

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 11th, 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): 3 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 second part of the e-mail discussion on selfishness.
Beginning of e-mail (Travis Hume):

“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?”

From “Instead of looking” to “we feel content and happy,” is correct. It is entirely possible, and useful, to reassign judgments of value from objects outside of ourselves, to characteristics within ourselves. It is helpful, and recommended, to *consider* previous successes and/or failures during success and failure, so long as their use is approached from the appropriate perspective.

It is beneficial to consider previous successes during moments of success, to acknowledge that you are on the right track, and have been on the right track, consistently. (A note: Missteps along the way do not mean that you have fallen off the track. If you understand where the misstep occurred, why, and take steps to self-improve, you convert the misstep into a boon, and gain from it.) Successes are appropriately interpreted as confirmation that the things that you're doing, and saying, are having the intended beneficial impact on others.

Pleasure that comes about from interpreting success this way *should* be fully embraced and enjoyed, as it is a product of right action, thought, and intention.¹

It is beneficial to *carefully* consider failures amidst successes, to prevent the pleasure that you feel from doing the right thing for the right reasons from turning into vainglory. It is not easy without practice and vigilance to be able to discern the point at which pleasure from accomplishing the right thing (which is a pleasure that can, and should be fully embraced as a good that you earned,) turns into pleasure derived from being praised by others.

Contemplating failures can be a boon, in different ways. You can relate the progress that you've made towards self-improvement to your state of being at the time the failures occurred, ie, to gauge how far you've come. You can look back at the failures, study them, and ask yourself what all could, and should have been done that may have changed the outcome of the failure, based on what you know now, and the progress you've made. You can look at past failures as checks against behaviors you observe in other people, as you will better understand why others are doing what they do, in similar situations. Both successes and failures can be used to hone your rational skills.²

Response (Friend):

“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 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

¹ The “right track” refers to making progress as a practicing Stoic. To the practicing Stoic, conventional successes and failures are indifferent (including their corresponding material rewards or detriments), but the use made of them is not. A Stoic should look to conventional successes or failures as opportunities for self-improvement, and to guide and assist other persons by force of example – doing their best with the time, resources, and circumstances available, to the fullest extent their respective role allows. By aligning philosophically consistent choices, a continual aim for self-improvement, a goal to aid others directly or indirectly as able, and carefully managed expectations of oneself and events to come, a practicing Stoic is poised to regularly commit “virtuous actions” – appropriate acts befitting a person as a social and rational being, combined with a conscious intent to develop virtue as the ultimate aim and benefit. By “pleasure” I’m referring to the Stoic state of “Joy,” which results from frequent virtuous actions. I.e., a practicing Stoic feels enduring peace and contentment for consciously, consistently doing good for its own sake, independent of external reward or failure.

² From anticipating conventional successes and external gains e.g. additional money, an improved reputation, and praise, there comes the risk of interpreting them as ends in themselves. In order to temper these expectations, the practicing Stoic may call to mind examples of similar situations that have happened to themselves or others across time – situations in which the unexpected happened, such as sudden complications, or withheld external rewards (e.g. a coworker being given the credit). The result of this carefully managed exercise is improved resistance to failure, a greater appreciation for preferable outcomes, and a heightened focus on self-improvement through the tasks at hand.

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.”

Response (Travis Hume):

Correct. We are mortal. All things outside of our mind, even our bodies, will some day be gone. It is not helpful to think about this necessary event in terms of these things being taken away from us. It is helpful to think about it in terms of giving these things back. There was a time where not even our own lives were in our possession. There was a point in time where we never had a car, or a computer, or a girlfriend, or a house, or a job, or anything that follows and is connected to that chain of thought. There was a point in time where we did not have self-awareness, or a conscience, or a first breath.

We have received everything we now possess as a consequence of a series of causes spurred from the powers that be. It is appropriate, helpful, and beneficial to be thankful for everything that we receive, because we can never so conventionally poor as we were at our birth, and especially so, before we were born. Our own bodies, and lives, were given to us. It is appropriate to treat everything we receive as if it were borrowed from another person; we should treat what we borrowed with respect, in thankfulness for the time its lent to us, conscious that we could have never received the opportunity, and in readiness to return what was lent to us when it is asked to be returned.

Your favorite coffee mug falls, and breaks? There was once a time you never had a favorite coffee cup, and you did without. You fill your favorite coffee mug with coffee, and enjoy your coffee? There was once a time you never had a favorite coffee cup, and presently, its intact and fully able to be enjoyed. Practice thinking in terms like these in relation to other things, and you have yet another means to make progress.³

Response (Friend):

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.

³ Throughout this response in the discussion, I am drawing heavily from memory of passages from Epictetus' Discourses. Epictetus recommends that we treat the things provided to us by Nature (the powers that be) as if we were guests in an inn, or a friend's home. We ought to treat these things with the care and respect befitting of one's role as a guest for the time it's allotted to us, and as circumstances permit. As it is in the case of borrowed things, they will eventually need to be returned, so that others may have an opportunity to possess them for a time; however, we can appreciate them fully until that time.

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.

Response (Travis Hume):

There has been a misconception since ancient times that practicing Stoicism means embodying principles and ways of thinking that will cause a person to lose all interest for life, withdraw into themselves, and become defeatist. The polar opposite is the case.

A Stoic recognizes the designs of Nature, and understanding the underlying, necessary principles within those designs, will align themselves with it. They will assess the nature of human beings as social animals that must cooperate in order to survive. They will understand that the rational faculty of human beings is functionally designed to accomplish this best. They will devote their greatest effort to refining this rational faculty, so they may best serve others; they are very likely to receive good treatment, in kind. A Stoic, then, is very likely to try to assume an office of some kind in which they can benefit others, or to commit themselves to public service, in the name of humanity, for their own humanity.

Stoicism is a complex philosophy of life that interweaves rational analysis, with independence of mind, with heartfelt affection for humankind. Its practice is anything but easy, because it rarely sits well with poor habits we've long been accustomed to, but no great, or valuable thing comes easily.⁴

~ End of Original Content ~

⁴ The sentiment of this response is something that I share today. As has been said, the practicing Stoic aims in all they do to simultaneously refine their skills in applying Stoic philosophy, while benefiting others. It was important to me to state that definitively to my friend, whose occupation affected hundreds of others daily. To practice Stoicism is to place demands on oneself to shape oneself in light of fate, instead of remaining at the receiving end of it. It is a taxing road, but one that I would personally choose many times over if provided the chance to reconsider walking it.