



"Only when I am in unity with my will can I be a friend, for then it will be in my interest to guard my character to maintain the relations I desire with others."

-Epictetus

Applying Stoicism When Life Gets Tough

This article explores how to implement Stoicism to life's difficulties, including the nature and origin of emotions, and the judgments that bring rise to them. My primary purpose is a deeper understanding of the psychological process we act upon on a moment-to-moment basis.

The goal, at the very least, is an improvement in control over our reactions to difficulties, and greater inner breathing room to develop a measured response to emotions. Establishing a deeper understanding of our psychological process may lead to life-long changes in behavior that sets us on a path towards *Eudaimonia* - a state of self-actualization, excellence, fulfillment, and flourishing as a human being.

The ancient virtue-ethics philosophy of Stoicism held that the ultimate goal of life is learning to "live in accordance with Nature." Nature is a namesake for the powers that be – the patterns and mechanics that make up the universe, whether sentient, unconscious, or consisting of a series of causes. To "live in accordance with Nature" is to act upon an understanding of our roles, abilities, and faculties as human beings in relation to one another and to the universe.

The Stoic understanding is reinforced by continually making choices which cultivate virtue and curtail vice in ourselves. Virtues are characteristics that are beneficial to our constitution as social and rational animals, including wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance. Vices are characteristics that are harmful to our constitution, such as greed, anger, and vanity.

All external things in life (events, objects, other persons and their actions, etc.) are neither good nor evil. External things are classified in Stoicism as *indifferents*. The possession or absence of indifferents has no bearing on whether one may be considered to be in a good or evil state. That said, when present, preferred indifferents may be put to use as means for self-improvement and pursued or avoided in a manner conducive to a human being simply as a living animal; a preference for health over sickness, wealth over poverty, etc.

But if these preferences are allowed to rival or take priority to development of our virtues, then we risk giving the preferences greater weight than they're due, and falling into a vicious (evil) state. The Stoic Epictetus illustrates this:

"You alone can determine the value of a thing and no one can prevent or force you in this. You are only subject to interference and compulsion in those things that lie outside your power to have. These objects are neither good nor evil, but they may be dealt with well or badly and this is up to you. (Epictetus, Discourses, Bk. II, 5)"

How Our Judgements Form Our Emotions

Judgments of what we consider good or evil form the basis for our feeling one way or another towards life's events. Our judgments determine what we truly believe is beneficial or detrimental to us personally. People often hold some external things to be goods, and some external things to be evils. Conflict comes about as the result of disagreement over who should possess something held to be good. Accordingly, judgments on the possession of or aversion to external things are the source of all conflicts, public and personal, between organizations, nations, families, friends, and others:

"...Watch dogs that are playing in friendship. Now throw a bit of meat between them to see what becomes of their friendship. Throw a bit of money, a romantic interest, or glory between father and son and see what happens. ... If self interest, piety, honor, country, friends, and justice could all be measured using the same scale they would all be stable, but if self interest is measured on one scale and other things on another, all else will be out weighted by self interest...Man inclines to that side where "I" and "mine" are. Only when I am in unity with my will can I be a friend, for then it will be in my interest to guard my character to maintain the relations I desire with others. (Epictetus, Discourses, Bk. II, 22)"

Our judgments can be examined and changed to control or prevent internal conflict in ourselves. We are also capable of developing the ability to persuade and encourage others to accomplish the same, provided we have sufficient skill, possess the appropriate intentions, and those in question are receptive to it.

Creating Inner Breathing Room

It is important to develop a habit of "stepping back" and considering the psychological process we experience whenever we're presented with a situation that stirs negative feelings. Usually our psychological process happens in sequence: Sensory information (what the Stoics named an *impression*) near-simultaneously combines with an involuntary value judgment (*the first movement of the soul*) to form a *proposition*, or an account of the situation we can understand and base decisions upon, such as "X seems to be happening, and this is good."

The beliefs we currently hold (what we think is truly good or evil), incline us to act in a particular way. However we have a choice; we can either agree that a proposition is a true and accurate depiction of the circumstances, or that it is not true or accurate. If we agree to a proposition, the Stoics called this *assent*. By assenting to a proposition, we will experience a strengthened version of the involuntary value judgment we formed at the onset of the situation in a form that all are familiar with: emotion.

If emotion stems from judgments that have been trained into consistency with our nature as social and rational animals, then they are considered *rational elations*, and are fully acceptable to embrace. However if emotions arise from inconsistencies with our nature, they are considered *passions*, and are ultimately harmful to us. Epictetus illustrates this psychological process, and makes an argument for this careful self-monitoring in light of it:

"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 plausibilities 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, Discourses, Bk. I, Ch. 27)"

Developing Strength in the Face of Difficulty

Initially, changing unreasonable judgments will lead to a heightened resistance to difficult or unpredictable circumstances, a deeper more pervading sentiment of appreciation, and a greatly increased sense of independence and self-command. Our goals are likely to gradually change as progress is made; trending away from emphasis on personal behavioral benefits, and towards the goal of self-actualization.

We should start out very small and carefully however, as this endeavor often demands retraining lifelong habits and ways of thinking. The effort required to retrain our habits scales with the length of time that a judgment has been possessed, and the frequency it has been acted upon. Judgments which have been reinforced over a lifetime are very difficult to change. Likewise, newly formed habits are maleable and require deliberate reinforcement.

Non-preferred events and disapointments in our lives can be transformed for our benefit in cultivating virtuous characteristics such as

patience and forbearance. Commonplace difficulties - accidentally breaking our favorite coffee mug, being stuck in mile-long traffic, waiting two hours for reserved seating at a busy restaurant - should all be thought of as opportunities to refine the virtues best suited to confronting them. The more we incline our minds towards indifference to small problems, the better we will be able to handle really big setbacks in life; illness, job loss, death, etc.

If we can maintain the Stoic mindset from the beginning of the day to the end, we will have made significant progress. Changes in judgment that practicing Stoics aim for will pave the way towards increased resiliency, and eventually, a deep sense of self-command independent of our circumstances. Collectively, these aims and stances form a solid foundation in pursuit of "living in accordance with Nature."