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Applying Stoicism: Overcoming Difficulty (Working Title)

By Travis Hume



The conditions present in the world are as they are, whether or not we are aware of them, and their degree or extent. On becoming aware of these conditions (provided our impressions of the conditions are truly as they appear to be {include Epictetus' quote on "either things are or are not as they appear to be"}), the only change in the circumstances is one's assent to a proposition in line with or against our currently held judgments. It could very well be the case that what appears to us by the conditions to be a hardship will be interpreted as a good or preferable thing to other persons. Change our judgments, and we change our interpretation; Our judgments, and only our judgments, are in our control.

Our judgments are altered or reinforced through the exercise of choice. Habit is acting on a pattern of choices. Altering a judgment depends on acting on contrary habits for a set purpose. Many habits are life-long, and so will take considerable effort to retrain. Sustained difficulties can be effectively managed by consciously limiting the scope of what is good ({appropriate actions combined with deliberate and philosophically consistent intent = virtuous action}) and evil to moment-to-moment

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decision-making, in a deliberate move to act contrary to impressions that the non-preferable circumstances are evil, and pleasant outcomes (even if just a state of cessation from the difficulties) are good.

Pleasant, sustained circumstances are occasions where we may be tempted to “let our guard down,” if we feel reasonably comfortable that we have consistently and correctly applied Stoic philosophy. Epictetus states that caution is always due regardless of appearances, but suggests that if one remains duly cautious, we can enjoy pleasant things “as long as we attend. {verify, find quote}”

The psychological effects from hardships can be blunted by degrees beforehand by preemptively imagining them as possible outcomes to the situation; as something that can and does happen to many others. One can be trained to resist misfortune through purposeful, isolated exposure to the conditions that are found in the potential hardships under consideration (such as eating bread over more preferable and equally immediate foods) over several days, and then asking ourselves “was this what I was afraid of?” – or, by reducing the scope of the hardships by drawing attention to the fact that life is experienced moment-to-moment, and that impressions are not always accurate.

The Stoics referred to hardships as “competitions/trials/tests {verify, find quote}” of our grasp of the philosophy, and means to improve our grasp further, when pre-emptive practice or practice in less severe circumstances seems to have stalled. Aiming to combat difficulties before they come is likened to physically training ahead of an upcoming athletic competition. When the time comes that we must apply what we’ve learned, we should be ready to say “This is the kind of situation I’ve been training myself for.”

There will be no shortage of difficulties in our lives. Even the most materially well-off are not and will never be immune to impressions of hardships. At some time, in some way, by some degree, all persons must contend with unpleasant circumstances. Some may be inclined to find rest in distractions, or to move away from the conditions for an extended period. Yet the judgments that lead to the interpretations of the difficulties as evils are retained – reinforced by the attempts to escape. One may pursue relaxation without fear of yielding to difficulties provided there is reasonable assurance that the judgments underlying the initial impressions have been identified and scrutinized for substance over appearance.