instinctive attraction to health, social status and their own preservation towards universal preservation. This process is referred to in Greek as *oikeiôsis*<sup>27</sup>, although the translation to English is difficult because it is not simply a word but a process, the closest word for this would be appropriation, it is the process by which we make the universe our home. It is based on the idea that from infancy we begin developing our faculty of self preservation, being concerned only with sustaining and preserving ourselves, to a point in adult life where this develops into the desire to preserve others as we recognize that we are interconnected and interdependent on all other people in the universe, and that other people are in our immediate sphere. The final stage of this process asks us to make the universe our home and see ourselves as a part of this whole through non-attachment to self. This final stage of the Stoic perspective can be achieved through the pursuit of the highest virtue which is wisdom, and to live a life of selflessness seeing all around you as a part of yourself and therefore seeking to preserve these parts is the highest state of being. At this point we are the Stoic wise man.

This is the end goal for our patient, but the Stoic method is not simply based upon theological beliefs about the cosmos and our role within it, but also eminently practical steps to achieving this non-attachment to self. For Stoics “every instance of emotion is in its very essence a judgment concerning some present or potential state of affairs.”<sup>28</sup> Stoics ask that we appreciate that what converts an impression into

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<sup>27</sup> For a particularly good exposition of this concept see Cicero, *On ends*, 3.62 – 8, in A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge 1987) p 348. Cicero describes one of the starting points for the development of the universal community of the human race (*oikeiosis*) as the love which parents feel for their children. Furthermore, we are much more closely bonded than other creatures through our desire to live in close proximity to one another in city states. He concludes by asserting that the wise man must see that man is created with a view to protecting and preserving his fellow man. See also, Anonymous commentary on Plato’s *Theaetetus*, 5.18-6.31 also in A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge 1987) p 350

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p 4

belief, which is termed “variously as ‘assent’ *sunkatathesis*, ‘judgment’ *krisis*, or ‘forming an opinion’ *doxazein*,”<sup>29</sup> is a voluntary phase which can be resisted. For example, if we find ourselves in a distressing situation we are to tell our selves that it is not as it seems, such as telling ourselves we are in a festival when surrounded by a mob on a hot day. Or when enduring toothache we should think about how much we enjoyed the cake we were eating yesterday to take the mind to a different state.

Or we could utilize the Socratic doctrine that no-one errs willingly: Socrates argues that every moral error involves a cognitive failure about the action or the principle that it violates, and cognitive errors negate or at least weaken responsibility for actions caused by those errors. Socrates generally assumes that actions taken in ignorance are involuntary, and that therefore the proper response to wrongdoing is not retribution, but education.<sup>30</sup> This might help us to see that those who do bad things to us do it through ignorance and therefore deserve our pity rather than anger. Stoics urge us to realize that though our fate is decided the mental state we are in as a result is not. For example, if we are wrongly imprisoned by a tyrant we should take comfort in the fact that even though our hands and legs are bound our mind is free and independent, because this part of us no one can change, it is ours and ours alone.<sup>31</sup> At all times we are urged by Stoics to surrender all that is not our own and through doing this we will find contentment.

However, the state of the wise man that we are urged to aspire towards should not be understood as an entirely unemotional state, but rather one in which our emotions are almost perfectly controlled. The wise man is not without emotion because he feels Seneca’s first, involuntary stages of emotion (tremblings, glint in the eye etc.) but not in the way that ordinary people do. He senses the involuntary first phase of emotion not in the obvious outward way that we might, but rather he senses some movement internally but it does not take on an outward expression.

So for example; at the sight of an angry mob baying for his blood the wise man’s knees do not tremble, neither do his eyes widen, nor his heart rate increase, but

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<sup>29</sup> M. R. Graver, *Stoicism and Emotion*, University of Chicago Press, (Chicago and London 2007) p 26

<sup>30</sup> See Plato’s *Apology*, specifically 25e-26a, and also the beginning of Plato’s *Meno*, 70a-74c

<sup>31</sup> Epictetus, *The Discourses and Manual*, trans. P. E. Matheson, Clarendon Press, (Oxford 1916)

instead he notices something deep within him which is like the flickering of a candle or the faintest breeze on a still day. The important point here is that the wise man is not devoid of emotion, he still has a function for anger, but unlike most people it is always of positive use, i.e. it alerts him to dangers, things to be avoided, anticipated or prepared for. For him it is not an irrational overwhelming and unthinking tirade but rather his mind is like a radar which registers anger as a blip or an anomaly in the expansive calm of his cognition. Like Socrates whose students could see a glimmer of anger in him when during lectures his voice became softer and his manner became calmer, they recognized this as his experience of anger. An anger which hardly needs any further training to reign in, but our concern is with those who are so consumed by anger that it affects their mental wellbeing, perhaps the Stoics can offer a solution to this problem for the less Socrates-like amongst us.

There is also a crucial distinction for the Stoic wise man concerning pain and anger. As we have seen, anger still has a counterpart (see above) in the wise man and serves in a positive way by alerting him to adverse circumstances, by contrast, our Stoic wise man experiences no sensations of pain at all, not even a flickering. He is, after the fullest of Stoic training, beyond the reach of all forms of distress in the moment, his only engagement with pain is the caution he takes at all times in order to avoid it in the future.<sup>32</sup> As Graver puts it “having perfect (Stoic) understanding entails that one regards as evil only those things that really are evil; that is integral evils such as personal failings, errors, and other events or situations whose causes lie within oneself.”<sup>33</sup> In order for one to accept that something is really evil, one would have to accept that one of our failings has been realized, however, our perfect wise man has none of these failings and therefore nothing could befall him which is evil. The actions of another could befall him, but this is not evil, as it is, as Epictetus constantly points out, beyond his will and therefore indifferent.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, the response of the Stoic wise man would be perhaps one of pre-emptive action to avoid the evil but not one of distress.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> M. R. Graver, *Stoicism and Emotion*, University of Chicago Press, (Chicago and London 2007) p 54

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p 55

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p 55

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p 55

In this chapter we have established the Stoic framework, the foundations of Stoic thought, their theories of mind, emotion, action and value, the nature of impressions and their important role in the Stoic technique, the doctrine of *oikeiosis* and the ideal of the Stoic wise man towards which our mental patient must aspire. Our task now is to go beyond Stoicism's theoretical foundations and see how it functions in practice, in the every day, and what we can glean from this for the treatment of the mentally ill.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Stoic Methods for Alleviating Anger**

In the last chapter we explored the foundations of the Stoics' thought. Now we can look at the practical steps to achieving this which rest upon these foundations for alleviating one of the greatest causes of mental distress; anger. We shall establish the Stoic superstructure for overcoming anger with Epictetus' *Discourses* as he gives the most developed Stoic theory of emotion, before seeing how the detailed practical steps of Seneca fit within this framework and finish with a slightly more popular and perhaps easier to grasp account from Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*.

## **Epictetus**

The difficulty with Epictetus' approach<sup>36</sup> is that by borrowing the Socratic paradox in order to give us a perspective upon why things which cause anger arise is that the method inherits all the flaws which the paradox itself is ridden with.<sup>37</sup> Specifically, the fact that someone does not err willingly when annoying us is not of primary importance at the moment of irritation, neither is it important whether he does this in full awareness of its disadvantages, simply because at the moment we are annoyed by someone his motivation could not be farthest from our thoughts.

Why is this? If we take the example of adultery; upon discovering our beloved has eloped with another man, the offence, or the blow, is not lessened, at least initially, by the knowledge that our partner, or her lover, or both, commit this act through ignorance or cool nonchalance. There is something in the immediacy of the annoyance which causes us to overlook the underlying reason behind something and we are instead consumed by the annoyance itself. Due to this the practicality of Epictetus' method can be questioned because it fails to address the reality of being consumed by anger, instead asking us to have a 'god-like' perspective on wrongdoing not being caught up in the moment and urging us to pity the wrong doer.

Admittedly, Epictetus produces a method which is intellectually satisfying, in the sense that in the calm of a reflective moment, or academic study, we can acknowledge that it is a noble means of alleviating anger. But in the frenzy of the moment, in which we are consumed by the event, he does not offer a solution but merely a pause for reflection, and an assertion that we appreciate that no one errs willingly.

By reflection Epictetus means that we delay our reaction to something, such as a supposed wrong or ill, and only after a time, (he doesn't specify how much), we should make our decision and act upon it. His implicit assumption is that we make better decisions after reflection than we do in the moment, but is that necessarily so? Is there not a danger that as we reflect our feeling about something will fade and therefore our insight into the situation may fade with it, of course here I am assuming

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<sup>36</sup> For a fuller narrative on Epictetus' approach to Anger in his *Discourses* see Appendix 1.

<sup>37</sup> Flaws too numerous to cover in a dissertation on Stoicism, for a good introduction to this see; A. E. Taylor, *Socrates*, Beacon, (Boston 1952) and T. Irwin, *Plato's Ethics*, Oxford University Press, (New York and Oxford 1995)

that emotion can give positive insight into certain situations. For Stoics the fading of emotion is a good thing because emotions do not help us to make good decisions, and the assumption which my argument rests upon, that emotion can provide positive insight, would certainly not be accepted by a Stoic. Quite the opposite in fact, emotions, for Stoics, do not give insights, but distortions of how things really are.

For example, when encountering a friend who, unbeknown to you, has suddenly just heard that their husband has been brutally murdered and is therefore in a state of shock and anguish, sometimes, through using one's own emotion in the first instance one can better discern what has occurred, and crucially, better empathise with the friend. Through, although perhaps only in a small way, sharing in the emotion of the friend, one gains an instant insight into their situation which could not be gained through reflection or delay. If one handled the same situation in a Stoic way we would not engage our emotion when we saw the friend so distraught and because of this our ability to help would be decreased, particularly if we paused and reflected on what was happening. Simply because there is a certain communication between people via emotion which allows often very complicated things to become clear in a moment, which would otherwise take a long time to discern, an instantaneous emotional insight or 'emotional understanding' shall we say.

In Epictetus' defence we ought to note that he is primarily concerned with anger in this regard and I must concede I am unsure of what his exact position on my example would be, but the general assumption he has that our decision making improves upon reflection and when we avoid emotion seems to be flawed, if only partly. The consequences of this flaw seem significant for his methodology as it appears to open the door for a whole raft of different cases where instantaneous emotional decisions can be a more effective way of handling problems than reflective consideration. Also it strengthens the more general 'emotions are not always bad' line of argument which is already deeply damaging for the Stoics.

More generally the Stoics appear to ignore the fact that wrongdoing is not always experienced in a reflective moment, quite the opposite; often anger consumes us to the point where grand thoughts about why<sup>38</sup> this is happening become irrelevant. The point is not that he is necessarily wrong about his urge that we be thinking at all times, but rather that this seems to be a rather too high ideal for most, if not all, to

follow. In short, if Epictetus' approach to anger is to be effective it needs to reflect the fact that wrongdoing is not experienced in a calm, even-minded or reflective moment. It needs to address anger in the frenzy of the moment, in its earliest beginnings, rather than simply avoiding this by urging us to pause and see that no-one errs willingly and that therefore we must pity those who would annoy others.

I think the main difficulty with Epictetus is his idealism, if he maybe allowed some forms of anger and not others then I think his system would be a more realistic approach to alleviating anger. For example, if he allowed that simply reacting angrily when assaulted without reason is in a very different category to becoming angry when one's bath water is luke warm then perhaps it would be more workable. Furthermore, I concede, unlike Epictetus, that there are many things beyond the reach of therapy, and I think how one reacts after being violently punched in the face is beyond the influence of psychotherapy, at least for most people. However, instances such as becoming angry at luke warm bath water is something which Epictetus' reflective technique would be far more useful for. My point here is I do not mean to throw the baby out with the bath water, there is much of value in his method, but his failure to, in my view, be realistic about therapies limitations, leads him to an overly optimistic or idealist perspective which does not seem grounded in a real or solid appreciation of the experience of emotion. Consequently, his approach is of less use than it could be. What I propose is a two-tier approach to emotion. In one category are the instances where most, although not all, can resist and in the other are instances where most, but again not all, cannot resist.

