

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: December 3rd, 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): 2 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 ~

Note: This content follows directly from the first part of the e-mail discussion on selfishness.

Beginning of e-mail (Travis Hume):

In a word, every human being has the capacity to value things inside of themselves, as well as things outside of themselves. If value is attributed to things outside of themselves, they must necessarily be disturbed if those things are taken away, or do not meet their expectations. They must necessarily be exhilarated when those things come into their possession, and delight them for a time.¹

If value is attributed to things inside of themselves, these responses are similar, with one critical difference: So long as the valued things are within the mind, they are within the control of the person. They can be filtered through the faculty of reason, seen for what they are, and retained so long as they are acted upon, and implanted in intention. Here, i'm talking about the virtues. Virtues are revered in every culture, as something to be aspired to embodying. Virtues cannot be taken away from a person, even if all of their possessions are taken away, the clothes are stripped off their back, and they are left in the dust. Conversely,

¹ The satisfaction of new, external things tends to fade once one is familiar and accustomed to those things. What's more, if one or more aspects of the new things are unlike what one imagined, negative feelings often accompany the positive ones. New fears appear as new external things are gained – following the understanding that what is gained can also be lost, taken, or damaged. The Stoics classify feelings towards external things in four ways: Appetite is the desire for an external thing that isn't immediately present, Pleasure is satisfaction for a present external thing, Distress is anxiety over an external thing that isn't immediately present, and Fear is dread over a present external thing. A person is likely to experience the full intensity of all four states throughout their day-to-day lives, so long as they believe that external things are on equal or higher ground than Virtue (i.e. being a good person).

possessions can be taken away, clothes can become torn and destroyed, and conditions can be changed at any time.²

Necessarily, anyone that values things outside, more than things inside, will depend their happiness upon things that are by nature volatile. Their happiness will be volatile in kind.

Anyone that values things inside, more than things outside, will depend their happiness upon things that are by nature within their power. Their happiness will be within their power to grasp, in kind.

You can work to embody humane, constructive, meaningful, true principles, and show that it is possible to have a happiness that is not easily disrupted, that lies within your way of thinking, and your means of behaving. Anyone that is of sound mind will assent that if it were possible (and it is,) to accomplish this, to possess the ability to be happy of their own volition, independent of outside forces, they would prefer it to their current state of thinking. This is what you would be representing, and encouraging, as a force of example.³

Response (Friend):

Instead of looking to possessions to provide us with happiness and fulfillment, we need to look within ourselves for that happiness and contentment. There is a reason that acting properly on the “I know I should or I know I should not” feelings just feels appropriate. Consequently, by focusing on acting virtuously we feel content and happy. I am not sure if this is Stoically correct so I would be interested on your feedback. Would it be helpful to think about previous successes in moments of trial/tribulation? Conversely would it be helpful to think about moments of failure during times of success?

One of the things that has been most helpful from the Stoic principles is understanding that everyone acts in their own best interest. It has helped remove a lot of emotional distress.

² A principal goal of the practicing Stoic is to recognize the common long-present habit of associating “good” or “evil” with external things, and redirect the valuation to the internal practice of Virtue wherever possible within themselves. Virtue is comprised of wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance – e.g. of being discrete and resourceful, honest and fair, courageous and industrious, and disciplined and modest. Whereas the acquisition or avoidance of external things depends largely upon many conditions coming together and resolving in certain ways, the cultivation of Virtue and mitigation of Vice (Virtue’s counterpart) hinges solely on an individual’s chosen speech, thoughts, and actions in light of it. Consequently, the benefits of developing Virtue cannot be harmed or manipulated by external forces – only by choice can a person go against their Virtue; choices can only be overridden by additional choices.

Regular virtuous practice results in three states: “Joy,” “Wishing,” and “Caution.” Joy is elation from committing consistent present and past virtuous choices, resulting in feelings of enduring enjoyment and tranquility. Wishing is endeavoring to help others in speech and action, and comprises compassion and generosity. “Caution” is considered a vigilant avoidance of choices that will harm one’s Virtue by contributing to one’s vice. Caution takes the form of discretion, humility, and self-awareness.

³ While a good reputation is a common consequence of being virtuous, it is not on equal terms with Virtue itself. It is wholly acceptable to “wish” for the betterment of others by being a good example to them, but peace of mind must not depend on how that example is ultimately received. I am suggesting to my friend that incorporating Stoic principles into his daily life and work may inspire others to improve themselves.

Sometimes it is harder to understand but I am constantly working on it. I really agree with what we discussed last evening, only through embodying the virtues can we hope to change someone's thoughts/actions.

One thing I have been thinking about is the frailty of our existence as physical beings. Our possessions can be taken and destroyed. We can be left naked in the dust as you said. We could lose part of our bodies or our bodies in entirety. I found this secluded spot in the woods below T-Lot yesterday and just sat there writing for an hour and a half listening to the insects and animals. The sun was setting and the light was filtering beautifully through the trees. I thought about what I just discussed, how valuable I deemed my eyesight and hearing to be which allowed me to experience that moment. How if I was physically impaired I could have never walked to that spot nor have discovered it in the first place. How the clothes I was wearing kept me warm, but they too could be taken from me. They will age with wear and eventually fall apart and become unusable. I really contemplated how temporary everything is. Even the most durable things that exist or that we create, in time, will fall apart and become unusable.

I am trying to constantly look within myself for strength and the ability to continue to act in accordance with the virtues we have discussed. I do not want to rely on possessions or others for my happiness, but myself. This does not mean I lead a solitary or isolated lifestyle. In fact it is quite the opposite since acting in accordance with the virtues would place me in positions to best serve fellow humans. As you mentioned, It is possible to embody these virtues and be happy of your own volition. Becoming truly independent of outside forces and not allowing them to influence your actions is a difficult challenge. I believe it is one that I have made progress on so far and I will continue to combat this challenge. Nothing that happens can ever change or destroy who I am on the inside or the actions I take.

I have some non-Stoic quotes that I believe are helpful.

Successful people are always looking for opportunities to help others. Unsuccessful people are always asking, "What's in it for me?"

-Brian Tracy

Certain things catch your eye, but pursue only those that capture the heart.

-Ancient Indian Proverb (aka do only those things that embody the virtues)

We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.

-Plato

Happiness is not something readymade. It comes from your own actions.

-Dalai Lama

Challenges are what make life interesting and overcoming them is what makes life meaningful.

-Joshua J. Marine

Remember that not getting what you want is sometimes a wonderful stroke of luck.
-Dalai Lama

When everything seems to be going against you, remember that the airplane takes off against the wind, not with it.
- Henry Ford

~ End of Original Content ~