

Below is background information on the content. My current thoughts on the content will be reflected in footnotes at the bottom of each respective page. With the exceptions of annotations, page numbers, changes in font (for readability), name replacements or identifiers (protecting and indicating participants in discussion-based content), the original content is unedited.

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Date of commentary: November 28th, 2016.

Date of original content (Approximate): February-March, 2013.

Format: E-mail exchange.

Subject (Approximate): Selfishness, acceptance, humility, perseverance, self-analysis.

Participants: 2; Travis Hume, and a friend; workplace relationship.

Part (if Applicable): 1 of 3.

Synopsis: A friend in the workplace is trying to understand how to come to terms with others' selfishness. The friend wishes to know how a Stoic views selfishness. An e-mail conversation begins between the friend and I (Travis Hume) to continue the discussion. A relevant quote is given first, followed by a cursory reminder of where the conversation last left off. I briefly explain (according to my understanding at the time) the origin of selfishness, how to come to terms with it in others, and personal methods to control it.

~ Start of Original Content ~

Beginning of e-mail (Travis Hume):

"If the greatest harm that can befall a man is the loss of what is best in him, and right moral purpose is his best, isn't it enough for a man to lose his moral purpose without incurring your anger besides? Would you punish the blind for not seeing? Pity him, but do not be offended or angered.

We become angry because we value the things the depraved steal from us. Stop admiring your clothes, your treasures, your wife's beauty and you will no longer be angry. Stop provoking others to envy with your vain displays of possessions. A man can only lose what he already has, things beyond your power. There is no room for the thief and the adulterer among what is your own, your moral purpose, alone among your possessions.

The ancients said: "KNOW THYSELF." It follows that one ought to begin with small things and pass on to the greater. "I have an earache." Don't groan, "Ah poor me!" I don't say you may not groan, but that you shouldn't groan in spirit; the universe despises weakness.

Put your confidence in your thoughts for the future and walk erect and free, don't rely on the bulk of your body like an ox, you don't need to be invincible by force like a beast. The invincible man is the man whom nothing beyond his will can dismay, a piece of silver, a wench, a bit of reputation, or abuse, or praise; all these things he can overcome and more. The man who can overcome temptation is invincible." – Epict.I, 18. pp.119-127. ¹

¹ Shortly after the initial conversation between my friend and I, I began searching the Discourses of Epictetus for a quote that seemed to most directly and explicitly address the Stoic view on selfishness.

Many elements of this quote apply to different things that are affecting you, I, and everyone else, day-to-day. Last night, you mentioned that there is no true way to eliminate selfishness. That one may try their best, and still fail avoiding selfishness. I took time to ensure that my response on this was true, and as accurate as I can make it.²

It is not possible to **eliminate** the animal side of ourselves that proposes selfish behaviors. It is fully possible, however, to respond to those selfish proposals and control them with our rational faculty. Our rational faculty, without any training, responds automatically to these proposals, by assenting to them, or withholding assent to them. By assenting to the proposals, we make a judgment that the proposal is in our best interests to act upon. By withholding assent, we make a judgment that the proposal is not in our best interests.³

With training, the rational faculty can act apart from the compulsion of the animal side of ourselves. The concept "critical thinking" is an example of a term that is representative of this ability, as well as the statement "Thinking outside the box." A human being has the power, through rational judgment, and the ability to make choices, to make impressions "wait" for us, until we're able to correctly identify them for what they are. It is possible, using myself as an example, to become aware of this process, by consciously running these proposals/impressions through the mind as they occur.⁴

Selfish desires are proposals from our animal sides. The desires necessarily must meet with our rational faculty, which acts as a filter, and a judge. We can shut down (withhold assent) these proposals when they hit our rational faculty, by maintaining good intentions, and refusing to act upon the selfish desires. This ability is a skill. Just like a skill, the more you practice it, the easier the process will become, the more quickly you will be able to recognize desires for what they are, and the more independent of your animal side you will become.⁵

Be patient with yourself, as you develop this skill.

² My thoughts at the time of writing were threefold: (1) I must self-monitor, and ensure that nothing written thereafter is dishonest, exaggerated, or for display. (2) My writing is being drawn from my current understanding of Stoic practice, which is imperfect. I aim to improve my practice through illustrating what very little I know, as I know it. (3) If it is possible that I may help my friend in some way, it is reason enough to write.

³ This paragraph is based on my understanding at the time of what is "beneficial to the constitution of human beings." Like other animals, humans have basic impulses to sleep, eat, drink, secure shelter, and procreate. Unlike other animals, we have the faculty of reason - our defining quality as a species. Reason enables us to determine whether the fulfillment of certain impulses is truly in our best interests, given the factors at hand.

⁴ Stoics very early in practice work to develop the ability to identify "propositions" (initial value judgments combined with sensory information) that are happening within themselves, and to recognize that the act of "assenting" to these propositions (agreeing that they are accurate representations of what is truly happening) is the root of their feeling one way or the other. The development of this skill helps prevent the practicing Stoic from acting and reacting purely on the basis of basic impulses and first impressions.

⁵ I attempt to stress the importance of valuing self-control, self-awareness, and integrity over fulfilling desires that concern external personal gains or pleasure. In addition, there is an intended implication that a heightened desire to help others is a natural side effect – a desire consistent with Stoic philosophy.

Response (Friend):

Thanks for your response. I think that the most important part is that no matter what we try out best and even if we fail, we utilize it to encourage and push us further in our journey. Our failures are actually positive learning experiences that we can draw from at any point.

“I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work.”

– Thomas A. Edison

I find that failure is a great teaching experience and it is a reflection of your character if you are able to pick yourself up after you have been beaten down. It may become easier with time, but it still hurts just the same.

I agree, sometimes being patient is the hardest part. We are instinctively drawn to the animal instinct of instant gratification. It is important that we recognize what is occurring in our minds and allow our rational faculty to process this information, analyze it, and act appropriately. I like how you used the example of the rational faculty acting as a filter for all of the things we see, hear, taste, touch, and feel. We should pass everything through the filter so that we are better able to understand it and act appropriately.

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