His *Discourses* are replete with practical steps to avoiding anger such as when in 'a large company you should not call it a crowd or a mob or a nuisance, but a high-day and a festival.'<sup>39</sup> Or when alone you ought to consider it peace and freedom. Or if we have a maimed leg, as Epictetus did, he urges that we 'joyfully yield it up to him who gave it.'<sup>40</sup> At all times he urges us to remember that we have the ability to meet all that befalls us in life with our reason and the knowledge that Zeus has pre-determined all things, hence, only our will is within our control and therefore concerns about everything else ought to be surrendered.

The practicality of pretending one is at a festival when surrounded by a mob only seems to extend to the point immediately prior to our being jostled or elbowed in

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<sup>39</sup> Epictetus, *The Discourses and Manual*, trans. P. E. Matheson, Clarendon Press, (Oxford 1916), p 85

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p 85

the ribs, or worse punched. There is something in the immediacy of physical discomfort that minds cannot help but be disturbed by, and even if one is successful in convincing themselves they are at a festival despite being jostled by a crowd would they still be able to maintain this pretence if they were struck in the face? Or if they were tripped and fell painfully to the ground? Everybody has their limit in such experiences, perhaps Epictetus could endure far more than most, but all have a point at which what happens to the body is such that we react through anger to the discomfort.

In short, he is overly optimistic about the mind's ability to detach itself from the body in such situations, the experience of pain (firing of c-fibres) which regularly produces anger, is the same in all of us and no amount of studies of the natural order of things or devotions to Zeus and submission to his will can distance one from the firing of our c-fibers. In short, there are some salient features of what it is to experience physical discomfort that cognitive therapies can perhaps prepare us for prior to the event, or soothe our anger afterwards, but not overcome altogether, and it is Epictetus', as Bernard Williams puts it, 'lethal high-mindedness'<sup>41</sup> which leads him to fail to appreciate this. Williams goes on to argue that sometimes emotion can be useful, an idea which I shall address at greater length below, our point here is that regardless of whether or not emotion can be useful, there are occasions when it is inevitable and it is Epictetus' failure to realise this which leads him away from the realm of practical ethics and towards lofty idealism.

To conclude this section, there are two distinct points to make, firstly, therapy cannot in principle deal with certain situations. I gave the example of being punched in the face, but I think there are many more, our point here is that because Epictetus fails to acknowledge this, it leads him towards an unrealistic lofty idealism. An idealism which would perhaps lead him to fail to explore different treatments for certain cases, such as drugs for example. Indeed, there seem to be more avenues open for the alleviation of anger than Epictetus realises. I also acknowledge, that as the cited WHO report attests drugs are not ideal, but perhaps in some cases they are the only hope, or maybe there are some cases which are completely beyond hope. In these

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<sup>41</sup> Williams critiques the Stoic assertion that nothing matters except your character, see R. Sorabji, *Is Stoic Philosophy helpful as Psychotherapy?*, in *Aristotle and After*, ed. R. Sorabji, Institute of Classical Studies, School of Advanced Studies, University of London, (London 1997) pp 203-4

cases every method ought to be used and I think a great flaw with Epictetus is his certainty about the success of his method which leads him to ignore other options.

The second point to conclude our discussion is that maybe there is more to therapy than Epictetus allows. Specifically, his failure to adopt a more balanced approach to the reality of the emotional experience, which accepts that there seem to be two main categories of emotional experience; 1) those that most can resist, such as the anger felt at luke warm bath water, and 2) the variety that few can resist, e.g. being angered when punched in the face. He needs to develop a therapy which can work with this understanding of emotion, and as it were, begin again with his method, by addressing the anger in the moment of irritation, just as we experience it. This could involve the idea I developed above that some emotion is positive or insightful in certain circumstances, which may let people know that what comes naturally is not necessarily bad, this in turn may help to put their mind at rest in emotional periods.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> It is not my intention to produce a new form of psychotherapy inspired by Stoicism, hence the description of a possible alternative method is brief.

## Seneca

The greatest problem with Seneca's approach to anger<sup>43</sup> stems from one of the foundations for his philosophy; the idea that the human soul is wholly rational and that emotional states are unnatural distortions of the soul. He argued against the prevailing Platonic/Aristotelian position which asserted that there are both the rational and the irrational within the soul and that one of the purposes of Philosophy, amongst others, is to train the irrational part of our psyche to the point where we are no longer overwhelmed by events to the extent that we assent to emotions when our rational component would disapprove. Seneca, like other Stoics, does not accept that there can be wrongdoing without the mind's assent. Therefore, when one is angered the reasoning element is behind the action at all times.

He asserts; '...impulse never occurs without the mind's assent, nor is it possible to act for retribution and punishment unbeknown to the mind.'<sup>44</sup> If we imagine that one day, by accident, we stubbed our toe very painfully into a chair and then immediately kicked the chair in anger Seneca would have us believe that we had assented, i.e. judged that this was appropriate, prior to kicking the chair because nothing occurs without the mind's approval. To speak of 'approval' in the rashness of an angry moment seems problematic, it is not certain that when stubbing a toe we go through the process of asking ourselves, if only momentarily; 'how should I respond?' and then concluding 'I should kick this chair across the room'. A Stoic might respond by arguing that even though the choice in this situation is strictly limited we still have one, and that we should have been preparing ourselves for the toe-stubbing from the moment we entered the room in order to put us in the best position to judge our impressions correctly if we happened to stub our toe painfully.

Seneca's argument revolves around the notion that the training we ought to engage in during our upbringing will, by adulthood, have brought us to the stage where we develop a habit of anticipating painful or emotional states and that therefore we are well equipped to avoid them before, and crucially when, they arise. The difficulty with this is that the techniques used to achieve this seem rather shaky when they rest upon the Stoic foundation that the soul is only rational and that emotions are

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<sup>43</sup> For a detailed exposition of Seneca's approach to anger see Appendix 4

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p 44

merely aberrations of rationality. Specifically, if we look at the sort of techniques Seneca describes for the training of an infant it seems they presuppose some independent role or emotional factor. The point here is it appears that whilst his philosophy rests upon the concept of an emotion as an aberration of rationality, his techniques, at least some of them, seem to give emotion, or seem to need to give emotion, a far more significant status; either that or his techniques rest upon the flimsiest of definitions of emotion such as aberrations, or distortions of the souls natural state.

Seneca might argue that the techniques for avoiding emotion in childhood, which rest upon the foundation notion that emotion is merely an aberration of the soul's natural state, is acceptable because the goal here is to improve or increase our rationality. Put simply, he might reply to my criticism by arguing that the end justifies the means here, therefore he might not see the shaky foundation as necessarily problematic.

Also, in contrast to Seneca's position it seems there are occasions where there is action without the mind's assent, it is not that the body acts independently, but that the rational capacity is not functioning, or is not engaged, at this point. It is replaced by an unthinking reaction, it is not that, as he puts it 'anger is a motion which out leaps reason and drags it along,'<sup>45</sup> but rather 'anger is a motion which out leaps reason and leaves it behind'. In short, some actions or emotions occur without judgment and are involuntary reactions, often to irritating and unforeseen circumstances. Such as moving your hand from a hot stove where the sensory neuron in the affected hand sends a signal directly to the muscle, bypassing the central nervous system, and thus causing action without involving a cognitive process.

A view which is strongly supported by the influential social psychologist Robert Zajonc, especially in his 1980 paper entitled "Feeling and Thinking: Preferences Need No Inferences." In this paper and others Zajonc argues for the "primacy of affect", by this he means an emotion can occur prior to and independent of related cognitive states. His evidence for this is as follows: Firstly, he argues that emotions are phylogenetically and ontogenetically prior to conditions. Secondly, he asserts that emotion and cognition involve separate neuroanatomical structures.

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p 44

Thirdly, he argued that appraisal and affect are sometimes uncorrelated, to evidence this he asserts that our judgments about persons can come apart from our emotional responses to them. Fourthly, emotional reactions can be established without appraisal, he uses the example of taste aversion, where an animal can be injected with a nausea-inducing substance after a particular food is ingested. If done repeatedly the animal develops an aversion to the type of food it consumes prior to the induced feeling of nausea. Fifthly, Zajonc argues that emotional states can be induced without any prior mental states, for example, if one smiles then their level of happiness can increase.<sup>46</sup>

This creates a problem for Seneca's method because his tripartite division of the emotions into the initial involuntary trembling, the voluntary judgment that it is right to act, and the reckless out of control moment<sup>47</sup> seems to be flawed now. Specifically, the toe-stubbing example appears to blur the distinction between Seneca's second voluntary phase and his reckless, out of control, third phase. The crucial point for Seneca's method, which this point calls into question, is that we can resist the second phase and we can judge whether or not to react. It seems conversely that there are some instances such as painful toe-stubbing, in which we are so caught up with the pain and surprise of the moment that we react angrily without judgment and without the minds assent. In such instances Seneca's technique for avoiding anger which asks us to realise that we can prevent angry reactions by realising that our reaction is voluntary seems deeply flawed.

However, a Stoic might counter this by arguing that we should have recognised that objects in a room pose the potential for an angry response due to the pain they might produce in us. A Stoic therefore walks carefully into a room appraising the potential for things to produce an emotion within him, in the same way as he does when in the company of idiots, he therefore prepares himself for the likely emotion and is through this able to better judge how to react when the emotion threatens.

Despite this, I still maintain that there are some particularly painful things which are unseen and can produce emotion in anyone, even the wise man. This stems from a more fundamental distinction between the Stoics view and my own; the Stoics believe in determinism, and that the universe is rational, and that the wise man has, in

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<sup>46</sup> For a more comprehensive treatment of this issue see the second chapter of J. Prinz, *Gut Reactions A Perceptual Theory of Emotion*, Oxford University Press, (New York 2004)

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p 45

some sense, become omniscient through his close proximity to the *logos* which governs the universe, whereas I am closer to the free-will perspective. Hence, for the Stoics, our wise man has a 'God-like' mind and he is able to anticipate all things and prepare himself for them accordingly. I do not mean to get into the free-will/determinism debate<sup>48</sup> here, but the point about stubbing toes into chairs and other painful experiences is that what we think about how we react to them seems to depend upon which side of the debate we find ourselves, the Stoics are very clearly on one side and I am closer to the other.

Leaving painful toe-stubbing aside, his preventative measures such as ensuring that children are brought up away from luxury, not being allowed to get their own way through bad temper, with a simple diet and a lifestyle like that of their peers does seem more effective. Also, diagnosing those who are pre-disposed towards anger and not over exerting them with strenuous physical exercise and complicated subjects seems far more workable. One difficulty here is his idea about fair haired people with ruddy complexions and the four elements which constitute humans pre-disposing certain people towards anger. Where as he is right in claiming that some are more easily angered than others, it is not the case that this is determined by hair colour or complexion, this should be read as stemming from a desire to support Roman prejudices towards their northern neighbours, rather than representing any serious genetic theory.

Seneca's ideas concerning Germanic people is an early example of what Jesse Prinz refers to as *Biological Reductionism*,<sup>49</sup> which is the idea that emotions differ from culture to culture. Essentially, this debate about whether some are born to be more irritable than others, or some cultures are more irritable than others, seems to be another part of the seemingly infinite nature versus nurture debate, which is certainly too broad to be dealt with in any serious way by our discussion here. The point for our debate is that, as Prinz argues, all people in all environments experience emotion in broadly similar ways. And the sort of pseudo-science that Seneca talks of falls into the same category as Margaret Mead's 1928 study of Samoans which argued that Samoans live a life free from anger, sexual jealousy and other emotions which we

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<sup>48</sup> This is certainly too broad a debate to be within the scope of our discussion.

