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Applying Stoicism: Overcoming Difficulty (Working Title)

By Travis Hume



There will not be a shortage of difficulties in our lives. Even the most materially well-off are not and cannot be immune to hardships. At some time, in some way, by some degree, all persons must contend with very unpleasant circumstances. Some may be inclined to find relief in distractions, or to move away from the conditions for as long as they can. Yet the judgments that magnify and describe difficulties as evil things are ever present and reinforced by repeated attempts to escape.

The conditions that make up our difficulties are present in some form before we become aware of them. On becoming aware of these conditions, the only change in circumstances is our agreement or disagreement that our account of the situation is accurate, and whether we consider it to be good or evil – a consideration drawn from our currently held judgments. It could very well be the case that what appears to us to be a hardship may be interpreted to be good or beneficial by other persons.

The philosophy of Stoicism maintains that judgments are among the few things within our control. If we shape our judgments of what we consider good or evil, what

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we consider good or evil will be shaped accordingly, and likewise our resistance and response to difficulties. The Stoic schoolmaster Epictetus illustrates this, as put down by his student Arrian: “Impressions come to us in four ways. Things are, and appear so to us; or they are not, and do not appear to be; or they are, and do not appear to be; or they are not, and yet appear to be. Thus it is the task of the educated man to form a right judgment in all these cases; whatever the difficulty that afflicts us, we must bring forward the appropriate aid against it. ... If it is the plausibility of circumstances, which make certain things seem good when they are not, let us seek for aid in that area. If it is a habit that afflicts us, we must endeavor to discover an aid against that. ... (Epictetus, *The Discourses*, Bk. I, Ch. 27, 1)”

Our judgments are changed or reinforced through our choices. Habit is acting on a historical pattern of choices. Changing a judgment depends on acting contrary to our habits for the set purpose of installing new habits that will retrain the judgments that are already present. 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 and evil to moment-to-moment 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. The Stoic Roman Emperor describes this endeavor: “Don’t disturb yourself by thinking of the whole of your life. Don’t let your thoughts embrace all the various troubles that you may expect, but on every occasion ask yourself: what in this is past bearing? Next, remember that neither the past nor the future pains you, only the present, and this can be reduced to very little if only you will circumscribe it and chide your mind to hold out against so little. (Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations*, Bk. VIII, 36)”

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

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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."