<sup>49</sup> J. Prinz, *Gut Reactions A Perceptual Theory of Emotion*, Oxford University Press, (New York 2004) p 103

consider perfectly natural.<sup>50</sup> And Colin Turnbull's 1972 report which claimed that the Ik people of Uganda were without love.<sup>51</sup> These ideas represent more of a desire to support certain previously held notions about the difference of certain cultures than a desire for an objective understanding of emotion. Hence, whereas we ought to take his advice that some are more easily angered than others and tailor therapy for such individuals around this, this is not determined by ethnicity, complexion or hair colour, but rather, as he himself points out; by factors such as being overly indulged in childhood and always getting their own way.

However, Seneca's advice about asking for as much evidence as a judge requires in court before deciding whether or not to accept testimonies of things which may lead to anger seems a pretty solid approach, and particularly useful for detecting lies. However, we could not be certain that in our judgment we did not have a bias to one view and therefore maybe the scepticism is of little use as things can be analysed and over examined to fit what we already believed, rather than changing our minds when finding contradictory evidence. The point here is that examination is not necessarily objective so perhaps treating problems like a judge treats cases does not always produce the correct answer or perspective to a given problem. We are not necessarily going to be more rational over time than we are in the moment and Seneca's failure to appreciate this seems to be a key weakness in his argument.

His urge that we should seek easy-going friends, and to not be self-indulgent or overly sensitive, yet disciplined with the mind so that it only feels the hardest of blows is all makes good common sense. He also asks that we not see ourselves as blameless but view others wrongdoing as similar to our own and part of the wider nature of what it is to be human, i.e. we all do bad things so do not become overly angered by others wrongdoing seems very practical.

However, another difficulty arises with his assertion that the wrongdoer is already suffering due to his wrongdoing and therefore we should not become angry with him but rather, pity him. This approach only seems effective if we accept Seneca's wider principles of what it is to be human, specifically, what our role is to one another within society. He holds that it is natural for humans to be in fellowship with one another, to work together, acknowledging our common bond of humanity. Therefore, natural or healthy states for individuals within society are when we are

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p 103

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p 103

working together and unhealthy states when we are wronging each other by pursuing our own selfish advantage. Unless we accept these ideas looking at someone wronging us and pitying them because they have already punished themselves through allowing their soul to fall into such an unnatural, unhealthy state becomes problematic.

Seneca's thoughts concerning the shared purposes of humanity are based upon the belief that human nature is rational. Yet there is much to suggest that we do not have shared goals or purposes at all, but in fact, quite separate and distinct goals, although they may bear resemblance to others. There is much to suggest that our nature sets us all on a path of mutual antagonism not cooperation. Especially as we share similar appetites with others, such as the conflict between both males and females over the pursuit of the opposite sex, or the shared need we have for food which depletes natural resources, the likelihood of confrontation seems high, particularly if we leave aside Seneca's beneficent pre-determining God. I am not here questioning whether or not the soul is, as Seneca argues, rational but rather whether this leads us to working together towards a shared goal, indeed, it may be rational to pursue only one's own interests at the detriment of all others. The crucial point for our debate here is not whether the soul is wholly rational or otherwise, this would be too broad a discussion for this paper, but simply that there is much evidence to strengthen the case against the idea that humanity have a shared purpose. It does not seem necessary to question Seneca's position on the soul to achieve this.

When we look at the fact that humans have shared needs for the same resources, for example, most peoples' staple diet relies upon either rice or corn production, hence although they may all be rational in getting this it may bring them into conflict in the process. This is a particularly pronounced problem where there is not enough cultivatable land to sustain a given population. They are all still rational agents, and they could all still have Seneca's notion of the rational soul, but they are brought into conflict through circumstances beyond their control such as drought for example. Of course for our Stoics the universe is rational and the *logos* which orders the universe would not allow over population and depleted resources in this way, it would have to come about through human failing or emotional unhealthy decision making. My point here is that, in contrast to the Stoics, we would not necessarily have to all be acting irrationally for our Stoic 'shared purpose' to be subverted.

Moving on from Seneca's theories about the soul, can Seneca's method for alleviating anger function effectively on its own? Can we pity people who steal from us, commit adultery with our wife and murder our family members? Is it possible to accept that we do not need to react because they have already punished themselves enough through committing such acts? Needless to say many have very different conceptions of morality than Seneca, some may believe, like Thrasymachus<sup>52</sup> and Callicles,<sup>53</sup> in some form of natural justice in which the strong should take what they wish from the weak and that Stoic ideas about the common fellowship of humanity are irrelevant or simply wrong, perhaps concocted by the weak to subvert the strong from their natural advantage.

Furthermore, for those who accept the ideas presented by Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*, specifically, his critique of a form of morality by which actions are judged by their motivations, the Stoic method becomes hard to accept. As Nietzsche argues; in the "pre-moral period of mankind", actions were judged by their consequences. Over the past 10,000 years, however, a morality has developed where actions are judged by their origins (their motivations)<sup>54</sup> not their consequences, he argues that this is redundant and must change making our moral compass more consequence oriented. The point for our debate here is that the Stoic urge that we see none as erring willingly and therefore all wrong doers as deserving of our pity becomes hard to accept if we have adopted Nietzsche's framework.

Simply because, as perhaps Nietzsche was aware, at the moment we are being attacked, there is something about the immediacy of the experience which pushes all thoughts of the wrongdoer's motivations far from our minds. In short, we do not have the luxury of reflection at the point of attack and our anger is instantaneously aroused often out of a sense of self preservation. A Stoic would reply that sufficient training from childhood would prepare us for such an attack and we would therefore respond simply out of habit and that an emotional response after an attack was a symptom of a lack of training of the soul. In contrast to the Stoics a Platonist/Aristotelian would argue that an emotional response to an attack was evidence not of a lack of education, but of education of the irrational part of the soul. The latter seems more convincing an

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<sup>52</sup> See Book One of Plato's *Republic*

<sup>53</sup> See Plato's *Gorgias*

<sup>54</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil; Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge 2002) p 32

argument as the Stoic is asking us to imagine that we develop habits which override our experience of pain, when it is a physiological experience I fail to see how any education can change this. In short, the Stoic argument here seems to depend upon a far too optimistic belief about the mind's ability to detach or distance itself from the experience of the body and they have not successfully argued for this, instead leaving us with their usual "high minded" response.

Another divergence between Nietzsche and the Stoics would come at the point in the Stoics' training in *oikiosis* where he moves from self-preservation to universal preservation by recognising that self does not exist independently of the rational principle which governs the universe. For Nietzsche this would be considered part of the "mentality of the herd"<sup>55</sup> which he so vehemently opposed because it subverts exceptional individuals from their natural advantage over the weak by asking them to care for others rather than pursue their own agenda. Also, the idea that someone is wronging themselves through their stealing, raping or murdering would become harder to accept, hence, asking someone of such beliefs to pity their attacker rather than be angered as they damage themselves would be absurd. It seems without accepting Seneca's foundations; that humanity has a shared purpose, that we should work together in unity, and those who do wrong wrong themselves, it becomes hard, if not inconceivable, to imagine that we would be able to alleviate our anger with wrongdoers and replace it with pity.

Furthermore, Nietzsche argues that it is wrong to pity,<sup>56</sup> as it is a weakness which leads to a loss of self, and therefore we can assume that he would consider it especially mistaken to pity those who wrong us. My argument differs from this by not questioning whether or not it is right to pity<sup>57</sup> but rather that we cannot in many instances due to the immediacy of the experience. The inevitability in many circumstances that we will react with emotion, either through becoming angry or being distressed by pain I think is a good enough critique of Stoicism in itself without becoming embroiled in wider disputes concerning the morality of emotion. We seek a practical method of alleviating mental illness, therefore Stoicism's strength or weakness in this regard shall be assessed on its practicality, not whether what it proposes is moral, our concern is simply whether it works or not. My point is not that

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p 68

<sup>56</sup> See M. Nussbaum's "*Pity and Mercy, Nietzsche's Stoicism*", in *Nietzsche, Genealogy and Morality*, ed. R. Schacht, University of California Press, (Los Angeles and London 1994)

<sup>57</sup> This issue is too large to be covered in this paper.

I would be happy using a system which is immoral as long as it works effectively, but rather, I criticise Stoicism because, although it may well be moral, it does not seem to work well enough to be considered a full proof solution to all the problems mental illness presents.

Seneca's beliefs about the soul being completely rational and emotions as being distortions of the natural state of the soul lead him to see the emotions as negative and hence to be avoided. If we look more closely at anger than Seneca, particularly if we examine what it stems from, perhaps we can shed more light on the use of emotions and whether or not they are positive or negative. People become angry when attacked, when hit with objects or fists or legs or feet, anger commonly, or though not always, arises. Why is this? Self preservation<sup>58</sup> is one of the strongest human instincts and it is because of this that our anger flares up when attacked, the desire to survive, to not be fatally wounded wills us on, the emotion serves as a catalyst to our defence mechanism in this process. In short, anger is the active agent which galvanises our will to survive and motivates us to action. It is through the effective use of anger that individuals, nations and perhaps entire species have survived.

Admittedly, the cases of anger which Seneca was keenest to deal with were not generally of this sort, i.e. not anger stemming from a sense of self preservation, but rather anger stemming from overly powerful and overly indulged tyrants, but the point remains that there is some positive anger. If we take Tennis for example; a player on a court is significantly more likely to win a match if, at key moments, he uses anger to steel himself on. Such as when racing to the back line to get to a shot which was lobbed over his head, the desire to not be beaten and the emotion he utilises to achieve this is not bad, quite the opposite, it produces positive results; he is more likely to win. To conclude this point, in contrast to Seneca I propose that there are two types of anger; positive and negative. The positive anger is the sort used in instances such as self defence against an unprovoked attack or winning at sport and

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<sup>58</sup> The Stoics would agree that our will to survive is strong but that this evolves from childhood through the *oikeiosis* process into something far broader than simply self preservation. Specifically, a Stoic would argue that by adulthood even individuals with the most limited education would have evolved from self-preservation to the state of tribal preservation or their immediate group, for a good example of this see football hooliganism.

can be considered as broadly beneficial or useful.<sup>59</sup> The second kind can be distinguished by its destructive nature or its purposelessness. In short, if the emotion produces broadly beneficial results<sup>60</sup> then it should be encouraged and nurtured, but if it is of the other sort then Seneca's argument against it seems sustained.

Hence, perhaps therapy which seeks to subvert anger, asking us to always see anger as unnatural, is not entirely healthy and perhaps effectively used anger, i.e. not toe-stubbing, is important and natural, a part of what it is to be human that if we lacked perhaps our very survival in certain circumstances would be in jeopardy.

But what if we accept Seneca's foundation? What if we do see all wrong doing as stemming from ignorance and therefore deserving of our pity? The first point to make here is that the success of this approach seems to depend upon the immediacy of the wrong doing. For example, it is easier to be philosophical about the brutal murder of someone else's close relative, seeing the murderer as someone whose view of the world is so distorted that he himself deserves pity, but what if it is one of our relatives? Someone we love, cherish, could not bear to be without? Would we be able to withhold our anger, even if we accepted that no-one errs willingly and the purpose of humanity is to work together in unity? And would it be good if we could?

Is there not a sense of justice in what anger can produce? The functioning of any criminal justice system seems to reflect a certain consensus of what society is angered or harmed by.<sup>61</sup> Admittedly, the Stoics are not anti-criminal justice, they certainly believe in punishing wrongdoing, but the point for our debate here is that it is not always good to suppress emotion. Furthermore, it is often necessary to go

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<sup>59</sup> A view supported by the argument in Book two of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. In summary Aristotle's view is that a virtuous person will perceive all forms of pain and pleasure on appropriate occasions and in appropriate ways. Hence, his position is very close to mine on the positive use of emotion.

<sup>60</sup> We shall understand beneficial here in Utilitarian terms.

<sup>61</sup> Society, collectively speaking, is harmed although perhaps not always angered by things such as theft, rape and murder, hence their laws reflect this and their legal philosophy adapts according to what is perceived as harmful which is linked to what causes anger. Stoics would argue that it is possible to be harmed without being angered, I agree with this, but I do not think this is healthy. Anger, rather than the realisation that we have been harmed, motivates us to action in a unique way. It is this motivation to action, which anger causes, which is positive in certain situations for resolving problems, such as when being punched in the face and responding angrily in self defence. Would we respond in self defence as effectively if we, rather than becoming angry, merely registered harm? Of course this would depend upon the individual concerned, (highly trained martial artists seem to be an exception), but my argument is that for most, in a self-defence situation, anger is the force which motivates us to action in a way that only anger can, therefore I see it as inherently positive and to be encouraged in such circumstances.

through the full emotional cycle, including anger, before one can forgive those who, as discussed, have had a loved one brutally killed. And this seems to be a natural, almost cleansing,<sup>62</sup> process that people go through under such circumstances. What I mean by this cleansing is that the emotion serves to work out the feeling which would otherwise remain, and cause greater difficulty later on. Rather like a splinter which is left in a wound, if part of a feeling remains, it may increase over time producing a greater problem. The emotions serve almost like an anti-septic in a wound, in the sense that it clears out the feeling/irritation ending the problem. Perhaps a Stoic would argue that they could get to the forgiveness stage more quickly through avoiding anger, this may work for the one-in-a-million wise men, but what about the average person? Don't they need to go through a process which does, regardless of whether it is right or wrong, inevitably happen for most people? There seems to be two separate conclusions to be drawn here; 1) Emotion, in some circumstances, seems inevitable, and 2) emotion often provides a healthy basis for a theory of action.

Furthermore, what if we take the wrongdoing another step closer, imagine we have been falsely imprisoned and are being tortured, can we really as the cork screws are turning pity the torturer realising that he does not know what he's doing? Or the one who instigated the torture, for not fully realising the nature and purpose of human life? Would that be close to our thoughts at that moment of agony or later as we suffered in pain afterwards? Would we really feel pity for one so misguided as the one who brought all this upon us? To conclude this point, it seems the closer the wrongdoing is to us the less effective Seneca's approach for alleviating anger is.

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<sup>62</sup> I acknowledge that this is a debatable point (whether or not experiencing anger is a positive means of cleansing emotion), but there seems to be evidence to support my view. For a good introductory look at this issue see *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 28, No. 6, 724-731 (2002) DOI: 10.1177/0146167202289002 © 2002 Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Inc. "Does Venting Anger Feed or Extinguish the Flame? Catharsis, Rumination, Distraction, Anger, and Aggressive Responding" (Brad J. Bushman)

## Marcus Aurelius

The difficulty with Aurelius' technique for avoiding anger<sup>63</sup> is that its effectiveness does seem to depend too much upon whether or not we accept his cosmological perspective. Specifically, if an Emperor has wrongly accused us of a crime we have not committed and prepares a horrific torture session for us, without seeing ourselves as Aurelius does; believing that 'nothing will befall us which is not in accordance with the nature of the whole' and that there is a pre-determined order and pattern to all things we could not help but be angered by the horror and injustice which awaits us. If we do not accept that there is an order to the universe pre-determined by God<sup>64</sup> like a director of a play in which all we need do is play our pre-defined role not concerning ourselves with mere trivialities such as being punched in the face. In short, wrongdoing seems to become harder to accept and more likely to rouse anger in us if we have no sense of why it is happening or any conception of it being necessary or inevitable in the way that Aurelius does, either as a cosmological necessity or a practical inevitability. Instead, without his theological underpinning<sup>65</sup> it seems more likely that we be consumed by the injustice of the wrongdoing, not understanding why it occurs, why it happens to us, or even why we are here at all. His technique does not seem to function independently of his cosmological perspective, the result is that for those who do not share his view of the universe the usefulness of his methods as psychotherapy become quite limited.

Furthermore, his technique asks that we wipe out our false impressions of things, specifically our judgment that things are bad and therefore worthy of our anger, because nothing outside the will is good or bad for the Stoic, but it is only our judgment which may falsely determine that such things are good or bad. Perhaps Aurelius' point is that the situation becomes worse if we become angry, but it is already bad,<sup>66</sup> our judgment of it does not alter this. This seems problematic;

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<sup>63</sup> See Appendix 3 for a greater understanding of the uniqueness of Aurelius within the Stoic tradition and a fuller exposition of his treatment of anger from his *Meditations*.

<sup>64</sup> Indeed there is much to support that there is not an order to the universe at all, or at least not one that humans fully grasp.

<sup>65</sup> And this determinism is a distinctly Stoic doctrine (not Epicurean).

<sup>66</sup> In my view it is not only things within the region of the will that are bad but also many things outside the will. Furthermore, I hold the view that something can be intrinsically or fundamentally bad, not just bad because we perceive or judge it to be so.

regardless of whether or not one becomes angry at being robbed it is still a 'bad' thing, i.e. immoral.

Specifically, it is immoral to rob people, and it should not happen, and is therefore worthy of our anger in order to prevent it, furthermore, if people are less likely to become angry when robbed it is likely to embolden thieves, thus increasing wrongdoing. Also, the fact that practically all societies see theft as immoral<sup>67</sup> indicates that it is not indifferent but wrong. The Stoics would agree that it is wrong in an objective sense, and stems from someone's false impression that it is right to do this, but their urge that the victim sees this as indifferent seems to be unrealistic and not necessarily providing a healthy foundation for morality.

To summarise this point; there is some good which comes from angry responses if they prevent bad things from occurring such as theft or murder, and I would concede to the Stoics that anger is perhaps not an ideal way to deal with robbery. But the point seems to be that it is better to become angry, even if anger is wrong, in order to prevent the greater wrong of theft. In this sense I would be willing to accept that becoming angry<sup>68</sup> to avoid being robbed is perhaps only better by degree than being robbed, although this is very hard to determine. There is also an important distinction here for Stoics between 'robbing' and 'being robbed'. In the first instance one robs, according to Stoics, on account of their false judgment that it is good or expedient to do so and this decision is within the region of the will and hence it can be classed as bad. In the second case, 'being robbed,' is outside the region of the will and therefore neither good nor bad but indifferent for the victim.

A position which does not seem to fully take into account the idea that something can be intrinsically bad, i.e. not simply giving the impression of being bad (for an individual) but actually being bad, which seems to contradict his assertion that all things beyond 'virtue and vice' are indifferent and hence not worthy of anger.<sup>69</sup> Also, he does not seem to allow that we can acknowledge that something is bad and

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<sup>67</sup> With the exception of small and isolated communities living in stone age conditions who lack the notion of property, such as the indigenous inhabitants of the islands in the Great Andaman archipelago in the Bay of Bengal.

<sup>68</sup> I would acknowledge that one can deal with being robbed in a number of ways, adrenalin, for example, produces the desire to run or to fight and both seem quite affective for avoiding being robbed, my argument is that anger is one method that Stoics rule out yet it seems to be of use in some situations. Therefore, my point is that they are too quick to rule out emotional responses to problem solving and avoidance.

<sup>69</sup> See Chapter One, p 4.

then not become angry about it, for Aurelius we either misjudge our impressions and become angry about something, or we realise that things outside the will are indifferent and subsequently do not become angry. Is it not possible that we could acknowledge that something is bad, not just indifferent, and then not react? He doesn't seem to allow for this, even though it seems more practicable as a technique in psychotherapy without taking the vast step that he urges of being indifferent to everything that occurs.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **Stoic approaches to the relief and prevention of pain**

Coping with, preparing for and avoiding pain in all its many forms ought to be one of the most important goals of any type of psychotherapy, simply because it ruins many peoples' lives through the mental suffering it produces. Furthermore, the rather rigid distinction conventional Western medicine makes between physical and mental suffering needs to be overcome through a more holistic approach to suffering which Stoicism's ancient wisdom might provide. Epictetus, born a cripple, certainly did not lack in his knowledge of suffering, and once again it is he that provides the framework for the Stoic theory of pain and its alleviation so we shall begin with his account. But it is Aurelius, the soldier, the politician and Emperor with his immense experiences on the battlefield and in the Roman political arena who perhaps, of all Stoics, has the broadest understanding of human experience, and so it is to him that we shall turn for the details of the method and the practical steps to achieving the Stoic goal.

## **Epictetus**

As with Epictetus' approach to anger his urge that we adopt his 'God-like' perspective on our pain<sup>70</sup> comes with some difficulties. There seem to be four main flaws in his approach; 1) we must accept Epictetus' cosmological perspective in order to see our pain as being divinely ordered and therefore beyond our concern; if we do not believe in his God and his ability to order all things our pain has less purpose. 2) Even if we do accept his perspective, his approach to alleviating pain still fails to address the immediacy of painful experiences, instead asking us to see this as predetermined. 3) Once again his approach to alleviating pain does seem to be rather too optimistic about the mind's ability to distance itself from the fate of the body, as though they were not interconnected. And finally 4), if we accept his approach to alleviating pain, i.e. realising that it is inevitable, beyond our will, pre-determined etc. it does rather conflict with something fundamental to our humanity.

Let us outline the fourth criticism first, hope is simultaneously man's greatest strength and weakness, leading him at times to success through persevering through unimaginable odds and at others to disaster by his wild, if not desperate, optimism. Many critically injured people survive not because of the treatment they receive, or though naturally this plays a part, nor due to any other external factors, but purely through their hope that things will improve.

Let us imagine that there are two people suffering from immense pain whilst undergoing treatment for cancer. The first patient is a follower of Epictetus in the fullest sense and therefore sees the universe as divinely ordered, recognises himself as a part of this whole and believes that it has been pre-ordained that he has cancer and that it is also pre-ordained whether or not he make a full recovery following treatment. The second patient is the polar opposite to the first; he does not believe in God, the idea that he is a part of a whole with a specific purpose, nor that his life is and therefore his cancer and his potential recovery is pre-determined. The question to test Epictetus' approach is which is most able to alleviate the suffering? And which is most likely to survive? Admittedly, there could be numerous other factors which cause remission in cancer patients, but let us imagine that the one variable is their

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<sup>70</sup> For a fuller exposition of Epictetus' approach to pain see Appendix 1.

perspective on their pain and suffering, specifically their belief about why this is happening and their beliefs about their ability to influence the outcome.

For our Stoic he has resigned himself to his predetermined fate, and as the pain increases sees no blip in Zeus' divine ordering, contenting himself with the knowledge that things outside the will such as his pain are beyond his control and therefore indifferent and meditates on the seemingly perfect ordering of the universe and his role within it. He has even progressed in his Stoicism to the point where he wishes to be in pain because he accepts it as his fate.

Conversely, he sees no reasoning or logic behind the universe or his suffering, he has not surrendered his life to a divine order and therefore does not content himself with the knowledge of it in times of hardship, without the 'God like' perspective all he knows is what he observes and he fails to see any wider purpose to his existence. For him perhaps it is natural to cling to the familiar, and for our sceptic this is his world; i.e. his friends, family, leisure pursuits etc., in short all the things from which he derives happiness. And in his moments of intense agony he wishes and hopes for these sensations to be over so he may return to a state when he was most happy. How does he do this? What technique will our sceptic employ? He takes his mind off his pain<sup>71</sup> and thinks about how much he loves his wife and all the times they have spent together<sup>72</sup> and how many more good times he may enjoy with her if he survives.

For our Stoic, who also had many enjoyable times in the company of *his* wife, although crucially, unlike the sceptic, he recognised that spending time with his wife is outside the region of the will and therefore not good but indifferent, he realises

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<sup>71</sup> Admittedly, Stoics employ this technique also the sceptic is not alone in this. The technique is Epicurean in origin. See M. Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations 3 and 4*, trans. M. R. Graver, University of Chicago Press, (Chicago 2002)

<sup>72</sup> This technique differs from 'unqualified' shifting the mind off the problem in that it seems there is some hope which is perceived as real and this is the Epicurean/Cyrenaic method of shifting the mind from pain to pleasure which is based on pleasant past impressions. The argument rests upon the notion that we will go where our mind takes us, it is distinct from our Stoic 'purposeless' shift in the sense that it focuses one on where they want to be, rather than merely taking their mind off the problem. I acknowledge that it is hard to find solid evidence that this works as will power or our ability to direct the mind is notoriously hard to quantify or measure.

that whether he has these times again or swiftly passes away is pre-ordained and therefore not worthy of consideration.

In answer to the first question; which approach is most able to alleviate the suffering?, it seems reflecting on all the good times you have had whilst in pain may successfully take the mind elsewhere but perhaps the contrast between these times and the pain one goes through during cancer actually heightens one's anguish at the present condition. Instead, our Stoic accepts all the pain and does not hope for being in a happy time, but merely accepts the pain as his fate. Through the acceptance the pain may be easier to bear for the Stoic than the hopeful sceptic who tortures himself by reminding himself of good times. The pain may seem worse by contrast. So perhaps Epictetus' approach is more successful for coping with pain, but is it as successful in terms of survival, is the Stoic cancer patient more or less likely to survive due to his resignation? Admittedly a good Stoic would bear his fate cheerfully but is this not too hard an ideal to reach, wouldn't there be some sense of resignation on the Stoics path to the wise sage.

Although the question is perhaps slightly outside the scope of this paper, as the paper relates in the main to the effectiveness of the Stoic technique for alleviating emotion, it does provide an interesting critique of the Stoic approach to things outside the will and the effect a Stoic perspective has upon our survival.<sup>73</sup> The sceptic, clinging to life in his darkest moments, not accepting what he is going through, but hoping for its end, wills himself on through the pain, focusing on good times in the future probably goes through more emotion than the Stoic, but crucially his will, his desire, his hope to return to a time without pain is greater than the Stoic and this perhaps makes his survival more likely.<sup>74</sup> So in answer to the question is Stoicism a

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<sup>73</sup> The Stoics do not believe that our behaviour can affect our survival in the sense of changing the time of our death, they believe such things are predetermined and fixed. The only thing which is not fixed, as Epictetus constantly points out, is our internal attitude towards our fate. The problem here is that if we do not accept Stoic determinism then the scope of what we think we can affect expands exponentially, either that, or we reject their approach altogether. This issue really turns on the free-will/determinism debate and it is hard to say anything conclusive on this before this debate has been concluded.

<sup>74</sup> See "*Influence of psychological response on survival in breast cancer: A population-based cohort study*" by Margaret Watson, J S Haviland, S Greer, J Davidson, and J M Bliss, (2007) in *The Lancet* (354: 1331-1336), although the findings suggest that, despite what previous studies indicated, the 'fighting-spirit' (the patients perspective on their situation) factor in cancer patients did not seem to influence the outcome of any breast cancer treatment. But the patients which fell into the 'helpless/hopeless' category were more likely to relapse or die. In short, there was a correlation between a helpless/hopeless attitude and increased rates of remission or death and it seems our Stoic, with his cosmological fatalism may fall into this category.

successful method of alleviating emotion? Yes it is, but it is some what of a pyrrhic victory for the Stoics.

This point seems to demonstrate that always avoiding emotion in the way that Stoics urge does not always produce good consequences, it seems conversely, that there are some occasions where enduring pain, going through pain, hoping you were not in pain, although causing greater mental anguish at the time, does in fact lead to a greater good in the long term, such as our survival. By not seeing suffering as simply indifferent or inevitable, but something to strive against and avoid we allow our will to survive to determine our actions, our inner survival mechanism kicks in, in the same manner it does through our being angered when attacked, hope arises during moments of unremitting pain and despair, the purpose of this is to ensure, or at least make our survival more likely. The problem with Stoicism is that through constantly avoiding our emotions we are disarming our strongest instinct; our will to survive.

## Marcus Aurelius

As with anger Aurelius asks that we adopt a ‘God-like’ perspective on our painful experiences, not being overwhelmed by it, but rather seeing it in perspective to our wider role in the universe. He urges us to see that pain is not necessarily contrary to our nature so long as we are doing the work of a human being,<sup>75</sup> i.e. if a foot is in pain whilst engaged in the work of a foot or the hand in pain whilst engaged in the work of the hand it is not contrary to our nature and therefore not an evil. He insists that we adapt ourselves to the circumstances in which we find ourselves, constantly reminding ourselves that we are all working together towards a single end and therefore our role, even if we endure pain, is not without purpose or contrary to the order of the universe. And everything is predetermined by the Gods through their counsel and whatever comes about as a consequence of their counsel we are bound to welcome and acquiesce in.<sup>76</sup> He attempts to answer some critics by theorising that even if the Gods did not exist, or were not concerned with humanity and the ordering of the universe, we ought to realise that the benefit to every being lies in what accords with its nature and constitution.<sup>77</sup> And our nature is that of a rational and sociable being. Hence, enduring pain through realising it is not unnatural for us is not, as Aurelius’ argues, necessarily dependent upon our belief in the Gods, for Aurelius our nature and therefore our purpose is self evident and things in accord with our nature, such as pain, can be endured through full knowledge of our nature and purpose.

As with other Stoics Aurelius’ technique for enduring pain revolves around reciting his maxims at times of pain such as; “there is nothing shameful in this nor does it make our governing intellect worse than it was; for neither in so far as it is rational nor in so far as it is concerned for the common good does pain cause it any harm.”<sup>78</sup> Peculiarly for a Stoic<sup>79</sup> he even calls upon Epicurus to aid us in our struggle

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<sup>75</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Robin Hard, Wordsworth Editions Limited, (Ware 1997). p 51

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, p 53

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, p 54

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, p 66

<sup>79</sup> Stoics, or at least orthodox Stoics such as Epictetus, have an intense rivalry with Epicurus and the Philosophical school which he founded. The positive inclusion of a quote from Epicurus should be seen in the same light as Aurelius’ Heraclitean perspective on the nature of the universe, which he shares with other Stoics. Stoics believed that the matter of the world is in the state of flux, but that things made of that matter are ordered by the divine active principle (fire for Zeno), and thus the cosmic ‘flux’ have well-determined boundaries (theory of eternal recurrence).

against pain, he quotes Epicurus; ‘pain is neither unendurable nor everlasting, if you keep its limits in mind and do not add to it with your imagination.’<sup>80</sup> He urges us to at all times live “our lives free from all constraint and with the utmost joy in our hearts...even if wild beasts are rending the poor limbs of this lump of clay that has congealed around you.”<sup>81</sup>

Furthermore, one who is afraid of pain is sure to be afraid at times of things that come to pass in the universe and that is an impiety.<sup>82</sup> Instead we must embrace pain as our fate, and realise that this is not an evil thing. Above all, when dealing with pain Aurelius’ urges that we adopt the ‘cosmic-perspective’ by continually picturing the whole of time and the whole of substance, and reflecting that every particular part of them, including ourselves, when measured against substance overall, is but a fig-seed, and when measured against time, but the single turn of a drill.<sup>83</sup> In this way we take our mind off the painful condition of the body and replace it with a ‘God-like’ perspective on the universe and our small role within it, the aim of this is that we see how minor and insignificant our pain is and therefore cease to be so troubled by it.

It is one thing to rise above our human birth, in the way that Aurelius urges, at times of relative comfort during reflection, but quite another to maintain this view whilst in pain. The success or failure of Aurelius’ approach seems to hinge on the ability of a human being to maintain the ‘cosmic- perspective’ whilst in times of agonising pain. But is this really possible? If we look at the immediacy of pain, the all consuming agony of the moment, in which all we can think about is the pain, is it really possible to simply meditate ‘on the whole of time and the whole of substance’, seeing ourselves and therefore our suffering as a part of this whole and not an evil?

If we take small amounts of pain such as when we stumble in the street and have to put our hands out to stop ourselves from hitting the pavement could we resist pain then by seeing our stumble and subsequent pain as something perhaps in the nature of a human being? It seems the answer is probably yes, but what if we shattered our hand in the process? Would we successfully be able to apply Aurelius’ adage ‘if a hand is harmed in the work of a hand it is not an evil’? In that instant, as the c-fibres fired in our hand around the braking bones would we be able to content ourselves with the knowledge that because we are enduring the pain to our hand

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, p 66

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, p 67

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, p 81

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, p 97

whilst our hand is engaged in the work of a hand it is indifferent to us? The issue of whether we can or not after the event seems to be fairly open, depending upon what kind of a person this happened to, i.e. how easily taken by emotion he is, and how much he values his body etc. But at the time of impact, when the pain comes, it seems there is something in the immediacy of the pain experience which, for most if not all people, prevents such high minded perspectives such as Aurelius' 'cosmic-perspective' because we do not experience pain in a reflective, transcendental moment. His approach seems to fail to appreciate this, instead urging us to adopt the 'God-like' view.

In Aurelius's defence one might argue that there are painful circumstances in which a Stoic approach to pain avoidance is very useful and perhaps achievable, but not through his cognitive approaches but through adrenalin; a natural involuntary process. If we take a soldier in battle as an example, one who during a sword fight sustains a minor, non-fatal laceration on his hand, his ability to ignore this pain, if only until he has defeated his opponent, may well determine whether he survives or not. The functioning of the adrenal gland causes us to overcome pain in the moment and so perhaps if the Stoics could find a cognitive approach which worked in unison with this physiological process it might be more effective in practice. Perhaps if from childhood they taught the young to channel their adrenalin effectively, whilst simultaneously coaching them in the Stoic cognitive processes there could be some new method achieving the harmonization of the two. A fuller exposition of how this might be done is certainly outside the scope of our discussion here, but the crucial point here is that perhaps we can successfully ignore pain by using the Stoic methods in tandem with already existing physiological properties. Also, this idea seems to link very well with the Platonic/Aristotelian theory of emotion,<sup>84</sup> further supporting the idea that Stoic methods may be able to function independently of their doctrinal framework.

Leaving this point aside, if we look at Aurelius' approach to pain more generally we see that there is an important distinction to be made between his approach to pain and his approach to anger. The ideal of the wise man which he urges us to aspire towards allows for some anger to be experienced, although crucially; in a fundamentally different way to how an average person experiences this. The wise man

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<sup>84</sup> That we should use emotion appropriately and only on appropriate occasions.

notices flickerings or glimmers within himself when a mob chases him or a job slaps him, but when it comes to pain he has no such corresponding sensation. Our wise man, at the end of his training, feels no pain at all, and furthermore the Stoic acknowledges no positive use for it.

The first point to make here is that this seems far less realistic an approach to pain than the Stoics approach to anger, in short, it seems far more “high minded”, or optimistic about the mind’s ability to distance itself from the fate of the body than it does for its treatment of anger. Furthermore, for the Stoics pain is only negative, yet there are many instances where experiencing pain can be a positive thing. If we take the example of a chronically obese man who is likely to die early, suffer from impotence, depression, heart disease, joint deterioration, diabetes and all the other ailments which affect the chronically obese, the only way he is likely to increase the quality of life is through experiencing some pain.<sup>85</sup>

He needs to lose weight, and the most effective way to do this is to reduce his calorific intake and increase his activity levels. Now this is going to be distressing in the short term, as he has grown accustomed to over eating and not exercising, but the point for our discussion here is: As with someone who gives themselves time to mourn the death of a loved one rather than simply ploughing on with their lives and thus never truly getting over the loss, a lesser pain often prevents a greater pain. And it is a deep flaw in the Stoic method that it fails to acknowledge this. Specifically, they fail to realise that distress, in all its forms, is a necessary fact of human life and serves as a tremendous training in how to deal with life’s inevitable hardships. Without this training, whether it is the obese man going jogging, or the husband mourning the loss of his beloved wife, the hardships of life only build up and eventually produce greater suffering in the long term than if we had addressed the lesser pain in the first instance.

For Stoics this pain is not amongst the bad things, as it is outside the region of the will, but it is not a preferable either. For Stoics we must endure pain, without qualms or any form of emotion. My argument is that pain is a necessary learning experience in life which prepares us for life’s greater hardships, such as excruciating pain or death. The Stoics do either one of two things as regards pain, either a) avoid pain altogether, or b) endure it if it is in line with their nature. The difference between

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<sup>85</sup> The Stoics teach that one should endure pain without a qualm and so do not seem to entertain the notion that a painful experience might be a useful experience.

my approach and theirs is the mental state of the person enduring the pain. It seems to me that when someone simply endures pain without qualms and without emotion their experience is distinct from one who truly suffers through experiencing emotion. At the end of the painful experience it seems to me that the non-Stoic has gained important life experience and a deep knowledge of the frailty of the human condition, where as the Stoic in his 'high mindedness' has missed one of life's most important experiences and through this lost the opportunity to learn from the pain and as a consequence is not as well prepared for future experiences as he could have been. In this sense I see Stoicism as an 'emotional celibacy' a 'self-denial' which dangerously restricts something natural and intrinsic to our humanity preventing us from experiencing life fully.

## **Conclusion**

So how successful is Stoicism as a practical means to alleviate emotion and to reduce the effects of mental illness? Does it succeed in the way its proponents imagine it does, allowing us to avoid our emotions overcoming pain and anger through harmonising our soul with nature and our will with God? Can we really achieve Aurelius' 'cosmic perspective'? And is it possible to successfully recognise one's self as part of a providentially ordered universe through the study of nature in the way that Epictetus urges and as a result not be distressed by what befalls us in life?

We must begin by looking at the foundations of the Stoic system. Firstly, the idea that the soul is only rational and emotions are therefore unhealthy unnatural distortions of the soul seems to require greater evidence than the Stoics give. The debate between those who hold the Platonic/Aristotelian position (that the soul is composed of both rational and irrational parts), and those who favour the Stoic perspective will not be easily resolved and is slightly outside the scope of this paper. The point for our discussion of Stoicism as psychotherapy is; is always avoiding emotion unnatural?<sup>86</sup> Or, do benefits come from emotions, even the bad ones? Because if they do and we maintain the Stoic position regarding the nature of the soul then something which is supposedly unhealthy or unnatural is actually now a positive, hence more fundamental questions about our natural state may be raised.

For the purposes of our discussion here the fact that there are times when anger could reasonably be thought to produce good consequences,<sup>87</sup> for example; when it wills us on in the face of a violent unprovoked attack to defend ourselves. Or the experience of pain indicating that we are in a dangerous situation leads us to remove our hand from the hot stove and therefore preserving our body seems to go some distance in favour of the argument that emotions can be good, or at least emotional responses can produce good results. Admittedly, this is not a 'knock-

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<sup>86</sup> Admittedly, even the wise Stoic sage has some *feelings* or senses which indicate emotion the Stoic argument seems to revolve around replacing our emotions as they are with the wise sages sensations.

<sup>87</sup> The definition of good here is our survival, i.e. not meeting an untimely death. Admittedly, Stoics would not use this definition but it seems to be a broadly popular conception of good so seems relevant for the discussion.

down' argument because there are numerous counter examples one might give in defence of the Stoics to show that emotional responses are bad and therefore should be avoided. The point here is simply that the issue of whether or not emotional responses are good or bad ways of dealing with life's problems is not as black and white as Stoics maintain. As we have seen there are some varieties of anger such as the rages of evil tyrants, which are distinctly negative having destructive consequences. Whereas when we are spurred to anger in self-defence whilst being assaulted without provocation, we could argue that this was positive anger as it produces a good consequence; our survival, or at least positive by contrast to the first variety.<sup>88</sup>

Secondly, the issue of whether the Stoic method functions independently of their cosmological perspective is perhaps the most important issue because there is much to suggest that the Stoics are mistaken in their view that the universe is predetermined, ordered and every part plays a particular role which contributes to the whole. Specifically, modern Physics challenges Stoic determinism ( the idea that every event is fully determined by its antecedent causes), therefore their theory of emotions (that emotions are obstacles to the smooth running of the universe) now seems problematic. Furthermore, the Stoic belief that the ethical order depends on a universal order<sup>89</sup> now looks quite shaky. If one does not accept that there is an order to the universe and that we are a part of this whole and play a role within this entity our suffering may be seen as without purpose or meaning. More generally, it raises wider questions about not only the purpose of our pain and whether it is good or bad but also the purpose of our existence. Such questioning, or strong belief, would not lead one to find the Stoic view convincing, hence we must ask; can the Stoic approach function independently of its cosmological grounding?

Aurelius is perhaps the keenest to answer this question. He even entertains Heraclitean notions<sup>90</sup> of the nature of the universe, specifically whether or not it is in a state of flux.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, he allows that the method works even if we accept this

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<sup>88</sup> In fact, I am open to the idea of emotions being good or bad by degree; it seems hard definitions for something as broad as emotion, such as positive or negative may be problematic.

<sup>89</sup> Although, perhaps if we replaced the notion of 'universal order' with 'natural order' the Stoic system may still be able to function, particularly as their conception of the Universe does *now* roughly conform to 'our' notion of nature.

<sup>90</sup> However, it is important to note that Heracliteanism is not atypical among the Stoics. In fact many pseudo-Heraclitean forgeries came from the near-Stoic circle.

<sup>91</sup> See e.g. *Med.* 4.3, 6.10, 7.32, 8.17, 9.28, 9.39.

and the Cynics view that life is an ever changing pageant.<sup>92</sup> His argument is that we can achieve our peace of mind regardless of whether we believe in teleology, or purpose in nature, as e.g. Epicureans, it is possible to argue for the elimination of emotions.

The notion that our purpose is revealed through our design and that this reveals that we are parts of a rational whole which must work together and therefore pain and anger incurred in the process of the fulfilment of our design is highly questionable. Our purpose may very well be revealed by our design but this does not necessarily mean that our nature is as the Stoics suggest.

Nietzsche and Callicles' perspectives upon our nature and purpose seems to provide a significant blow to the Stoic notion of our nature: For Nietzsche any theory is viewed as inherently redundant and flawed as he sees it as strangling the individuals within any given society and holding the strongest and brightest back from forging ahead and pursuing their natural advantage. This in turn holds back humanity as a whole, because, as a result of this strangulation, the majority fail to reap the benefits which would arise from allowing the brightest individuals to advance humanity. The ideas the Stoics have about human purpose and the nature of the universe, if accepted by a majority within society, would inevitable serve to restrain the brightest individuals as they would be expected to submit to this 'order' of the universe, seeing themselves as a tiny part of this order, who have the same role as all the other human parts. This would be unacceptable for Nietzsche, as such a perspective is anti-individual and would produce humanity's stagnation rather than progress.

To conclude this point; if we do not accept that there is a pre-determined order to the universe, which is disrupted by emotion, and that our purpose is to work harmoniously with our fellow man towards a common goal and that therefore pain and anger are bad and to be avoided, incurring pain and anger can be viewed in a very different light. We may conclude that our lives have no cosmic purpose and therefore all we care about is pursuing what our will urges us to pursue, we might choose to live in a state of nature or pursue a 'will to power'. With these perspectives our emotions may be experienced in the way a lion might experience them, i.e. not understanding them or having perspective on the experience but simply being caught up and overwhelmed by them. In this way nature will find a natural level for our emotions as

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, intro. p 16

anger will be most commonly found in the strong not the weak, because the strong have the strength to back this anger up, whereas if the weak constantly became angry they would be attacked and killed. The argument here is that without the Stoic 'cosmic perspective' and a sense of our 'purpose' we may be lead to a more naturalistic theory of emotion. The Stoics, despite Aurelius' valiant attempts, do not seem to have successfully argued for their theory of emotion functioning effectively independently of their theological framework.

Thirdly, assuming that we do accept the Stoics cosmological ideas isn't there something in the immediacy of pain or anger which prevents us from embracing the Stoic perspective when we need it most? Specifically, at the point where we are punched in the face the Stoic perspective on the experience seems to desert us. Although a Stoic may not accept this point because a wise man, for Stoics, can be happy anywhere, even in the stomach of the bull of Phalaris.<sup>93</sup> And the idea that Seneca has that there is a clear distinction between the first stage of emotion; the involuntary trembling and sensations and the second voluntary stage in which we coolly judge what to do seems simply wrong. Particularly when we are in the excruciating moment as our big toe rams into a chair and we instantaneously lash out at it. We do not judge in that moment that we should kick the chair across the room, we just do it without thought. Therefore, the point here is that there are occasions, although perhaps only very few, in which the immediacy of the pain or anger simply overwhelms us to the point where we act involuntarily. In these moments Stoicism cannot help us.

However, this again does not appear to be a 'knock-down' argument either because there are many occasions where anger and pain can be avoided successfully

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93 The brazen bull, or the Sicilian bull, is an execution/torture device designed in ancient Greece. Perillos of Athens, a brass-founder, proposed to Phalaris, Tyrant of Agrigentum, the invention of a new means for executing criminals; accordingly, he cast a brazen bull, made totally of brass, hollow, with a door in the side. The condemned was shut up in the bull and a fire was set under it, heating the metal until it became "yellow hot" and causing the person inside to roast to death. So that 'nothing unseemly might spoil his feasting', Phalaris commanded that the bull be designed in such a way that its smoke rose in spicy clouds of incense. The head of the ox was designed with a complex system of tubes and stops so that the prisoner's screams were converted into sounds like the bellowing of an infuriated bull. It is also said that when the bull was reopened, the scorched bones of the remains shone like jewels and were made into bracelets.

through careful preventative measures. Such as avoiding things and people that are likely to cause us to become angry. As before the occasions where one is completely overwhelmed by an experience through its immediacy seem to be in the minority when one looks at the full range of painful and annoying experiences. Seneca's advice concerning peoples' upbringing and choosing the right company and making the right choices about how to spend one's time do seem convincing.

Fourthly, there is something in Stoicism which seems to subvert a substantial part of our nature and seems to render it quite unhelpful as psychotherapy as a result. Specifically, there is something in a human which allows him to look beyond the misery of his predicament, to hope for a better world and a better life for himself. This quality is difficult to define but perhaps the word 'spirit' comes part way and is manifested through our hopes and desires. And it is this quality which allows us to endure unimaginable suffering and come through in one piece, to meet unimaginable odds with a steely steadfastness, a dream-like, perhaps delusional optimism about our circumstances which has allowed for our survival as individuals, and perhaps as a species, which Stoicism seems to subvert through its determinism.

Although this is a disputed matter, it seems often that it is only the will power which determines who survives and who dies in adverse circumstances. The point is that Stoicism's hard-line determinism stifles our hopes and dreams, strangling our spirit and asking us to bow to an ordered universe in which we are playing a pre-ordained and involuntary role. The consequence of this seems to be that we stop dreaming about our ability to test the limits, to see what we can achieve, to dare greatly in our endeavours. Admittedly, Scott<sup>94</sup> should have turned back, but there are many throughout history to whom humanity owes a great debt of gratitude for their fortitude and wild optimism for it is these individuals that have shaped our world making it what it is. Without this dream perhaps our ancestors may never have struggled free of nature's stifling embrace.

Or, returning to mental illness, perhaps for some in their darkest moments the one thing which keeps them from the precipice is the hope that things will get better and that they can achieve this improvement by their own means. Where as our Stoic simply accepts all that comes to him like a grateful child, over awed by its maker and

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<sup>94</sup> Captain Scott famously pressed on during his ill-fated attempt to be the first man to reach the South Pole in his 1912 expedition and died shortly after arriving at the pole and discovering that he had been beaten by his Norwegian rival Roald Amundsen.

the scale of the universe, he gives up, not hoping for improvement, staggering onwards never challenging nor questioning his lot.

Our question is: Is this a healthy perspective to offer to those who suffer from bi-polar disorder, acute anxiety disorders, or multiple personality disorders and other mental illnesses? Will it make them more or less likely to improve? Or make a full recovery? Can accepting all that comes to you and all that does not come to you in life with a smile, and being content in the knowledge that you are a part of a whole with a purpose despite being horrifically disabled or handicapped really help to alleviate the suffering?

It seems in many cases, particularly those deemed beyond hope, it would be inhumane not to try. But for those whom one could reasonably expect to improve, who perhaps go through suicidal phases, they must be given the means to fight, to hope and to persevere and there is something in the Stoic technique which seems to allow for the subversion of this inner resource we employ in crises and therefore must be recommended with great caution.

**Appendix 1: An Exposition of Epictetus’  
Approach to Anger and Pain from his *Discourses***

**Anger**

Epictetus urges us to resist anger when encountering other peoples’ errors by seeing their errors as the result of their feeling that it is expedient or beneficial to attain or do some thing. Therefore, when dealing with a thief we ought to pity him because he steals due to a mistaken feeling that this activity is of benefit to him, hence, we should not become angry with him or seek to punish him harshly because all he really needs is to see his error in judgment. In short, Epictetus uses the Socratic paradox that nobody errs willingly, but only due to a lack of knowledge or misuse of the will,<sup>95</sup> and this is all that is within our power so erring is evidence of loss of all that one has, so rather than being angered by such individuals one must pity them.

Furthermore, if we find ourselves angered by our wife’s adultery Epictetus urges; “cease to admire your wife’s beauty...”<sup>96</sup> and you will cease to be angry with the adulterer. Or if we have a possession stolen from us then we should not be angered, but rather, conclude that someone has yielded to a feeling, i.e. the thief has felt that it is a good thing to have such possessions, yet it is not, it is indifferent what possessions we own and, crucially, they are outside the power of our will so we ought not to have concern for them. For Epictetus the anger arises from our holding dear things which are beyond our power and failing to acknowledge that it is only our will which is within our power, not our wives nor our possessions. He urges us to see our losses and our pains as linked only with what we possess, and urges us to be free from the false impression that wives and possessions are within the power of our will.

However, we ought not to conclude from this that Stoic wise men are so ‘other worldly’ that they do not love and care about their partners; they are deeply concerned for the world but not in the narrow self-centred way that

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<sup>95</sup> Epictetus, *The Discourses and Manual*, trans. P. E. Matheson, Clarendon Press, ( Oxford 1916) p 99

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, p 99

others are. Specifically, through having progressed through the *oikeiosis* process they go from caring just about themselves and things related to or connected to themselves to caring about the wider universe and everything within it in equal measure, with no special preference given to those on the basis of proximity or relation to the wise man.

He extends this point beyond wives and possessions and urges us to have the same perspective on our bodies, arguing that a tyrant might chain our legs or sever our heads but that he cannot take our will. Again, to avoid anger here we must only accept the will as being within our power and leave wives, possessions, bodies etc. outside of our will and therefore outside of our concern. In short, anger subsides if we realise that good and bad lie only within the region of the will, and not in the quality or quantity of things external to us. And those who act in a bad way pay the penalty in their own person, “for it is impossible for one to be deluded and another to suffer for it.”<sup>97</sup> If we fully realise this in the way that Epictetus’ urges we would never grow angry with someone for acting badly, as the thief who steals the lamp pays for it: “For a lamp he became a thief, for a lamp he broke his faith, for a lamp he became a brute.”<sup>98</sup> Instead we should be led to pitying them in their error.

Admittedly, Epictetus’ method for alleviating anger is not simply concerned with ‘why’ something is happening, it does also address ‘what’ is happening and asks us to see the ‘what’, if it happens to be being punched in the face or something similar, as indifferent, i.e. neither good nor bad because it is outside the region of the will. So when being punched for no reason we are to tell ourselves that what is happening to us is not something to be concerned with but just an inevitable part of our predetermined lives.

### **Pain**

In order to demonstrate his technique for alleviating pain Epictetus invites us to imagine that we have been imprisoned by a tyrant who has chained our leg and he asks that we see this as indifferent to us as it does not

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, p 127-8

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, p 133

affect our will. He declares; ‘it is impossible for that which is free by nature to be disturbed or hindered by anything but itself.’<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, regard for tyrants and concerns about the pain they may inflict upon us stems from the false impression we have that things external to us are of great consequence. At all times before being concerned by pain we must meditate on the fact that it is only the will which is within our power and therefore whether we are in pain or not is beyond our control and therefore not worthy of our concern. Also, we must view tyrants as tragic characters, ‘Oedipus in person,’<sup>100</sup> because they begin with a prelude of good things and then all of them lose these so understand loss in a way that few others will. At all times when enduring pain inflicted upon us by others we must remind ourselves of Epictetus’ words ‘no one has authority over the things in which we are interested’ and ‘for men good and evil lies in the region of the will, and everything else has no concern for us.’<sup>101</sup> And it is we and we alone who crush ourselves in moments of pain through misjudging our impressions concluding that what befalls our body is of great importance.

He takes his determinism to the point where if he knew that it was ordained for him to be ill, he would wish to be ill.<sup>102</sup> He urges us to not see circumstances which befall us as hardships, because, he argues, it is not a hardship that something born should be destroyed. And our anguish at painful things befalling us stems from our consciousness of our lot and our failure to fully realise our true nature;<sup>103</sup> that we are a part of the universe like any other part and will endure things just as any other part does and eventually be consumed back into the whole. The technique for enduring pain involves one bringing their will into harmony with events, in such manner that nothing that happens should happen against one’s will.<sup>104</sup> As a result of this ordering one cannot fail to get what they will and no pain, fear, anger or other emotion can disturb them. In all this the desire of the true Stoic is to be at one with God.

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, p 102

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, p 115

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, p 116

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, p 159

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, p 160

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, p 187

**Appendix 2: A summary of Seneca's method for alleviating anger in his *On Anger***

Seneca's method involves repeatedly putting all the faults of anger on show so as to appraise them, as though anger were in-the-dock at trial, and in this trial we must see that anger's true nature can be revealed by comparison with all that is worst. The mind that is calm, not overworked with much activity is furthest from anger, so at all times we must ensure that we are not overwhelmed by too many things. Therefore, at each stage one must make an appraisal of something before doing it and in this make a reckoning of yourself, of what you are preparing to do and what has prepared you yourself to do it.<sup>105</sup> Seneca's proposal asks us to never embark upon something which at its completion we are unsure of how we did it.<sup>106</sup>

For Seneca, anger, like other emotions is an unnatural state of the soul and can be viewed as a state into which the reasoning capacity may fall. His approach to anger involves asking one who is about to become angry whether what has befallen them is really bad, and trying to convince them that it is not. The best cure for avoiding anger must begin, according to Seneca, in childhood, by bringing children up to be good-tempered and doing a number of things as an adult, such as; not believing all that people say, not being self indulgent or overly sensitive, not exhausting oneself by overdoing things, choosing the right easy going friends and not reacting immediately when angered.

Seneca argues that we must choose our company wisely as character traits, like some illnesses, can pass from one to another. A man should avoid all who will provoke his temper and seek companions who are straightforward, easy-going, restrained, not the sort to arouse your anger, but who can bear it.<sup>107</sup> If we do have a particular tendency towards anger then we

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<sup>105</sup> Seneca, *Moral and Political Essays*, ed. and trans. John M. Cooper and J. F. Procope, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge 1995), p 84

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, p 84

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, p 84

ought to seek the company of those who share our views so as to give our bad temper respite. And in education those prone to anger must be soothed by poetry and histories not forced to study hard subjects. In short, enjoyable activities help to take the angry mind away from the things which anger it and so should be encouraged. Debating in the forum and any other activity which aggravates the fault should all be avoided as should tiredness which destroys anything mild and peaceable in us and arouses violence.<sup>108</sup> Similarly, people who are of old age or in ill-health are more prone to anger and so should be treated delicately. Above all Seneca's therapy urges that we be sensitive with those who are pre-disposed towards anger and make all efforts to soothe them through distractions, and avoidance of challenging or stressful pursuits and company.

Seneca prescribes a series of steps for us to 'cure' ourselves of anger. Firstly, we must allow only the minimum freedom of speech and inhibit the impulse.<sup>109</sup> By this he means that we should always delay reaction to things which may anger us not allowing our reactions to be based upon impulse, but gradual, considered responses. Secondly, we have to be aware of how our anger begins in order to prevent it from being aroused, some are angered by idle talk, others arrogance, in short we must know our weaknesses so as to better protect them. The next step involves not simply awareness of how we become angered or avoidance of anger but how to deal with the unforeseen things with humour. He reminds us of a story in which Socrates once had his ears boxed and said nothing more than 'What a nuisance it is that one never knows when to go out with a helmet on!'.<sup>110</sup> And at all times we must put ourselves in the place of the one with whom we are angry and to try and be understanding about his failings. But above all, we must delay our reaction as Plato did when angry with a slave because he could not find the time. He ordered a slave to take off his tunic and bear his shoulders for the whipping. Then he realised he was angry and drew back his hand holding it aloft as though about to whip the slave. He left it there chastising himself rather than the slave for his anger. He then stripped himself of his power over his slaves

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<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, p 84

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, pp 86-7

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, pp 87-8

because one who cannot control their anger ought not to be in charge of slaves at all.<sup>111</sup>

Seneca's greatest urge is that we make allowances for people when they do wrong. Specifically, when we hear malicious or slanderous things we must ask ourselves, 'who am I that it should be a sacrilege to offend my ears? And, 'am I not to pardon the lazy, the careless, the talkative?'.<sup>112</sup> A child can be excused by his age, a woman by her sex, anyone outside the household by his rights as a free man, and anyone inside it by being part of the family.<sup>113</sup> If a friend offends us then we must think he did not mean it, if an enemy – he did what an enemy ought to do. Our composure in enduring wrongs should come from the belief that there is no power so great that wrong cannot be done to it. This includes ourselves, and so all haughtiness must be avoided as we are no greater than any other and are therefore as deserving of wrong to befall us as any other. In brief, our anger will subside if we are quick to make allowances for others and to overlook their provocations as there is a limit to the wrong another can do us, but the damage we can inflict upon ourselves with anger is limitless.

Seneca underpins the allowances for others' wrongdoing with reference to the universality of error. He invites us to see peoples' error, not as individuals' failings, but as an intrinsic feature of humanity, and therefore one which we all share in. He asserts that we are bad men living among bad men; and only one thing can calm us – we must agree to go easy on one another.<sup>114</sup> Our anger at others' wrongdoing arises when we feel that it is undeserved because we do not act like this, but we do, if not at the moment, then in the past or at some time in the future it is inevitable we will err in life. Even if we successfully achieve the Stoic ideal of the wise man, as mentioned in the introduction, we would not be completely without the initial involuntary phase of anger, we would experience it as Socrates did as a minute inner flickering.

Furthermore, many people are angered because what they receive falls short of what they hope for. They say 'he gave me the praetorship, but I had hoped for the consulate', or 'he gave me the twelve fasces, but did not make

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, pp 88-9

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, p 101

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, p 101

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, p 103

me a regular consul' and 'I got elected into a college of priests, but why into only one?'. For this anger Seneca reminds them that one of life's pleasures is to have something left to hope for.<sup>115</sup> At the heart of Seneca's therapy is the urge that we accept all that we have in life, all that we lack and to be content in this, not eyeing the lot of others. Without this approach even the gods incur our anger because someone is ahead of us. And we forget how many are behind us or what a huge weight of envy follows at the back of one who himself has few to envy.<sup>116</sup> It is not that the Stoic ideal is entirely disinterested in the pursuit of things in the world in the way that the cynics are, but rather their interest lies not in material things, or careers and reputations but in the pursuit of the virtuous rational self. Hence, the Stoic wise man pursues wisdom and goodness, but above all strives to unite his soul with the will of God.

Much anger stems from our attachment to little things in life such as money, food and drink, also, abusive language, disrespectful gestures, restive beasts of burden, lazy slaves, suspicions and the malign misconstructions of what someone else has said.<sup>117</sup> Seneca prescribes laughter for all the things in life which drive us to tears. He also borrows a method from Sextius, that of examining your conscience at the end of every day by asking yourself 'what ailment have you cured today?' What failing have you resisted? And where can you show improvement? He urges that our sense be trained to endure. For Seneca his end of day examination involved chiding himself for speaking too pugnaciously and resolving to not be in the company of ignorant people again, and rebuking himself for being too frank in admonishing a man in a manner that didn't help the man but only annoyed him.<sup>118</sup> And when he was denied a place of honour he became angry with his host failing to realise that it makes little difference where he sits.

He gives examples for us to follow such as when Diogenes of Babylon was lecturing on anger and a cheeky adolescent spat on him, he bore it gently and wisely. "No", he said "I am not angry. But I am not sure that I should not be." And when Cato was pleading a case with Lentulus, Lentulus worked up a

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<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, p 107

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, p 106

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*, pp 108-9

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, p 111

thick mass of spittle and landed it right on Cato's forehead. He wiped it off his face with the words: "I will swear to anyone, Lentulus, that people are wrong to say that you cannot use your mouth!"<sup>119</sup>

Seneca's method also professes to equip us with the ability to deal with other peoples' anger and how to cure it, he gives the first stage as rest, allowing the anger time to pass. If a man's anger is violent anger he should have some irresistible shame or fear knocked into him, or if less violent conversation of a pleasant or novel kind can be brought in to distract his curiosity. He suggests distractions such as saying to the angered person, 'perhaps your enemies are enjoying your bad temper'<sup>120</sup> or reminding the angered person that there will be a punishment for the one who has angered him. Or if one finds someone unusually cruel in their anger, and is of a higher position, than them the best approach is to simply over rule the enraged persons' judgment. But this can only work if you are of a particular stature in society for your influence to take effect.

Seneca concludes his argument by urging us to direct our minds at all times towards virtue alone. He urges us not simply to moderate our anger but to eradicate it altogether, and the first step in this is to meditate on our own mortality, this of all things will help to give us perspective on the emotion and allow us to distance ourselves from it as we see its futility. We should ask ourselves; 'what joy is there in acting as though we were born to live forever, declaring our anger and squandering our momentary span of life? He urges us to realise how brief our lives are and to be people who are loved whilst alive and missed when gone.<sup>121</sup> Death is on its way, to make you all equal he reminds us, and in our anger we and the one we are in a rage with are like bull and bear tied together in the amphitheatre and when the one has worn down the other the slaughterer awaits them both. Above all we should remember that at any moment we shall spit forth this life of ours, in the meantime while we still draw breath, while we still remain among human beings, he urges that we

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<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, p 112

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*, p 113

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, p 115

cultivate our humanity,<sup>122</sup> because life is too short to spend our time in a state of anger.

For Seneca, our anger is often directed towards inanimate objects such as books with text too small to read properly or clothes which we rip to pieces because they displease us. Our offence, although sometimes we do not realise this, stems from the craftsman who made the garment or wrote the book but this is no reason to become angry because the deficiency in the objects may be due to a deficiency, or lack of ability, in the craftsman and they may have done as well as they could in their work.<sup>123</sup> And taking out our anger with people upon inanimate objects is, in Seneca's view, crazy. Also, it is just as crazy to become angry with animate things such as horses that will not obey our commands when we ride them, but will obey the commands of another rider, as though it were their own decision, rather than familiarity or the art of management, that made some animals more submissive to some people than to others.<sup>124</sup>

Seneca analyses anger further and asserts that we become angry at the gods or with nature when a winter is prolonged or when there is bad weather at sea and we are intending to set sail. He urges that we should view these processes as part of nature and not designed to either hinder or help us but simply as part of the ordering of the universe, and this process is, according to Seneca, of the utmost benefit to us as human beings even though we often fail to realise this. At other times we become angry with magistrates, parents, teachers or judges whose efforts may produce present torment but future good. In so many things our anger stems from failing to see beyond the moment and instead being caught up in an event without any perspective on the pre-ordained order of the universe and our role in it.

Admittedly Seneca makes an important distinction between humans and animals and so there, on this point, may be some doubt here, i.e. whether we can take evidence from how animals behave and use this for an argument concerning humans is uncertain. Although, hazarding a guess I think a baby

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<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*, p 116

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid*, p 64

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, p 64

would react similarly to an animal in such circumstances but an adult would be more likely to deduce the real cause of his nausea.

He challenges us to not see ourselves as blameless or faultless as this often leads us to anger at others' failings. Or we have a very narrow criterion of assessment for ourselves, which may only be that we conduct ourselves within the parameters of the law, ignoring our failure to fulfil the demands of piety, humanity, justice and good faith.<sup>125</sup> Awareness of our own failings and how we might anger others gives us a perspective upon others wrong doing that we would not have had. In short, other people's faults are before our eyes, our own lie over our shoulders.<sup>126</sup> Above all Seneca's technique asks us before we become angry with someone to consider: 'surely we too have done something like this? Surely we have made this sort of mistake...'<sup>127</sup>

Seneca urges us to give the other person the benefit of the doubt at all times and in order to do this we must resist the earliest onslaughts of anger as they are the easiest to succumb to. The delay will allow us to appraise the validity of the information we have received which may anger us and this will give us time to decide whether what we hear is true. It may be the case that someone has invented a malicious rumour in order to break up a solid friendship or perhaps the story has been invented by someone purely for the sport of it so they can watch from a safe distance the people they have brought into collision.<sup>128</sup> Therefore, Seneca asks that we treat all testimonies which may lead to anger with as much suspicion as if a dispute over a sum of money had arisen; in this we would need witnesses, and witnesses would be useless without oaths, and then there would be time for each side to plead their case before a decision could be arrived at. In a similar way we should calmly weigh up all the evidence we have for believing some news which may present itself to us, like a careful magistrate, not quick to judge, nor easily convinced.

Seneca argues that there are circumstances where we ourselves have witnessed the event, on these occasions we should carefully go through the character and intentions of their perpetrators. It may have been a child who

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<sup>125</sup> *Ibid*, p 65

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, p 66

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, p 66

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, p 67

didn't know any better, or a Father who had a right to do us a wrong, or simply a Mother making a mistake or perhaps someone was acting under orders and is therefore not blameworthy. Or if the injury was done by a good man then one should not believe it, by a bad man then one should not be surprised.<sup>129</sup> And at all times we must see the wrongdoer as someone who has already suffered. Our anger is increased also by a sense of the injustice or unfairness of the particular circumstances. Something is far easier to bear if we have seen it coming, but when it surprises us it comes with a sense of unfairness. This sense of the unfairness of the wrong often stems from our righteous indignation that we do not deserve something like this, or our surprise that someone whom we believed to be good does in fact have a bad streak. Again, Seneca asks us to see this bad streak not as simply an individual's failing but a flaw in the human race and to become angry at the human race is to be angry at nature and hence futile.

Seneca argues that it is possible to effectively suppress our anger, especially, if we do so due to fear. He gives the example of King Cambyses, who was too fond of wine. Prexaspes, one of his closest friends, advised him to drink less, declaring drunkenness in a king with the eyes and ears of all upon him to be a disgrace. To prove his friend wrong the king asked his friend's son to go beyond the threshold and stand there with his left hand over his head. Then he drew his bow and shot the boy through the heart. He then looked at the father and asked whether his hand had been sure enough. 'Not even Apollo' the father replied, 'could have aimed better.'<sup>130</sup> Seneca's point here is not that it was right for the Father to act like this, indeed he would have been justified in killing the king, but only that it is possible to suppress extreme anger or to conceal it and use words in such circumstances to express the opposite.

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<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*, p 68

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, pp 90-1

**Appendix 3: The position of Marcus Aurelius within the Stoic tradition and his approach to anger from his *Meditations***

The first point to make regarding Aurelius is that there is an important distinction between the orthodox Stoic position as represented by Epictetus and Seneca and the system Aurelius presents, specifically, it is his pragmatic approach to the doctrines of other schools of philosophy which distinguishes Aurelius from other Stoics.<sup>131</sup> For example; by allowing that his system works regardless of whether one believes the world to be ordered (the Stoic perspective) or a fortuitous combination of atoms (the Epicurean position)<sup>132</sup> he produces a less Stoic based system which might be more acceptable to those who doubt some aspects of Stoic thought. He also maintains that the universe consists of a perpetual flux rather than an ordered structure like Heraclitus and he has the quasi-Cynic view that nothing resists the passage of time and that life is an ever changing pageant.<sup>133</sup> He simply uses ideas that seem to make sense to him, in this way, he is slightly harder to define as a Stoic than Epictetus<sup>134</sup> and Seneca as his ideas do not fit as neatly into the framework of the other two. In short, Aurelius is more concerned with finding a workable, effective and convincing system of philosophy than narrowly adhering to all the many doctrines of Stoic orthodoxy.

Aurelius directs us away from anger by urging us to see that it is in our very nature to work together with others. Aurelius draws upon the doctrine of *oikeiosis* again when he argues that the good is that which universal nature brings, and which serves to sustain that nature.<sup>135</sup> The working together with others ought not to be simply an option but our underlying purpose which is revealed through our nature as part of the universe, hence there is no place for

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<sup>131</sup> Although Seneca had Platonic leanings.

<sup>132</sup> However, Seneca also uses Epicurean 'distraction' techniques among his therapeutic recommendations. Yet he does not say, as Aurelius does, that this ethics could be valid in a virtually godless cosmos of Epicureans.

<sup>133</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Robin Hard, Wordsworth Editions Limited, (Ware 1997) intro. p 16

<sup>134</sup> Epictetus is more of a moralist than Aurelius.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid*, p 11

anger with others. He also borrows from Socrates by urging us to see wrongdoing not as deliberate, but instead as a product of ignorance. In light of this he asks us to ask ourselves when we are wronged ‘what conception of good and evil led him to commit such a wrong?’ and when we have seen this we shall feel neither surprise nor anger, instead we shall forgive him because he knows not the difference between good and bad. And at all times Aurelius urges that we retire into ourselves, retreating into our soul, finding serenity in our rational capacities own just conduct.

His technique for anger is that we wipe out our impression of anger, i.e. our false impression that something is bad and therefore worthy of an angry response.<sup>136</sup> This technique is underpinned by his desire that we watch the stars in their courses as though we were accompanying them on their way, to help to alleviate the sense that things which happen or are said to us are bad, and replace this with an awareness that we are only playing a small part in the grand scheme of things and minor things such as insults and slander ought not to trouble us on our celestial journey. Without this ‘grand’ perspective our time is taken up by looking at the failings and wrongdoing of others, instead, we ought to look straight ahead to where nature is leading us.

We can halt the rise of anger if at all times we keep in mind two points; firstly, that how we act is of moral significance and secondly, that the material on which you act is neither good nor bad in itself,<sup>137</sup> it is only our misjudgement which leads us to conclude that being deceived or robbed is annoying. And every judgment, impulse, desire or aversion arises from within us and nothing evil can enter in.<sup>138</sup> Also, when we examine the true nature of all things as part of the divine order we will see that there is no purpose nor justification for our anger. At all times when appraising a situation we must ask ourselves ‘what is there in this which is unbearable and beyond endurance?’<sup>139</sup> Also he asks us to remember that in the face of every difficulty

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<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, p 61

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid*, p 65

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, p 73

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid*, p 75

that leads us to feel distress, we ought to apply this principle: this is no misfortune, but in bearing it nobly there is good fortune.<sup>140</sup>

Above all one must realise that if you suffer distress because of some external cause it is not the thing itself that troubles you but your judgment of it.<sup>141</sup> To avoid falling into these false impressions when appraising wrongdoing Aurelius asks that we put our trust in two things: firstly, that nothing will befall us which is not in accordance with the nature of the whole (the universe), and secondly, that it is possible never to do anything which is contrary to the deity and guardian spirit within us, and no-one can force us to disobey its will.<sup>142</sup> In short, we can live a life free from anger if we live at all times in accordance with our nature, judging impressions correctly, i.e. realising that things in themselves can neither be good nor bad but only our impressions of them may wrongly suggest this, and constantly aware of our place and role in the cosmos.

Aurelius begs that before becoming angry we ask ourselves; what is the present content of the part of me which is commonly called the governing faculty?<sup>143</sup> For this is the one part of us that we exercise full control of, not the wrongdoings around us, nor those who slander us from afar, or even our status or class, but only the governing principle. And it is to this, and this alone, that we must turn our attention at all times in order to prevent our anger. Our ultimate goal should be that our soul becomes indifferent to things indifferent, recognising that all existing things will change very swiftly.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> *Ibid*, p 33

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid*, p 77

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid*, p 38

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid*, p 38

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid*, p 46

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